Material from a millenium: detritus from a developing city

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SUMMARY

This paper is concerned with the study of medieval finds (other than ceramics) from the City of London and from Southwark on the opposite bank of the Thames. Objects from the mid Saxon settlement of Lundenwic are not considered here.

INTRODUCTION

London has inevitably been prominent in the study of medieval finds from Britain since interest in the subject first became established in the middle of the last century. The main collections are those of the Museum of London and the British Museum, although there are also significant holdings of medieval material from the capital in the Cuming, Royal Canterbury and Maidstone museums, mainly assembled by 19th century antiquarians. A large number of medieval items unearthed during large-scale 19th-century redevelopments in the urban core went into private collections (the majority of these finds are now irretrievably lost). None was fully published, although selected items were the subject of various articles and some were included in a catalogue, which was written in sufficient depth to hint at the full scope of the remarkable acquisitions made in that period.

The catalogue, compiled by C. Roach Smith in 1854, articles by Syer Cuming (1851 etc), among others, and the Guildhall Museum Catalogue, which appeared in 1908, were the staple reference works for researchers up to the publication of the London Museum Medieval Catalogue in 1940 (this has been in and out of print ever since; the latest edition is 1993). After

almost 60 years this catalogue remains, despite the omission of several important object categories, the standard reference for researchers, in part because of the absence of any more recent reasonably comprehensive synthesis of the many important, but scattered contributions, made over the last six decades (notably those from the mid 1970s to 1990s which are the subject of this present review).

SAXON AND EARLY NORMAN

Finds evidence from the Saxon era has most recently been synthesised by Vince (1990) and this analysis presents a very different perspective from that in Wheeler's Saxon and Viking catalogues (1935 and 1927). Recent fieldwork has produced what seems, in comparison with what was available from excavations in the 1970s and 1980s, a surprising amount of fresh material. From this a significant number of new points have emerged, though publication has still to catch up.

The earliest post-Roman finds from central London are the well known 5th-century brooch from the (?)shell of a Roman bathhouse at Billingsgate (see Fig 1, 19), and also a couple of fragments of a glass claw beaker from the same site (recently identified by John Shepherd) which can be attributed to the 5th or 6th century (although residual in a later pit) – still hardly enough to infer urban continuity.

Coins are probably the most fully researched category of finds from the Saxon period in London because of the wider framework of numismatic studies against which they can be considered. At present many of the earlier coin

discoveries from the future urban centre appear isolated from other finds of comparable date, but the importance of sceattas in the economy of the London area has emerged, and further work on fresh material should provide a clearer perspective of their broad context. Coins have been most recently reviewed by Stott (1991) but this is already in need of updating because of important new discoveries.

Recent finds include a remarkably compact focus of mid oth-century coins at what may well have been the east side of Ethelred's Hithe (BUF90, see Fig 1, 8; Ayre & Wroe Brown 1996). The finds comprise two Northumbrian styccas from the 840s-50s and three *Londonia* pennies of Alfred the Great, a generation or two later, alongside a series of brooches and (?)spindle whorls, several of which have close parallels in the Rhineland and along the coast of modern France and the Netherlands (eg Wamers 1994, Capelle 1976). Some of the brooches have designs based on coins that were copies of the coronation issues of Louis the Pious from France (identified by Marian Archibald, who has seen parallels from East Anglia).

This small group of material, discovered just where, arguably, it might have been expected that is, at the centre of the main port - is mixed with later items which may include finds from the Norman period, so more-enigmatic finds recovered with them cannot yet be positively identified. Although they cannot be claimed as primary in stratigraphic terms, the findspot and the focus are significant. The location, well to the west of the site of the bridge (present in some form at least by the end of the Saxon era), pointing to connections upstream as well as links down river with East Anglia and the Continent, mirrors indications of trade that had been evident for a while from pottery found in London (Vince & Jenner 1991). Three sceattas were found (again in much later deposits) in Bermondsey across the Thames and only a little way downstream from Ethelred's Hithe (Egan forthcoming c). The discovery of late Saxon finds redeposited into later medieval strata characterises most, if not the majority, of objects from this era retrieved in the modern urban core (Fig 9a). Survival in situ of primary Saxon deposits within the walled area seems very limited and appropriate sites may simply no longer exist. The admirable synthesis of Saxon finds in the City from excavations of the 1970s and 80s (Pritchard 1991) underlines this, and also the relative paucity of non-ceramic

material prior to the Norman Conquest in comparison with extensive later medieval assemblages in the urban centre. A special study of textile remains from the Saxon period has also been published by Pritchard (1984).

