

DATASHEET 39

Anglo-Scandinavian Horse Harness Fittings

by

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Horse harness and related fittings are amongst the most commonly found items of 11th-century metalwork and a considerable number have been recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (www.finds.org.uk). Similar fittings to those found in England, including most of those discussed here, are also known from southern Scandinavia (Pedersen 1996-7), particularly Denmark. Stirrup fittings and their distribution have already been dealt with in some detail elsewhere (Williams 1997a, 1997b). This paper sets out classifications for the main other types of copper alloy Anglo-Scandinavian horse harness fittings and proposes a standard terminology for these artefacts. Similar fittings to some of those discussed here are known in iron but these survive more rarely.

Fragments of harness links and cheek pieces can usually be identified by their characteristic oval or lozengiform loop terminals which are often decorated with three projecting knobs. It is not clear whether these knobs had any practical function. Some examples lack these knobs, however, being plain ovals, and these could be a little later in date (bit links, see below, always have one larger plain oval terminal, however, and this should not be confused with those lacking the projecting knobs). It is not clear whether, on these and

the related pieces discussed here, the leather strap was simply knotted through the knobbed loop or whether there was another fitting, perhaps an iron ring. The former perhaps seems the more probable (as the terminals of fittings from Radnage, Bucks. and Halford Hill, Warwicks. (Fig. 1), for instance, have a rectangular slot in place of an oval aperture).

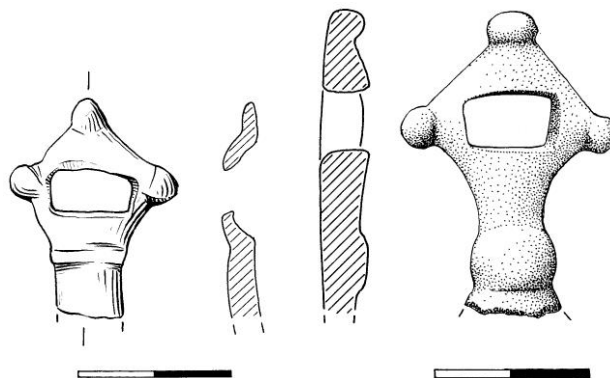


Figure 1: *Incomplete terminals with rectangular slots from Radnage, Bucks., left and Halford Hill, Warwicks., right. All scales are in cms.*

The decoration used on these fittings, and particularly on the cheek pieces, derives from the late Viking Ringerike style which was current during the reign of Cnut (1014-42) and may have had a longer life in England. The ensuing Urnes style is thought to have appeared around the middle of the century.

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There is no obvious example of the Urnes style amongst the fittings discussed here.

Cheek pieces

A single cheek piece linked the end of the bit to the cheek strap of the bridle and comprises a flat plate with a centrally-placed projecting arm for attachment to the leather harness strap; the arm usually terminates in a knobbed loop. Cheek pieces were provided in pairs and each is pierced with a round hole through which the ends of the jointed iron bit (the bar which the horse clenches in its teeth) projected (Fig. 2). Sometimes this hole has been worn through friction against the bit, causing the cheek piece to be discarded (c.f. an example from Tandridge, Surrey (Williams 1997c, fig. 1a, and possibly also 1b)).

