

Quentovic defined

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Some of the major sea-ports of medieval Europe still continue and flourish as ports; medieval Hamwic became the container port of Southampton. Some have faded away, as their harbours have silted or the pattern of trade has moved away. Some have so completely failed that certain knowledge of what and where they were has been forgotten. Chief of these lost ports of Europe is Quentovic, whose site has been sought in northern France and is here defined in the Canche valley, south of Boulogne.

The principal early medieval port in northern France, and perhaps the most important seaport of the Franks, certainly of the Frankish homelands, was Quentovic. The place-name is variously rendered and means 'the market on the Canche', a minor river with a large estuary lying some 18 miles (29 km) south of Boulogne (FIGURE 1). The site was famous throughout the northern world and appears in chronicles, laws, coin inscriptions (both Merovingian and Carolingian), saints' lives and charters. In recent decades there has been an upsurge in interest in sites of this type, categorized in recent works as 'emporium' and in contemporary sources as 'vicus' or 'wik'. Yet the site of Quentovic had not been satisfactorily located.

Many places have been put forward as the site of Quentovic over the past 140 years. These are located mainly, though not exclusively, within the Canche Valley from Montreuil to the sea at Etaples or Le Touquet. Interest in the site is enhanced for British archaeologists by Quentovic being the recognized port of entry for the hosts of Anglo-Saxon pilgrims flooding down the roads to Rome. The site flourished from the 6th century until it disappeared from view in the mid 9th century AD. There is an as yet unexplained epilogue marked by a 10th-century coinage issued in the name, and in the types, of the 9th-century Charles the Bald, and struck in the name of a possibly vanished Quentovic. All of the available evidence was

admirably summarized by Dhondt (1962) but since then the matter has rested.

In 1973 Roman pottery kilns were discovered during road improvements near La Calotterie, south of the Canche and well inland from the present coast (Couppe & Vincent 1973). These Roman finds lay in an area which, until then, had not been considered as occupied in antiquity; and therefore it now became another candidate for the site of Quentovic. Soon after this, further accidental finds were made some 350 m to the north of the Roman kiln sites. A farmer cutting ditches unearthed a considerable number of human bones, associated with a wide range of material, worked stone, flints, ironwork and some pottery. Some of these pottery types were clearly Carolingian and a little could have been of Merovingian date. A brief rescue excavation was carried out by Pierre Leman (Leman 1981). Although the range of material was confusing, Leman was convinced that this site was associated with Quentovic.

The site

In March 1984 a group of academic and extra-mural archaeologists, mainly from Manchester University but with initially strong support from Sheffield University, offered to assist Pierre Leman in establishing the exact nature of the site. It was difficult to believe that this low-lying area, apparently in the middle of the early medieval estuary and lacking any surface