The picture has changed significantly over the last decade with finds not only from the earliest re-establishment of London, but also a wide range from the later Saxon and Norman settlement. This now furnishes a greatly increased amount of material to work with, from a series of riverside sites along the centre of London's waterfront (Gaimster et al 1990,179-80 site 63; Nenk et al 1991, 153 site 107; Nenk et al 1992, 230 site 125). Very little of this fresh data has been published in detail, and the material that is in print was not published in this country (Normanni 1994). The current, superficial impression is that the earliest material recovered on each site gets earlier the further west (the closer to Ethelred's Hithe) it was found. This can hardly be a realistic picture of the distribution of London's material culture during this period, any more than Wheeler's suggestion of a well populated western half of the City and a sparsely settled eastern half. This was based, among other considerations, on the distribution of the finds then known (Wheeler 1935, 98–113). The pattern now observed is primarily one of survival. It possibly represents more intensive redevelopment (which would have redeposited more of the early medieval deposits during subsequent centuries in areas progressively further away from Ethelred's Hithe when the focus of riverside shipping moved eastwards, closer to the Bridge (see Fig 1, 14).

The variety of dress accessories and other finds provide the opportunity to establish some basic parameters for material culture in London either side of the Norman Conquest - to gauge, for example, just how representative of the range available in the City the manufacturers' cache of lead-tin brooches, beads and rings (the 'Cheapside Hoard' - Clark 1991) actually was. A number of finds from recent fieldwork (dress accessories and the like) show stylistic affinities to Scandinavia – but perhaps not as large a proportion of the whole as might have been expected from reading Wheeler's 1927 catalogue of Viking material (which emphasised artistically accomplished items and those which appeared to relate to warfare). Some of the recent finds have discernible Swedish and Danish stylistic references, and a few direct parallels can be pinpointed in those countries. These influences were obviously a significant

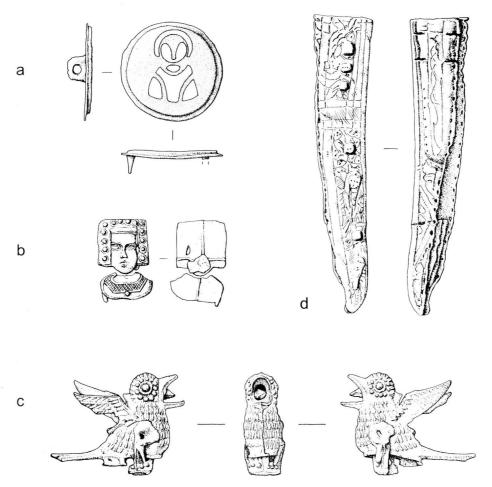


Fig 9. a) Saxon-period copper-alloy saint brooch probably made in Germany, found in a late medieval deposit, overall diameter 27mm, scale 1:1 (from Pritchard 1991, no.96); b) late medieval tin mount depicting a woman wearing a headdress: cheap and cheerful accessories of this metal and pewter saw a dramatic rise in popularity at this time, length 20mm scale 1:1 (Egan & Pritchard 1991, no.1092); c) Toy bird of lead/tin, 14th century (from Egan 1998a no.931), a remarkable plaything with moving parts, height 26mm, scale 1:1; d) Leather scabbard with strawberry design, mid 15th century, length 158mm, width 30mm, scale 1:2 (from Cowgill et al 1987, no.418), this particular motif, enhanced with red paint seems to have been fairly common in London at this time.

element in the cultural melting pot of London, but with a tendency now to look for interpretations of home-grown adaptations of Scandinavian style, rather than seeing every such item as an import, a clearer perspective of their significance is now emerging (it also shows how selective in object retention some museum curators were). The recent 'Scandinavian' finds and hints of Irish material are strands, among many others, that relate to London's connections across the seas. Standing back, there has recently been an emphasis on tracing details of continuities and discontinuities in material culture in an 'Age

of Transition' from 'late medieval' to 'post medieval. It is now possible to begin to do the same with these earlier London assemblages by looking at the broad sweep of objects from, say, the late 10th to late 12th centuries (rather than dividing what has come down these centuries into two separated sets of phenomena either side of 1066).

