
DATASHEET 51

Medieval Base-metal Mirror-cases at the Museum of London

by

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Introduction

In the 1991 Museum of London (MOL) publication *Dress Accessories*, Geoff Egan observed that ‘small metal-cased mirrors have only recently been recognised among excavated medieval finds’; in part, this was because they had previously been thought to be Roman (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 358). In the intervening decades many more examples have come to light, especially as metal-detected finds recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS). However, despite some recent scholarly interest (see, for example, Lewis 2014; Standley 2008 and 2013), such objects remain an under-researched resource.

Michael Lewis (2014, 355) has noted that the PAS had recorded 154 medieval mirror-cases on its database by the end of 2013, the vast majority of which (151 of the total) were recorded as copper-alloy (currently about 200 are listed). By comparison, as of 2015, the Museum of London collections held 26 objects categorised as cased mirrors; over half (15 of the total) are lead-alloy, which is an interesting and noteworthy difference. In part, this difference may be accounted for by the find circumstances: the majority of the Museum of London examples are recovered from sites

close to the River Thames where the water-logged conditions helped to preserve them.

This datasheet will present a sample of base-metal mirror-cases held in the Museum of London collections, most previously unpublished, broadly categorised by decorative theme. The Museum of London material provides valuable data that is both comparative and complementary to that on the PAS database, other archaeological finds and museum collections.

Description and dating

While there are exceptions, base-metal mirror-cases most usually consist of two circular cast discs with a pair of pierced lugs on one side and a single pierced lug opposite which, together with rivets, effectively form a hinge and clasp that join the halves together and enable the case to open and close. The copper-alloy discs are usually slightly convex while the lead-alloy examples tend to have a bevelled edge (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 358-61). The enclosed convex disc of mirror glass (which rarely survives) was held in place by a form of putty or cement. Based on stylistic grounds or associated archaeological evidence, mirrors of this base-metal type are generally dated to the

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period broadly spanning the 13th to 14th centuries (Lewis 2014, 355). The cases are notably small, ranging in diameter from approximately 28mm to around 60mm; the copper-alloy examples are typically 28-30mm, while the lead-alloy are less uniform in size. Classed as dress accessories (Egan and Pritchard 1991; Standley 2013), the small size of these objects means they were portable and easy to carry about the person.

The mirror-cases were cast in a mould. Aside from material, the main distinguishing feature between the copper-alloy examples and the lead-alloy ones is in the form of decoration. The majority of the former are typically punched with a relatively labour-intensive secondary decoration in the form of a cruciform design (reminiscent of St Cuthbert's cross) which, surviving evidence suggests, was common to both discs. Lewis has categorised the copper-alloy forms into two broad types: type A, and a less common type B, a variation decorated with collets and mounts. The few Museum of London copper-alloy examples (where the decoration survives) fall into the most common design category, Type A1 (Fig. 1; Lewis 2014, 356-359). As Lewis notes, the number of decorative forms on this mirror type is surprisingly limited (*ibid*, 356).



Fig 1: copper-alloy mirror-case (93.76/1)

By contrast, in form, the Museum of London lead-alloy examples share similarities with other mass-produced items of the same period, in particular pilgrim badges (some of which also contained mirrors) and it seems likely some of these objects are related, and served a similar market (Spencer 2010, 17-18). Since the lead-alloy mirror-cases are much more varied in their size and decorative forms it is hard to formulate an obvious typology, though

there are broad themes, based on decoration, into which the examples that follow can be grouped.

CATALOGUE OF DECORATIVE TYPES

Type 1: Floral/Abstract/Circles

1. Lead-alloy, mid-13th century (Fig. 2).
Diameter c. 42mm (MOL accession no. 93.72/10)

A circular mirror-case half which has a pierced single lug on one side and a pair of pierced lugs directly opposite. It is decorated with central, double concentric circles which are surrounded by six radiating double concentric circles all infilled with a petal-like design. The background is infilled with smaller circles and there is a central raised dot.



Fig. 2: Type 1 lead-alloy mirror-case half decorated with circles (93.72/10)



Fig. 3: Type 1 lead-alloy mirror-case half decorated with central cross and concentric circles (84.240/5)

2. Lead-alloy, late 13th century (Fig. 3).
Diameter c. 52mm (MOL accession no. 84.240/5)

A circular mirror-case half with a single pierced lug on one edge. It is decorated with a central cross (Greek-style), each arm of which terminates in double concentric circles infilled with a cross-hatch detail and a central raised dot. The background contains a diaper pattern and there is a raised dot at the centre of the cross.



