

DATASHEET 55

Decorative copper-alloy leather mounts and strap-slides of the 16th-18th centuries

by

Dr Simon Maslin FSA

simon.maslin@surreycc.gov.uk; simon.maslin@hampshireculturaltrust.org.uk

Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking, GU21 6ND
Hampshire Cultural Trust, Chilcomb House, Chilcomb Lane, Winchester, SO23 8RD

Introduction

This guide intends to contextualise the design, dating and use of cast copper-alloy decorative leather mounts and strap-slides used during the 16th-18th centuries. This period has produced a huge number of stray finds of this type; the PAS database (finds.org.uk/database) currently records over 10,000 objects which fall under this definition. Despite being so commonly encountered, objects of this type and date have rarely been recovered from excavated contexts (Egan 2005, 39). This has resulted in them only being documented in generalised terms with broad dating (e.g. Read 2016).

Form and function

Mounts and strap-slides of the post-medieval period are similar in size and design but different in function. They are uniformly cast in one piece, with convex or flat decorative plates and distinctive integrally cast fittings.

Mounts were purely decorative in function and have two (or sometimes up to four in the case of larger examples) integrally cast pointed fixings on the reverse. These pierced leather and were then bent into a hook or clenched to tightly grip the rear surface. Such distinctive

fittings are considered likely to differentiate mounts used with leather from those used for furniture or furnishings, which typically have a single, square-sectioned, straight shank (e.g. Cotter 1958, 192; Margeson 1993, 83; Egan 2005, 39). They also clearly differentiate them from earlier, medieval strap mounts which commonly have separate rivets or integrally cast straight rivets designed to be fixed with roves on the rear of the strap (Egan and Pritchard 2002, 162). Mounts constructed of sheet brass with soldered fittings are of much later (19th-20th century) date.

Strap-slides or ‘keepers’ have decorative plates which superficially resemble mounts but were instead used to secure the loose ends of straps after they had passed through a buckle. These objects have two large L-shaped projections with flat cross-section which meet at the rear, forming a deep square or rectangular loop through which the straps run. This differentiates them from decorative mounts, which have smaller fixings (which do not form closed loops) typically sited well within the margins of the plate. When encountered incomplete or broken they are consequently frequently misidentified as mounts.

Datasheets are distributed to members of *The Finds Research Group AD700–1700*. Details of membership are available from the Group’s Membership Secretary Quita Mould, email findsresearch@gmail.com. Correspondence concerning the contents of individual *Datasheets* should be addressed to the author. Datasheet 55 © Simon Maslin 2021. All figures courtesy of the PAS, and the named partners. Where references are made to the *Portable Antiquities Scheme*’s online database (finds.org.uk/database), the object’s unique find ID number is given.

Editor Datasheet 55: Rob Webley

Datasheet series Editor: Nicola Powell www.findsresearchgroup.com

ISSN 0962 2217

Both of these types of objects were incorporated into sets with other matching styles of fittings such as sword-belt suspension mounts (Read 2008) and equestrian bridle bosses (Maslin 2020). A large assemblage of 33 mounts and strap-slides from Lincolnshire (LIN-97C35E), likely all from the same set of horse harness, demonstrates that a wide range of forms could be used together in composite decorative schemes (Daubney 2015). It is, however, often practically impossible to determine in isolation whether individual examples were used on personal dress, harness or bag strapwork (Leahy and Lewis 2020, 162).

Dating

The fashion for decorative mounts on leather straps used as elements of personal civilian dress was primarily a medieval phenomenon which declined in the early 16th century (Egan, 2005, 39). Subsequently, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the use of these objects became largely confined to horse harness, military baldrics and sword-belts (Read 2008; Rivers-Cofield 2008). After this period, the use of ornaments on equestrian harness became very much associated with the 19th-century heavy horse tradition (Brown 1952).

Previous studies have broadly ascribed mounts of the form described here to the period of 1690-1770 (Hume 1969, 242), however disparities in the distribution of different designs on dated sites in the USA has allowed basic discriminations to be proposed which have pushed some types into later date ranges (Rivers-Cofield 2008). Building on this, the key to refining a more coherent dating framework for forms within this period is the style of decoration, which ties into wider trends in decorative metalwork. Published assemblages do however include examples which fall into several of the categories proposed below. This suggests that whatever their individual chronology of use, these groupings overlap significantly in date and could have potentially been used together (Rivers-Cofield 2008; Daubney 2015).