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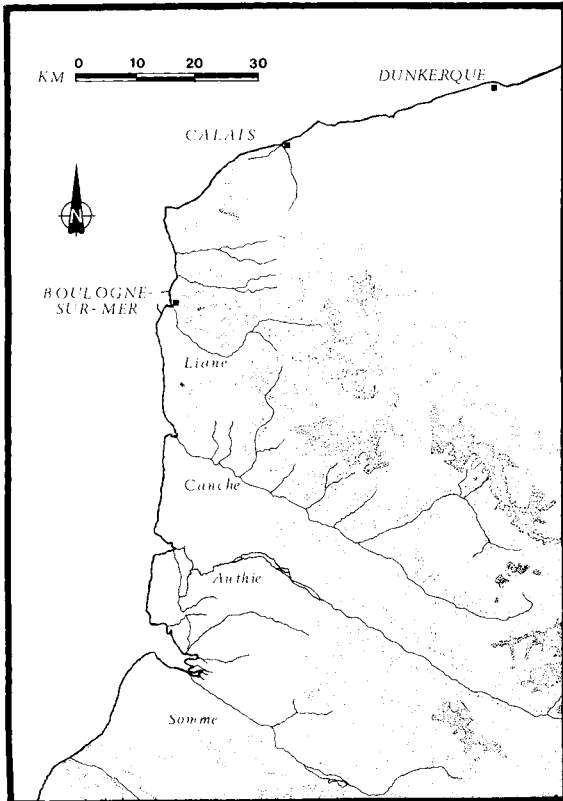
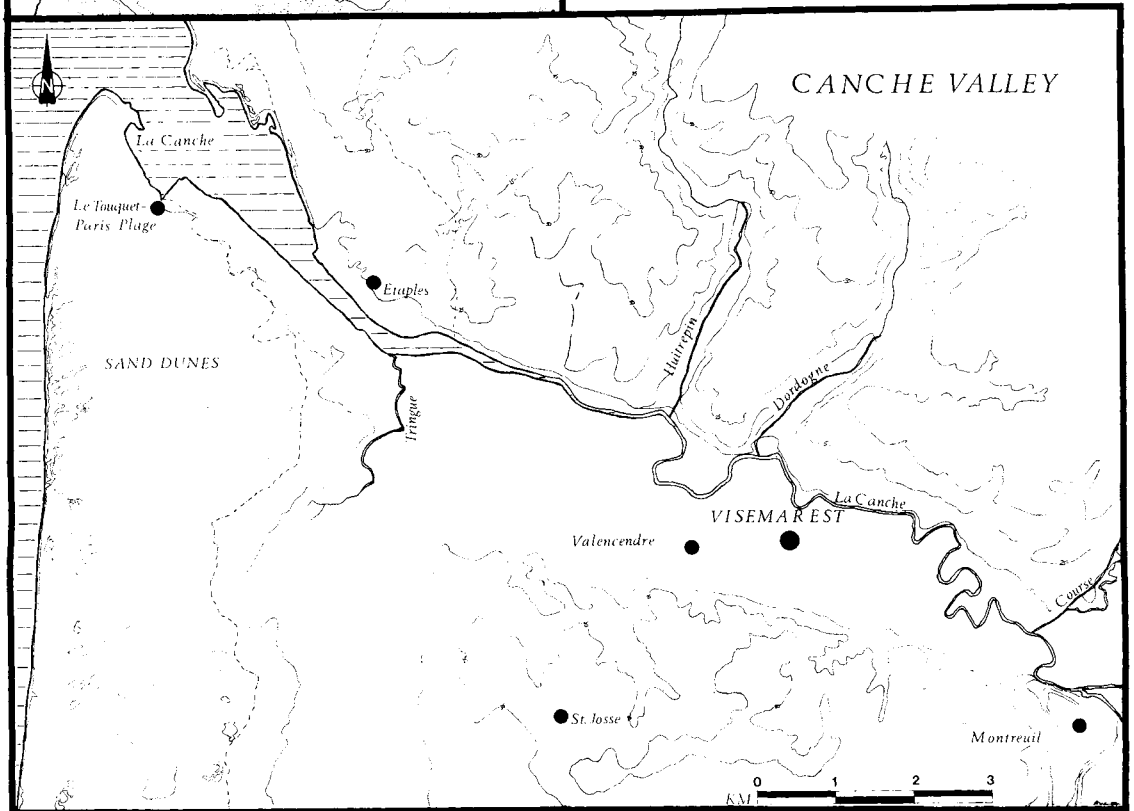


FIGURE 1. Location map of northern France, and the Canche Valley showing Visemarest.



indications of occupation, could have contained a major emporium. The field in which the human bones had been found was initially available only for survey, and so a major reconnaissance was begun along what appeared to be the old shoreline further towards the estuary mouth and close to the site of the monastery of St Josse. This survey, with minor trial holes, continued into 1985, mainly during long winter weekends. In summer 1985, arrangements for a rescue excavation at the site of the discovery of human bones (the 'nécropole') fell through, so the excavation was moved to a site to the east

where a geophysical survey by M. Jeanson had suggested major remains. By this time the basic team working (unfunded) in the Canche Valley consisted of those named at the head of this article, with the permission of M. Pierre Leman of the Direction des Antiquités Historiques (Nord/Pas-de-Calais) of the French Ministry of Culture.

