

DATASHEET 54

Post-Medieval Horse Bridle Bosses and Rosettes

by

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Introduction

Harness bosses form a diverse group of equestrian finds which are regularly recorded through the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS). In their decoration and function, they reflect the huge importance of horse riding as both practical and a platform for conspicuous displays of wealth and status. Although medieval bridle and harness bosses have been subject to previous examination (e.g. Ward Perkins 1967 [1940], 85; Egan 2004 [1995], 53-55), post-medieval examples have not. This datasheet intends to both clarify the function of these objects and suggest some basic typological groupings.

At the time of writing, there are over 400 examples of objects variously described as harness or bridle bosses of post-medieval date on the PAS database (finds.org.uk/database). This diverse group of objects variously includes those which function as bridle bosses and rosettes which are discussed here, as well as larger bosses intended to cover strap junctions (such as breastplates and martingales) and smaller floral, umbonate or circular decorative mounts which were fixed directly to

leather straps and saddles and which are not discussed.

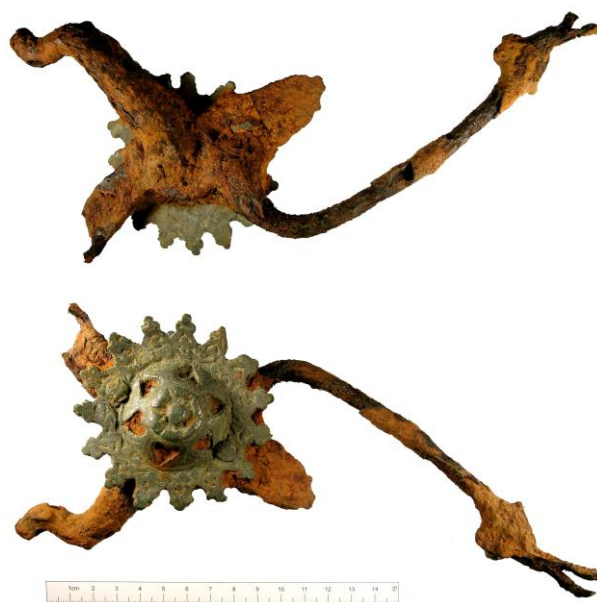


Fig. 1: A copper-alloy bridle boss of Openwork Multifoil Type, with two separate rivets which attach to the iron cheekpiece of a curb bit (SUSS-025985), © Sussex Archaeological Society

Form and function

Bridle bosses were cast from copper alloy (often with gilded or tinned surfaces), pewter or

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lead alloy and are typically between 50 and 65mm in diameter. Their function was purely decorative, and as prominent and highly visible features of the horse's tack, they were often elaborately decorated following broader fashions for decorative metalwork in the Tudor, Jacobean, Stuart and Restoration periods.

The basic distinction between a 'bridle boss' and a 'bridle rosette' lies in their position on the bridle; bridle bosses were mounted on the iron cheekpieces of curb bits, serving to conceal the ends of the mouthpiece (Fig. 1), whereas bridle rosettes were mounted on the upper part of the bridle at the horse's temple and largely decorative. Bridle bosses are typically umbonate to accommodate the ironwork of the bit junction, whereas bridle rosettes, though of similar size and shape, are more typically flat and discoidal.

Distinguishing incomplete post-medieval bridle rosettes from bridle bosses as stray finds is often problematic and some recorded examples could conceivably serve either function. The basic distinction lies with the nature of the fixings. Bridle bosses were riveted to an iron cheekpiece via two or more separate rivets positioned equidistantly around the rim of the boss, whereas rosettes were attached to straps via a soldered or integrally cast rectangular bar (usually of iron in the case of lead-alloy examples). The location of rusted iron on the reverse of bosses can sometimes help determine whether a mount has evidence of attachment to a cheekpiece or whether it has stumps of an integrally cast strap bar. These features can serve to distinguish them from other kinds of circular strap or furniture mounts which may have hooked fixing lugs for attachment to thick leather or screw thread attachments for furniture.

