

DATASHEET 52

Decorated two-part clasps

by

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Introduction

Both buckles and clasps can be used to fasten together the two ends of the same strap. The absence of a pin, which passes through holes pierced in the strap for a buckle, distinguishes the clasp from a buckle. A pin enables a strap to be held more securely, which suggests that clasps were used for items under less strain than those using a buckle. Two main types of medieval clasp are found: one with two components, the other with three. *Two-part clasps* consist of a frame, often decorated, and a strap plate (Fig. 1). *Three-part clasps* have a rectangular frame, a separate rotating end, and a strap plate (Fig. 2). Neither type is particularly common, but the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) database featured 489 three-part types and 229 two-part types at the time of writing. This datasheet will proceed to focus on two-part examples, its observations drawn mainly from the PAS database as it represents the largest available dataset. It will set out the different decorative types noted within it and compare them to the few retrieved from excavations.



Fig. 1: Diagram of a two-part clasp

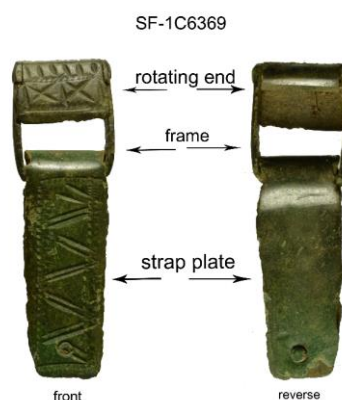


Fig. 2: Diagram of a three-part clasp

Commonly referred to as 'king's head' or

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‘crowned head’ buckles, two-part clasps all have a sub-rectangular frame, decorated at one end. The reverse of the frame is recessed, presumably to hold the strap in place securely, though the exact reason is uncertain. All examples noted are copper-alloy. Complete frames range in size between 14mm and 40mm in length and between 5mm and 28mm in width. ‘Large head (mitred)’ and ‘large head (plain)’ subtypes are narrower than the main ‘large head’ types or the ‘animal head’ type. Occasionally, some frames have been modified to operate as buckles, either with a pin present on the bar, or a pin hole in the strap plate, or a notch cut into the decorated end to allow for a pin; this will be discussed further below.

Manufacture

Like buckle frames, the frame would have been cast in a ceramic mould, allowing for multiple examples to be cast in one session, although few of the reported examples appear to be identical. Unlike for buckles, no casting moulds have been identified for these clasps to date.

The plate was formed from a strip of sheet copper-alloy, folded around the bar. A hole for a rivet to secure the plate to the strap is normally located towards the open end of the plate. A pin hole next to the bar is only found if the clasp has been modified to function as a buckle. Like other buckle and clasp types, the plates are often decorated.

Pins are only present on those examples modified as buckles. Such pins are either made from drawn wire or cut sheet metal, looped around the bar.

Decorative types

Five main decorative types have been identified with the PAS dataset: large head; small head; geometric; animal head; and bird head. Large head and small head types have been further subdivided into three subtypes: crowned;

mitred; plain/variant. In total there are nine different decorative forms.

Large head types

There are three main subtypes within this category: crowned, mitred and plain. On all large head types a human face is depicted, always facing forward and filling the entire width of the clasp. The difference between the subtypes is the head gear.

Large head (crowned)

These have a forward-facing sub-circular (sometimes more triangular) face, with a crown above it and hair to either side (Fig. 3). The crown has either two or four holes along the upper edge, and the more detailed examples show a trifoliate crown with side fleurs. The engraved eyes are normally triangular, and the mouth is a horizontal line.

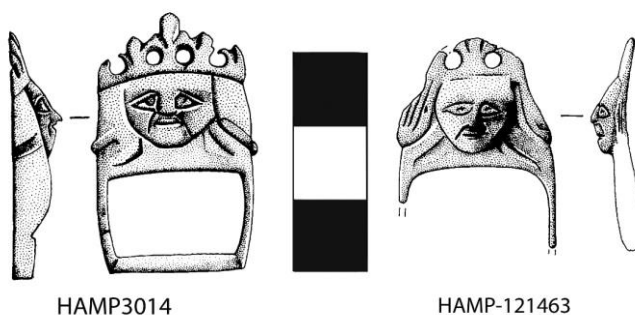


Fig. 3: Large head (crowned) type from Barton Stacey, Hampshire (left); from Micheldever, Hampshire (right)

Large head (mitred)

Similar to the large head (crowned) type, but instead of a crown, on these a triangular pointed hat is present (Fig. 4). The frame is often narrower than on the large head (crowned) type.

