Paper Information:

Title: 'Sexing' Small Finds
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Pages: 22–32

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1992_22_32
Publication Date: 31 March 1995

Volume Information:

Rush, P. (ed.) 1995. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: Second Conference Proceedings.* Worldwide Archaeology Series, vol. 14. Aldershot: Avebury/Ashgate.

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'Sexing' Small Finds

Lindsay Allason-Jones

John Clayton in 1880, when discussing why Coventina's Well was full of artefacts, put forward the hypothesis that 'lovesick damsels cast into the Well their spare trinkets in the hope of obtaining the countenance of the Goddess in their views'. 'To these interesting ladies we are doubtless indebted for the brooches, rings, and beads found in the Well' (Clayton 1880: 31). In 1979 Charles Daniels wrote of the buildings, referred to as 'chalets', discovered during his excavations at Housesteads: 'both Mr Gillam and the writer were struck by the preponderance of brooches and other trinkets at Housesteads XIII. To the writer this suggested that the chalets had been married quarters of some sort' (Daniels 1980: 189). Both archaeologists, separated by one hundred years of improved archaeological techniques, were basing their hypotheses on the premise that there were certain small finds which could be identified as having been used or worn by men and others only by women. With the recent development of interest in the topic of gender in archaeology many researchers are being tempted to base their theories of space allocation/role/status, etc., on the evidence of small finds. This paper looks at some groups of finds from Romano-British contexts, traditionally regarded as 'female', in order to see if there really are classes of artefact which might be assigned to gender – might be termed 'male' or 'female'.

Many archaeologists have continued to follow Clayton and Daniels' view that brooches are indicative of a female presence despite the overwhelming evidence for men wearing brooches throughout the period of Roman Britain. Almost every military and civilian tombstone where the deceased is

shown wearing a cloak has a brooch clearly visible fastening the garment (see for example: Ribchester: Shotter 1973a: pl.16; Housesteads: Coulston and Phillips 1988: nos 202–203; Vindolanda: ibid. no. 212). Philpott, in his extremely useful survey, *Burial Practices in Roman Britain*, has pointed out that 'sexual determinations of cemeteries have shown that males are often provided with a brooch at a number of sites, while the evidence of sexed late Iron Age cremations from King Harry Lane indicates that brooches were buried equally often with males and females . . . . The provision of brooches with males in cremations is mirrored in the mid-late 1st century in Dorset and Wessex, where brooches were largely confined to males and children in native inhumations' (1991: 123).

Having clarified the point that both men and women wore brooches is it possible to discover whether certain types of brooches were worn only by women while other types were confined to male costume? Theoretically one should be able to use the evidence from the cemeteries with this precision. Unfortunately, few cemetery reports are detailed enough. Even when the sex of the skeleton is given in association with a list of grave goods many of the older reports record merely 'a fibula' with no indication as to type.

One of the few cemetery reports which might be used to attribute gender to a brooch type is the Lankhills report (Clarke 1979) as only the male graves contained brooches, all of which were the 3rd – 4th century massive crossbow type, which have occasionally been described as insignia of rank for military or civilian officials. On the continent, however, such brooches have been found in female graves and it is possible that the gold example from The Wincle, Cheshire, found with necklaces and ear-rings, may be from a female grave (Johns, Thompson and Wagstaffe 1981).

Is it possible to make a judgement on the reasons why brooches were worn? Brooches would have been an essential feature of some Romano-British women's wardrobe as a few ensembles were literally pinned together. The costume now named after a woman called Menimane from Mainz-Weisenau (Espérandieu 1922: no. 5815) is the most obvious example. This was worn in the northern provinces in the pre-Roman Iron Age and the Roman period up to the early 2nd century AD, reappearing briefly in the 5th century. Menimane's costume included a closely fitting bodice fastened at the front by a brooch; over this she wore a loose tubular tunic, pinned at the shoulders by a pair of brooches with a third at the breast. Women wearing a similar outfit would have needed at least three brooches and many preferred more (see Wild 1968: fig. 21).

