

UNCORRECTED ARCHIVE REPORT

APPENDIX 8 – FIRED CLAY

by George Lambrick

Over 520 objects weighing more than 52kg were recorded. Details are held in the site archive. From a few contexts there was also a good deal of fairly amorphous daub or semi-fired oven material that was not quantified or recorded in detail. The material was recorded by broad class, and quantified context by context in terms of number of fragments and weight, with dimensions, fabric and a brief description of classifiable material.

Fabrics

Almost all the material was made of sandy clay fabrics, most of it either fine sand (S1) or slightly coarser material (S2), with variants related to varying amounts of other inclusions, such as plant remains.

Main fabrics

S1 Fine sand with glassy grains, sparse black and brown grains; probable malmstone inclusions, very occasional larger quartzite pebble, smaller black hard semi-angular inclusions or flint - possible origin outwash from upper greensand/ gault? Capable of being smoothed to a very fine or burnished surface. Many objects are poorly sorted and fired with the 'slabs' in particular often exhibiting a laminar structure.

S2 Poorly sorted fine to coarse sand with a range of clear, milky, brown quartz, micaeous and ferruginous inclusions, occasional pieces of malmstone, flint etc. Some objects are poorly sorted and fired exhibiting a laminar structure.

Other variants

S3 Poorly sorted fine sand with a range of clear, milky, brown quartz, micaeous and ferruginous inclusions poss same as S1

S4 Very like S2 but with occasional pieces of malmstone, flint etc and vegetation voids

S5 Medium poorly sorted sand with extensive white chalky inclusions

S6 Medium sand with milky, occasionally clear or coloured quarts v occasional plant voids (like S2 but no malmstone or flint)

S7 Medium sand very soft fired to rich orange red - may be same as S6 but without obvious plant remains

S8 Fine sandy slightly soapy fabric (like S1) with plant voids from ?crop processing

SH1 Fine to medium mixed sand with some poorly sorted fossil shell frags

SV2 Poorly sorted fine to coarse sand with a range of clear, milky, brown quartz, micaceous and ferruginous inclusions, possibly malmstone and abundant voids and occasional remains of plant material

The extent to which there are very real differences between the fabrics, or how far they are natural variations of a basic local sources of sandy clay is uncertain: the two main fabrics are quite variable with no absolute distinction, and likewise the variants may only be extreme examples of natural variability. In so far as there is any chronological distinction that might confirm a real difference, S6 was confined to a number of Saxon doughnut-shaped loomweights and almost all objects of this type were made in this fabric.

Neolithic to middle Bronze Age

No significant fired clay material was found in earlier prehistoric contexts

Late Bronze Age to Middle Iron Age

'Loomweights'

43 items were classified as 'loomweights' (though cf Poole in Cunliffe and Poole 1991 who regards these objects as 'oven bricks'). Most were fragmentary, with only 5 over 0.5kg. One was pyramidal, all the others triangular where observable. The two most complete examples (including the pyramidal one), were unstratified (along with 6 others from undated contexts). Among 3 examples from early Iron Age contexts, only one was definite (F305). The majority of other examples (23) came from middle Iron Age contexts. Six of the 11 pieces from Roman contexts were definite. The fabrics were split equally between the two main sandy fabrics, and firing varied from well-fired to significantly under-fired and fragile. One piece was extremely worn as if subsequently used in a cobbled threshold.

Main report Figure 69:

1. A typically late Bronze Age pyramidal weight has a single 1.0cm diameter hole through the apex (which has broken off on line of hole). The base was also broken - possibly in firing. One side was fired black, the other oxidised; little sign of wear in the hole. u/s
2. Typical IA equilateral triangular 'loomweight' of medium size with one corner missing; 0.8-1.0 cm diameter holes through two surviving corners, possible wear on two of inner edges of hole entrances?; broken off part not caused by another hole - probably only ever two holes. u/s

Not illustrated:

3. Typical IA equilateral triangular 'loomweight' of medium size with much

missing but somewhat unusually two holes through the surviving corner

Daub

There was rather little Iron Age daub, only a couple of pieces from an early Iron Age context (F671) the remainder from only a few middle Iron Age contexts (the west facing penannular gully complex (F200 + 203), the occupation layer in the uppermost fill of the Bronze Age waterhole (L106), a nearby gully (F126) and one of the ditches in the southern part of the site (F505). Most was made of medium sandy clay but a few fragments had abundant chalky inclusions or plant remains. Rod impressions were present in one instance indicating woven wattles. Diameters of rods varied from c 0.5 cm up to c. 2cm.

Other fired clay

No definite examples of Iron Age briquetage or ovens were noted, though daub fragments might have come from ovens. The remaining fired clay consisted of small irregular pieces of uncertain type.

Late Iron Age and Roman

'Loomweights'

As noted above, some pieces of triangular 'loomweight' were found in late Iron Age to mid Roman contexts. They could be redeposited from earlier contexts, but might indicate the survival of these objects into the Roman period, and is comparable to the pattern at Gravelly Guy (Lambrick and Allen 2004, 343, 400).

Daub, cob and possible oven remains

A Roman pit F19 produced a very large quantity of lumps of poorly fired and/or unfired material, generally consisting of earthy chalky lumps, but with many pieces having a smooth fine sandy (plastered?) face that seems to be fired to a pale orange colour. One or two pieces have possible impressions of rods but not commonly enough to be regarded as 'daub', and is perhaps better regarded as a kind of cob. Most surfaces are flat, but one piece has a very smooth curved surface. There is no indication of the thickness of the material so it is not clear if it came from a wall, oven or other structural object.