The anomaly at Site 1 (FIGURE 2) quickly resolved itself into the remains of late medieval/early modern farm buildings. Beneath this a layer of grey sandy loam sealed an area of intense occupation; grey and black occupation

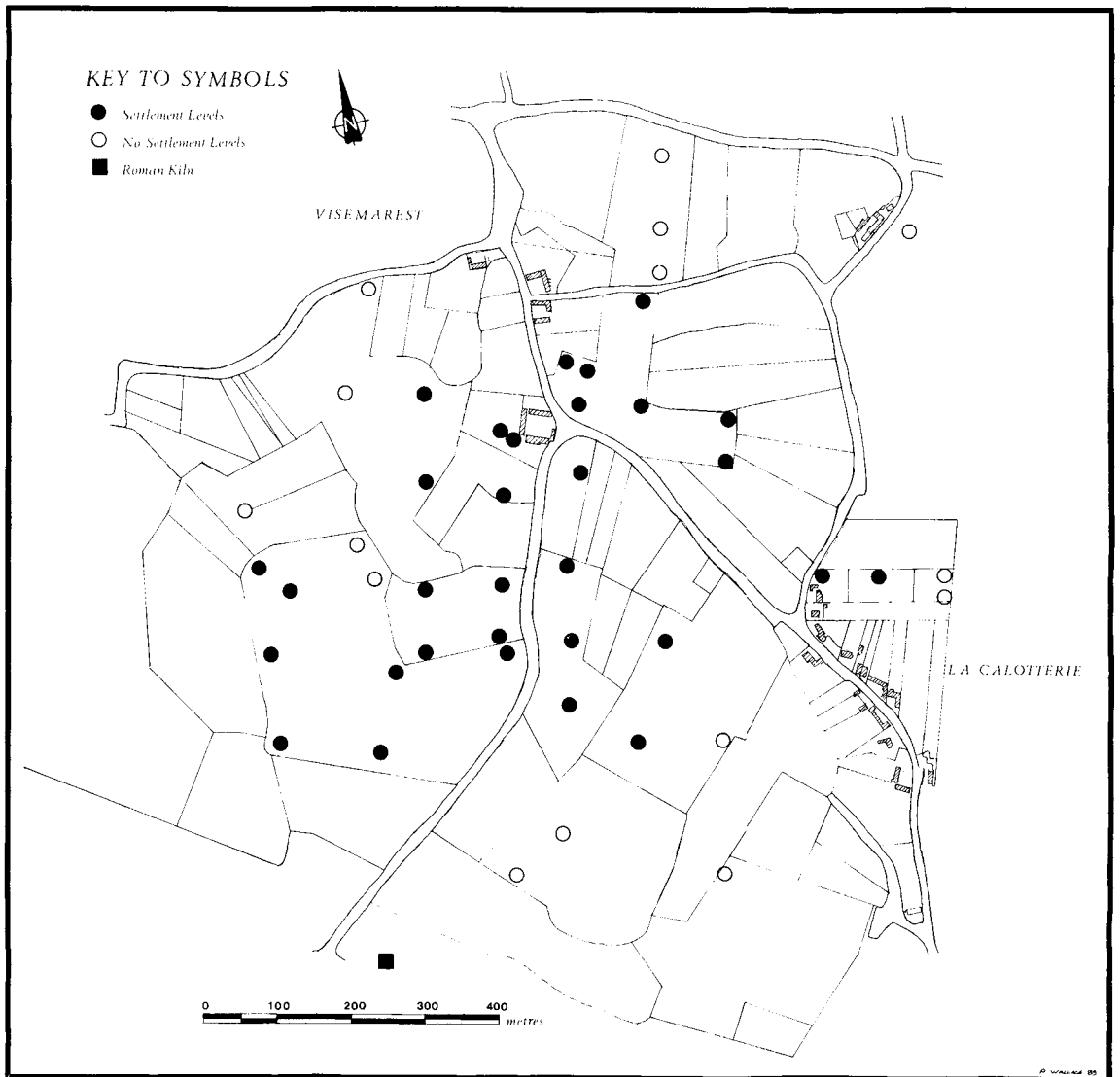


FIGURE 2. The extent of settlement layers representing the medieval site of Quentovic.