Women from the area of the Danube wore overtunics caught by a pair of brooches which were linked across the chest by a chain (Wild 1968: 207); so is it possible to attribute matching pairs of brooches to women, particularly those chained together? As men would have only needed a single brooch to fasten a cloak one might conclude that pairs of brooches linked by a thread or a chain were worn exclusively by women, although the evidence is not irrefutable. If the hypothesis does hold good then can one presume that any brooch which has been seen as one of a pair can be claimed as a female type? Unfortunately this is unlikely. Headstud brooches, trumpet brooches, disc brooches, and innumerable other types are found with chains or with the loops for attaching chains. The headloop is a feature which is rarely found on the Continent, despite the evidence for linked brooches on the Danubian tombstones, but it is a common element in the 1st and 2nd century British brooches and is ubiquitous on the trumpets, headstuds and other bow brooches which some specialists in the past have described as 'military'.

It is also possible to overemphasise the need for women to wear brooches to fasten their clothing. Not all women in Britain wore Menimane's costume or Danubian dress, the majority apparently preferring the Gallic coat worn by men, women and children throughout the Roman period. As this was a T-shaped roomy garment with a slit neck it required no brooches to hold it in position (Wild 1968: fig. 1). Wild has stated that clothing which needed more than one brooch to fasten it was rare in the north and that which needed a linked pair of brooches was confined to women who followed Continental styles of dressing.

As brooches continued to be manufactured and worn when Menimane's costume was out of fashion it must be presumed that some people wore brooches purely for decorative rather than functional purposes. The small triskele brooches and enamelled animal brooches are too small to fasten bulky woollen cloth and could be described as decorative only, but other types could be used for either purpose. Clearly more work is required in this area but the results so far seem to indicate that brooches were sexless; that they were bought by men and women alike, according to personal taste. If a man wanted to wear a small openwork triskele he did so, and if a woman wanted to wear a large crossbow brooch there was little to stop her. Loops were provided in case the purchaser needed to wear the brooches in a pair or attach a safety chain.

If it is difficult to determine whether a particular type of brooch was worn by men or women is it any easier with other types of jewellery?

Among the inhabitants of the city of Rome the wearing of ear-rings was purely for decorative purposes and strictly confined to women. To their historians and geographers the idea of men wearing ear-rings was simply evidence of the barbarity of foreigners and worthy of outraged comment. Isodorus (*Orig.* XIX.31.10) mentions that it was the fashion for Greek youths to wear a single ear-ring in one ear. Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* XI.50) was horrified that 'in the East, indeed, it is considered becoming even for men to wear gold in that place' (i.e. in the ear lobe). Other authors felt it was worthwhile to mention foreign men wearing ear-rings: Xenophon (*Anab.* III.1.31) refers to the Lydians; Juvenal (1.104) to the Babylonians; Macrobinus (*Sat.* VII.3) to the Libyans; and Plautus (*Poen.* V.2.21) to the Carthaginians.

If one looks at the coinage of the eastern kings, such as Phraates and Bahram, however, it is noticeable that they all wear ear-rings, from Phraates in 3 BC to Yazdgard in AD 457 (Toynbee 1978). In fact, throughout the period of the Roman empire the male rulers of the east and their subjects wore ear-rings and may have regarded them as a sign of rank.

The Roman army included many men from the eastern provinces and Africa where it was not considered improper or unusual for men to wear ear-rings. Despite the classical authors' disapproval of the practice it is possible that some of these troops continued to wear ear-rings during their military service in Britain. Unfortunately, there are no literary references which state categorically whether a serving auxiliary was or was not allowed to wear ear-rings. No ear-rings have been found in an indisputable relationship with a male skeleton in a Romano-British context, although bearing in mind the earlier remarks about brooches in cemeteries this is hardly surprising. Lankhills cemetery, which might have been of assistance, produced no ear-rings at all, even in the female graves (Clarke 1979), while the northern military cemeteries, such as Petty Knowes (Charlton and Day 1984), have produced very few metal artefacts other than coffin nails, hobnails and coins for Charon's fee. Ear-rings are not depicted on military tombstones but neither do they appear on the tombstones of women – the only exception being Regina from South Shields, who is depicted in the Palmyrene tradition and invariably is the exception to every rule (*CSIR* I.1. no. 147).

