

POTTERY STAMPS - A MIDDLE SAXON FAUNAL VIEWPOINT

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Summary

Interest in pottery dies and stamp impressions has been renewed in recent years, after a period of neglect. Experimental work has been carried out using 'opportunistic' bone dies, but a survey of surviving British dies of the Early Medieval period shows that the majority are made of antler, and not bone. This preference for 'purpose-made' antler dies is reflected also in studies of stamped pottery, and it seems likely that antler was the preferred medium for such objects both in Britain and on the Continent, at this time.

Dies used to produce stamp impressions on Anglo-Saxon pottery have attracted considerable attention in recent years, following a period of some neglect. Lady Briscoe's archive of stamp impressions - and closer definition of the terms 'die' and 'stamp' - have provided a worthy framework for the investigation of the relationships between surviving dies and stamp impressions (Briscoe 1981; 1983). The range of possible dies has extended to include jewellery (Briscoe 1985) and to encompass the stamping of loomweights as well as pottery (Steuer 1974). Attention has turned also to experimental attempts at reproducing stamp impressions using dies made from a variety of materials, including chalk, bone and wood (Myres and Green 1973, 257-8; Briscoe 1981, 26; Stokes 1984); and Roes has mentioned dies made from copper alloy and from baked clay (Roes 1963, 40).

Surviving dies known from pre-Conquest Britain were catalogued by Briscoe and some additions have been noted by MacGregor (Briscoe 1981, 22-3; MacGregor 1985, 194). A broader view of these dies, which include Middle Saxon examples and those from the continent, allows some more general points to be made which should influence future research.

There are no surviving dies of chalk or of wood, although either material could conceivably have been used. Experimentally, bone dies have proved to be the most efficient and useful (Stokes 1984, 28). Stokes used dies created with little or no modification from a cattle caudal vertebra and an unfused sheep tibia, but dies of this type are by no means common in the archaeological record, and neither are their stamp impressions. The list of dies provided here in Table 1 shows clearly that antler was the preferred medium for 'purpose-made' (rather than 'opportunistic') dies; 21 of the 25 dies given in Table 1 are made from antler. Of the other four examples, one is copper alloy and another is cetacean bone, a material which has more in common with antler than with domestic animal bone. This leaves the curious die from Lakenheath (Briscoe 1979), whose material has not been closely identified, and about which some doubts have recently been raised; there is some doubt also about the identification of the mid shaft of a long bone from Lackford as a pottery die (MacGregor 1985, 194). The rejection of Lethbridge's interpretation of the object (Lethbridge 1951, 19) would mean that there is no certain surviving example of a bone die from Britain.

This preference for antler extends also to the continent. There is no comprehensive study of continental dies, but a series of eleven Frisian examples were briefly discussed by Roes (Roes 1963, 40 and pl. XXXIX) and Evison has listed a number from Merovingian sites (Evison 1979, 46). Antler would seem to be the dominant material here as well.

TABLE 1

Pottery Dies from the British Isles

Bac Mhic Connain, North Uist	Cetacean Bone	Beveridge and Callander 1931-2, Fig. 15.4	
Birsay, Orkney	Antler	Stevenson 1952, Fig. 2.5	
Broch of Burrian, Orkney	Antler	MacGregor 1974, Fig. 10.145	
Dun an Fheurain, Orkney	Antler	Myres 1970; Ritchie 1971, Fig. 4.34	
Hamwic	SOU4.228	Antler	Hodges 1981, Fig. 2.5
	SOU31.2087	Antler	-
	SOU31.2670	Antler	Fig. 1
	SOU33	Antler	Hodges 1981, 13
	SOU169.1785	Antler	-
	SOU169.2411	Antler	Fig. 2
	SOU169.2826	Antler	-
Illington	Antler	Briscoe 1981, 22	
Ipswich	Antler	-	
Jarrow	Antler	MacGregor 1985, Fig. 104e	
Lackford	Bone	Lethbridge 1951, Fig. 17	
Lakenheath	Bone	Briscoe 1979	
Little Eriswell	Antler	Briscoe 1981, 22	
Norwich, Fishergate	Antler	-	
Shakenoak	Antler	Brodribb, Hands and Walker 1972, Fig. 60.76	
Swanley	Copper alloy	Brown and Bruce-Mitford 1960, 86-7	
West Stow	1	Antler	West 1985, Fig. 254.1
	2	Antler	West 1985, Fig. 254.2
	3	Antler	West 1985, Fig. 61.14
	4	Antler	West 1985, Fig. 21.1
	5	Antler	West 1985, Fig. 61.13

Virtually all antler dies appear to be made from the antler of red deer, although one example illustrated by Roes may come from roe deer, as does a recently discovered example from Hamwic, Middle Saxon Southampton (Roes 1963, pl.XXXIX.9) (Fig. 1). West illustrates a further example from West Stow (West 1985, Fig. 61.13). Red deer were prevalent within Europe during the Early Medieval period (Pietschmann 1977) and are familiar from Anglo-Saxon England, although English red deer were probably smaller than their continental counterparts (Riddler forthcoming).

