



ARCHAEOLOGICAL LEATHER GROUP NEWSLETTER

52 September 2020

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Editor's note

Welcome to the second of this year's Newsletters. We have a report from Trent and Peak Archaeology on their 2018-19 excavations in Nottingham, which produced significant evidence of water management, skin processing, tanning and dyeing from the 15th century onwards. This article was intended for inclusion in the March Newsletter but had to be omitted for lack of space. I'm not sure how many other society Newsletters will have this problem!

Despite the difficulties which everyone has been facing since March, ALG members and others have continued to send in, and to respond to' queries about leather objects; a selection of their questions are included here..

You will also find news of a major publication by Jan Moens on leather footwear and its production in medieval and later Flanders.

If you have a contribution for the next issue of the Newsletter (March, 2021) please could you let me have it by Monday, 1st March. In the meantime, best wishes and let us hope for easier times to come.

Sue Winterbottom

What a year 2020 is turning out to be!

I realise that cancelling the ALG Annual General Meeting was probably the least of our worries but it was the first time that the AGM has been cancelled since the ALG started.

The ALG was first formed in the summer of 1986 when the first, basic Rules were laid down and the subscription was £3.00 per annum.

After a few years the group lapsed, partly through scarcity of articles for the Newsletter and partly because it was proving dif-

ficult to find members to join the Committee.

The ALG was then relaunched in July 1994 at a meeting at Vindolanda. A new, expanded Constitution was drawn up and the subscription was raised to £10.00 per annum (so you can see what a great deal you are getting as the subscription is still £10.00 – and for all fully paid up members the 2021 subscription will be waived).

Nothing in the Constitution has ever said anything about cancelling AGMs, for pandemics or anything else! Of course when we wrote to you in early April it was in the hope that this was only a postponement, but lockdown has lasted longer than anyone imagined and we still have social distancing and difficulties with travel.

Please don't think the Committee are burying their collective head in the sand but we have decided to forget this year; Committee Members will stay in post for a further twelve months of their respective term of office.

Having realised that meetings will not be possible this year, the Committee still want to keep in touch with the members and therefore we are hoping to arrange a series of webinars and have been in touch with a few potential presenters. If you feel that you would like to host a webinar then please get in touch with me or Angela Middleton (contact details on final page).

Also, if anyone would like to write a piece for the March 2021 Newsletter then Sue Winterbottom, our Editor, would be very pleased to hear from you.

With very best wishes

Yvette Fletcher

ALG Chair

Cover illustration: Stone-lined feature from excavations at Pemberton Street, Nottingham (see pages 10-15)

YOUR QUESTIONS TO ALG

Enquiries to the Leather Group have continued to arrive, despite the disruption so many people have experienced to their normal activities.

archaeologicalleathergroup@gmail.com

is the address to write to if you have a question you think our members may be able to help with.

A brass riveted shoe sole

In January, Laura Burnett got in touch. She is the Finds Liaison Officer for Devon and Somerset at the South West Heritage Trust and had received this enquiry from Paul Hending:

A few months ago I found this small artifact at the east end of West Beach at Watchet. I'm not sure if it derived from a cliff fall or was washed in by the sea. It appears to be part of the sole of a very small boot/shoe with an inordinate number of tiny copper nails, some of which seem to make up the number 4[0]? on what I take to be the outer side of the sole. I wonder if you might recognise the age/origin of this odd little thing. I'll try to 'attach' a few pics of it. I'll be happy to drop it in at the Centre if you think it might be interesting. With thanks for your attention.

Two of Paul's photos appear opposite. Laura contacted Jackie Keily, who in turn suggested she contact the ALG and she wrote "...I am guessing from the style of the numbering it is fairly modern but I wondered if there were parallels for putting numbers on the sole? I assume it is not an early way to mark sizes!"

The request for information was circulated and Quita Mould replied:

Taking a quick look at the photos, you have the back part of a shoe bottom of brass riveted construction (with the waist and seat area remaining). Brass riveted construction was used in the second part of the

19th century and well into the 20th century. Personally I have never seen a number made from the brass rivets on the sole, it is certainly a first for me. Looking at the number, if it refers to a shoe size



The surviving parts of the shoe from Watchet

then the shoe is of continental manufacture as the size is not a British or an American one.