On the other hand, a large number of ear-rings come from forts and fortresses. Unfortunately, few come from firm contexts and many may have come from the *vici* or other areas where the presence of women would not have been unusual. A few, however, come from what might be seen as good military contexts. For example, two penannular copper alloy ear-rings

come from Longthorpe (Frere and St. Joseph 1974: 62 fig. 32 no. 78; Allason-Jones 1989a: nos. 317 and 318). This fortress was occupied from c. AD 44/8 to c. AD 62, an early period for women to be present in any numbers. One ear-ring was found in the *praetentura* whilst the other was found in building X, which Frere and St. Joseph suggested might be an auxiliary *praetorium*. This last example was found in association with an armlet and a nail cleaner and might suggest the presence of an officer's wife or daughter – the Vindolanda writing tablets have shown that some officers were accompanied by their families at a very early stage despite official disapproval (Bowman and Thomas 1986: 122; Tacitus *Annals* III.33). An armlet and a nail cleaner are not very convincing evidence for the presence of women either, as will be discussed later.

The majority of forts which have produced ear-rings are in the area of Hadrian's Wall, although none of the milecastles or turrets of that frontier have produced examples (Allason-Jones 1988). All three units raised in areas known to have favoured ear-rings, which are attested in Britain, were stationed in the north: the Hamian archers from Syria at Carvoran and Bar Hill, the *numerus Maurorum Aurelianorum* at Burgh-by-Sands, and the Tigris Bargemen from Mesopotamia at South Shields and possibly Lancaster (Breeze and Dobson 1978; but see Shotter 1973b for the latter). Of these only South Shields has produced any ear-rings (Allason-Jones 1989a: nos. 480–88) but equally only South Shields could be regarded as having been extensively excavated. The evidence for eastern or African troops in Britain wearing ear-rings is, therefore, slight but should not be disregarded. The literary sources are silent on whether the men of Gaul or the Germanies or even Iron Age Britain wore ear-rings but it would be rash to take this as firm evidence that it was not done. It is only possible to say that in Britain some foreign troops or merchants may have continued their native tradition of wearing ear-rings as they continued to prefer their native costume. After all, if the Syrian archers did not give up wearing their flowing robes when they were sent on foreign postings it is unlikely that they gave up their ear-rings.

Solid neck-rings or torcs were worn as symbols of power and status in pre-Roman Britain and as such had magico-religious significance. Dio Cassius (LXII.2.4) tells us that Boudica wore 'a great twisted gold necklace' when she led the Iceni into battle, indicating that she had taken on the authority of a Celtic warrior chieftain symbolically. During the Roman period torcs were awarded to soldiers for acts of bravery but later came to be regarded merely as good luck symbols (Maxfield 1974) and were fre-

quently worn as such by women (e.g. Regina *CSIR* I.i. no. 247). Necklaces made from beads seem to have been worn by women purely for decorative purposes (see Volusia Faustina: Allason-Jones 1989b: pl.23) but they were also worn by children of both sexes to support amulets. Melon beads of blue glass are usually found individually and one discovered attached to a *dolabra* sheath in Bonn Museum indicates that they too had an amuletic significance and may have been worn around the necks of either sex on leather thongs or copper alloy wire. In Rome itself the practice of men wearing necklaces and bracelets was considered to be on a par with wearing ear-rings: Diodorus Siculus (V.45) was disparaging about the Panchaeans who wore 'ornaments of gold, not only the women but the men as well, with collars of twisted gold about their necks, bracelets on their wrists, and rings hanging from their ears, after the manner of the Persians'. Clearly the arguments rehearsed previously about men of eastern origin wearing ear-rings can be extended to necklaces and bracelets, both of which can be seen on male Romano-Egyptian mummy portraits from the Fayum (Bowman 1990: pl. 9). There is evidence for gold armlets being male accessories in the early Celtic world (Strabo IV.4.5), and the massive armlets found in Iron Age contexts may well be a reflection of the use of torcs as symbols of the warrior class (see Anderson 1904). Unlike ear-rings bracelets have been found in male graves, both worn: Whitcombe, Dorset (grave 6: Whimster 1981: 271), Langton, N. Yorks. (Corder and Kirk 1932: 59, 66) and Cirencester (grave 179: McWhirr et al. 1982: 129); and unworn: Oakley Cottage, Cirencester (Reece 1962: 51).