Bridle Bosses

Bridle bosses originally came to be used in conjunction with a style of curb bit which originated in the late 15th century and continued in use for several centuries afterwards (Ward Perkins 1967 [1940], 85). They became particularly fashionable in the 16th and 17th centuries as part of elaborate sets of military

parade armour and aristocratic horse trappings. Although a broad continuum exists between late medieval and early post-medieval forms, dating differentials are broadly demonstrable on stylistic grounds. A diachronic shift is evident in the form of the fixings, with earlier medieval examples (not covered here) having a single central rivet (Egan 2004 [1995], 53-54, fig. 40), later medieval and early post-medieval examples typically having three or more rivets, and 17th-century and later forms being restricted to a single pair.

Types

Conical Type

Copper alloy, with conical bosses and wide, flat, undecorated rims (Fig. 2). Usually with plain, undecorated surfaces. A form which starts in the late medieval period and continues through into the 17th century. Earlier examples have between two and four pierced holes around the rim for separate rivets, which sometimes have decorative floral heads (e.g. KENT-866A5D). Examples of this type can be seen in situ on recorded sets of 16th-century parade armour (e.g. Stibbert 2001, plate 166).

Suggested date range: 15th to late 16th century (c. 1450-1600)



Fig. 2: A Conical Type bridle boss (YORYM-579D92), © York Museums Trust

Rose Type

Copper (occasionally lead) alloy and convex, with relatively narrow multifoil, sawtooth or smooth rims and a prominent rounded dome (Fig. 3). Characterised by elaborate moulded decoration across the entire boss, usually floral in form, with two or three rivet holes.

A diverse group typified by examples where the entire boss takes the form of a rose, sometimes incorporating figurative elements and often with a gilded surface. Less common variants have smooth, narrow borders with bosses displaying figurative scenes (typically St George and the Dragon), often with the early post-medieval arrangement of three rivet holes.

This is a predominantly 16th-century type associated with parade armour or military/aristocratic horse trappings. Examples can be seen depicted in contemporary illustrations (e.g. Stibbert 2001, plates 160-1, 197) and in equestrian paintings from the mid-16th to the first half of the 17th century (e.g. Titian's *Emperor Charles V at M hlberg* (1548), Rubens's *St George and the Dragon* (1606), Van Dyck's *Equestrian portrait of Prince Tomaso of Savoy-Carignan* (1634)).

Suggested date range: 16th to early 17th century (c. 1500-1650)



Fig. 3: A Rose Type bridle boss (SUR-7516EC),   Surrey County Council

Multifoil Type

Cast copper alloy with domed and often distinctively openwork centres, gilded or tinned surfaces and characteristically complex multifoil borders in the Baroque style. Usually with only two rivet holes. A characteristic 17th-century type, examples can be seen depicted in paintings of the period such as Van Dyck's *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* (1635-6) as well as in later paintings of the Baroque period, such as Cuyp's *Lady and Gentleman on Horseback* (1660). Read (1995, 148) has also previously dated this type generally to the 17th century.

Suggested date range: mid to late 17th century (c. 1620-80)

There are two basic forms:

Openwork Multifoil Type

Openwork centres moulded into a range of designs seen on other forms of contemporary decorative metalwork, including, stars, curved spirals, flowers and fleurs-de-lis (Figs 4, 5).



Fig. 4: An Openwork Multifoil Type bridle boss with a fleur-de-lis (PUBLIC-3742BB)



Fig. 5: An Openwork Multifoil Type bridle boss with a spiral (WILT-2015B4)

Figurative or Heraldic Multifoil Type

Solid convex bosses with moulded figurative decoration incorporating neoclassical motifs and scenes involving mounted figures (Fig. 6). An example depicting a horse and rider (identical to YORYM-E8B8C5) was excavated from Exeter in a context dated c. 1620-50 (Goodall 1984, 343, no. 148).

Another variant of this type is decorated with heraldic designs, which provide good supporting dating evidence. Recorded examples depict the Royal Arms at the time of the Stuart monarchs after 1603 (e.g. WREX-

67D64E) or the Commonwealth of 1649-1660 (e.g. NMS-071D66).



Fig. 6: A Figurative Multifoil Type bridle boss depicting Hercules in a lion skin headdress (WREX-D4352C), © National Museum of Wales

Oval Type

Umbonate and oval, with two rivet holes on the long axis, multifoil borders and moulded decoration in high relief (Fig. 7). The decorative scheme is often in a neoclassical or floral style with large pellets or petals being a prominent feature. Read (1995, 180-1) has previously dated this type broadly to the 18th - 19th century.