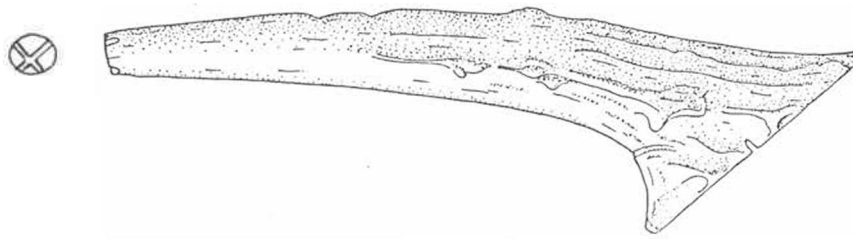


Fig. 1. 31.2670 (scale 1:1).

It has been assumed that dies found in East Anglia and dated to the Early Anglo-Saxon period were used to stamp pottery vessels (Briscoe 1981). A similar function was suggested for the dies from Frisia (Roes 1963, 40). It is equally clear, however, that not all dies need to have been used in this way. Their possible use in leather working has been proposed by Wahlöb and by MacGregor (Wahlöb 1972; MacGregor 1974, 78; 1985, 194). These arguments were anticipated by Brown, who discussed the copper alloy die from Swanley (Brown and Bruce-Mitford 1960, 86-7). The resemblance between this die and some later medieval bookbinding stamps led him to suggest that 'We may be quite sure that it was meant for tooling leather, and reasonably sure that it was meant for tooling leather bookbindings' (Brown and Bruce-Mitford 1960, 87). The Jarrow stamp, although made from antler throughout, would appear to fall within this tradition (MacGregor 1985, Fig. 104e). The notched stamp from the Broch of Burrian illustrated by MacGregor can be compared now to similar examples from Hamwic, Ipswich and Norwich, Fishergate (Fig. 2) and its use in leather working is again quite likely. If these are not pottery dies, then the curious links postulated for the Early Anglo-Saxon period between Scotland and East Anglia (Myres 1970) do not necessarily need to be maintained. The presence of four dies from Scotland is nonetheless intriguing, and awaits further explanation.

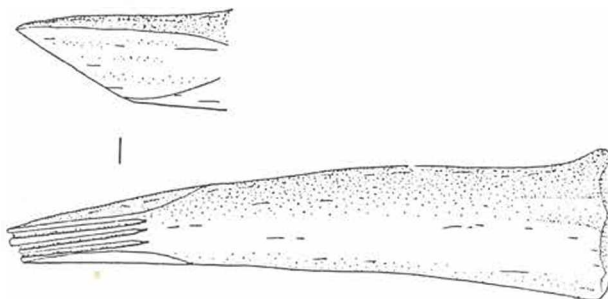


Fig. 2. 169.241 (scale 1:1).

Antler tines could be adapted with little modification to form dies whose surfaces were solid and devoid of soft cancellous tissue. Domestic animal bone generally lacks this quality, and fused epiphyses would provide points of weakness in stamping; any preference for the unfused diaphyses of sheep or sheep-sized animals should be seen in this light. MacGregor and Currey have shown how the mechanical properties of antler exceed those of bone (MacGregor and Currey 1983; MacGregor 1985, 25-9). It would appear, therefore, that the dominance of antler dies in the archaeological record may accurately reflect a distinct preference for the use of antler rather than bone in their production. It is worth noting also, that studies of the manufacturing debris from bone and antler working during the Early Medieval period are essentially studies of antler working. Published continental assemblages include those from Haithabu, Birka, Ribe, Wolin and other Pommeranian sites, Huy, Muhlberg, Quenstedt and Munster (Ulbricht 1978; Ambrosiani 1981; Chotliwy 1956; Willems 1973; Teichert 1984; Grimm 1930; Winkelmann 1971). Of these, only Munster contains substantial amounts of worked bone, in this instance the worked bone of horse. It is perhaps significant also that for Anglo-Saxon England one of the largest bone and antler assemblages, that of Hamwic, has provided seven dies, all of which are of antler.

There is little doubt that experimental attempts at reproducing stamp impressions may contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms of pottery production and decoration. A closer appraisal of the faunal preferences inherent in the Early Medieval period, however, can also add to our understanding of these processes. The opportunist use of unmodified domestic animal or bird bones in stamping has been emphasised by Briscoe, but there was little use of such 'natural' objects at West Stow (Briscoe 1981, 27-8; West 1985, 125). The overwhelming predominance of surviving dies of antler rather than bone - and the distinction between 'purpose-made' and 'opportunist' dies - demonstrated above, should surely then be considered when experimental attempts at pot-stamping are conducted.

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