The Bull Wharf site and others in its immediate area are also remarkable for having produced a small concentration of mainly 11th-century finds from the Byzantine world, which is otherwise hardly represented in the London area. There

are six lead document seals, at least five of which relate to the same treasury department - the genikon in the central administration Constantinople – and three low-denomination coins of similar date, which could arguably have been brought back from the Holy Land around the time of the First Crusade (Egan forthcoming d). These few items take finds from Norman London into a completely new sphere, and it will probably be some while before their significance can be fully assimilated. The suggestion by a Swedish colleague that the enigmatic 'Crowland Abbey' pottery (Vince & Jenner 1991, 111) may be from the Byzantine world (Roslund 1997, 269) seems more plausible than it was when the rare London occurrences of these ceramics appeared isolated from other material originating in that part of the world.

It would now be possible to extend the series of HMSO-style monographs (discussed below) on almost the whole range of non-ceramic finds back two centuries – the 11th and the 12th – into the period from which they had been only very sparsely represented in the 1970s and 1980s. The late 12th century was included in the published monographs, but it is now clear that a fuller perspective is available from the increased numbers of finds recovered over recent years.

Late Norman and later

The main publication for non-ceramic, later medieval finds in London over the last 25 years has been a series of seven HMSO monographs which deal largely with the period c.1150-c.1450. Most of the finds published came from just six sites, all on the waterfront, where waterlogged deposits ensure outstanding preservation of organic material and metals - the latter often retaining their original surfaces. With very few exceptions, the outstanding assemblages (widely but erroneously thought of as characterising finds from this period across the City) are confined to the waterfront. Here a tract of land some 100 metres north-south was reclaimed piecemeal from the Thames over several centuries during the Middle Ages. It extended right along the mile-long river frontage and comprised organic reclamation deposits some two metres deep, overlying foreshore accumulations at least as deep again. In each cubic metre searched, this reclaimed land regularly produces at least one prepossessing find (ie one which is individually

'registered' and worthy of publication). Apart from the fine preservation and the extensive range of the assemblages, a unifying strength of the publication series is the common chronological framework (from associated ceramics, coins and dendrochronology) brought together by Alan Vince, which, in the form of defined ceramic phases, allowed the tight grouping and chronological seriation of virtually all the stratified material. This phasing, defined by the predominant pottery wares of the period, can be applied across the whole central London region. It is a template to which approximate calendar dates suggested in the light of the best available information in the mid 1980s - were attached from the third volume onwards. Dating has inevitably been refined, and doubtless will continue to be. Nevertheless, the retention (most importantly) of the same basic divisions as well as the dates suggested at the onset (this is less important, but alteration midway through the series would have resulted in considerable confusion – a note in the introductory sections of the most recent publications gives a concordance with the current view) makes comparisons between volumes infinitely easier. Any redefinition of phases using different fabrics as criteria was particularly to be avoided, as this would have made it impossible to make valid comparisons from volume to volume because the fundamental dividing lines in the raw data would have been shifted. The involvement (more highly controversial at the time than today - not least because the resulting benefits have become abundantly clear from the publications now out) of the principal local metal-detecting group, the Society of Thames Mudlarks, as volunteers on two of the sites, Swan Lane and Billingsgate watching brief (SWA81 and BWB83) was instrumental in the recovery for the Museum of London's archaeologists from the main recorded sequences of both of the most prolific assemblages drawn on for the volumes (Egan & Pritchard 1991, x; Egan 1998, ix & 3; Nenk et al 1991 and 1992; cf Egan 1985/6). It is no accident that these two sites (see Fig 1, 12 and 17) furnished a disproportionately large part of the finds published - and not just metal finds, although this is the major focus. It is only necessary to look at the relatively paltry assemblages recovered at some of the other large waterfront sites, where fieldwork lasted much longer and where there were far greater resources in terms of a traditional workforce, but where the Society was

not involved, to get some idea of the dramatic scale of this contribution which was essential for the success of these publications.