Large head (plain)

These relatively rare examples tend to have a square forward-facing head, with ridges present along the upper edge to represent hair (Fig. 5). In comparison to the other types, the eyes are often circular depressions, but the mouth is

Main type (no. of examples)	Large head (86) (37%)	Small head (27) (12%)	Geometric (9) (4%)	Animal head (105) (46%)	Bird head (2) (1%)	Total (229)
Subtypes:	Crowned (66) Mitred (14) Plain (6)	Crowned (13) Mitred (2) Variant (12)	-	-	-	



Fig. 4: Large head (mitred) type from Winchester, Hampshire (left); from Warborough, Oxfordshire (right)

formed from a horizontal engraved line. Like the large head (mitred) examples, the frame tends to be narrower than large head (crowned) types.



Fig. 5: Large head (plain) type from Hanbury, Worcestershire (left); from Marlborough, Wiltshire (right)

Small head types

On these examples, the centre of the upper edge of the frame is decorated with a projection, often a small crowned head. There are three main subtypes: crowned, mitred and variant. Due to the size of the head, it can be hard to determine the subtype, between crowned and mitred.

Small head (crowned)

Two or four holes can be present in the crown (Fig. 6). Occasionally no holes are present, but diagonal grooves represent the fleurs in the crown. The outer corners of the frame, perhaps representing the figure's shoulders, are often decorated. The frames on this type tend to be more square than those of the other main types.

Small head (mitred)

Like the small head (crowned), the decorated area extends above the frame and bears a mitre,

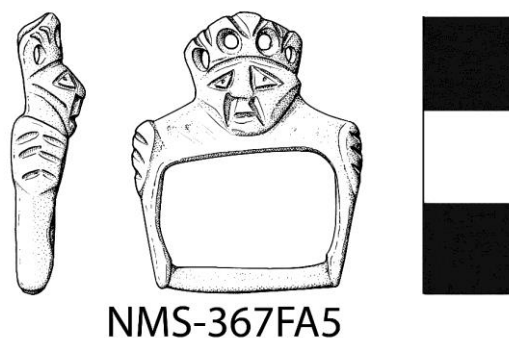


Fig. 6: Small head (crowned) type from Runcton Holme, Norfolk

with a triangular end (Fig. 7). The mitre is undecorated.



Fig. 7: Small head (mitred) type from Sandringham, Norfolk

Small head (variant)

On variants of this type the projecting head is replaced with a different device, such as a trefoil, acorn or rounded knop (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Small head (variant) with a trefoil, from Hanslope, Milton Keynes (left); with an acorn, from Melton, Leicestershire (centre); with a pine cone, from Penton Mewsey, Hampshire (right)

Geometric types

This small group comprises the least decorated examples. They tend to have a sub-triangular decorative end, often embellished with a series of diagonal or horizontal engraved lines (Fig.

9). Occasionally, as on LIN-52D2E8, they can have a squared off end with horizontal lines.



Fig. 9: Geometric type from Little Barningham, Norfolk (left); from Great Hale, Lincolnshire (right)

Animal head types

In clasps of the animal head type, and the bird head type (see below), the orientation of the face is different; instead of being front facing, it is viewed from above. The outer edge normally has a V-shaped incision in the centre, indicating a mouth. Two eyes tend to be located approximately a third of the way down the clasp. Diagonal lines indicate the top of the head (normally with vertical lines inside illustrating hair). There is a degree of variation within this type, which is susceptible to subdivision in the future. On SUR-DED4A1 (Fig. 10), drilled pits are used to identify the hair. Some examples are more stylised, some lacking eyes. The nose is extended on some. The animal head is the most frequently occurring type.

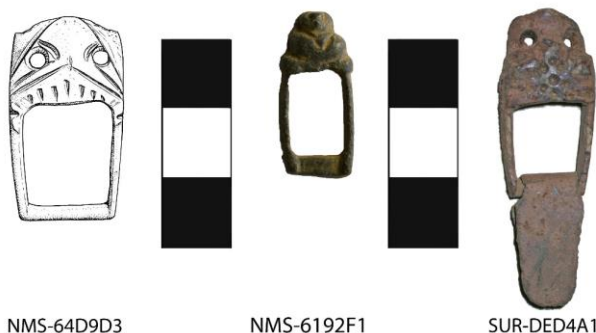


Fig. 10: Animal head type from Haveringland, Norfolk (left); from Sedgeford, Norfolk (centre); from Woking, Surrey (right)

The frame of DENO-8336D3 (Fig. 11) shows an unusual and rare variant in terms of construction: it has an integral plate with front and sides cast in one piece, and a separate sheet backplate.



Fig. 11: Animal head (variant) type from Muskham, Nottinghamshire (DENO-8336D3)

Bird head types

With only a few examples known, these are the rarest type. They have a distinctive extended triangular beak, with two closely set circular eyes (Fig. 12). Diagonal grooves represent feathers over the head.