Strap-slides/keepers

Lobed and waisted type (c. 1550-1700)

These are typically elongated, with lobed and waisted plates, sometimes with moulded and gilded decoration although earlier types are typically small and plain. Excavated finds of these are known from post medieval contexts from Exeter (Allan 1984, 331-332; fig. 187, no. 54), Gloucester (Heighway 1983, 192-193; fig. 110, no. 55) and Norwich (Margeson 1993, 40); the latter example being found retaining the end of a fragment of a leather belt with a 16th-century style of buckle. Examples from America have been suggested to have been used with military carbine belts in the mid-17th century (Rivers-Cofield 2008). Later 17th-century forms have gilded and moulded floral or foliate decoration in the Baroque style (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: *Lobed and waisted strap-slides; 16th-17th-century form (SUR-06384E, above) and later 17th-century Baroque form (SUR-9EAA59, below)*

Openwork or complex type (c. 1600-1700)

More elaborate examples have openwork and/or complex decorated plates. These are clearly contemporary to decorative mounts and other strap fittings of similar design and seem to date to the 17th century. The clearest examples of this are those used for 17th-century sword-belt sets with plates identical in form to the suspension elements (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: An openwork strap-slide (SUR-BBC6DD, above) and a strap-slide from a sword-belt set (NMS-473D32, below)

Enamelled type (c. 1645-1690)

A highly distinctive group of these objects is enamelled in a style characterised by retained metal vine-scroll on fields of champlevé enamel, predominantly in white and yellow (Fig. 3). This style, known as 'Stuart' enamelling, is characteristic of the period 1645-1690 and was likely made in London (Blair and Patterson 2006). A range of other strap fittings and dress accessories such as buttons, buckles, dress hooks, sword-belt fittings and strap mounts are known to have had similar

enamelled decoration. These associated objects suggest the existence of lavish and high-status sets of matching enamelled fittings, probably used for both personal dress and equestrian harness.



Fig. 3: An enamelled strap-slide (SUR-696CE5)

Decorative mounts**Umbonate (c. 1500-1750)**

The most ubiquitous forms of simple decorative mount, which persisted from the medieval period onwards, are domed or umbonate types. These can be simple or decorated, sometimes having engrailed or multi-foil borders, with gilding and incised designs. These do not generally display any figurative or symbolic aspect to their design, although some can be decorated in accordance with wider fashions, such as 'Stuart' enamelling (Fig. 4), which allows refinement of their dating. These mounts can readily be differentiated from other types of circular equestrian fittings, such as bridle bosses, on the basis of their much smaller size (Maslin 2020).



Fig. 4: Umbrate mounts: a 16th-17th-century gilded octofoil (SWYOR-547066, above) and a 17th-century example decorated with 'Stuart' enamelling (DUR-728037, below)

Simple heraldic motifs (c. 1500-1700)

A huge range of simple mounts used in this period were rooted in the visual language of heraldry. In the context of the flamboyance of late 16th- and 17th-century costume and harness trappings, they were relatively unobtrusive elements, as can be seen in the contemporary depictions of equestrian portraiture (e.g. Stibbert 2001, plate 207). This group likely contains mounts used on both elements of equestrian harness and personal dress.

A number of repeating designs within this group can be identified, most notably symbols such as the Tudor rose, *fleur-de-lis* and *escallops* which all have clear antecedents in dress accessories from the medieval period (Egan and Pritchard 2002, 163, 185, 201). The use of these designs originated in social and religious symbolism which led to their widespread adoption as armorial charges. This found material expression in livery badges and harness trappings during the 14th-15th century and in a late medieval fashion for 'pseudo' heraldic strap mounts (Willemsen and Ernst 2012, 59-64). Symbolic representations seen

within this group include the *escallops* (baptism and pilgrimage), the arrow (martyrdom), the acorn (independence, patience, modesty and chastity) and the *fleur-de-lis* (royalty, the trinity and the Virgin Mary) (Heath 1909; Kenk 1963; Cassels 2013). These attributes expanded their usage into representations of Christian identity; more obvious religious associations are seen in the diverse range of cruciform mounts of this period, typically of the heraldic cross *moline*, *flory* or *fleur-de-lis* type, usually openwork in form and with conjoined arms.