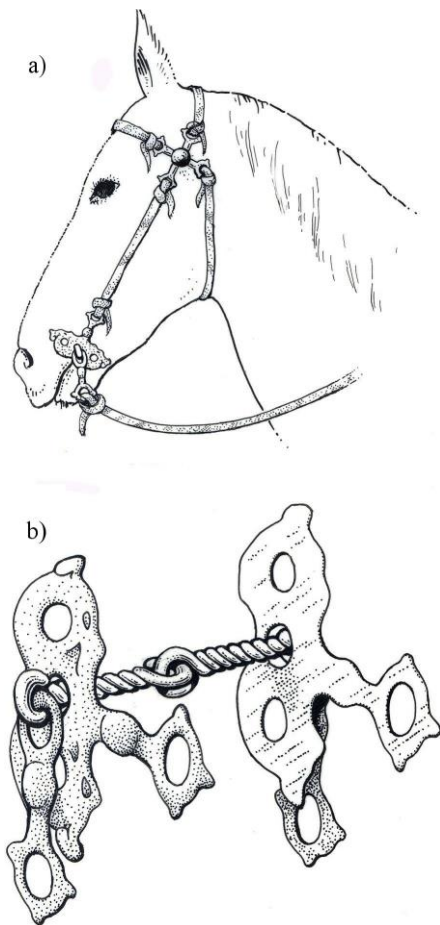


Figure 2: a) Reconstruction showing the use of cheek pieces and bit link and possible use of a four-way harness link. b) Reconstruction showing pair of cheek pieces, bit links and jointed iron bit.

Type 1 (Figure 3 a-d)

On cheek pieces of Type 1 each plate is decorated with an engraved pair of symmetrical strip-like creatures of late Viking inspiration, many of which face inwards, their heads and bodies creating areas of openwork on each plate. Outward-facing creatures are also known, while cheek pieces from Denmark display single creatures with heads to one side of the central projection and tails on the other. Pedersen (1996-7) identified two types of cheek piece based on whether there was a pair or a single creature. It is not clear if cheek pieces with the latter ornament have been found in England. These creatures come in many varieties but often have curling lip lappets and prominent crests. Particularly fine examples come from Witcombe, Gloucs. (Fig. 3a), though with crude detailing; Crewkerne, Somerset (SOMDOR-ED68B8); Patching, W. Sussex (SUSS-17A900), both the latter with inward-facing animals; and Willington and Jevington, E. Sussex (SUSS-9A83B4), the latter displaying an outward-facing animal with an asymmetrically-placed aperture for the bit. A fine and well-executed example of an outward-facing animal comes from Walton-on-Thames, Surrey (Fig. 3b). Another example, unprovenanced (Fig. 3c), has inward-facing animals and a central knobbed boss. Similar bosses often occur, for some reason, at the junction of plate and arm, though without the knobs. Fragments of cheek pieces can be most easily recognised if they retain the edge of the aperture for the bit (Fig. 3d; from Brimpsfield, Gloucs.). Type 1 cheek pieces are the most commonly identified.

Type 2 (Figure 3e)

This is a group of cheek pieces each of which has a pair of long tapering projections which end with a rounded knob. They also have engraved non-zoomorphic ornament. The only recorded fragment which retains the arm, from Thurnham, Kent (KENT-59B810), has a plain oval loop without the three knobs. Other examples are known from West Dean, Hants. (Fig. 3e); and Beddingham, E. Sussex (SUSS-C989B3). Another feature of this trio of examples is the group of prominent projecting lobes on the leading edge.