Early Iron Age fragments

In March, Lisette Verspay, a leather specialist in the Netherlands, asked for some advice:

I have a question. In the material I am currently researching there are four really small fragments dating from the early Iron Age. They are too small to determine the function, and I have yet to look at them under a microscope to see if I can determine what animal they are from. What else can I do with them? I have never dealt with prehistoric finds before, so I don't know the possibilities.

- and received four replies!

Susanna Harris wrote:

For species identification of organic preserved skins with no distinctive hair/grain pattern, you could commission DNA analysis or Proteomics (ZooMS/protein fingerprinting).

Try Luise Ørsted Brandt, University of Copenhagen for DNA; Matthew Collins, University of Cambridge or other labs for proteomics. See the introduction chapter to [the ALG publication] 'Why Leather' for labs working on proteomics a few years ago.**

If there are any hairs, for microscopic hair analysis I suggest Antoinette Rast Eicher in Switzerland.

Context will have to come from the position of the leather on finds etc. when excavated. For hard-to-understand leather in archaeological contexts see the work done by Esther Cameron.

** Editor's note - Susanna's introduction to Why Leather is worth reading in its own right. The whole book is available to read online at:

<https://www.sidestone.com/books/?q=Why+Leather>

Lisette also received a reply from Roy Thomson:

This sounds like a job for the ZooMS method. The Department of Archaeology at the University of York can carry out these determinations on a relatively modest fee paying basis. I don't have details of the people who are now involved but a query to the Department should get a response.

and from Carol van Driel-Murray:

Iron age leather is incredibly rare, certainly from our countries, so even if you can't determine a function, the find is important. What sort of context is it from? Are the grain and flesh surfaces split apart? This can give an indication of whether the leather was cured or vegetable tanned.

Determining the animal species will be tricky with small fragments, but there are a number of new, promising, projects trying to identify animal remains by means of protein analysis. If this works, it would mean taking very small samples in order to get an accurate identification - apparently even sheep and goat can be distinguished. These results are from medieval parchment books. But with leather, the tanning process is the first difficulty, and for archaeological leather its even worse as this usually needs some sort of conservation treatment. Our favoured method with PEG introduces too many unknowns, though there is a project in Denmark that is trying to assess the effect of PEG on protein analysis. So even if you can't do much with the finds, it is worth storing them carefully (deep freeze or dry) for the purposes of future research.

There are at present several protein projects starting

up and it seems to me that the methods are still very experimental, so be careful with your samples and don't give them away too easily, as such early material is too valuable to experiment on just yet. But do try to ensure the finds are stored somewhere secure, in a museum for instance.

Finally, a cautionary reply from Quita Mould:

The first thing to do, I think, would be to confirm that it is actually leather or at least a skin product and work from there. While it may be a leather or skin, it is worth checking because I have found that what looks like a piece of 'leather' with no diagnostic features has turned out to be the fruiting body of a fungus such as a puffball fungus. This has been the case for some small fragments of 'leather' from pre-historic contexts.

Found in a riverbank

In May, Vincent Reed, a specialist restorer of historic woodwork, wrote to us:

Hello, I was given your details by Angela Middleton from Historic England. Angela is a colleague of mine through ICOMOS.

I found this leather shoe in a riverbank just under the waterline. It has iron and what seem to be brass



The front of the shoe found by Vincent Reed
(more photos below)

nails in the sole. It would be interesting if anybody had an idea of a date? Please see images attached.

Rebecca Shawcross responded:

Hi Vincent, Have you had any feedback on your discovery yet? I think it was probably a front lacing boot rather than a shoe. It would have had a stacked leather sole and has hobnails. How long is it



Further pictures of the riverbank shoe

– is it an adult size? I would say from the pics it was a man's and with that square toe around the 1850s-60s in date.

In reply, Vincent sent another photo (bottom left) which included a scale and added:

Thank you so much for your email. This is fascinating! I love the size difference in shoe sizes between the Victorian era and now! This was found in the river and close by is a derelict Victorian Mill. Maybe the two are linked in someway?

Decorated medieval shoe

Later in May, Lisette Verspay got in touch again:

I have come across a beautifully decorated shoe. The vamp has been decorated with punched-out hearts and the surface has also been scraped away to make leaf motifs. The backpart is filled with incisions and punched-out squares. The shoe is dated 1325-1375.

I am looking for parallels. The shoes I have found so far don't have this combination of punched-out shapes and scraping.

Also, I am looking for parallels for shoes that are decorated both on the vamp and backpart.

The decorations there are completely different, which is very interesting. Thank you for your help.

