

Assessment of the leather from Aylesbury Berryfields, Buckinghamshire (AYLBER)

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1 Methodology

The following assessment is based on examination of the wet leather on 12th January 2017; the leather had been recovered from the excavations in 2011. A small amount of additional washing was required prior to examination. A basic record of the material has been made noting all the diagnostic features present, measurement of relevant dimensions and species identification where possible. Working drawings have been made of the principal items. The material is summarised below (2-3) incorporating the contextual information available at present, recommendations for conservation are given (5) and the necessity for additional work is considered (6).

All measurements are in millimetres (mm). Leather species were identified by hair follicle pattern using a low-powered magnification. + indicates an incomplete measurement. Any shoe sizing has been calculated according to the modern English Shoe-Size scale from the measurement of the insoles of shoes of multi-part constructions. No allowance for shrinkage has been made. The shoe terms employed are those in common use in the archaeological literature; seams, constructions and nailing patterns are fully described by van Driel-Murray in Goubitz, van Driel-Murray and Groenman-van Waatering 2001 and constructional thonging by Mould (1997, 328-31).

2 Condition of the material

The leather has been washed and is currently packed wet in double, self-sealing polythene bags. It is delicate, tears easily, prone to further fragmentation and liable to tear and break during handling.

3 Summary and dating

The remains of two shoes of nailed construction, the mostly commonly recovered shoe construction in use throughout the Roman period, were found in the lower fills of a large pit on the edge of the Roman road (Akeman Street) during excavations in 2011.

A shoe (SF2616), possibly worn on the right foot, was found in fill [3073], another (SF2628), for the left foot, was found in [3074]. The shoes were incomplete, being represented primarily by their bottom units. The shoes were not a pair, though of similar size, estimated as small adult size, they had differing constructional features and so were clearly of different styles. One shoe (SF2616) was more heavily nailed (type 2B) with a double row of hobnails around the edge of the sole and no constructional thonging, the other (SF2628) was more lightly nailed with a single row around the edge (type 1C) and had constructional thonging (type 2) holding the bottom components in place. This more lightly nailed shoe (SF2628) had a small heel stiffener, 30mm high, and an area of the lasting margin of its upper of sheep/goatskin, likely to be goatskin, preserved between the lower face of the insole and the upper face of the midsole. The feature in which they were found is dated to the second/third century. The shoes are compatible with this dating. As the shoe bottom units were incomplete and they lacked well preserved uppers, more precise dating is not possible.

More than forty coins of second/third century date were present in the pit along with complete and near complete pottery vessels, two articulated animal skeletons, three complete eggs and a basket or tray. This array of contents may suggest a ritual deposit potentially a rite of closure, and the two shoes may have been deliberately placed in the pit as part of this ritual assemblage rather than simply the result of domestic rubbish disposal.

4 Potential for further research

The two nailed shoes show that 'Romanised' footwear was being worn. The information adds to the small, but growing, body of evidence for the extent of the use of vegetable tanned leather in civilian SE Britain and illustrates the degree of 'Romanisation' adopted by a small rural community in the south east of the country. Relatively little is known about Romano-British leatherworking in civilian rural Britain in comparison to military and urban contexts, and the information is scattered with much residing in 'grey literature'. A summary of the assemblage should be included in any site publication/narrative to make the data gathered available to a wider audience enabling further research by others.

5 Conservation requirements

The wet leather cannot be stored indefinitely. Without conservation the leather will deteriorate and is potentially hazardous to health being liable to fungal and bacterial infection. Wet leather presents difficulties with short-term storage, transportation, study and illustration (English Heritage Guidelines 1995: 6; 2012). The eventual repository of the leather should be consulted regarding their discard and retention policy for wet organic material. It is usual for this to follow that recommended in the SMA Guidelines and unlikely that they will accept wet leather. If the leather is to be retained it is recommended that the wet leather is conserved. English Heritage Guidelines (2012) provides advice on the conservation options available. If freeze-drying is not available, in this case, it may be considered appropriate for the leather to be allowed to air dry under controlled conditions. The leather should be fully photographed to provide a permanent record should this be undertaken.