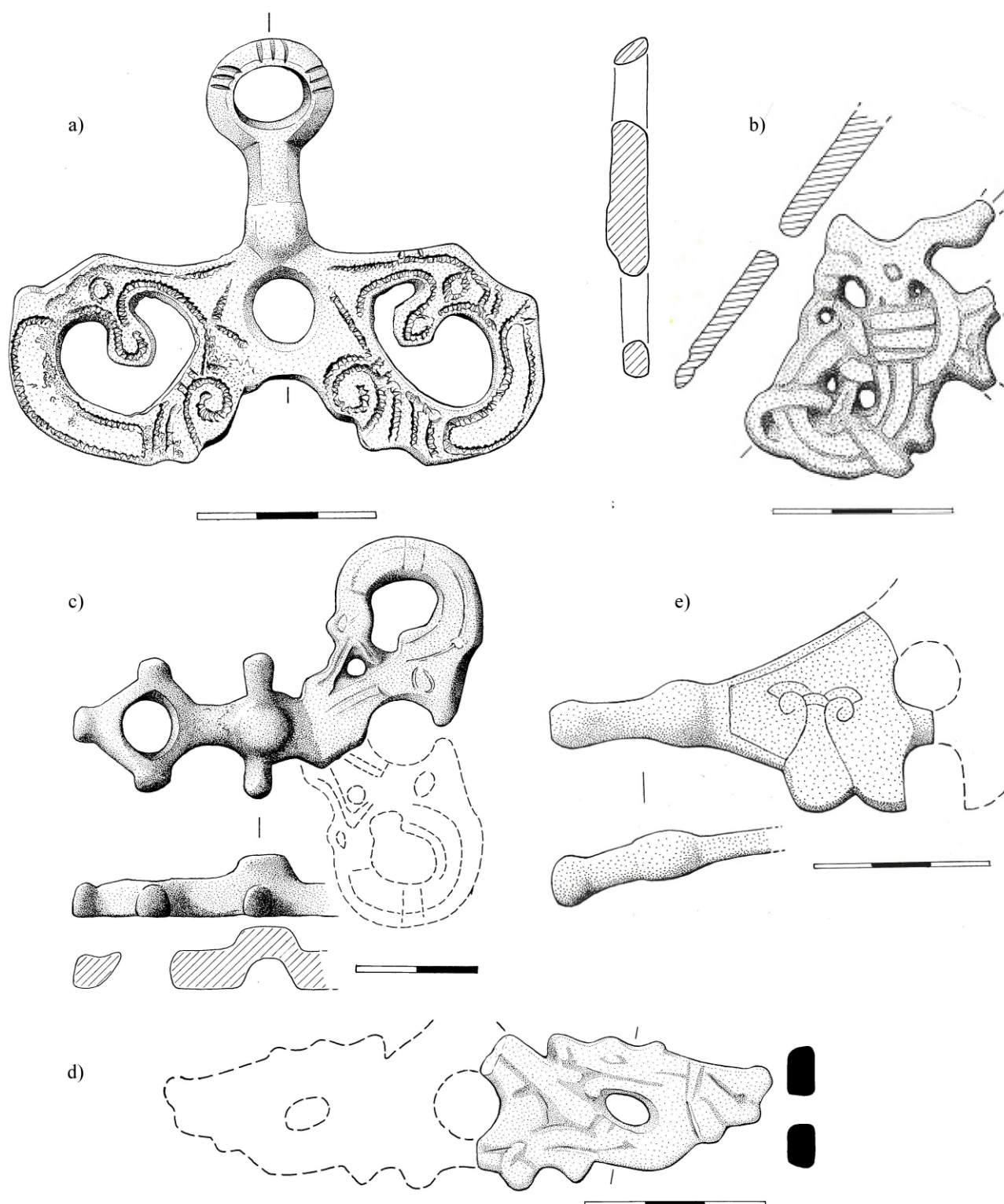


Figure 3: Type 1 (a-d) and 2 (e) cheek pieces: Type 1: a) Witcombe area, Gloucs.; b) Walton-on-Thames, Surrey; c) unprovenanced; d) Brimpsfield, Gloucs.; Type 2: e) West Dean, Hants.

That on the West Dean example has been utilised to form the base of an engraved pendent lobe with opposed spirals.

Type 3 (Figure 4 a-c)

This is a small group of three, rather

diminutive, cheek pieces from Hampshire and West Sussex (Fig. 4 a-c). The loop on the projecting arm of these objects is rectangular or trapezoidal and the openwork ornament is cast rather than being engraved. The cheek pieces from Chichester and Purbrook both

have a pair of inward-facing creatures. Those from Purbrook and Droxford (the Chichester fragment is too worn to be certain) have a projecting head at the junction of plate and arm; these are reminiscent of the heads found on Class B stirrup-strap mounts (Williams 1997a).