Suggested date range: 18th to early 19th century (c. 1700-1850)



Fig. 7: An Oval Type bridle boss (IOW-C7823D)

Lugged Type

Domed, often with engraved or moulded concentric decoration and narrow, smooth rims (Fig. 8). Defined by the presence of a pair of round peripheral attachment lugs for separate rivets. A type clearly depicted in David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1800-1801); an excavated example from Exeter derives from a 19th-century context (Goodall 1984, 343, no. 149). Hume (1978, 23) generally dates

American examples of this type to the 18th century onward.

Suggested date range: mid-18th to late 19th century (c. 1750-1900)



Fig. 8: A Lugged Type bridle boss (YORYM-0042B3)

Bridle Rosettes

Bridle rosettes were frequently made of leather or cloth in the medieval and post-medieval periods and consequently rarely survive. The metal forms discussed here are mostly of later post-medieval date, becoming particularly fashionable in the 18th century for carriage and draught horses and distinctively decorated in the Rococo and neoclassical styles. More modern forms are often highly elaborate objects, particularly in later 19th-century examples which had applied glass fronts with painted decoration beneath.

Umbonate Type

Copper alloy, umbonate or discoidal with smaller domed bosses and undecorated surfaces (Fig. 9). Probably contemporary with Conical or Rose Type bridle bosses (above) and seen in depictions of horse trappings from the later medieval period to the early 17th century (e.g. Stibbert 2001, plates 118, 202, 207).

Suggested date range: late 15th to 17th century (c. 1550-1650)



Fig. 9: An Umbonate Type bridle rosette (LANCUM-64D34F) showing the characteristic square strap bar

Plain Centre Type

Usually of lead alloy or pewter (sometimes gilded copper alloy), flat, discoidal or square. This type has plain or simple multifoil edges and is defined by a wide and flat (occasionally domed) central area which is undecorated and would have been highly polished for decorative effect when in use. The rims have concentric rings of decoration which is typically neoclassical or late Baroque in style comprising cable style borders with bands of geometric, foliate or floral motif. Early examples have rim decoration similar to 17th-century Rose or Multifoil Type bridle bosses (Fig. 10). In contrast, 18th- to 19th-century examples have borders of geometric or neoclassical style decoration (Fig. 11). Better preserved examples with simple cable style borders and wide centres are likely to be relatively modern in date.

Composite examples of lead-filled brass (e.g. SUR-8E87F6) demonstrate that some surviving lead examples of this type may be cores which have lost sheet metal facings.

Suggested date range: late 17th century to modern (c. 1650-1900)



Fig. 10: A probable late 17th-century Plain Centre Type bridle rosette (IOW-094EC9)



Fig. 11: An 18th to 19th-century Plain Centre Type bridle rosette (SUR-8E87F6), © Surrey County Council

Composite Centre Type

Lead alloy/pewter or copper alloy, umbonate to discoidal with concentric geometric or neoclassical style elements. This type often has a composite construction with a separate raised central element (Fig. 12), sometimes with applied enamelled decoration (e.g. LIN-5A4A90). Earlier examples are contemporary with Plain Centre Type rosettes but have a distinctive central decorative element; later examples are associated with the trappings of 19th-century draught horses.

Suggested date range: late 18th to mid-19th century (c. 1750-1880)



Fig. 12: A Composite Centre Type bridle rosette (WILT-B3B6D6), © Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum

Conical Type

Cast copper alloy (brass), conical or umbonate, usually with moulded concentric ridges and two integrally cast fixing lugs to the reverse for the strap bar (Fig. 13). The rims can be smooth or sawtooth in form.

Suggested date range: late 18th century to modern (c. 1780-1900)



Fig. 13: A Conical Type bridle rosette (SUR-E2B407), © Surrey County Council

Applied Facing Type

Copper-alloy backplate with flat or convex applied decorative facings, often of enamel or glass (Fig. 14). The fixings comprise a simple copper-alloy strap bar on the reverse. When found, these typically will have lost their facings to leave the plain backing disc and strap bar.

Suggested date range: mid-19th century to modern



Fig. 14: An Applied Facing Type bridle rosette (GAT-D0E4DC), © Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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