

Oxford St Aldates

Fired Clay

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Introduction and methodology

A small quantity of fired clay, amounting to 221 fragments weighing 856g from hand excavation and 52 fragments weighing 258g from sieved samples, was recovered from areas 1, 3, 4 and 10. This comprised structural material and two personal artefacts. The assemblage has been recorded on an Excel spreadsheet, which forms part of the archive.

Personal artefacts

Two rather fine spindles whorls, one complete and a broken half made in fine sandy clay were found in occupation layers 1010 and 3071. The latter was phased to the 11th century and the spindle whorl is likely to be broadly contemporary in date. The second broken whorl must be residual in layer 1010, which is phased to the 18th-19th century. Both spindle whorls are typical of Saxon or early medieval forms, though they are notably heavier than the average weight of 20-30g quoted by Wild (1988, 55) and are similar to disc shaped examples from Mucking (Hammerow 1993, 65). Examples of spindle whorls with concentric incised decoration have been found at York Blue Boar Lane in features dating to the 9th century. Hemispherical and disc shaped fired clay spindle whorls were found at Radley Barrow Hills in the back fills of SFBs (Chambers and McAdam 2007, 254-5). A ceramic spindle whorl was found in previous excavations at St Aldates, but stone spindle whorls were more common including two with incised concentric circles (Durham 1977, 152-3). The ceramic spindle whorls would have been personal items and provide evidence for the primary phases of cloth production.

1. Complete spindle whorl made in the form of a disc with a wide countersunk hollow 25mm dia by 6mm deep on one side; on the opposite flat surface is a faint impressed line concentric with the edge. The side is cut to a smooth bevel and has two thin incised lines marked around the circumference, one of which has partly worn away. The whorl is pierced centrally by a large cylindrical perforation 12mm in diameter.

Diameter: 46mm, height: 19mm; weight: 42g; fabric: orange fine sandy clay. Context: 3071; sf3002. Phase: 2 (11th century)

2. Broken half of a hemispherical spindle whorl with one flat smooth surface and one very smooth convex surface, which has a shallow groove impressed around the circumference. It is pierced by a large cylindrical perforation 12mm in diameter.

Diameter: 45mm, height: 15.5mm; weight: 19g; fabric: pinkish brown - pink with mauve tinge, v fine sandy micaceous clay. Context: 1010. Phase: 8 (early 18th-19th century)

Structural fired clay

The structural fired clay comprised 70 fragments (874g) much of which was indeterminate and either entirely amorphous in character or with a single moulded, usually flat, surface. One piece may have been shaped into a ball, but this could be the accidental effect of breakage and wear. Shaped pieces included several fragments with wattle impressions, some of which had a roughly moulded curving surface with finger marks typical of oven walls. The wattle impressions included

interwoven examples based on their angles to one another, or lying flat and parallel. The wattles ranged in size from 10 to 20mm diameter (Figure 1).

The fabrics consisted of a fairly coarse sandy clay matrix, which sometimes contained limestone grit and at least one was heavily micaceous. Organic or grass inclusions were present in a few pieces. Most were fired to varying shades of red, pink and brown, with occasional black or grey reduced areas or mottles.

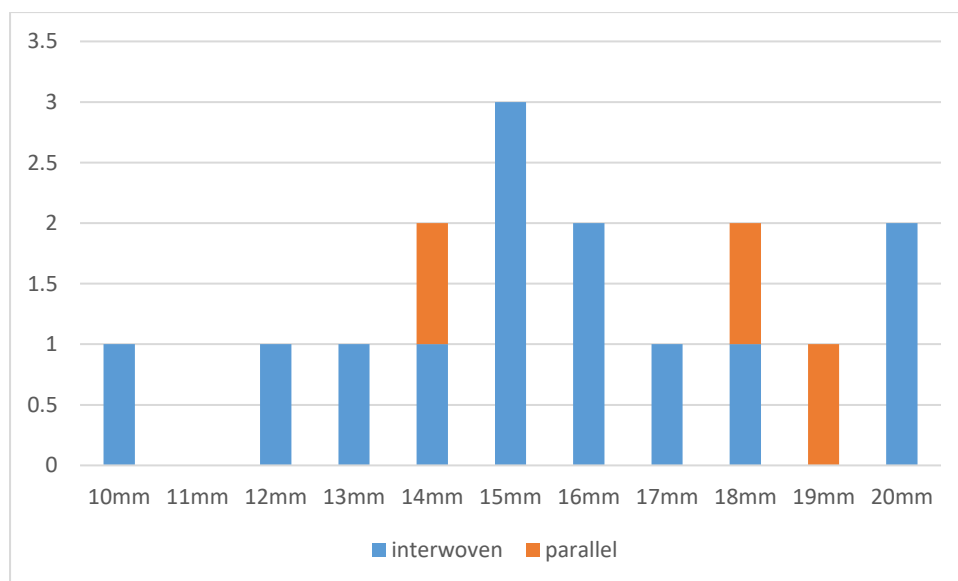
The structural fired clay derives from oven or hearth structures and occurs predominantly in Saxon or early medieval deposits of phases 1-3. Though the fragments are not intrinsically dateable, fired clay started to be replaced by brick and tile in the later medieval period for structures such as ovens and hearths that required fireproof materials. The assemblage reflects activities undertaken in the immediate vicinity of the site probably of a domestic character related to cooking or food preparation or artisan activities undertaken on the site during the earlier phases of its use.

One fragment (ctx 11023) had a rough exterior surface and two wide flat impressions of laths or split poles each over 30mm wide. These were separated by a narrow ridge of clay 7mm wide. The fragment was 22-36mm wide and is possibly the daub render of a wattle and daub wall panel.

Plaster, mortar and cement

Other building material comprised 28 fragments (1475g) of mortar, wall plaster, cement and concrete. This included coarse sandy cream or brown lime mortar, frequently with coarse grits used as wall render. The fragments ranged from 6 to 30mm thick, though most were under 20mm thick. Some of the plaster or render had lath impressions ranging in size from 17 to 27mm wide and 6-16mm deep. Some fragments of plaster are painted in white or where coloured mostly dull shades of green, but also brown and anil. Most of this mortar and plaster comes from deposits or phases 6-9 or where it occurs in earlier deposits is in several cases associated with intrusive 19th century material and the general character of this material suggests it is similarly late in date.

Figure 1: Wattle impression sizes



References

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