



CONTEXTUALISING METAL-DETECTED DISCOVERIES: THE STAFFORDSHIRE ANGLO-SAXON HOARD

NEWSLETTER JUNE 4TH 2012

Introduction

This Jubilee weekend provides a good opportunity to take stock of the progress of the project. In the first Newsletter circulated to the team on March 27th following English Heritage's commissioning of the project, I warned that I anticipated April would be occupied with contractual matters between Stoke and the organisations the work was being sub-contracted to. This has indeed proved to be the case. Barbican and Stoke exchanged contracts at the end of April, and this allowed the strands of work that Barbican has direct responsibility for to be commissioned. At the time of writing the contract between Stoke and the BM has not yet been signed, but it is hoped that the negotiations are now drawing to a satisfactory close and an agreement between the two parties will soon be in place.

In part May has been a period of meetings (and lunches) so that the practicalities of the project can be agreed. To this end I visited Lincoln to brief the X-radiography team about the project as they had not been directly involved in the Assessment stage work. There were also meetings at PMAG with the typology team and museum staff, BMAG with the conservators and Lincoln team, and at the BM to discuss that strand. These meetings were all extremely useful and enabled team members to meet, sometimes for the first time. They also allowed us to discuss the practicalities of access with the Museum teams. This is a slightly unusual post-excavation project in that research and exhibition needs have to be woven together. This puts added work on the Museum teams as every time an object moves condition reports have to be checked and at least one member of the curatorial team has to accompany them. At this point too they are having to check that the appropriate insurance valuations are in place for each individual piece, so that the material can move to Lincoln for X-radiography. As the research project is based at PMAG, this latter task is falling on the shoulders of the team there at a time when they are particularly busy with preparations for the big exhibition that will open in PMAG on July 21st. So I would like to record my special thanks here to both teams for all their help over the past month.

The easiest way to summarise what has been happening is to describe it according to the main project work strands.

Central Services and Management

There is now a section on the Barbican web site to tell the wider world about the project. It includes a brief outline of what we propose to do, the project design in a downloadable form and a page about the team itself. To see this go to the projects section of the Barbican web site or direct to:-

<http://www.barbicanra.co.uk/section.php?xSec=42>

This is probably a good place to remind you that the Hoard web site itself has a research section. As some people have been having difficulty locating this – the directions from the right hand panel on the front page <http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/> are:

Understanding the hoard → Research: understanding the Hoard .

We are currently having discussions with the Owners over whether information about the progress of analysis project is to go on the Barbican site, the Hoard site or both.

Bryan Alvey has started work on the database design and implementation. This has involved buying a separate domain name and that site will eventually become the secure web site for the analysis project. The data structure is now there and Bryan tells me that now the tricky web design starts.

Conservation at BMAG

The normal work of the conservators for the exhibitions etc has been ongoing, and since February there have also been two characterisation and grouping exercises that are now coming to completion. These were developed outside of the research project but will clearly make useful inputs into it. Deborah Magnoler has been working on the garnets and their cells looking to identify pieces with similar suites of designs. Cymbeline Storey has been looking at the fragments decorated with niello and has grouped ones that may have come from the same object. Both of these pieces of work will result in a fully illustrated document which will be of use both to the conservators themselves, the curators and the typology team.

X-radiography at Lincoln

On May 24th the first batch of material (486 items) was delivered to Lincoln for X-radiography. This consisted of all the fittings that belonged to edged weapons apart from a few that had gone on display at Lichfield Cathedral at the end of April. This category was chosen for investigation first as it includes a wide range of shapes and sizes of items. Some of these should be straightforward to X-ray but others are likely to pose technical problems. The X-radiography of so much gold is an unusual exercise and so this group will enable the Lincoln team to develop methodology. Initially they will be working to a very tight schedule as we aim to have all the items due to go on display in PMAG on July 21st back at the museum before the end of this month.

X-radiography is a standard research tool for the analysis of archaeological metalwork, but I know that some people have been puzzled as to why we are carrying out this exercise for the Hoard items. This puzzlement I think comes about because so many people have seen the items themselves, or images of them, that have been conserved or which were relatively clean. Many items though are still obscured by the muddy clay of the damp July field from which they were excavated. An example can be seen at:-

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/stokemuseums/5954951462/in/set-72157627233574538>

X-radiography should reveal the nature of the decoration, if any, inside the muddy covering. Even if the piece has been conserved the X-radiography is likely to reveal additional details. Many of the pommels, for example, retain the earth internally. The X-radiography will enable us to see if there are any additional fittings internally.

Typology at PMAG

Chris Fern and Guy Evans have started the initial cataloguing and photography at PMAG. They too are working to a tight schedule at present trying to record as much of the material that will be included in the PMAG exhibition as possible, so that it will not have to be taken off display again.

Guy has started taking systematic front, back and side views of all the items that will allow us to have a full scaled record for everything which we and other researchers will be able to use. Below you can see K130 from an angle you've probably not seen before. This of course is the piece that provides the biting beasts logo for the Hoard.



Photo: Guy Evans

I think Chris Fern has spent the month in a slight state of shock. He is faced with the problem that lovely as any particular piece is, this is not the stage at which many hours can be devoted to it. As a finds researcher myself, I appreciate the frustration that this will give rise to. I asked him to tell us about his favourite piece so far and this is what he said about K358.

‘Gold pommel K358 is remarkable even amongst the richness of the Hoard, for the splendour of its cast animal (Style II) decoration. The pommel ends terminate in jagged-toothed wolf heads, from which paired bird heads protrude (four in total). On each side a helmeted boar head projects prominently below the apex, with blunt snout and protruding tusks, that surmounts a panel of two confronted quadrupeds. Either side of this, two panels of niello inlaid vertical lines establish a contrast with the animal art; the lines on the other side are instead contoured, at 45°, giving the overall composition a deliberate asymmetry.’



Photo: Guy Evans

He is making new observations that are exciting the museum team all the time. Last week one enabled a join to be made between one of the two enigmatic lentoid fittings and a garnet cloisonné strip (see below). Whatever object these fittings came from, the effect would have been spectacular. The central cell of the lentoid had a grooved lattice pattern and so the setting (now lost) must have been transparent as this was intended to break up the light hitting the backing, making it sparkle. So garnet or glass would be likely. Chris suggests that something like bone may have been appropriate in the cells that surround it.

Chris's observations are proving useful to the PMAG curatorial staff as they prepare for the exhibition, though again the new understanding is put them under pressure as they discover they need to redesign mounts and re-write captions. It was always planned that the analysis project would be able to make useful inputs into the exhibition programme, but I do not think any of us anticipated that the input would start so soon.



Photo: Chris Fern

Conservation and Metal analysis at the BM

As noted in the introduction the contract between Stoke and the BM has not yet been signed, but preparations are underway in anticipation of that happening. It is planned that the foils and other fittings from possible helmets, and the items for the pilot metal analysis will be moved to the British Museum in the week beginning June 18th. The BM has also started the recruitment process for the two posts that will work on the material, with the metal scientist post being advertised on June 1st.

Next Newsletter

I anticipate that the next Newsletter will go out in late July. By that stage we would hope to know who our are new colleagues in the BM will be, and we should also have the preliminary results from the X-radiography. If you have any news for the issue, please remember to send it to me. I am very happy to include details of Hoard-related exhibitions, events and lectures in these Newsletters.

Please note that from 25th June to 3rd August I shall be out of the country working on my Pompeii project in Italy. I'll be available by email and at the end of my mobile phone, and Stephanie will be on hand in the UK.

H.E.M.C

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