6 Work required

A basic record (as defined in RFG & FRG Guidelines 1993) has been made, within the constraints of the condition of the material, and is appended to this assessment. Working drawings of the principal components of both shoes have been made. Should line drawings for publication be required the working drawings should be used to guide the illustrator as to views and details required, conventions to be used etc. Alternatively, they can be digitising. This record should form part of the site archive.

No further work is required. Any summary in the site narrative should include details of the nailing types and the presence and absence of the constructional thonging to enable data gathering by other researchers.

7 References

Driel-Murray, C. van 2001, Footwear in the North-Western Provinces of the Roman Empire. In: Goubitz, O, Driel-Murray, C. van and Groenman-van Waateringe, W. *Stepping through Time. Archaeological Footwear from Prehistoric Times until 1800*, Zwolle: SPA

English Heritage, 1995, Guidelines for the care of waterlogged archaeological leather. Scientific and Technical Publications Guideline 4.

English Heritage, 2012, *Waterlogged Organic Artefacts. Guidelines of their Recovery, Analysis and Conservation*.

Mould, Q. 1997, Leather. In Wilmott, T. *Birdoswald. Excavations of a Roman fort on Hadrian's Wall and its successor settlements: 1987-92*, English Heritage Archaeological Report 14, 326-341. London: English Heritage

Basic record of the leather from Aylesbury Berryfields, Buckinghamshire (AYLBER)

AYBCM: 2007.165, AYLBER10

SF 2628 Context 3074 Leather nailed shoe, left foot, adult size

Bottom unit of nailed construction with insole, midsole, middle packing, heel stiffener and lasting margin of upper present. Toe area, left side of upper tread area and sides of the bottom unit broken off. What remains appears straight but wear and the shape of the heel stiffener suggest it was worn on the left foot. Natural tread shape tapering slightly to the seat, with no distinct waist. The seat area has been moulded around the foot by wear. Constructional thonging visible at the insole seat and can be seen criss-crossing the tread area on the underside of the insole: constructional thonging type 2, thong 5mm wide. Midsole, of similar size to the insole, with a second fragment broken from the tread area. Folded tongue-shaped piece used as middle packing, with impression from bracing thread. No hobnails present but some iron staining visible, nailing CVDM type 1C with a single row around the edge, infilling at the tread and seat, and a single nail at the waist. Complete heel stiffener present c. 30mm high at centre back, grain side inward to the foot, of cattle hide. Small area of broken upper survives on the left side at the waist area and adhering to the lower part of the outside of the heel stiffener, surface is worn with no grain pattern visible. Part of the upper lasting margin is preserved on the underside of the insole tread area with elliptical holes along the edge with oblique impressions of the narrow thong, 3mm wide, with which it was stitched to the underside of the insole. Upper lasting margin leather sheep/goatskin. Surviving insole length 238+mm, width tread 67mm, 'waist' 52mm, seat 57mm. Estimated no smaller than adult size 3(35.5)

Context 3074 from sample 193 likely to be broken from SF2628 above

Bag 1: 7 small fragments broken from a nailed shoe bottom unit, 2 with nail holes present

Bag 2 from >10mm sieve: 3 fragments broken from a nailed shoe bottom unit with nail holes present, one fragment coming from the edge.

SF 2616 Context 3073 Leather nailed shoe, foot uncertain, adult size

Bottom unit of nailed construction, now broken into two parts, with insole, midsole, sole. The toe and part of the tread area broken off. Natural shaped tread tapering slightly to the seat with no distinct waist, foot uncertain possibly for the right foot. Insole of bovine leather, midsole and sole with clear impression of hobnail heads but no hobnails present. Nailing CVDM 2B with a double row around the edge, clearly visible down left side and waist and seat area of the right side, infilling at the tread and seat, with an unnailed area at the waist. No constructional thonging. Surviving insole length 202+mm, width tread 76+mm, waist 56mm, seat 53mm. Estimated small adult size

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