Fig. 12: Bird head type from Duddon, Cheshire West and Chester (LVPL-B63F73)

Modified examples

Generally only when the plate is still present, can it be determined whether a given example functioned as a clasp or as a buckle. Some examples, like BUC-AF91A7 (Fig. 13), demonstrate that the pin was a secondary feature, as the pin hole is a later addition.



Fig. 13: Animal head type from Wendover, Buckinghamshire. A circular pin hole in the strap plate contains a sheet metal pin (BUC-AF91A7)

Occasionally, as with LANCUM-7FF747 (Fig. 14) and LIN-4D3C15, the decorative detail has been altered to allow the frame to function better as a buckle, by cutting a grooved pin rest to hold the pin in place during use.



Fig. 14: Large head (crowned) type from Hambleton, North Yorkshire. A pin rest has been cut, obliterating the face and a pin hole has been created in the strap plate (LANCUM-7FF747)

Dating and non-PAS Finds

These clasps are considered to be of late medieval date (c. 1350 to c. 1450). The trifoliate crown on some is similar to that used on coins from 1279 onwards. Several published excavated examples are known and detailed below. Most were retrieved from unstratified contexts, which therefore do not contribute to our knowledge of dating:

- Five examples have been identified as part of the Meols, Wirral, assemblage: three animal head types (nos 894, 901 and 904), one bird head type (no. 902) and one large head (crowned) type (no. 903) (Egan 2007, 109/pl 18).
- At Great Linford, Buckinghamshire, an animal head type was found during a metal detector search on a stripped area (Zeepvat 1991, 142, fig. 53, no. 32).
- A small head (variant) type with a fleur-de-lis was found at Sunlight Wharf, London (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 120; Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Small head (variant) with a fleur-de-lis. Site I: SUN86 acc. no. 409

Two excavated examples have been found in dated contexts:

- A large head (crowned) type was found at the Templar Preceptory at South Witham, Lincolnshire (Goodall 2002, 104, no. 102). It was recovered from the occupation deposits of one of the earlier buildings, building 16, dated to between 1220/40, a phase of entire rebuilding, and the late 13th century. The final phase of occupation (late 13th century to 1313-38) included the enlargement of the Great Hall, but on the same footings. It is therefore possible that this example could be an intrusive item into an earlier deposit.
- Another large head (crowned) type came from a foreshore dump at the Billingsgate site in London, dated to London ceramic phase 11 (c. 1350-

1400; Egan and Pritchard 1991, 119-120, no. 568).

Distribution

The PAS database exhibits concentrations in Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk (Fig. 16). However, these counties have high volumes of recordable finds due to frequent metal detecting, therefore these concentrations are reflective of that fact. Mapping of the distributions of subtypes reveals patterning which, though mixed, follows the overall distribution enough to suggest that these clasps are a national artefact type, rather than identifying any specific regional trends.

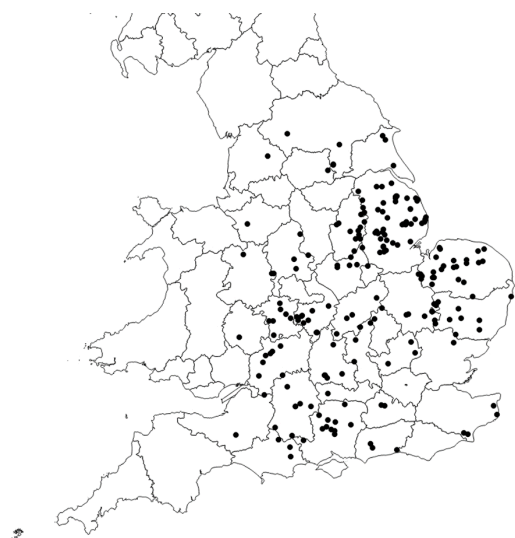


Figure 16: Distribution map of all the PAS recorded decorated two-part strap clasps. Only those finds recorded with a grid reference of six figures or more have been plotted.

Concluding thoughts

It is hoped that the work presented here will aid the consistent recording of these objects. Future

work might involve comparative analysis to try to see if any examples came from the same mould. It would also be useful to carry out an examination of effigies and memorial brasses to see if any can be identified 'in use' to gain a clearer idea of their function.

Similar designs (crowned heads, animal heads, acorns) have been noted on strap-ends (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 131, 133, nos 607, 614; Mills 1995, 356, fig. 156.110, Westbury cat. no. 180); strap-slides (Mills 1995, 356, fig. 156.112, Westbury cat. no. 100); and strap mounts (Mills 1995, 351, figs 153.62-3, Westbury cat. nos 37-8). It would be reasonable to assume that they all formed part of a matching belt set comprising buckle or clasp, strap-slide, strap-end and strap mounts. More research needs to be done to see if this hypothesis can be proved.

Acknowledgements

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The author would appreciate knowing about any further examples retrieved from securely dated contexts.

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