layers, interleaved with layers of clean sand, contained large amounts of early medieval pottery, securely stratified, along with a range of animal bones, antler fragments, hone stones, and such exotics as small pieces of glass, amber and Niedermendig lava – all the range of finds that two of us (DB and DHH) had been familiar with at Saxon Southampton. At the end of the two-week season it was clear that an early medieval site existed in this area, but was it Quentovic?

The excavated trenches, small though they were, were rich in features and contained the right range of finds, but could they represent simply a rich farm, part of a village, monastery or specialist dwelling? To demonstrate that this site was Quentovic it would have to be established that it was of a size comparable to Dorestad (40+ ha) or Hamwic (45 ha) with settlement of a comparable density, complexity and richness of finds.

The problem of the extremely confusing date-range of material that had come from Leman's excavations on the *nécropole* had to be resolved. A grid was laid over the area that surrounded the 1985 trenches and tested for occupation by means of *sondages*, small controlled excavations usually 4 m × 1 m in extent and generally 100 m apart on the gridlines. These *sondages* were excavated down to the top of the recognizable settlement layer, which was then cleaned and recorded. The pottery and finds continued to indicate the early medieval nature of the settlement. By the end of the 1986 season settlement had been shown by these means to have extended over an area of 10 ha. The exploration was continued during the 1987 and 1988 seasons, together with a series of smaller test pits excavated from the north side of the valley to the south side of the valley to investigate the geomorphology. The northern and southern extremities of the site have now been established, but the eastern and western limits are not clearly defined. A total of 47 *sondages* have been excavated and the occupied area can be shown to exceed 35 ha. Survey has shown, as was to be expected, that the settlement occupied the slightly higher ground in the valley bottom.

In some of the areas there is clear stratification, with occupation layers being separated by lenses of clean sand. The finds are rich; iron objects, badly corroded, are present together

with a large numbers of hone stones made from rocks which do not occur naturally on the site and are comparable to those from similar sites. The small size of trenches has precluded the definition of any complete building, but the evidence shows that these will be recovered as soon as a large enough area can be excavated. The main trenches have revealed evidence of timber buildings, including post holes, beam slots and stake holes, associated with numerous rubbish pits. The pits contained many animal bones, charcoal stained most of the layers and there was abundant pottery.

We can postulate that the settlement was founded on a raised sandy area in the otherwise tidal valley bottom. This island, or more probably islets, was colonized perhaps with regard to three factors: the estuary links the site by sea to the British Isles and via the coastal trade to northern Europe; the possible relationship to the north-south Roman road linking the site to land communications; and thirdly, very speculatively, by its being on the 6th-century frontier between Germanic and Romance peoples. The growth of the site to at least 35 ha, the accumulation of trade similar to the rest of the emporia and the addition of a fort (yet to be defined and possibly separate) and of mints for at least two periods, made the site one of the most important towns of the Merovingian and Carolingian periods.

The *nécropole*

In 1987 a small rescue excavation was finally carried out on the *nécropole*, which is ploughed annually. The mass of human bone initially discovered in cutting a drainage trench and recorded by Pierre Leman was still intermittently visible in the sides of the ditch; this, together with a second mass of bone 150 m to the south of the drainage trench, appeared to be associated with two small mounds and a considerable amount of stone. Further burials in a *sondage* 300 m to the east also represented some sort of cemetery with a number of individuals, male, female and juvenile. The burials here lay on, but did not cut into, the layers of grey and black soils which mark the Carolingian settlement; clearly they were much later in date but old enough for the sites to have been forgotten in the area.