Apart from being purely decorative, bracelets could secure amulets around the wrist, as at Cirencester (Crummy 1983: no. 1610) – where should the line be drawn between a bracelet worn for aesthetic reasons and something worn in order to fasten an amulet into position?

Finger rings are very difficult to attribute to a male or female wearer unless they are found *in situ* on a finger. Size alone is not an adequate criterion: some women have large hands, some men very small hands, and the wearing of rings on the second joint of the finger confuses the issue. It has often been supposed that only men wore intaglio rings but this is not so. Intaglios could be worn for decoration alone and women would also have required them for business purposes such as sealing letters and documents.

Jewellery, therefore, is not as clear an indicator of gender as might be thought.

A survey of the small finds from the turrets on Hadrian's Wall revealed other artefacts, which had traditionally been taken to be female, in male

contexts (Allason-Jones 1988). The turrets were only occupied for a total of forty years in two separate stages and only by the military. None so far excavated show any sign of squatter occupation and several were either demolished or had their doorways blocked up when the army withdrew. It might, therefore, be presumed with some safety that only men attached to the army were present on these sites. The presence of needles, nail cleaners and tweezers – all traditionally used as indicators of a female presence – may come as a surprise. Soldiers in the 2nd century, no doubt, had to mend their clothes, clean their nails, and remove splinters. Recent excavations at Vindolanda and Carlisle show that Roman soldiers, like British soldiers in the Second World War and in the modern army, were issued with sewing kits – known nowadays as 'housewives'.

Among the commonest finds on Roman sites, whether civilian or military, are pins, made from a variety of materials. These artefacts have been the subject of a number of articles, both classifying the types and debating their use. MacGregor (1976: 13) expressed doubts as to whether they could all be identified as hairpins, offering an alternative suggestion that they were used to fasten garments. Cool, in 1991, presented the evidence for decorated pins having been solely for hairdressing, but the large number of roughly fashioned, undecorated, bone pins found on sites remain ambiguous. Philpott (1991) in discussing the possibility of attributing function to pins by their position in graves, emphasised the difficulties that ensue when the exact position is not recorded but drew attention to groups of pins found at the feet of inhumations. He pointed out that metal pins 'are rarely found close to the skull but are usually found lower down the body'. He continued, 'it may be significant that the deposition of metal pins which were apparently functional in the grave occurs at a time when there is a decline in the use of brooches in graves for fastening garments. Metal pins may have partially replaced brooches as shroud pins in the 3rd and perhaps 4th century' (1991: 151).

Much is known of hair fashions during the Roman period and while it is clear that both long and short hairpins were used, indeed required, in female hairstyles, there is no evidence that male hairstyles needed pinning. The Italian fashion was for men to wear their hair short and while male skeletons have been found with long hair in the Celtic provinces, for example at Poundbury (Green, Paterson and Biek 1981), none appear to have affected pins. We must, therefore, remain open minded as to whether the discovery of pins indicates a female presence.

So are there any groups of artefacts which clearly indicate the presence

of women? Few seem to be good indicators - medical instruments with a purely gynaecological purpose form a rare group. There is also the possibility that items made of jet had special significance for women.

Jet was first worked in Britain in the Bronze Age but, although the Romans were aware of the properties of jet when they invaded Britain, the manufacture of jet objects at such places as York does not appear to have gathered momentum until the late 3rd or early 4th century. It was then used to make jewellery - beads, betrothal pendants, bracelets and fine finger rings, as well as hairpins, spindles, and spindlewhorls.