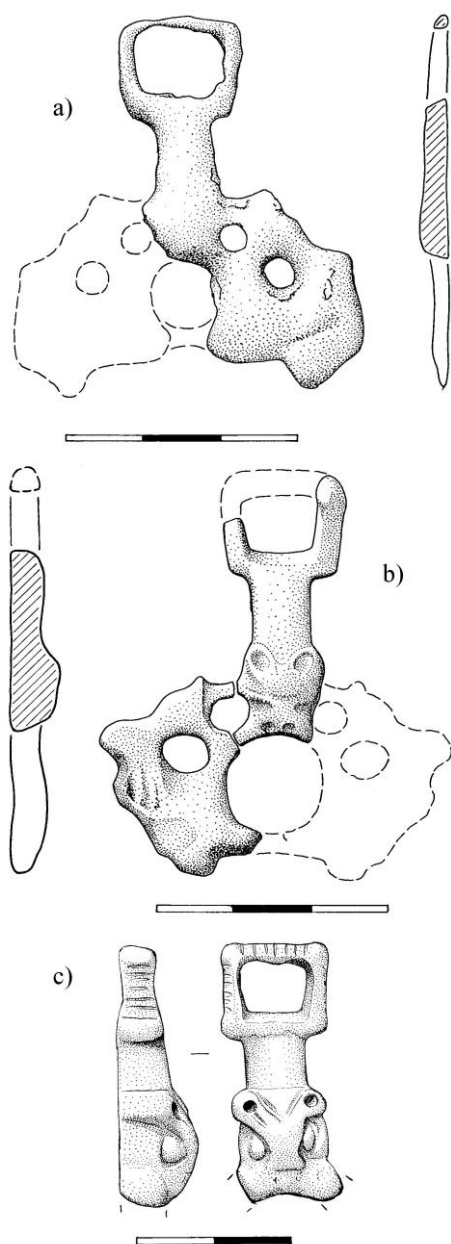


Figure 4: Type 3 cheek pieces from a) Chichester, West Sussex; b) Purbrook, Hants.; c) terminal from Droxford, Hants.

Bit links (Figure 5)

This is a series of undecorated links which were attached to the ends of the iron bits, adjacent to the cheek piece, and to which were secured the reins (Fig. 5). One end has the

characteristic knobbed loop while the other is larger and oval; the oval loops were attached to the bit and because they swung they are often found worn through. There is usually a rounded boss on the arm joining the two loops. Links with two oval terminals are also known (e.g. SOMDOR-DBBDC3).

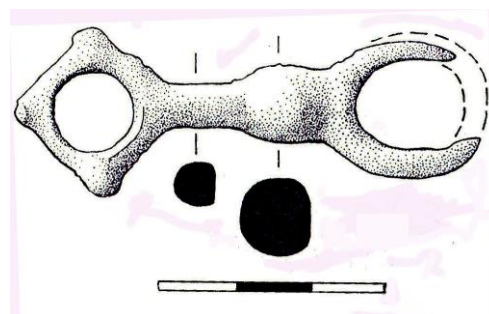


Figure 5: Worn bit link from Brockham, Surrey.

Harness links (Figure 6 a-d)

This is a ubiquitous series of double-ended links which have a centrally-placed boss (Fig. 6a). The precise function of these links is not clear and they may have been used at many points on the harness where an attachment was needed, and not just on the head.

Many links have a plain central boss but there is also a wide variety of more decorative central elements, including fully-modelled faces (Soberton, Hants., Fig. 6b), and engraved designs (e.g. Dorking, Surrey, Fig. 6c; and Ashmanhaugh, Norfolk (NMS-026755), with niello inlay). Three examples from Suffolk (Flowton (SF-E7BA78); Ixworth (SF-B793C2); and Nacton, the latter two engraved) have elaborate trilobate projections (the late Viking-inspired 'pendent lobe and opposed spirals' (Fig. 6d), rather than a fleur-de-lis (c.f. Williams 1997a, fig. 5)).

Harness links with integral rivetted plates (Figure 6e)

This group of double-ended links has a flat central plate, often with a trilobate terminal, pierced for rivets, and also often with engraved decoration (c.f. Barcheston, Warwicks., (Fig. 6e); Westbury, Bucks. (Ivens *et al.* 1995, fig. 152, 56)). These links were presumably rivetted to a fixed strap. An incomplete example from Quidenham,