When two trenches were opened on either side of the drainage ditch which cut the

northern mound, it became clear that the burials, in two distinct layers, cut or sealed the early layers. The burials consisted of articulated burials, some covered by chalk blocks: in one instance at least, chalk blocks appeared to line the grave. There was also a mass of disarticulated and partially articulated bone, some quite obviously buried as such and, as with some of the articulated burials, covered by flint and chalk blocks. Some of the disarticulated bone had probably been spread by ploughing, the impact of which also showed in the frequent finding amongst the bones of chalk and flint cobbles which presumably had originally covered individual burials or groups of disarticulated bones. In the second mound, to the south of the first, human remains were discovered, both as articulated burials and as disarticulated bone. These, much less dense than in the northern mound, were dug through a layer of material so unlike the normal silty sand found on the site that it had obviously been imported. In addition, the burials were sealed by a continuous area of flint and chalk cobbles. Here, too, the burials clearly sealed earlier occupation layers. In both mounds a small number of possible coffin fittings were found, but no grave goods were in evidence.

Interpretation of this assemblage, some of the bones exhibiting signs of trauma, provisionally assigned it to the early modern period. It was assumed that the bones were those of Protestants, the large number being the result of near-by Montreuil as a prison town. This view fitted well with the fact that these burials appear to be stratigraphically distinct from and later than those layers representing the end of Carolingian Quentovic. In an earlier rescue observation, Pierre Leman considered some of the burials to be of Merovingian/Carolingian date. However, in view of the clear stratigraphy, we were not prepared for our one radiocarbon date which centres around 715 AD. The sample dated came from a fully extended and articulated burial and further samples will need to be analysed before the problem can be resolved.

Future research

With the boundaries of the site broadly defined, we returned to the site in the 1988 season to begin the examination of a trench designed to provide a reasonable sample of the structures and material from the site; to continue to refine

the plan of the extent of the site, it was hoped with some indication of harbour and other zones; and, finally, to examine the possibility that the emporium did not so much 'die' as migrate up the valley to become the riverine suburb of Montreuil. This first year of a four-year project has revealed a complex of 14th-century date which has some bearing on the ceramic history of the site. The season was concluded with the topmost early medieval layer exposed, and with three more years to elucidate one small area of this major international site.

The finds

The pottery

The early medieval pottery assemblage recovered from the 1985, 1986 and 1987 seasons is large, complex and without parallel in France. Because the assemblage closely resembles that from Saxon Southampton, fabrics are referred to by the class numbers assigned to the Southampton material by Hodges (1981). A contemporary kiln has not been located on the site, but the Gallo-Roman kilns at La Calotterie, less than a kilometre from the excavations, indicate that local clays from the valley sides are suitable for potting. An antler tine with a pottery-stamp design cut into its end (FIGURE 3), recovered from the site, indicates that decorated pottery was almost certainly made *in situ*. The lack of a kiln site has prevented the recognition of a local pottery sequence, but the high percentage of black wares (10%) and grey wares (15%) (Hodges' Class 14 and 15 respectively) together with the shell-tempered wares (20%) make these the most likely candidates (Coutts & Worthington 1986).

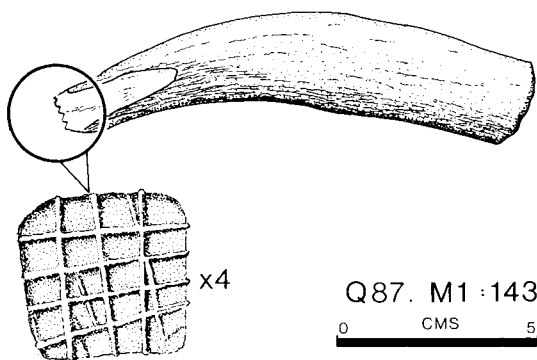


FIGURE 3. Antler pottery stamp.

