

## DATASHEET 32

### Late Anglo-Saxon and Viking-Age strap-ends 750-1100: Part 1

by

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As far as can be discerned from the archaeological record the strap-end first made its appearance in England during the late Roman period as an item of belt equipment (see, for example, Hawkes & Dunning 1961), and thereafter remained a common class of multi-purpose strap fitting until the later Middle Ages. The date range AD 750-1100, however, represents an unprecedented phase in the life history of this artefact, not only in terms of the numbers produced relative to other classes of contemporary dress accessory, peaking during the 9th century, but also in terms of the multiplicity of forms introduced, the latter reflecting many of the artistic developments of the Christian Anglo-Saxon era.

Strap-ends provided the dual service of preventing straps to which they were attached from fraying or curling, and on items of costume, adding weight to make them hang down attractively. One can deduce from their considerable variation in size and the fact that they were evidently worn in sets, pairs and singly, that the range current during this period encapsulated several functional contexts. Archaeologically attested uses in a period of Christian burial are few and restricted to tongue-shaped (Class E)

examples, from hoards or pagan Viking burials, found with matching buckles (forthcoming, *Datasheet 33*). Functional associations for the large corpus of stray losses found archaeologically or by metal-detectorists must otherwise be inferred; possibilities include textile girdles and garters, and straps for fastening bags and satchels.

The classification presented here is a simplified and slightly modified version of that included in a nation-wide survey of some two thousand Late Anglo-Saxon and Viking-Age strap-ends (Thomas 2000a). Morphological differences are used to divide the corpus into seven principal classes, which, depending upon the level of internal stylistic variation, are sub-divided further into decorative types. As shall be seen the range is surprisingly diverse and new discoveries, especially those brought to light by the expanded Portable Antiquities Scheme, will no doubt necessitate future refinements. Simple strap-ends formed from folded strips of metal, although current during the period, are not included here.

Classes A to D, all metal, are presented in this *Datasheet*; Classes E to G will follow in Part 2, *Datasheet 33*.

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**Class A: With a split end, convex-sided or tapering plate, zoomorphic terminal and an average ratio of length to width of 1:3.5 (Fig. 1)**

Comprising over 60% of the database, this class has long been recognised as a type-fossil of the 9th century from its representation in coin-hoards and its possession of stylistically diagnostic features including the *en-face* animal-head terminal, which appears on a range of contemporary artistic media (see, for example, Webster in Webster & Backhouse 1991, cat nos. 205 & 206). Its frequent display of Trehwiddle-style decoration is another classic 9th-century trait (see below). The chronological limits of the class probably lie either side of the 9th century; an 8th-century origin has been proposed on more than one occasion (e.g. Graham-Campbell 1974, 234) and there is mounting evidence for their continued production and circulation well into the 10th century in the north of the country, by which time they had largely been superseded by tongue-shaped (Class E) examples further south.

Regional traits associated with this widely distributed class include variations on both the standard round-eared variety of animal-head terminal and the trilobate palmette - a foliate motif which is customarily placed in a fan-shaped field at the split end. Strap-ends featuring terminals with comma-shaped ears and palmettes formed from looping tendrils, such as that from Upper Poppleton, Yorks (No. 1) are likely, on the basis of a focussed distribution, to be of Northumbrian origin (Thomas 2001, fig. 4.1a). Other regionalisms are associated with the decorative types discussed individually below.

**Class A, Type 1: Trehwiddle style (Fig. 1.1-4)**

The largest of the decorative types encompassing deluxe, silver strap-ends with niello inlays, as recovered from several contemporary hoards, and a multitude of copper alloy examples, both with and without inlays. The corpus displays a seemingly limitless repertoire of permutations on the mainstream canon of the Trehwiddle style (as

defined by Wilson 1964, 21-35), some representative of regional genres, as, for example, the looping beast featured on a group of Northumbrian finds (No. 2) or the speckled fruiting plant (No. 3), related to the ornament of the brooches from the Pentney hoard, Norfolk, which characterizes a geographically defined East Anglian group (see Thomas 2001). Elaborate examples featuring the classic Trehwiddle-style trait of dividing the main decorative surface into constituent fields are commoner in south-eastern England (No. 4).