The volumes on Knives and Scabbards (Cowgill et al 1987) and Dress Accessories (Egan & Pritchard 1991) deal with finds that are highly individual and subject to the vagaries of fashion in both form and decoration so they are accordingly catalogued item by item. The mid 14th century saw the rise of a fresh range of inventive lead/ tin accessories (see Fig 9b) to rival and (by the mid 15th century) to overtake the previous monopoly shared between copper alloys and iron. There are other significant and recent contributions on the same subjects: Clark 1991 (which includes the Saxon-Norman era) and Egan and Forsyth 1997 (which continues beyond the period). The subject matter of Shoes and Pattens (Grew & de Neergaard 1988) and The Medieval Horse and its Equipment (Clark 1995), in contrast, and despite chronologically definable developments, show much more coherence in fashion and techniques of manufacture; the former takes a highly synthesised typological approach. Virtually all the categories of finds considered exhibit major trends (the static, commoner forms of lace chapes and pins arguably coming closest to being exceptions). It is more difficult to trace trends in the development of knives than their leather scabbards, the decoration on many of which can fairly readily be assigned to a limited series of basic categories. Scabbards have the last of the Saxon interlace and animal-art decoration, giving way markedly later than on most other artefacts to more naturalistic conventions of the high Middle Ages, and the simultaneous development of all-over decoration from masses of tiny, multiple punched motifs with more individualistic, bogus-heraldic devices. A strange fashion for gaudy strawberryplant designs seems to have been popular towards the end of the Middle Ages (Fig 9d). The volume on textiles (Crowfoot et al 1992) is perhaps the most difficult of the series for a generalist to appreciate (it is so highly successful in its specialinterest niche that a single order for 1,000 copies from the United States has made it the best seller). The textiles, too, show clear chronological trends in weaving and tailoring techniques, within which are a number of more individual fashion traits - with some surprising exotic material, including Chinese silks among what may look to many at first sight like unprepossessing scraps. The Medieval Household (Egan 1998a) is

a catch-all title encompassing most categories of finds not included elsewhere in the series. It covers fixtures and fittings, lighting equipment, kitchen and tablewares (non-ceramic), writing/ reading and leisure items, and the highly complicated subject of commercial weighing equipment. A number of trends have emerged for the development of various classes of lighting equipment and tablewares of different metals through the three centuries considered (Fig 10a; Egan 1997c). The section on glassware gives an indication of the recent, rich London finds of this elusive material (cf idem 1998b and Clark 1983; see Nöel Hume 1957 for previous discoveries). It has now become clear - mainly from work and exhibitions on the Continent that glass was a significant commodity in the medieval period and a fuller synthesis should now be made (preferably with an exhibition and a publication that are national in scope). The last planned volume of the series, on pilgrim souvenirs (Spencer 1998), brings together the contribution from a life's work on these fascinating finds (Fig 10b) (cf idem 1968, 1978 and 1982). It provides a much needed corrective to some of the misinformation in Mitchiner 1986, which, in the absence of a more authoritative synthesis, has led astray colleagues abroad as well as in this country.

Some individual finds have merited publication on their own, like an early pair of spectacles (Rhodes 1982), a courtly silver collar (Spencer 1987) and a long trumpet (Lawson & Egan 1988). One of the most significant results to emerge from London finds over the past two decades is the revelation of a thriving toy industry from at least the turn of the 14th century. It is quite clear from finds of miniature mounted knights, decorative jugs etc (mainly in lead-tin, Fig 9c) that children did enjoy what we regard as childhood play (this counters the view previously held by many social historians). Study of an extensive private collection (Egan 1996), now in the Museum of London, first drew attention to this and confirmation comes from finds from formally excavated groups.

There are also a number of diverse papers drawing on important assemblages to add fresh details of other aspects of medieval London: a range of metalworking evidence has been drawn together, including waste from making knives and dress accessories (Egan 1997a, idem et al 1992); debris from a bronze foundry producing bells and domestic vessels has been looked at