Two black-ware vessels are worthy of individual mention. One, recovered from a well in *sondage* 1, is a good-quality wheel-thrown pot. The rim is everted; the area between the rim and shoulder decorated with 'finger-bosses' with a burnished lattice design between. A rim of the same form, macroscopically the same fabric and with the same design was recovered from the kiln at Barelle, near Arras, and dated to the 9th century (A. Jacques pers. comm.). The second vessel is represented by half of the rim and the bucket handle. Insufficient evidence exists to suggest a vessel shape, but two parallels have been identified: from Hamwic: a fragment of rim and bucket handle in a similar Class 14 black ware fabric (Hodges 1981: chapter 3, figure 5, no. 10), and a spouted pitcher from grave 309, at St. Peter's, Kent, had the traces of a transverse bucket handle at each side of the rim. The vessel was tall (24 cm high) with an ovoid shouldered body with trefoil spout (Evison 1979: 76-7; figure 13c; figure IX B, C). Although the mouth of the vessel from Quentovic is wider, 11.5 cm against 9 cm, it does seem possible that this also was a pitcher. Trefoil spouts have been recovered but not in black-ware fabrics.

Whilst some of the black and grey wares may derive from a wider area than Quentovic itself, a large percentage of the remaining assemblage certainly does. Amongst the fabrics so far identified are Beauvais ware (Class 9) some sherds of which have red-painted lattice designs which can be dated to the 9th and 10th centuries; Trier Ware (Class 12); Eastern Belgian Ware (Class 13); Quartz tempered Ware (Class 17); Lower Seine Valley (Class 25); a Normandy or Beauvaisis variant (Class 34); small quantities of Seine Valley Ware (Class 11); one large body sherd of heavily burnished grass-tempered ware and two sherds of Pingsdorf ware. The date-range of these early medieval pottery types covers the period from the 7th to the 10th centuries.

A detailed analysis of the pottery is in progress, including thin-section analysis by Catherine Coutts of Sheffield University. It is hoped that thin-section analysis of sherds from the Gallo-Roman kiln at La Calotterie and sherds from the early modern farmhouse will enable the local clay source to be identified and thus suggest which early medieval wares were produced on site.

The coin

One 8th-century *sceatta* of series G (type 3a) was recovered during the 1987 season (FIGURE 4). The obverse shows a stylized bust facing right with a hand holding a cross in front of the face and a double 'boat shaped curve' below the bust. The ear is V-shaped, the eye enclosed in a similar V. The reverse shows three crosses and a group of three pellets in a square. The coin belongs to the 'coarse style' of series G and belongs stylistically to a group of coins recently discussed in the *British Numismatic Journal* by Dr Metcalf (1986).



FIGURE 4. The coin.

The glass

The 1985 and 1986 seasons produced 61 sherds of glass, many less than 1 cm square. The 1987 season produced some 30 sherds and a fragment of crucible which had been used for melting small quantities of coloured glass. The material from 1987 appears to resemble the 1985/6 material, the detailed analysis of which has been carried out by Michael Heyworth of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, whose work forms the basis for these comments.

As with the pottery, the striking parallel is the 7th- to 9th-century material from Saxon Southampton. All but four fragments are vessel glass of soda-lime-silica composition typical of the latter half of the 1st millennium AD and coloured light blue or light green. Diagnostic fragments identified vessels of the Palm/Funnel Series, Bowl/Jar forms and one fragment of ring base of Cup form. Decorated fragments which cannot be assigned to specific vessel types include horizontal ribbing, carination of vessel wall, marvered and applied trails in the same colour as the body, and one light blue fragment with red streaking in the metal. Three fragments of potash glass have been recovered from early medieval contexts, one representing a tall beaker form. Potash glass is usually dated after the transition period at the end of the 1st millennium AD in Britain.