Beth Richardson and Jackie Keily replied:

Beth Richardson:

What a beautiful shoe!

Can you get copies of the books 'Shoes and Pattens' (by Francis Grew and Margrethe de Neergaard) and 'Stepping through Time' (by Olaf Goubitz)? There are examples of both types of decoration (although not hearts) in Shoes and Pattens eg the engraved and scraped leaf motifs on a late 14th-century shoe, page 87, Fig 121 – and there are punched hearts on a late medieval shoe from Dordrecht in 'Stepping through Time' page 53, Fig 27. The cross-hatched quarters (back) are also paralleled in 'Shoes and Pattens' page 86, Fig 120.

The back of your shoe with peaks at the butt-seams is an unusual shape – also I couldn't see stitch holes for a lasting margin around the bottom edge but that may just be the lighting in the photograph? Actually, those illustrated on page 85 and 87 in 'Shoes and Pattens' don't seem to have lasting margins either. Perhaps the quarters acted more like a thick back-strap on highly decorated shoes like these or



Decorated shoe - vamp



Decorated shoe - quarters

perhaps the archaeological illustrator didn't draw the stitch holes because she didn't want to spoil the design. Someone will know the answer!

Jackie Keily:

I assume you know the London examples that are published in the 'Shoes and pattens' book? If not let me know and I can send images. They are not exactly the same and do not feature your combination of cut-outs and scraped decoration, but there are examples with cut-out decoration and others with scraped decoration, including on the heel portion of the upper. All date to the late 14th century, but fashion-wise we were probably a bit behind you on the Continent!!I don't think there is much more new from London like this. What a fabulous shoe - are there more like it?

Lisette:

Yes, I have S&P right next to me, thanks. It is only one decorated shoe and a decorated knife sheath. The rest are normal shoes. All dumped in a ditch in the second half of the 14th century.

Unidentified leather object

In June we received the following from Susanne Bretzel-Scheel, an archaeological conservator for LWL-Archäologie für Westfalen:

I have an object for preservation on my table [see photo below] here, and I am at a loss as to what it



The unidentified leather object from Gronau, North Rhine-Westphalia

could be. Therefore I would kindly ask you to publish two photos of the object with the request whether someone has already seen a similar object and could give me more information.

The object is 15.5 cm long x 2.8 cm wide. The embossed leather lettering is edged with seam stitching: under the microscope you can see finest thread impressions between the holes. The rivets run through the leather completely. A belt? A strap? The object comes from the moat of a castle from an excavation in Gronau, Germany, the dating is not exactly known. Probably between the 14th and 16th century.

I look forward to any ideas from you!

Annemarieke Willemsen replied first:

Looks like (half) a sheath to me!

then Barbara Burnett wrote:

What an intriguing object! I have some thoughts as a conservator, not as a leather specialist. You will probably have observed this already: it looks like a combination of two items, one piece older than the other. There is the relatively robust and simple leather 'strap' backing, and then the upper decorative 'strap' has been attached to it. It doesn't seem to be stitched like a scabbard, but other people know more about this than I do.

So, here's one scenario: the older decorative piece was once used until it no longer functioned. It was especially valued, so was then kept and transferred, riveted, to a new leather substrate for continued use, though perhaps a lower status use. The decorative piece comes to an end, the backing piece continues. Not sure what that means...

Anyway, enough thoughts. Hope you can solve your puzzle!

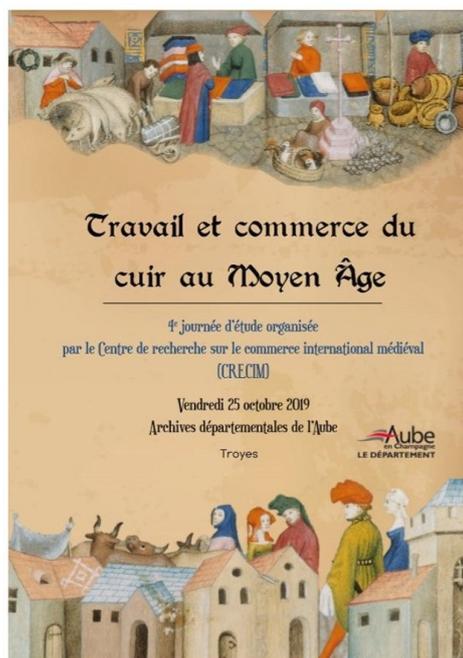


Conference at Troyes, 25 October 2019

In October 2019 a fourth Conference was held at Troyes by CRECIM – the Centre for Research on Medieval Trade, whose headquarters are at the archives of the Département de l'Aube. The subject this year was "Travail et commerce du cuir au Moyen Âge". ALG member Franklin Pereira contributed a paper on "Le cuir dans la Péninsule Ibérique: réseaux commerciaux et culturels" (Leather in the Iberian Peninsula: commercial and cultural networks).