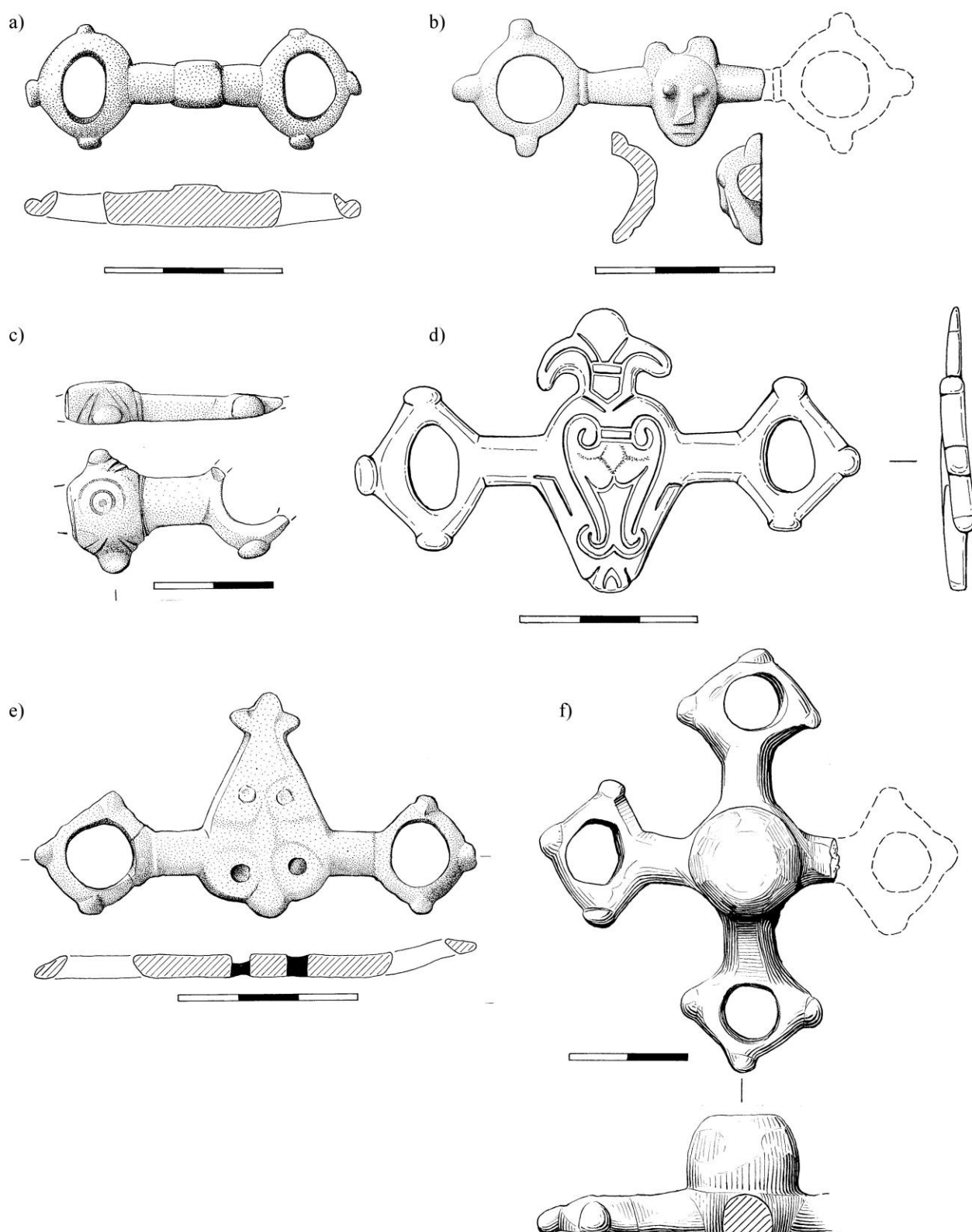


Figure 6: Harness links: a) Lower Chelmscote, Warwicks.; b) with face on central boss from Soberton, Hants.; c) with engraved central boss from Dorking, Surrey; d) with decorated central plate from Nacton, Suffolk (drawing by Donna Wreathall); e) with integral rivetted plate from Barcheston, Warwicks.; f) four-way harness link from Sutton, Suffolk.