In addition to these common forms, a huge range of geometric heraldic charges represented by recorded examples are seen, including *stars*, *mascles*, *fusils*, *gouttes* (droplets) and *lozenges*. Also identifiable are plant motifs including the thistle, the *trefoil* (a stylised clover), pomegranate (a globular fruit body with stem) and acorn, all of which are usually shown with an asymmetrical terminal lobe representing a *slipped* (torn) stem. In examples of badly corroded mounts of this type the asymmetrical stem projecting from the plate is key to the identification of the form. More ambiguous representations include arrow-shaped mounts with trefoil terminals which may depict a plume of three feathers or an *ermine spot* tail, both charges having associations with royal arms.

The demonstrable persistence of these designs across the huge socio-political and religious changes of the post-medieval period suggests that whilst surviving as decorative motifs, they may not have maintained these associations in the form originally ascribed. Their use appears to have been eventually superseded by changing fashions which reduced the use of figurative and symbolic mounts in favour of more abstract, composite styles introduced by the end of the 17th century.



Fig. 5: Examples of simple mounts: Tudor rose (SUR-EE2062), fleur-de-lis (SUR-F562E4), escutcheon (SUR-E36B7A), acorn (SUR-3400F6), plume of feathers(?) (ESS-0C4C87), masque (SUR-F9CD8B), thistle (IOW-595393), cross fleuret (NMGW-3E43C7), trefoil (WILT-B5BC76), arrow or ermine spot (SUR-34603D), lotus (IOW-DF86F6), pomegranate(?) (SUSS-108E80)

Decorative mounts with complex and composite motifs (c. 1550-1750)

A diverse and widely used group of mounts demonstrate designs which may be described as ‘composite’, incorporating a range of different elements. Here simple forms and heraldic motifs find expression as terminals attached to larger ‘architectural’ style plates comprising vases, balusters, pediments, finials or ornate frames, with fluted, scrolled and ogee margins. Many of these designs have clear 16th-century antecedents and lasted in various forms well into the late 18th century.

The simpler forms, which are likely earlier in the series (c. late 16th to late 17th century), comprise bilaterally symmetrical plates with one or two ‘heraldic’ terminal elements on the long axis. These include teardrop-shaped plates with acorn terminals, vase-shaped plates with *escallop* terminals, and heart shaped plates with *fleur-de-lis* terminals. Some of these designs themselves represent elaborations on simpler heraldic motifs; for example, arrow and plume shapes may have expanded into elaborate heart-shaped plates with *fleur-de-lis* terminals (Fig. 6).

The more complex ‘architectural’ forms in this series are likely later and have previously been associated with contemporary fashions in furniture and domestic fittings of the early 18th century, which provides a sensible stylistic dating proxy (Rivers-Cofield 2008, 21). The relatively large size of the plates and fittings on some of these later designs strongly suggests that they were, as a group, primarily intended for use on equestrian harness.

Decorative mounts of Baroque style (c. 1645-1750)

A group of very decorative mounts which are quintessential products of the Baroque movement which dominated the visual arts of the later 17th century. Typically elaborate, with gilded surfaces and curlicued frames, the designs are often figurative, utilising a visual language of floral elements, vine-scrolls and winged cherubs. The use of vine-scroll decoration has its origins in medieval concepts of the ‘tree of life’ and allegories for Christ



Fig. 6: Examples of complex mounts: vase shaped mount with scallop terminals (BERK-1916A5); abstract composite mount with scallop terminal and openwork architectural elements (NMS-B8B5DA); heart shaped mount composed of scrollwork with *fleur-de-lis* and scallop terminals (IOW-30A1FE); architectural pediment and finial form (SUR-78932E)

(Heath 1909, 131). The depiction of the ‘sacred cherub’, derives from the chubby winged male child (*putto*) depicted in art of the 16th-century Italian Renaissance and symbolises both the omnipresence of God and the personification of love in the form of Cupid. Cherubs were used in ornamental metalwork for a wide range of high-status household objects, such as clock spandrels, from the late 17th to the third quarter of the 18th century (Hume 1969, 12) and these mounts are clearly contemporary with that tradition.