The paper discusses the mis-use of the term 'Cordovan leather', from the 19th century onwards, to refer to a style of highly decorated leatherwork whereas in medieval production and trade it referred rather to a particular tannage of goatskin. It also argues that the expression 'Islamic Spain' (in reference to leatherworking, and other crafts) is misleading, since it ignores the co-existence of artisans of Christian, Jewish and Islamic heritage when parts of modern Spain and Portugal were under the rule of a succession of Muslim caliphates, emirates and kingdoms. A significant influence was that of Mudejar art – a fusion of Islamic and Christian traditions - whilst Spain as an entity can only be traced back to the marriage of the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469. An abridged version of Franklin's paper can be read (in French) here:

<https://tinyurl.com/y6sk3689>



Nineteenth century horse tack

by Lisette Verspay-Frank

Recently I researched the leather finds from an excavation at Veldhoven, a village near the city of Eindhoven (the Netherlands). Amongst the finds were several thick belts/straps with iron buckles attached, found in a 19th century well.

One had a O-shaped buckle, the other a D-shaped one (Figure 1). The thickness and sturdiness of the straps indicated that they were pieces of horse tack. Now, I have come across pieces of horse tack before, but normally I have not been able to go any further in my analysis than that. These straps were so big and distinctive, however, that I thought it should be possible to narrow it down to the position on the horse.

Several years ago I bought the book *Brabants Tuig* by Geert de Bruijn about historical horse tack. Browsing through the book I came across

Figure 2. In it was a picture of a breeching (Dutch: *achterbroek*), with straps ending in O-shaped and D-shaped rings (not buckles). I looked further, but nothing else seemed to apply. Wanting a second opinion, I decided to ask my neighbour. He is an retired farmer in his seventies, old enough perhaps to have driven a horse and cart over the fields in his youth.

So, armed with straps and book, I decided to visit my neighbour. Fortunately he was outside admiring his sheep (and lambs), and I was able to explain the situation. After looking at the finds - he didn't even need the book! - he confirmed it was indeed the breeching from a horse tack.

So, what is it exactly that I have found (see Figure 3)? The O-belt is the breeching seat (Dutch: *broekriem*) which goes round the back of the horses behind. The D-belt is the backstrap (Dutch: *rugriem*), which connects the breeching with the saddle. So, what does it do? The breeching is connected with chains to the thills (cart shafts), which means that if the horse is going backwards, the breeching will prohibit the