**Class A, Type 2: Patterned (Fig. 1.5-7)**

Dominating the cheaper end of the strap-end market, this is a very diverse type encompassing a range of non-representational, curvilinear and geometric patterns, whether incised, engraved or punched, often in combination with highly stylized animal-head terminals and trilobate palmettes (Nos 5 & 6). Most of the groups are distributed widely; one notable exception, characterised by a compass-drawn, roundel-and-cross design, has a marked northern focus, comprising two of the class's three northern Scottish findspots (No. 7).

**Class A, Type 3: Anthropomorphic (Fig. 1.8-9)**

A small type distinguished by display of human representations, ranging from the naked man with raised hands on a strap-end from Brandon, Suffolk (No. 8), to iconographic compositions, some perhaps invoking Christian imagery, such as the fully-clothed man picking fruit on the silver strap-end from Cranborne, Dorset (No. 9). Whereas the latter compare well with sophisticated pieces of Trehwiddle-style metalwork attributed to Alfredian Wessex, such as the Fuller brooch (Webster in Webster & Backhouse 1991 cat. no. 257), the former draw upon a more obscure vernacular tradition otherwise difficult to parallel in portable art-work of the period, although reflections of the same also appear on later, Class E strap-ends (see *Datasheet 33*).

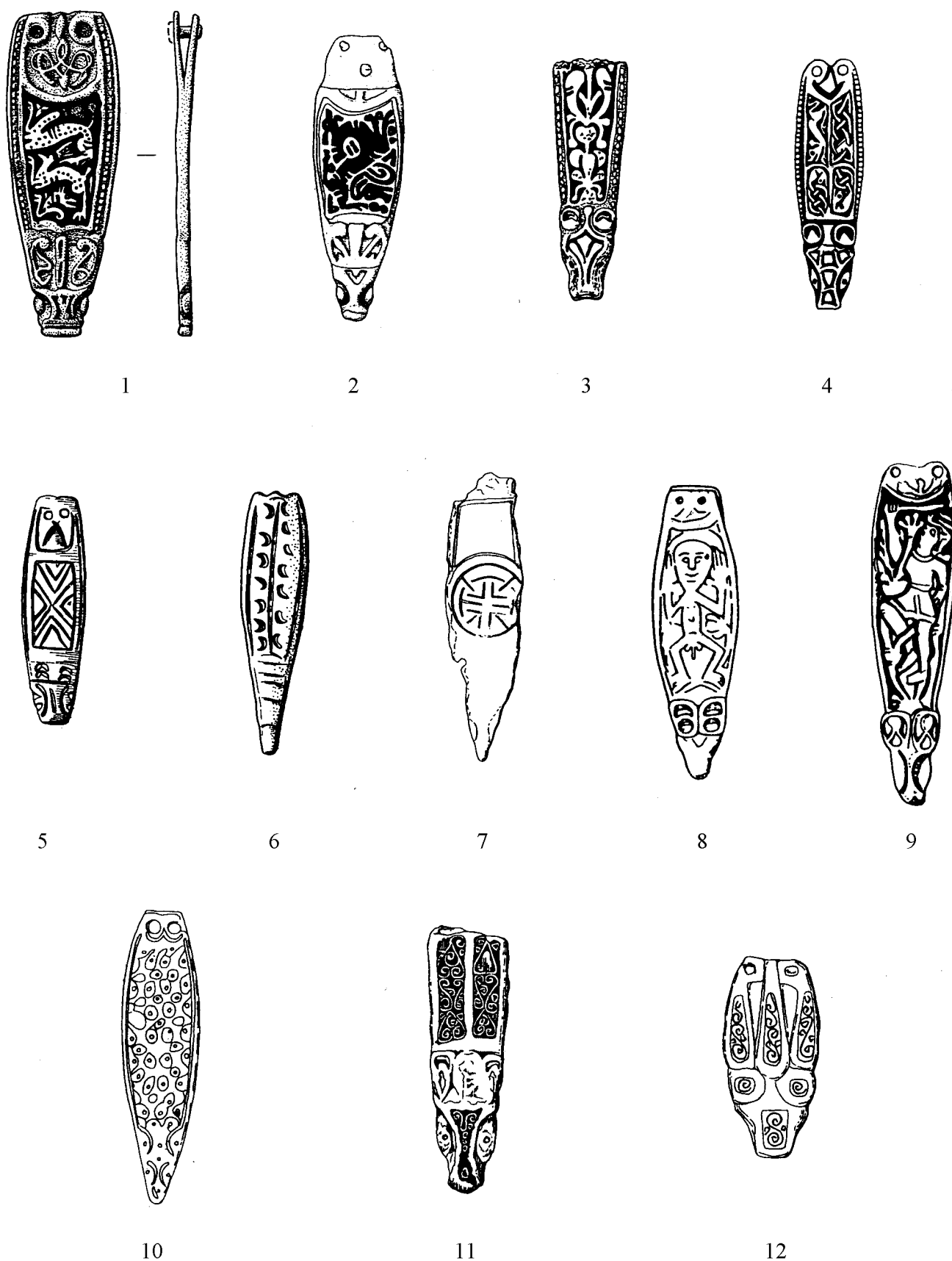


Figure 1: Class A strap-ends. A1: Nos 1-4; A2: Nos 5-7; A3: Nos 8-9; A4: No. 10; A5: Nos 11-12.  
Scale 1:1. See List of Illustrations, below, for full details

### **Class A, Type 4: Enamel** (Fig. 1.10)

Whereas scientific examination has revealed that enamel may sometimes substitute niello as a ground for highlighting Trewiddle-style decoration and simpler geometric patterns (Stapleton *et al.* 1995), this category is strictly reserved for motifs and compositional arrangements peculiar to the technique. Included are strap-ends carrying plain rectilinear fields of champlevé enamel and those decorated with an inlaid pattern of densely clustered, centrally-punched annulets, as featured by the example from Poundbury, Dorset (No. 10). There is a marked southern bias to this type's distribution.

### **Class A, Type 5: Silver wire** (Fig. 1.11-12)

Characterised by fields of niello inlaid with delicate scrolls of silver wire, often formed into S-shapes, this highly distinctive style of decoration is restricted to strap-ends and contemporary hooked tags (Thomas 1996). The most narrowly distributed of the types, with over 85% of its 100 findspots falling within Suffolk and Norfolk, the majority of such strap-ends are likely to be of East Anglian origin. The main concentration of outliers reflects the activity of contemporary trading networks along the eastern seaboard and can be compared to the distribution of other East Anglian exports such as Ipswichware pottery (*ibid.