Jet is rarely found in a male grave in Britain and when it is, as at Oakley Cottage, Cirencester (Reece 1962: 51), it is unworn. Jet artefacts regularly appear in female graves at York and elsewhere in the country - mostly in the eastern counties. Knife handles and a few fragments of furniture inlay have also been found but these may have belonged to women. One clearly male item is the scabbard chape from Bonn in Germany (Hagen 1937) but this stands out as an exception, the rest all appearing to be biased towards the female.

The reasons for this bias may be religious as most of the British finds have been from graves or other religious contexts, or because jet, like amber, had a particular significance for women. Pliny related that 'the kindling of jet drives off snakes and relieves suffocation of the uterus. Its fumes detect attempts to simulate a disabling illness or a state of virginity' (*Nat. Hist.* XXXVI: 141–42). There is, however, a noticeable lack of fertility amulets made from jet.

So where does this leave Coventina's Well and Housesteads? The 'trinkets' from the Well include ten brooches, fourteen finger rings, two hairpins and five bracelets. These are the only objects which might be regarded as female on traditional criteria other than a large number of glass beads, all of which may be from the same necklace as they include twenty-four gold-in-glass beads. Coventina herself is unambiguously female (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985: pl. VI) although we have no clear evidence as to her responsibilities and one must conclude that she was an 'all-rounder', dealing with matters of healing among other human concerns. All the inscriptions refer to male worshippers, but this may not be significant in itself as women very rarely dedicated stonework to a deity on their own behalf - the ratio of female dedicators to male in Roman Britain being about 1 in 10. Are the pieces of jewellery the female equivalent of an altar dedicated by a man or would it be considered logical to present a female deity with a feminine artefact - an item of jewellery might be seen to be an

appropriate offering with which to placate a female deity. There are no *ex votos* which might indicate a female congregation, unlike the spring of Sulis Minerva at Bath where breasts of ivory and bronze have been found (Cunliffe 1988: pl. 3). The Wheelers suggested that the discovery of hairpins and bracelets at a temple indicated a shrine of healing which catered for women with gynaecological complaints (Wheeler and Wheeler 1932: 42), but Coventina's Well with only five bracelets and two hairpins compares badly with the suggested temple of healing at Piercebridge, Co. Durham, where over one hundred of each have been found (Scott forthcoming).

The artefacts which might be regarded as male are also unimpressive: a strap-end, three studs, a seal-box, three belt buckles and seven bell-shaped studs. Of these, only the buckles can be regarded as being exclusively male with any confidence on the grounds that articles of female clothing of Roman date involving buckles have not been discovered so far. Having said that, women may have had buckled satchels, boxes or horse harness. The finds from Coventina's Well do not conclusively prove female devotees for the cult, whether love-lorn or not.

As was mentioned earlier, the jewellery from Housesteads found in barrack block XIII was considered proof of married quarters in the late 3rd century to the early 4th century. It was said that there was 'a preponderance of brooches and other trinkets'. The actual numbers of artefacts are twelve brooches, only two of which are of late 3rd to 4th century date, four finger rings, three bracelets, two ear-rings, and nine hairpins. This does not seem excessive when compared to other sites, particularly as the area of XIII covers the road outside as well as the interior of the building. The same picture emerges at Wallsend, where chalets have also been found (Daniels forthcoming). Wallsend has been almost fully uncovered and for the whole site there are forty-two brooches of which four are late; there are also ten bracelets, two ear-rings, six finger rings and thirty-six bone hairpins. Again, this does not imply a preponderance. Neither Housesteads nor Wallsend has produced much jet. If these two factors are added to the difficulty of ascribing artefacts to gender, the argument of the chalets being married quarters on finds evidence alone is considerably weakened.

This has been a brisk survey of only a small group of artefacts but it should serve as a warning about the dangers of identifying objects and their purpose from the limited viewpoint of modern values. The blinkered view of the predominantly male, middle class, 19th century archaeologist is still alive and well and even the most radical theorists can fall into the trap of building their theory on the shifting sands of small find identification.

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