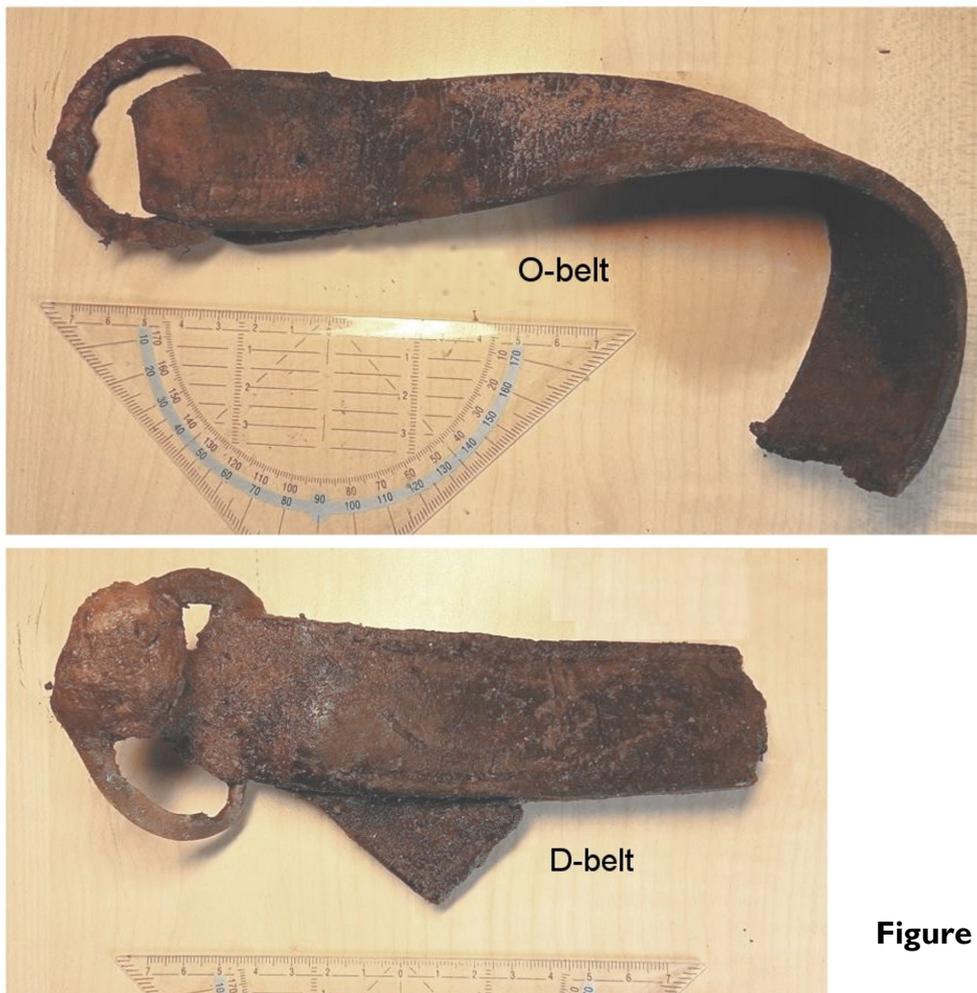


Figure 1

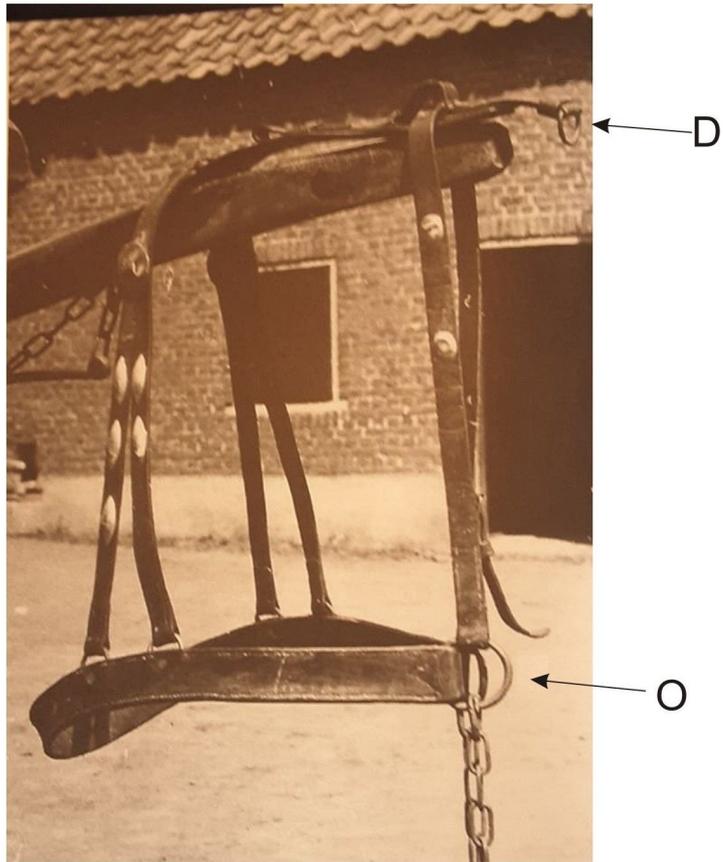


Figure 2 (from *Brabants Tuig* by Geert de Bruijn)