Norfolk (NMS-840EB5) has engraved ornament including opposed spirals, and also an oval loop and provision for two rivets.

Four-way harness links (Figure 6f)

This is a series of four-way links or strap distributors, often with a prominent central

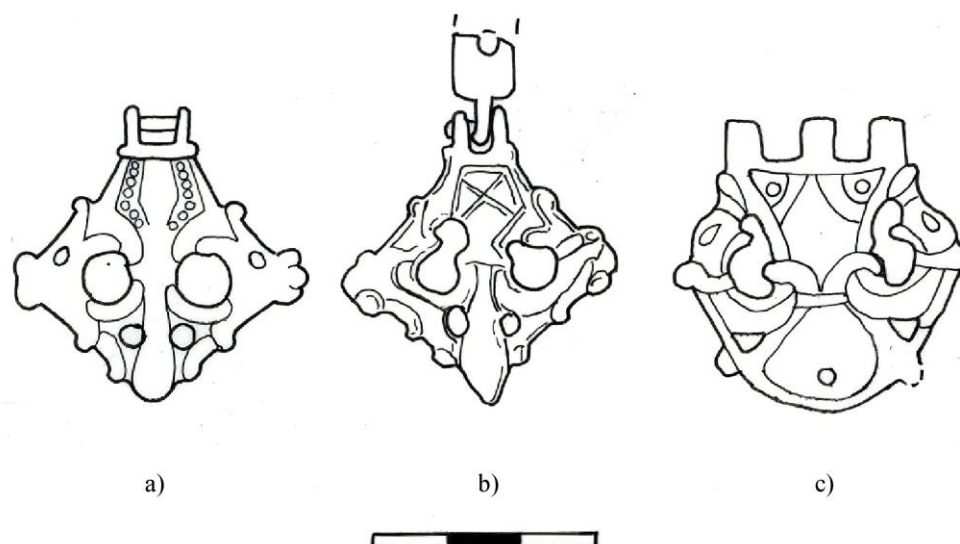


Figure 7: Harness pendants from: a) 'Yorkshire'; b) Howell, Lincs.; c) unprovenanced (*The Searcher*, Sept 1997, p. 44). Estimated scale.

boss, and usually, though not always, with knobbed terminals (c.f. Sutton, Suffolk, Fig. 6f). Decorated examples are rare, but at least one is known (HAMP-58B723).

Harness pendants (Figure 7 a-c)

A series of openwork pendants is presumed to be harness-related (Fig. 7). Few appear to have been published (c.f. Margeson 1997, fig. 36, perhaps from Norwich) and none appears to be known from southern Scandinavia. Only one is presently on the PAS Database (NLM-3CD626, from Hibaldstow, Lincs.). Most known examples are diamond-shaped and from the limited evidence available these seem to be confined to the eastern counties of England from Norfolk to Yorkshire.

The diamond-shaped examples (Fig. 7a & b) have a pair of projecting tabs on the upper edge with an axial bar between them (on the Hibaldstow pendant the tabs are very long). An example (e.g. Fig. 7b) has been found with the straight-sided lower part of a riveted suspension hanger attached but the complete form of these is not known. Other examples, although not certainly pendants (Fig. 7c, and Graham-Campbell 1992, fig. 9, from near Basingstoke, Hants.) are U-shaped and have

three pierced projections along the upper edge to take a single bar. The symmetrical ornament on all known examples comprises a pair of crested animal heads facing each other, above a pendent lobe; this is often debased.

Other fittings

Other copper alloy fittings and mounts of similar date and with similar decoration are known in a variety of forms (e.g. a hooked fitting from Westbury, Bucks. (Ivens *et al.* 1995, fig. 153, 79)) but at present it cannot be said whether these relate to harness or are dress accessories.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank both those finders and museums who have allowed me to record their harness fittings and my colleagues, both in the Portable Antiquities Scheme and beyond, who have commented on earlier drafts of this paper. Any remaining errors are my own.

Alphanumeric references relate to records on the Portable Antiquities Scheme online Database (www.finds.org.uk). Go to the Advanced Search option and search under the references given.

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