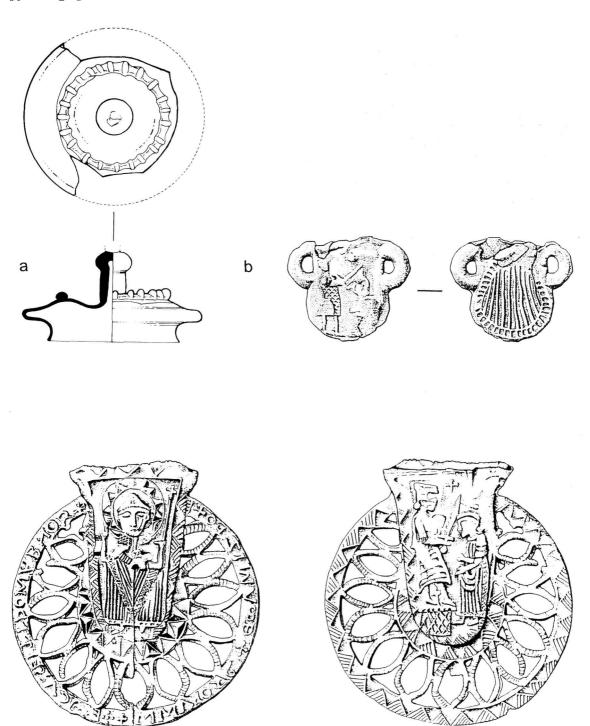


Fig 10. a) White glass lid, early 15th century (Egan 1998a, fig 184), medieval opaque white glass is so far only known from London, though it was almost certainly made on the Continent. Diameter c.92mm, scale 1:2; b) Becket ampullae of tin – pilgrim souvenirs from Canterbury originally containing holy water (Spencer 1998, nos 1 and 14). Finds of ampullae, formerly rare items, run into double figures at large waterfront sites where metal detectors were used in skilled hands. Length of top ampulla 27mm, bottom one 69mm, both scale 1:1.

(idem forthcoming c) and work is in progress on cloth-finishing industries (idem forthcoming a, cf idem 1979 and 1995 for individual finds of medieval date. One study has considered the validity of a perceived division between 'medieval' and 'post-medieval' dress accessories (Egan & Forsyth 1997). Contrary to initial impressions there are clear distinctions to be drawn somewhere from the late 15th to mid 16th centuries in the scope of motifs on a range of these items, resulting not least from religious changes brought by the Reformation.

Seals have a long publication tradition (most recently Spencer 1984 for London finds). There are at present no specific plans to publish new evidence on coins, jettons and tokens from tightly dated, formal excavations, or on bladed weapons. Earlier works, such as Roach Smith 1854, Rigold 1982, Mitchiner 1988, Mitchiner & Skinner 1983 and 1984, show some of the huge range of coinlike items used in the medieval capital, but those published mostly lack close archaeological dating. A remarkable series of recent finds of coin dies in London, some for provincial mints, has been fully published by Archibald et al 1995, as has one of three 'casual-find' coin hoards (idem 1980). Even medieval magical practice has been discerned from some finds (Merrifield 1987).

Work in progress on the results of a series of excavations on the sites of London's medieval religious houses, mainly in the periphery of the City, has revealed a range of finds that appear to be characteristic of these institutions. The items relate to clerical work (the compiling and use of written records and religious texts) and include also relatively expensive equipment for water provision and food preparation (eg lead piping, taps and stone mortars) and specifically religious metalwork (a 12th-century enamelled crucifix and fragments of other fine items), all of which would probably have been beyond the purses of most ordinary inhabitants. Egan (forthcoming b) deals with the remarkably diverse finds from Bermondsey Abbey, one of the richest of the religious houses (see Fig 1, 28).

CONCLUSIONS – FACTORS IN RETRIEVAL AND PUBLICATION

London finds have become an unparalleled national resource for understanding everyday living in the medieval period. Spencer's *Chaucer's London* (1972) demonstrated this to a new

generation, even before the boom in recovery of the 1970s to 1990s. Despite the special factors that limit the range of objects at each end of the medieval period (the considerable disturbance to the earliest and latest layers) London's material is almost inevitably called on when major exhibitions about the Middle Ages are being planned. This happened to a limited extent for English Romanesque Art (Zarnecki et al 1984) but more prominently for the Age of Chivalry (Alexander & Binski 1987). There are also important contributions, simply unavailable from other sources, to narrower-themed exhibitions, like the exhibition concentrating on pewter (Hornsby et al 1989). London was also the obvious place to look for an English perspective for a survey of medieval glass across north-west Europe (Baumgartner & Krueger 1988).

The massive increase in the retrieval of medieval finds, particularly when these are non-selectively recovered during the course of formal excavations within the framework of a closely dateable sequence, has transformed the scope of the study of material culture in the Middle Ages. The skilled use of the metal detector, both in the hands of private individuals and archaeologists (the Museum of London's metal detectorist, Alan Gammon – now retired – made significant contributions in both roles) has been the most important single factor in the number of significant discoveries referred to in this paper.

Publication, however, remains, as always, the exception rather than the rule, both for outstanding single objects and for more routine finds. Useful analytical work has been undertaken on some of the material that has become available, and a number of fresh perspectives have emerged (particularly in the series of finds volumes discussed above). It will, nevertheless, be a long time before all the implications now becoming evident are assimilated. There are still many exciting discoveries to be made, both in the field and in the capital, and in the archive of medieval finds held by the Museum of London.

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