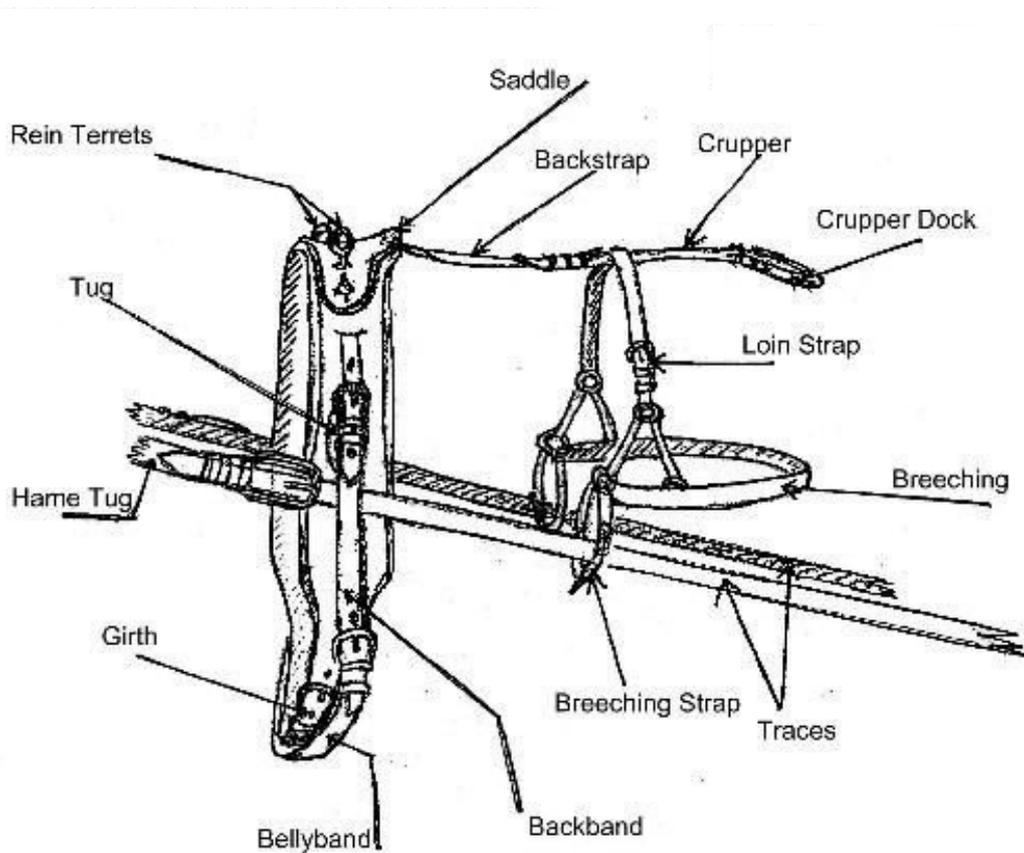


Figure 3 Single harness pad with crupper and breeching

cart from bumping into the horse. It will do the same if going downhill and the cart is going faster than the horse.

All in all, it was a very satisfying journey to find out what the straps were, with a great result.

Leather on the Leen

by Camilla Collins, Dr Kris Poole, Laura Parker, Kristina Krawiec and Paul Renner

Trent and Peak Archaeology

During 2018 and 2019, Trent and Peak Archaeology were commissioned to undertake archaeological excavations in advance of development at two adjacent sites at London Road and Pemberton Street, Nottingham (Figure 1). These sites are located on the southern side of the historic core of Nottingham, at the base of the sandstone outcrop of Malin Hill and on the floodplain of the River Leen. This area was known as Narrow Marsh and, from the medieval period until the early 20th century, was a poor, overcrowded part of the city (Lomax 2013, 148).

The excavation area fronted onto London Road to the north, whilst to the south it fronted onto Pemberton Street (Figure 1). Modern truncation had removed earlier features near the southeast corner of the London Road site and in the centre of the northwest-southeast aligned part of Pemberton Street (Figure 1). Nonetheless, several phases of occupation associated with skin processing were identified at both sites, with significant, well-preserved sequences spanning the medieval to post-medieval periods. Post-excavation analysis of the site is ongoing, but this article outlines the current state of knowledge and interpretation of the site.

The archaeological remains directly overlay deposits associated with the former course of the River Leen. The river is now a canalised shadow of its former self. The medieval Leen would have been a wider, braided system with multiple shifting courses within a mosaic floodplain.

A fragment of human skull recovered from the base of the river deposits suggests that this sequence accumulated between the 11th to 14th centuries AD. The first phase of activity at both sites was represented by a deliberate attempt in the 13th and 14th centuries to raise the ground



Plate 1: The first phase of 13th/14th century walls below a more substantial 15th century building at the London Road site.

level to carve out useable land on the Leen floodplain. On this built-up land, several roughly constructed sandstone walls at the London Road site were recorded, representing makeshift shed structures or yard plots (Plate 1).