One object from the same context appears to be part of a slab 8cms thick with a strongly concave edge, one face having a more rounded corner to this edge than the other. The opening formed by the concave edge could be a hole in an oven or kiln floor, but it is rather thick for an oven floor and there are no pottery wasters. It is more likely to be from an arched opening in the side of an oven. The fabric is like the outer surface of the rest of the material in the context and may be from the same structure. The absence of earthy/chalky material is not necessarily significant, as it is possible that more of the

better fired outer material was used to form a strong surround for the opening.

Only 12 pieces of daub with more obvious signs of wattle impressions were found in Roman contexts. Most were made of medium sandy clay but a few fragments had abundant chalky inclusions or plant remains. In a couple of instances a fine sandy clay surface appears to have been added to chalky earth core. Rod impressions were present, diameters of rods varying from c 0.5 cm up to c. 2.5cm.

Fired Clay Slabs

Approximately 175 pieces of fired clay slab weighing a total of c. 15.8 kg were recovered from late Iron Age to later Roman contexts. These objects are often referred to as 'Belgic Brick', generally consisting of rather poorly fired often laminar fine sandy clay usually with a smooth to very smooth (even burnished) surface on one side and a less smooth surface on the other, often with abundant plant impressions similar to the impressions on some pottery bases identified as crop processing debris (see Appendix 19). Some very smooth surfaces appear to be almost a slip or lime wash.

The vast majority (96 fragments) were made from the fine sandy fabric S1, with ten in medium sandy fabric S2, and three in other variants of these fabrics. Firing varied from good to poor, some examples having a very flakey, poorly wedged laminar structure.

No complete slabs were found or even any examples with opposing edges present to indicate their size. Thicknesses (where complete) varied from about 2 to 4 cms. Where edges survived (which was quite commonly) they varied in rectilinear, angled, rounded or bevelled profiles. Corners were very rare but two possible edges appear to change direction at an oblique angle and some edges were distinctly curved rather than straight, though not quite like the ceramic discs found elsewhere (Biddulph 2005). Surfaces were generally flat or slightly curved, with some instances of the smoother surfaces being somewhat dished as compared with the edge, giving a strong impression that the smoother surface was the top. In a few cases the smooth surfaces were slightly crazed.

The use of these objects has been the subject of much debate and remains uncertain. Some show differential wear as if used as flooring – perhaps as sections of hearth surround (which might also explain the oblique angled edges). Other uses might include various forms of food preparation or uses in drying materials. The possible significance of the apparent association with crop-processing debris is unclear: it may mean no more than that the slabs were made in the same area as where crop processing debris accumulated, or this material was convenient way to stop the bottom of the slab from sticking to unwanted material as it was made – the plant material would just burn off during firing.

Tiles

Only six pieces of Roman fired clay were recorded as 'tile', and only one was fairly clearly part of a tegula roof tile (a very worn piece from an undated context might be

another). The other pieces were not very clearly different from the 'slabs' but tended to be better fired and often thinner, one piece having a curved cross-section, though not obviously an imbrex.

Other fired clay

There were over 122 other unclassified pieces of fired clay weighing over 3.5kg from Roman contexts, many of which are likely to be from objects such as those identified above.

Saxon

Loomweights

A total of 16 pieces of typical doughnut-shaped loomweight were recovered weighing 2.3kg. Six pieces were from pit F664, six from the backfill of recut well/pit F43, one from pit or waterhole F39 and two from a small pit or ditch (F660). None of them was complete, but where it was possible to estimate internal diameters varied from 3.3cm to 5-6cms, external from 11cms to 13.7cms. They were consistently made of a medium sandy fabric that tended to lack the chalk, flint or malmstone inclusions in the common fired clay fabrics, and was mainly fired to an external orange colour. In one instance the fabric was supplemented by plant material. Thicknesses varied from 3.5 to 5 cms, in some cases being tapered by about 1cm either inwards to the centre or outwards.

The dimensions are comparable to other local examples (eg Yarnton Barclay in Hey 2004, 290-2) but only up to a third of any one weight survived and it was difficult to be sure of their shape but appear to have been annular or intermediate rather than bun-shaped (Hurst 1959).

Mass material or cob

In addition to the loomweight fragments, F43 produced a variety of small and larger pieces of soft medium sandy clay lumps fired to a rich orange red, the largest of which weigh over 4kg, some with apparent surfaces (though not all of these are real, some being the result of excavation when soft). Some pieces have impressions of wattle (though not closely woven) and at least two pieces have what appears to be a slip or limewash surface, possibly suggesting that it may be the remains of burnt cob/ mass walling.

Other fragments

There were very few other fragments of fired clay from Saxon contexts.

Modern

A modern brick and a few pieces of post-medieval roof tile were recovered.

Discussion

The most distinctive objects, notably the Iron Age and Saxon 'loomweights' are typical of their periods. The pyramidal example is one of the more distinctive pieces of evidence of late Bronze Age activity on the site, while the recovery of triangular examples from Roman contexts again raises the issue of whether they remained in use into the Roman period.

The site has produced an rather unusually large quantity of slab fragments of so-called 'Belgic Brick,' though it is not uncommon in the Upper Thames valley, which is part of a much wider distribution across southern England (Hey 1995, 136-8; Booth and Hayden 2000, 318; Booth and Symonds 2004, 344-5; Biddulph 2005)

The virtual absence of Roman brick and tile is typical for lowly Upper Thames farming settlements.

The structural oven or cob walling material from Roman and Saxon contexts is too amorphous to tell exactly what sort of structure it represents.

References

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