* 85). Examples can be difficult to identify as the inlays are often missing and silver wire may be obscured by corroded niello; in such cases a reliable indicator is the characteristic shape and layout of the inlays, for example, two longitudinal fields in a parallel disposition, or three tear-shaped examples placed side by side (Nos 11 & 12). Subsidiary fields of silver-wire inlay may also be present on the split end and terminal.

### **Class B: With a split end, parallel-sided or a slightly tapering shaft, zoomorphic terminal, and an average ratio of width to length of 1:4.5** (Fig. 2)

**Class B, Type 1: Transverse grooved** (Fig. 2.13) In its simplest and most popular guise, this class is decorated with parallel transverse

grooves or raised mouldings, commonly in bands located either end of the shaft, and often with a wedge-shaped split end and highly stylized animal-head terminal; a small number also have plain or hooked terminals (No. 13). Occasionally, the shaft may carry additional elaboration such as circular facets. Examples recovered from stratified archaeological contexts, such as the series from Winchester and Canterbury, suggest that this type was introduced during the latter 8th or early 9th centuries and thereafter remained popular into the 11th (Hinton 1990). Widely distributed in southern and south-eastern England, this class appears with much less frequency than its convex-sided counterpart on sites located north of The Wash.

### **Class B, Type 2: Trewiddle style** (Fig. 2.14)

The expanded wedge-shaped split ends of Class B strap-ends are occasionally elaborated with Trewiddle-style decoration, confirming contemporaneity with 9th-century Class A examples. In all such cases the decoration is highly simplified and restricted to the portrayal of single motifs, sometimes in combination with beaded borders (No. 14).

### **Class B, Type 3: Silver wire** (Fig. 2.15)

Silver-wire decoration, of the same variety as that characterising Class A, Type 5 strap-ends, makes a rare appearance on this class. Again, it is the expanded split end that forms the principal decorative zone, although further fields of inlay may also be present on the shaft and terminal (No. 15).

### **Class B, Type 4: Multi-headed** (Fig. 2.16-17)

This type is distinguished by animal heads additional to that employed at the terminal. These are modelled in relief and feature rounded ears and muzzles, sometimes with drilled nostrils (No. 16). They vary in number and disposition; the commonest arrangement is a confronted pair located centrally, although sometimes a single head, facing either the terminal or the split end, appears at the top of the shaft. Stylised examples display a tendency for the facial features to be reduced to a series of punched dots and arcs (No. 17).