There are two basic types: *complex openwork* with plates formed of conjoined elements and *scutiform* with solid shield-shaped or oval plates (Fig. 7). Both demonstrate intricate designs, moulded in relief, with surface gilding and occasionally use of enamel in the ‘Stuart’ style. In many cases, corrosion makes interpretation of the compositions difficult. The fine design and very small size of many of these

mounts, particularly the scutiform types, suggest that they were intended for military belts or high-status personal dress rather than equestrian harness.



Fig. 7: Gilded decorative strap mounts of Baroque style: complex openwork (NMS-04ACB0 and IOW-4843B4); scutiform (SUR-D69E27 and LVPL-5E6674)

19th-century forms (c. 1750-1900)

Mounts from the later 18th century onwards are simple and abstract in form, typically having convex plates with undecorated surfaces (often tinned), bevelled or ridged sides and concave reverses. The most common varieties have forms which can be described variously as kite or diamond, pelta, dome, 'bat' or 'axe' shaped. Simpler forms in this group have identifiable antecedents from the medieval period; however, during the 18th century the more complex, heraldic and figurative styles fell out of fashion. This late group ultimately became part of the heavy horse tradition in the Victorian and Edwardian periods and is entirely associated with use on horse harness.



Fig. 8: Decorative leather strap mounts of the mid to late 18th century onwards: 'bat' shaped (SUR-B28854), diamond shaped (SUR-02792E) and 'axe' shaped (PUBLIC-CBB67E)

Bibliography

Allan, J P, 1984 *Medieval and Post-Medieval Finds from Exeter, 1971-1980*, Exeter Archaeological Reports: 3

Blair, C and Patterson, A, 2006 Surrey Enamels Reattributed (Part 2), *Journal of the Antique Metalware Society* 14, 10-21

Brown, R A, 1952 *The History and Origin of Horse Brasses*, Lewes: W E Baxter

Cassels, A K, 2013 *The Social Significance of Late Medieval Dress Accessories*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield

Cotter, J L, 1958 *Archaeological Excavations at Jamestown, Virginia*, National Parks Service Archaeological Research Series **4**

Daubney, A, 2015 2. Aunby and Dembleby, in M Lewis (ed) Report of the Portable Antiquities Scheme 2014, *Post-Medieval Archaeology* **49:2**, 334-46

Egan, G and Pritchard, F, 2002 *Dress Accessories 1150-1450*, Medieval Finds from Excavations in London **3**

Egan G, 2005 *Material Culture in an Age of Transition*, Museum of London Archaeology Service Monograph **19**

Heath S, 1909 *The Romance of Symbolism*, London: Frances Griffiths

Heighway, C M, 1983 *The East and North Gates of Gloucester and Associated Sites. Excavations 1974-81*, Western Archaeological Trust Excavation Monograph **4**

Hume, I N, 1969 *A Guide to the Artifacts of Colonial America*, New York: Borzoi Books

Kenk, V C, 1963 The Importance of Plants in Heraldry, *Economic Botany* **17:3**, 169-79

Leahy, K and Lewis, M, 2020 *Finds Identified II: Dress Fittings and Ornaments*, London: The British Museum

Margeson, S, 1993 *Norwich Households: Medieval and Post-Medieval finds from Norwich Survey Excavations 1971-1978*, EAA Report **58**

Maslin, S, 2020 *Post-Medieval Horse Bridle Bosses and Rosettes*, The Finds Research Group Datasheet **54**

Read, B, 2008 *Hooked Clasps and Eyes*, Langport: Portcullis Publishing

Read, B, 2016 *Identifying Metal Artefacts: Volume 1*, Witham: Greenlight Publishing

Rivers-Cofield, S, 2008 A Preliminary Study of 17th and 18th Century Leather Ornaments from Maryland, *Maryland Archaeology* **44:2**, 12-27

Stibbert, F, 2001 *European Civil and Military Clothing: from the First to the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Dover Publications

Willemsen, A and Ernst, M, 2012 *Medieval Chic in Metal: Decorative mounts of belts and purses from the Low Countries, 1300-1600*, Zwolle: Spa-Uitgevers