In the 14th to 15th centuries the use of the site was likely to be seasonal, due to the dynamic nature of the river, but by the close of the 15th century had progressed to more permanent occupation. Larger sandstone walls were recorded representing a single building fronting onto the main thoroughfare leading up to Malin Hill. This was part of a series of narrow tenements and commercial properties that lined the southern side of the road of the Narrow Marsh at that time. At Pemberton Street, water management features were recorded, with wooden drains and ditch features clearly indicating that occupation of the site was a challenge.



Figure 1: Location and plans of the excavations at London Rd. and Pemberton St., Nottingham. Trent and Peak Archaeology

From the 15th to 17th centuries the primary use of this location was for leather production, as indicated by the archaeological features recorded, namely tanning pits and the large animal bone assemblage recovered. A large hearth, probably used for dyeing, was recorded in the yard space at London Road and was contemporary with the tenement buildings. More significantly, a large number of clay-lined pits (34 in total) were present, three of which were recorded at the western boundary of London Road, with a larger complex of pits excavated at Pemberton Street (Figure 1; Plate 2).

The majority of these pits were circular and impressions within the clay lining indicate that they once held wooden barrels. These circular pits ranged in diameter from 1.2m to 1.92m and in depth from 0.1m to 0.82m. They were present across the majority of the site. In addition to these, a smaller number of square clay-lined pits, measuring 0.75m to 1.2m wide and 0.2m to 0.24m deep, were present, as well as at least two long, rectangular clay-lined features. These rectangular features (Plate 3), measuring 2.3m to 4.1m long by 1.8m to 2.02m wide and 0.08m to 0.52m deep, were similar to contemporary examples excavated at The Green, Northampton, suggested to have been used for 'foot tubbing' light leather (Shaw 1996). The majority of the

square and rectangular pits were located in the southwestern corner of the Pemberton Street site.

Some intercutting of features was evident, indicating more than one phase of activity, but it has not yet been possible to determine the site layout in each phase. Nonetheless, although the pits did not form a coherent plan (likely in part due to later truncation), those in the southern area of the Pemberton Street site were arranged in a roughly rectangular shape. Within this, situated slightly off centre, was a stone lined pit divided into two parts, each of which was filled with lime (Plate 4 and front cover). Three surviving post-holes near this feature indicate that it may have been covered by a simple wooden structure. Aside from this possible structure, no other evidence of buildings contemporary with the tanning/tawing activity was found during the excavations.

The finds assemblage from the site was dominated by animal bone, largely thought to represent waste from skin processing with only a small proportion of consumption waste represented. Although some of the material is still being processed, there are in excess of 5000 bones within the assemblage, of which around 4600 bones have so far been assessed (Plate 5).



Plate 2: Tanning/tawing pits at Pemberton Street.



Plate 3: One of the rectangular features, possibly used for 'foot tubbing'.



Plate 4: Stone-lined feature, divided into two parts, filled with lime.

These remains are dominated by the bones of sheep (approximately 4000 fragments), of which metacarpals (front foot bones) are the most numerous, making up 2500 fragments of the total. These bones represent a minimum of around 1300 individual sheep, indicating the scale of resources being drawn into medieval and early post-medieval Nottingham. Sheep metatarsals (back foot bones) were also present in some numbers, but were six times less common than metacarpals. The majority of the remaining sheep bones are phalanges (toe bones), whilst very few horn cores (only around 20) are present. Despite metapodials being a particularly diagnostic bone for distinguishing between sheep and goats, no evidence for goat was identified in the assemblage.

After sheep, the next most common species represented was cattle. A minimum of 101 individuals were identified, with horn cores making up just over half of the 420 cattle bones. The remainder of the cattle bones potentially represent food waste, although calf bones, typically comprising metacarpals and/or radii and mandibles, appeared in a number of contexts. In addition to the exploitation of skins of fully grown cattle, it appears that use was also being made of calfskins. Other species that appear to have been utilized for their skins, albeit in much lower numbers, were horse (in many cases represented by partial skeletons) and possibly dog and cat. Further analysis is required in order to de-

termine whether particular species and/or body-parts were being dumped in particular areas or features of the site.

The remainder of the finds assemblage consisted of ceramic building material, pottery and a small assemblage of metal finds comprising iron nails and copper alloy objects (coins and personal dress items). No tools were recovered and no leather or skins were present.