Fig. 4: Type 1 lead-alloy mirror-case half decorated with fleur-de-lys pattern and collets (VHA89 [2084] <1586>)

3. Lead-alloy, medieval (Fig. 4). Diameter c. 44mm (MOL accession no. VHA89 [2084] <1586>)

A circular mirror-case half with a single pierced lug on one side and remains of a single lug directly opposite. Decorated with a repeating fleur-de-lys pattern on a cross-hatched ground, this is punctuated around the rim with four equidistant circular bosses or collets and has a single, larger boss at its centre. In common with the collets on PAS copper-alloy Type B, the bosses appear hollow and may have contained coloured glass or beads (Lewis 2014, 357-8).



Fig. 5: Type 1 lead-alloy mirror-case half decorated with petal-like lobes (VRY89 [V1031] <3280>)

4. Lead-alloy, medieval (Fig. 5). Diameter c. 35mm (MOL accession no. VRY89 [V1031] <3280>)

A circular mirror-case half with a broken and damaged edge. This example is decorated with 12 radiating petal-like lobes which are enclosed by a double circle, the inside of which is punctuated around its edge with equidistant raised dots. There is a distinct hole on one edge of the case but it is hard to be certain if this is the result of a problem in manufacture, deliberate action or general damage.

A couple of cases with similar designs are discussed in the *Dress Accessories* publication; one of these also has a hole at its edge which Egan suggests could be a flaw as a result of a

bubble in the mould during the casting process (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 358-9, nos 1709 and 1710). These parallels, while broadly similar, illustrate the lack of uniformity among the designs in terms of size and decoration. Evidently none are from the same mould which indicates many different design moulds were in use.

Type 2: Hunting/Romance



Fig. 6: Type 2 lead-alloy mirror-case half decorated with stag and hunting dogs (84.260/1)

5. Lead-alloy, late 13th to 14th centuries (Fig. 6). Diameter c. 50mm (MOL accession no. 84.260/1)

An incomplete, formerly circular, mirror-case half with a pair of lugs on one edge. Although the decoration on this example is severely worn, it is possible to make out traces of a stag being attacked by two hunting dogs. The background consists of a cross-hatched pattern. There are a number of raised dots scattered over the design.

This example can be cross-referenced with another fragment in the museum's collection which depicts a stallion and traces of its rider's cloak (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 363-4, no. 1718). The latter is of a superior quality and material (silver-gilt) and points to a potential hierarchy of design and materials spanning across social classes. A copper-alloy example with similar hunting imagery, which was excavated at Shapwick, Somerset, is discussed in some detail by Eleanor Standley (2008, 201), who suggests it may have been given as a courtship gift.

Another potential courtship gift or lover's trinket that features a romance theme is discussed by Spencer (2010, 326-7, no. 325f). This circular lead-alloy mirror-case half has detailed, though fragmentary, openwork decoration and depicts a scene from the story of

Tristram and Iseult, the pair with a cup held aloft between them. Two horizontal bands frame the main scene and contain a somewhat jumbled script that alludes to Tristram, Iseult and King Mark; castellations are depicted above and Tristram's dog below. Found at Billingsgate on the north bank of the Thames in the City of London, at 66mm in diameter this is a particularly large example of a mirror-case which Spencer has categorised as a secular badge. For further discussion on a comparable Tristram and Iseult mirror-case excavated in Perth, see Hall and Owen (1998).

There are also two bone mirror-cases in the Museum of London's collections which both feature castellations and an apparent romance theme; these, too, illustrate how such themes permeated across social classes (MOL accession nos 4954 and 21805).

Type 3: Heraldic



Fig. 7: Type 3 lead-alloy mirror-case half decorated with lion-like beasts (93.164/1)

6. Lead-alloy, 13th century (Fig. 7). Diameter c. 40mm (MOL accession no. 93.164/1)

A circular mirror-case half with a pair of pierced lugs on one side. It is decorated with two facing rampant, lion-like beasts, separated by a central, plain vertical band. One beast is crowned, the other guardant. They are on a cross-hatched field and there is a raised dot at its centre.

This mirror-case is a nicely preserved example. There are others of this type in the Museum of London collections: one has a damaged edge and the other is only a small fragment (for details of the more complete of the two, see Egan and Pritchard 1991, 358-9, no. 1708). A slightly larger mirror-case lid with minor variations in its design to that described above was excavated more recently at Riverbank

House, London (Mackinder 2015, 119, no. <S71>).

Of the decorative types presented, this is a relatively common design which, though clearly a very small sample, may indicate heraldic imagery was particularly popular in London at least, or it may merely be an accident of survival (Cowgill 1987, 42-43).