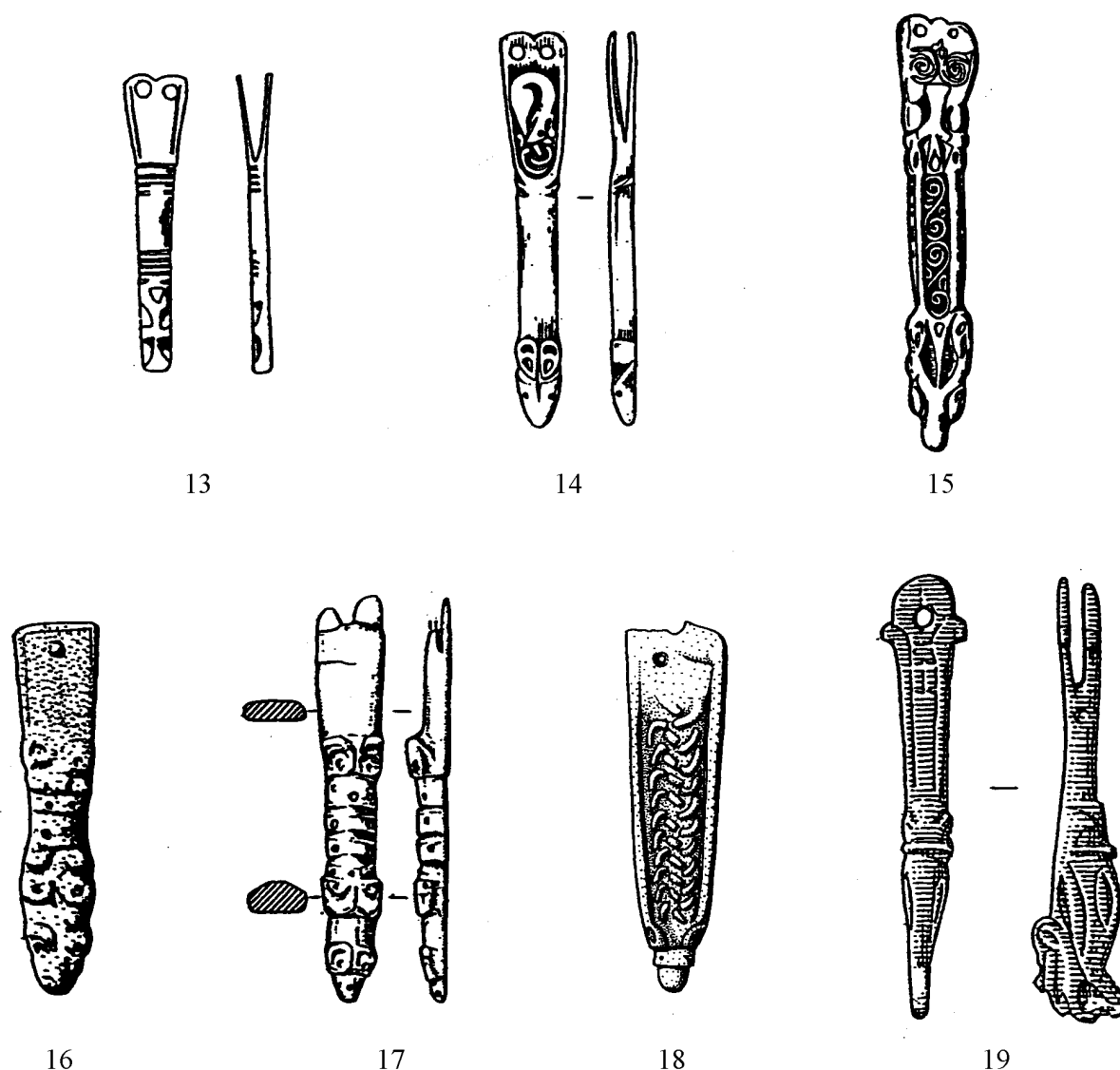


Figure 2: Class B strap-ends. B1: No. 13; B2: No. 14; B3: No. 15; B4: Nos 16-17; B5: No. 18; B6: No. 19. Scale 1:1

The distinctive muzzled animal head, replicated at the terminal, reappears on a selection of metalwork of Scandinavian and Anglo-Scandinavian origin, including the strap-end mounts from Borre, Vestfold, Norway (Wilson & Klint-Jensen 1966, pl. XXVII), and a hybrid tongue-shaped (Class E) strap-end from Aggersborg, Denmark; the latter occurs in combination with interlace decoration executed in low relief (Graham-Campbell 1980, cat. no. 187).