Worked bone and antler

Many pieces of cut antler have been recovered, together with an antler spindle whorl with ring and dot decoration (FIGURE 5), an amulet and the antler-tine pottery stamp (FIGURE 3). Although no combs have so far been found, the waste material found is consistent with comb manufacture. Several pieces of animal bone include two weaving picks and a shallow pyramidal counter or button. The amount of cut waste antler found indicates that antler working was taking place on site, and its spread suggests a date nearer the beginning than the end of the period. (Arthur Macgregor pers. comm.).

Deer bones do not form a part of the animal bone assemblages recovered from the rubbish pits.

Metalwork

Although more than 60 fragments of metal have been recovered, almost all are so corroded that, as X-rays indicate, conservation is impractical.

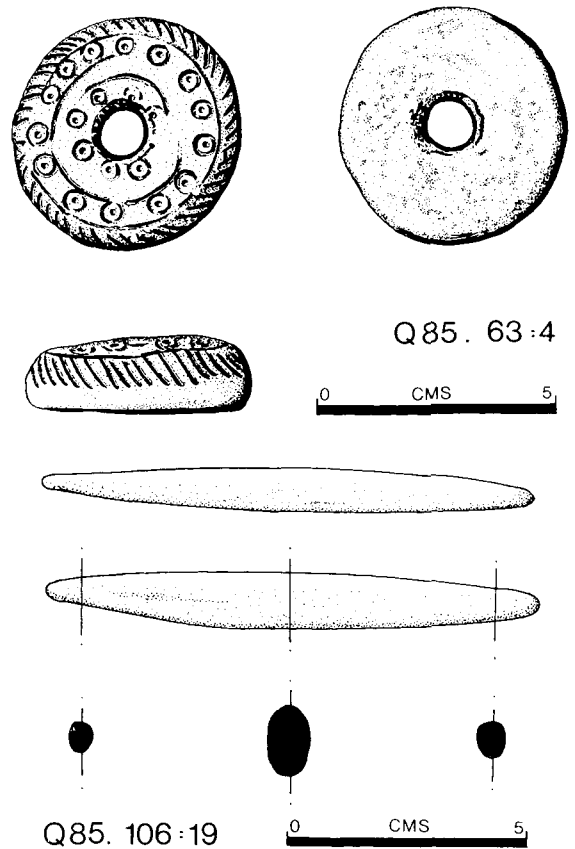


FIGURE 5. Spindle whorl and thread picker.

It has been possible to identify several nails and pins together with two knife blades. One blade has two rivet marks and the other, when X-rayed, revealed a narrow strip along its cutting edge, either the carbonized edge of the blade or a narrow steel insert.

Several fragments of slag have been found but not analysed. Deposits on a fragment of crucible, analysed by Justine Bayley of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory using X-ray fluorescent techniques, contained copper, zinc, tin and lead. These types of mixed alloys were common in the early medieval period in England.

Hone stones

A large number of hone stones have been recovered from a wide area of the site. Seven found together during the 1985 season, and a further two from other areas of the site have been examined. Five of the group of seven were of sandstone of varying coarseness, all thought

to be from the same geographical region which has yet to be identified. The other two hone stones were quartz with very fine sand highly compacted. The hone stones showed various stages of wear from unused to highly worn. One of the fine-grained stones had a narrow groove in one side, consistent with the sharpening of a narrow object such as a pin or a needle. Stone does not occur in the natural sandy soils of the site, and other smooth stones found may represent 'linen smoothers'.

Other finds

These include two clay loom-weights, five small pieces of amber, a fragment of shale or jet,

and a piece of Niedermendig lava too small and of too poor quality to be a quern stone but nevertheless identifiably from the Eifel Mountains (Jonathan Parkhouse pers. comm.).

The evidence of the material so far recovered points to a date span of 7th to 11th centuries with goods and materials brought into the site from a wide geographical area. It also points to on-site pottery manufacture, textile working, glass and metal working and the manufacture of objects in bone and antler.

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