Type 4: Religious Imagery



Fig. 8: Type 4 lead-alloy mirror-case decorated with crucifixion scenes (BWB83[257]<130>)

7. Lead/tin-alloy, medieval (Fig. 8). Diameter of each half c. 35mm (MOL accession no. BWB83 [257] <130>; Egan and Pritchard 1991, 360-361, no. 1712)

This is an unusual and notable example in that the case is complete, with both halves intact and joined together, each half having one pierced lug on one side and a pair opposite; a pair of lugs on one half is joined to a single lug on the other by means of a rivet which acts as a hinge. The mirror-case has a striking openwork design and a shiny silver-like appearance. Each case half is broadly similar with a somewhat crudely realised crucifixion scene depicting Christ on the cross at the centre, flanked by haloed figures of Mary and John to either side; any differences are likely the result of the casting process (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 360-361). The sun and a crescent moon are depicted in the upper section of the design in the space between the upright and horizontal beams of the cross. A foliate scroll around the rim of each half has an inscription which reads + JESUS. One of the halves retains its original foil backing. It is possible it may originally have been painted (ibid).

There are other examples of this type in the Museum of London collections. Egan gives a detailed description of the above example and another mirror-case which, while the imagery is seemingly more accomplished in design and execution, is fragmentary by comparison and does not appear to have any trace of the writing or scroll around the rim - evidence which again points to a different mould (compare Egan and Pritchard 1991, 360-361, nos 1712 and 1713). The openwork design of these mirror-cases (and the Tristram and Iseult example above) is a noteworthy variation. Bearing in mind the object, the subject matter is interesting and may indicate that this mirror served a pilgrim-related, possibly amuletic, function (Spencer 2010, 17-18).

A sub-category of fragmentary base-metal objects currently catalogued as mirror-frames (some of which are very delicate openwork) includes a couple of examples which are also apparently religious in theme:



Fig. 9: Type 4 lead-alloy mirror-frame decorated with pillars and arches (86.251/5)

8. Lead-alloy mirror-frame, 15th century (Fig. 9). 45mm x 27mm (MOL accession no. 86.251/5)

A fragment of delicate openwork broadly circular in shape with an architectural design reminiscent of church-like pillars with pointed arches and a rope-like edge; possible lettering (the letter i?) or script features in the spaces between.



Fig. 10: Type 4 lead-alloy mirror-frame decorated with Latin prayer (86.232/50)

9. Lead-alloy mirror-frame, 15th century (Fig. 10). Length approximately 58mm (MOL accession no. 86.232/50)

Likely to be the fragmentary remains of a mirror-case rim and formerly circular, this object has a Latin inscription which reads '+ o maria mater dey + miserere' ('O Mary Mother of God have mercy') together with some tiny floral detail. Spencer (2010, 142-3, no. 148a) describes another potential mirror-frame with a similar inscription as an Annunciation badge. This latter example has a clip and rebate on the reverse which may have housed a mirror.

Though incomplete, these mirror-frame examples are a useful resource and provide further material evidence of the variety of mirror-types and designs that were in circulation in the later medieval period.

Type 5: Undecorated

A very small minority of cases are without decoration, though it is hard to be certain if any surface decoration has worn away, if sometimes only one half of the complete case was decorated or if some were never decorated at all.



Fig. 11: Type 5 lead-alloy mirror-case half with no visible decoration (SWA81[2057]<2123>)

10. Lead-alloy, medieval (Fig. 11). Diameter 35mm (MOL accession no. SWA81 [2057] <2123>; Egan and Pritchard 1991, 359, no. 1711)

A circular mirror-case half which, apart from the lack of decoration, is similar in form to others discussed above: circular with a bevelled edge and a pair of pierced lugs on one side with a single lug directly opposite.

Another undecorated example, although heavily corroded and copper-alloy rather than lead-alloy, is worth noting as it has an attached loop (Fig. 12; MOL accession no. 88.425/1).



Fig. 12: copper-alloy mirror-case half with attached loop (88.425/1)

While it is not possible to be certain whether the loop was an original feature of the case or was attached at some point post manufacture, it is an interesting and unusual addition. If original, it may suggest that such objects could be attached to a belt or girdle and carried about the person (Lewis 2014, 359). Compared to the more common copper-alloy types typically recorded by the PAS database, this example is also relatively large at 40mm diameter (70mm including the loop). It dates to the 15th century.

Closing remarks

The Museum of London's collection of base-metal mirror-cases shows great variety, indicating that these are not straightforward objects, nor are they straightforward to categorise, though some refinement may be

possible especially as more mirror-cases come to light. Nevertheless, the material evidence provides a valuable and under-researched resource which gives a particular insight into the ownership, use and disposal of such objects in London. Further work is required, in particular into their relationship to small religious items, such as pilgrim souvenirs that feature mirrors, and also into how these cased mirrors were worn, carried and used.

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