#### **Class B, Type 5: Interlace (Fig. 2.18)**

This type, related to the aforementioned Aggersborg strap-end, employs an animal-

head terminal drawn from the same family as that distinguishing Type 4 in combination with ribbon interlace, sometimes displaying distinctively Anglo-Scandinavian features such as Borre-style ring-knot (No. 18). In the case of both Type 4 and Type 5, manufacture within an Anglo-Scandinavian milieu is confirmed by a Danelaw focus in the distribution of finds (Thomas 2000b, fig. 20). The stylistic affinities highlighted for the animal heads suggest a currency during the late 9th and 10th centuries, an attribution supported by archaeological discoveries from Coppergate, York, and Franciscan Way, Ipswich.

**Class B, Type 6: Animal-head terminal displayed side on** (Fig. 2.19)

A very small percentage of this class is provided with a distinctive form of animal-head terminal distinguished by the fullness of its modelling, with almond-shaped eyes and gaping jaws, the latter displayed side on (No. 19). This type of animal head is diagnostic of Late Viking Ringerike and Urnes styles and indicates an 11th-century date.

**Class C: With a split end, narrow, sub-cylindrical shaft, and an average ratio of width to length of 1:13 or above** (Fig. 3.20)

On this class the shaft usually swells centrally leaving a narrow 'waist' marking the junction with the flattened, single-riveted split-end. Decoration, if present, is restricted to transverse grooves or incised intersecting lines. Over half of the recorded examples are furnished with spherical knobs at the terminal (No. 20).

This class has a strong association with Middle Saxon trading settlements, *Hamwic* (Southampton) and *Lundenwic* (London) having produced the majority of extant examples, with *Gipeswic* (Ipswich) contributing a further find (Hinton 1996, 37-40).

Their length, which would have made them cumbersome as dress-fittings, is possibly indicative of a specialised function. Several examples have been discovered from well-dated archaeological contexts indicating a period of usage spanning the mid 8th to 9th centuries.

**Class D: With a waisted split end and convex or lozenge-shaped shaft** (Fig. 3.21)

A small class, consisting of ten strap-ends, featuring an expanded convex-sided shaft which may take on a more angular, lozenge-shaped appearance, and a prominent waist at the junction between the split end and the tongue, commonly marked by one or two transverse mouldings (No. 21). The class is usually simply decorated, some examples having punched ring-and-dots. As in the case of Class C, many are provided with spherical terminals.

The absence of stylistically diagnostic decoration precludes an accurate dating, although stratified examples such as that from Flixborough, Lincs, suggest that the class was at least current during the 9th and 10th centuries (Thomas forthcoming). A notable concentration of findspots in Lincolnshire may point to a local workshop specialising in their production.

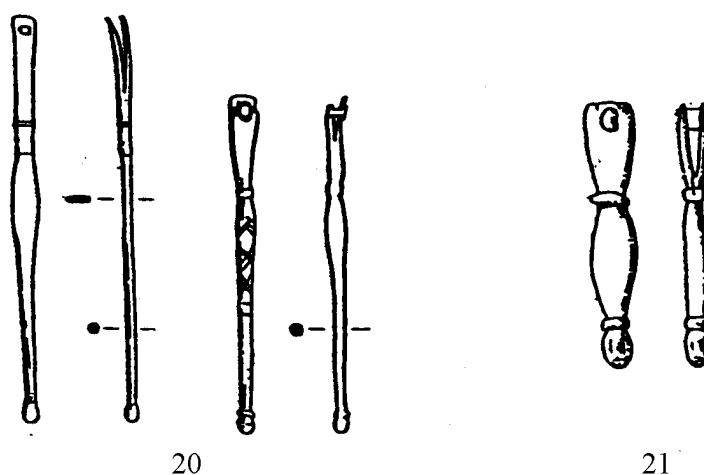


Figure 3: Class C (No. 20) and Class D (No. 21) strap-ends. Scale 1:1

## Acknowledgements

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which this *Datasheet* is drawn. Dr Helen Geake kindly agreed to read a draft of the *Datasheet* and made many useful comments and suggestions; my thanks to her and the *Datasheet* editor, Dr Rachel Tyson, for their help and encouragement in bringing this improved version to press.

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- 21) Flixborough, Lincs (Reproduced with kind permission of the Humber Archaeology Partnership)

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