

Recording early medieval discoveries from the Thames foreshore

As London's Finds Research Officer for the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), Stuart Wyatt's work has been restricted this year, so here he reviews some interesting early medieval finds made before and during lockdown.



TOP RIGHT Two silver sceattas – such coins were in everyday use in eastern and southern England in the early 8th century

Recording of PAS finds in 2020 has been something of a frustrating time both for mudlarks and for me! The foreshore had been closed for several months during 2020 due to the Coronavirus lockdown and, although the foreshore is now accessible again, recording has been limited as I was unable to meet finders or have regular access to my base at the Museum of London.

In addition, many museum specialists have been furloughed for much of the year, limiting the amount of further investigation that some recent finds warrant although they were found prior to the lockdown.

In the months before the first lockdown, there had been some fine examples of Anglo-Saxon small finds recorded along London's Thames foreshore. Usually early medieval finds from the Thames make up only a very small percentage of those reported to the PAS in London, so, when one does come in, I always get a little more than just excited!

Runic inscription

The most interesting of these was reported to me at the Museum of London in winter 2019. This was an Anglo-Saxon copper-alloy disc¹ measuring some 28mm across, and which seems to be a rare, but incomplete, example of a flat disc-headed pin with a runic inscription. The pin, which may have been attached on the reverse, is missing. The suggested runic lettering

from the futhorc alphabet, reads clockwise from the top as 'l a g m w u l f'. Although it is not yet known what the letters denote, the use of such lettering suggests an 8th-century date for the disc.



The corpus of this form of inscribed disc-headed pin is very small and pins with runic script are even rarer finds in Britain, with only three others recorded on the PAS database.² The wide distribution for the recorded PAS pins shows no clear pattern, with pins being found at either end of the country from Carlisle in the north, down to Salisbury via Hampshire in the south. A complete gilded copper-alloy example, the Malton pin in the British Museum,³ shows this type with its pin attached to the back of the reverse, while another incomplete example from Carlisle has a small decorative dome-headed copper-alloy stud through the central hole.⁴

Researcher Dr Catherine Johnson⁵ has suggested that such linked-pins were thought to be worn in pairs or trios across the chest, attached together by tiny chains at their sides. However, in the London example, she points out that the solder on the reverse may

indicate a different use, as does one of the other examples from Hampshire⁶ where it has been suggested that it may have been a brooch. Further investigation into the pin and its inscription is ongoing.

Another notable find has been an incomplete cast lead-alloy early medieval nummular disc brooch dating from c. AD 775–1100.⁷ The brooch has a triple-beaded rim with a central right-facing diademed bust with a cross in the lower left field below the nose of the bust. Measuring some 20mm in diameter, the reverse has the remains of

BELOW The copper-alloy disc, front and back, inscribed with runic letters. The runic lettering, which reads 'l a g m w u l f' awaits further research.



the pin lug and catch plate. This brooch fits a group of late Saxon disc brooches which copy, or appear to copy, coinage of the period. Similar brooches are illustrated in Weetch,⁸ with the variants being divided by whether they copy obverse or reverse designs.

From sceattas to skulls

Other exciting finds have been in Anglo-Saxon coinage: two fine coins have been recorded recently. They are silver *sceattas* dating to AD 680–710.⁹ Both obverses show a diademed head facing right within a pelleted serpent circle, while the reverses show a bird (probably a dove) on a cross within a pelleted serpent circle and two annulets in the field of the cross.

More mysterious was the discovery In March 2019 of a human frontal skull bone, recovered from the west London foreshore at Wandsworth. After being reported to the police, this has been returned with a Saxo-Norman date of AD 960–1100.

Mysterious structure

Looking further afield, another early medieval find – this time a structure – was made on the Thames foreshore, to the east of Shornemead Fort in Kent.

I had gone to the Thames estuary, at the invitation of a licensed Thames mudlark, to look at a Roman pottery assemblage when I came across a brushwood structure which was eroding out. Sections of it were in danger of being washed away after being exposed by autumn storms. This was a linear structure running at



ABOVE Cast lead-alloy nummular disc brooch found on the foreshore

right angles from the foreshore towards the river.

On my return, I contacted Elliott Wragg (then the Thames Discovery Programme Project Officer) and Gustav Milne (CITIZAN Project Leader). Having decided that the structure warranted further investigation, we returned with Oliver Hutchinson (CITIZAN Discovery Programme Officer) to take some samples of the more substantial timbers for carbon dating. These have recently returned a late 8th–9th-century date ranging from either a calibrated radiocarbon date of c. AD 779–791 (7% probability), or c. AD 800–815 (3% probability) or, most likely, c. AD 818–899.

With mudlarks back on the foreshore recovering Londoners’ lost and discarded treasures, I am hopeful that more Saxon/early medieval artefacts will be discovered, illuminating this little-known period of London’s history and the lives of these early medieval Londoners.

Stuart Wyatt is the Arts Scholar Finds Liaison Officer, having worked for the PAS since 2015 and as Finds Liaison Officer since 2017.

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FAR LEFT From left to right: Eliot Wragg, Oliver Hutchinson and Gustav Milne assessing the brushwood structure east of Shornemead Fort, while trying to remain relatively clean on slippery river deposits



LEFT Cleaning sticky river mud from one of the in-situ timbers

1. PAS no: LON-41A95B.
2. PAS nos: LANCUM-EEFFFB, DUR-79B856 and HAMP-0EE512.
3. BM Acc No: 2000,0508.1.
4. The Carlisle example: PAS no: LANCUM-EEFFFB.
5. C E Johnson *A comparative study of portable inscribed objects from Britain and Ireland, c. 400-1100 AD* PhD thesis, University of Glasgow (2020).
6. The Hampshire example: HAMP-0EE512.
7. LON-E6D81E.
8. The London brooch is Weetch type 2.Ai, but with a reverse of Weetch type C+. See R Weetch *Brooches in Late Anglo-Saxon England within a North West European context: a study of social identities between the eighth and eleventh centuries* (2013) 15–16, Fig nos 176,179.
9. LON-784587 and LON-AACB72.