The evidence for skin processing at this location correlates with previous findings on the River Leen floodplain. These include further clay-lined pits and cattle horn cores between Cliff Road and Canal Street, some 300m to the west of Pemberton Street, as well as a large collection of cattle tarsals and metatarsals (dating from the 13th to 15th centuries) from the Broadmarsh Shopping Centre (Brown 2006; Higgins 2017). Tanning pits have also been recorded within some of the caves under Nottingham city centre, such as at Drury Hill (dating from around 1300-1500 AD) and at the Black's Head site on Lister Gate/Low Pavement (infilled during the late 16th-17th centuries: Waltham and MacCormick 1993).

The earliest documentary reference to tanning in Nottingham dates to 1395, and by 1667 there were one hundred master tanners in the town. By 1767 this number had reduced to just three (Holland Walker 1926). The number of tanneries by the River Leen had also reduced from 47



Plate 5: Part of the bone assemblage from Pemberton Street.

in 1667 to 21 in 1707 (Clarkson 1966, 35). The documentary sources and the archaeological evidence therefore indicate a peak of tanning activity in Nottingham between the 14th and 17th centuries. The archaeological evidence unearthed at London Road and Pemberton Street is firmly within this timeframe. It also represents the most extensively excavated skin processing site with the largest assemblage of industrially-derived animal bone from Nottingham. Further post-excavation work on the remains recovered from both sites should shed light on the nature of the activity at this location and make a valuable contribution to understanding of the tanning/tawing industry, both at a local and national level.

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New Book

Jan Moens, **De archeologie van leren schoeisel in de middeleeuwen en nieuwe tijden in Vlaanderen. Een chronologische, technische en typologische studie. Analyse en interpretatie.**

Spa uitgevers 2020. Many illustrations.

Following the books on footwear by Goubitz and Volken, a third major standard work on shoes has appeared, but specifically on Flanders - Belgium. In total, Jan Moens examined 38 leather assemblages, 20 of which were provided with an absolute date while the other 18 could be dated based on other finds. The finds studied are examined and described chronologically, technically and typologically.

Particular attention is also paid to the production processes of shoemakers and cobblers and the locations where these professions carried out their activities within the urban context.

It is a comprehensive study covering all aspects of the material. It will be a necessary resource for students and researchers in the subject both because of the new insights it contains and as an addition to the previously published works.

More information can be found on the website of the Spa publishers:

<https://spa-uitgevers.biedmeer.nl/Webwinkel-Product-431787407/>



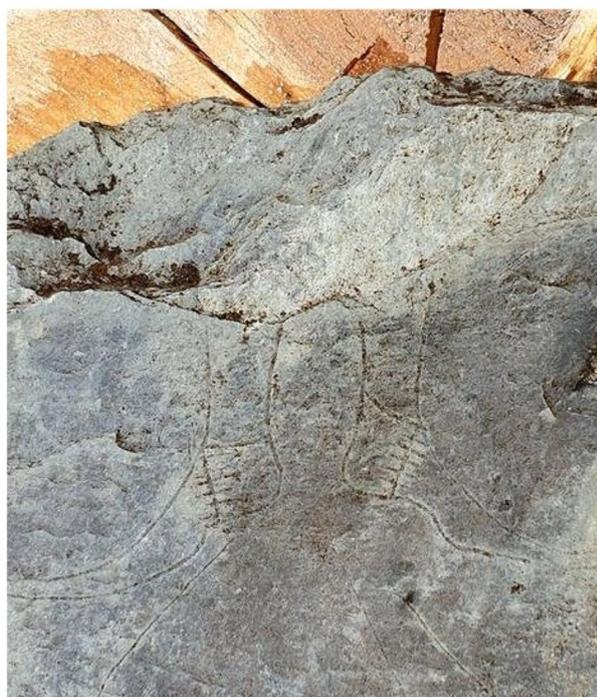
Poulaines on a slate

Jan Moens has reported a recent find from Bruges of a medieval slate bearing the scratched depiction of a knight on horseback. He is blowing a horn and wears shoes with long, exaggerated pointed toes (poulaines). On the reverse, the legs of a standing figure appear. The figure is wearing a similar pair of shoes with the side seams indicated by vertical lines cut by a series of horizontal dashes (see below).

Days earlier another slate had been found, inscribed with the alphabet and a few digits. Could these graffiti perhaps have a scholastic origin? Both slates probably date to the 14th century and are illustrated on the facebook page of BAAC Vlaanderen, a Belgian archaeological and historic buildings consultancy:

<https://www.facebook.com/BaacVlaanderen>

The relevant posts are dated 4th August and 29th July.



Feet with poulaines on the slate from Bruges

Archaeological Leather Group Committee Members, 2020 -21

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