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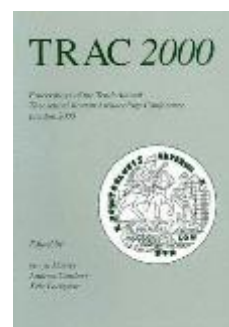
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# 9

## Small Finds: Problems and Possibilities

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### 9.1 Introduction

The term 'small finds' was one adopted, sensibly, due only to the size of most of the artefacts included within the intended scope of the category. Why bother to call a collection of brooches, hairpins and furniture studs 'big finds'? But all too often, these objects have been treated in accordance with their name, and their significance ignored or under-appreciated. It is much more glamorous to give detailed examination to a building plan than a group of gaming counters. Brooches, a long term status symbol for archaeologists as well as (possibly) the people they study, often are given more attention, and those finds considered to be unusual or rare are usually singled out for more detailed mention than their less attractive companions. But even these are only described in detail, a few interesting observations on style or manufacture noted, and then forgotten about for the remainder of the report. If we are lucky, a typology of claw-footed chair legs may be compiled at some point, but this is often as far as it is taken.

For finds to be useful in the study of identity, this approach must change. Identity requires the study of objects which are believed to have occupied a place close to the people being studied, and nothing could be closer than the objects used on a daily basis: the small finds. If we accept that people express their identities through their manipulation of the world surrounding them, small finds must no longer take a back seat in meaningful analysis. Although recent work has accepted that certain artefacts may have stories to tell about their users, this is usually confined to personal accessories or items of like nature (*e.g.*, Cool 1990; Jackson 1985). However, upon close inspection even the furniture studs and claw-footed chair legs have things to tell, if only we are willing and open-minded enough to look. If identity is accepted as something which runs through every aspect of one's life, whether conscious or not, expressions of it must be sought in every part of material culture. Small finds, as the material culture used and manipulated every day, must be included at the forefront.

### 9.2 Small finds' potential

The potential for the analysis of identity through small finds does not have to be demonstrated in a grand manner. Simple, basic methods are often effective to notice differences, or even similarities, which are telling enough to raise questions answerable by more sophisticated means. Some of these indicators may be seen by looking at the assemblages from a group of villas in southeast Britain, in the counties of Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire. As part of the analysis, eight sites were chosen, four of which had a history of immediate pre-Roman occupation: Gorhambury (Neal *et al.* 1990), Park Street (O'Neil 1945), Rivenhall (Rodwell & Rodwell 1986a,b) and

site	personal adorn.	fittings/fasts. tools	textile manuf.	unknown /uncer- tain	religious beliefs /prac- tices
Boxmoor	✓	✓	✓		
Dicket Mead	✓	✓		✓	
Gadebridge Park	✓	✓	✓		
Gorhambury	✓	✓	✓		
Latimer	✓	✓	✓		
Park Street	✓	✓	✓		
Rivenhall	✓	✓	✓		
Stanton Low	✓	✓			✓

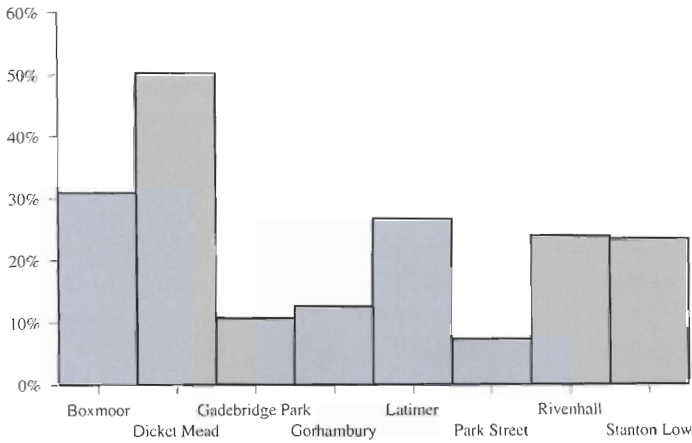
**Table 9.1:** Most prevalent functional categories appearing at each site.

Stanton Low (Woodfield & Johnson 1989); and four of which did not: Boxmoor (Neal 1976), Dicket Mead (Rook 1987), Gadebridge Park (Neal 1974) and Latimer (Branigan 1971). This selection was made in order to detect whether there were differences among assemblages, which were noticeably attributable to site history. A simple study was undertaken, using only two of the artefacts' characteristics: function and material. Those included in the study were the small finds in occupation levels from the immediate pre-Roman period if applicable, through to the end of Roman period occupation, excluding pottery, vessel glass and coins. These were loosely grouped into sixteen categories according to assumed function, based on Nina Crummy's 1983 classification system for the finds from Colchester (Crummy 1983, pp. 4-5), with some modification.<sup>1</sup> They were also analysed based on the material of composition; the results from each site were then compared with each other.

Before continuing, the 'functional' aspect of the analysis must be qualified. It is accepted that there can be more than one possible function for an object, and that not all functions are always easily detected. It is also accepted that as time progresses, objects take on different meanings based on a number of factors: who is using them, under what circumstances they came to belong to, or be used by, a certain person, or even the prevailing social conditions of the time. However, in order for any investigation to be conducted, some allowance must be made. Even if an object was produced with the sole purpose of looking pretty, then that objective can be considered here to stand as its function. Although often problematic, functions were an essential part of an artefact's total makeup, and thus cannot be ignored. Hidden meanings are likely to remain hidden, deceptive objects are likely to remain deceptive, and so the best we can do is to proceed with the most apparent function. When there is more than one obvious function, for instance a sword sheath which may operate both as an item of personal adornment and one with military associations, this presents an opportunity to look at the object concerned from more than one angle, something which should not be, but often is, ignored.

When examined on the basis of both functional categories and materials, the most striking characteristic the assemblages display is their high degree of similarity to one another. This was detectable both among individual sites and between the two groups. Of the sixteen categories, two dominate the assemblages in almost every case: objects

<sup>1</sup>Due to certain ambiguities inherent within the categories, and/or lack of quantification, 'buildings and services' and 'objects with military associations' (Crummy 1983, 4-5) were omitted from this analysis.



**Figure 9.1:** Alternative material usage: percentage of object assemblage not made of copper or iron.

of personal adornment and those used as fasteners and fittings (Table 9.1) Personal adornment and fasteners/fittings occurred in the three categories with the highest proportions of finds at every site. In all but three sites, tools rounded out the top three. In addition, within these functions there is no noticeable change over time in the sites with pre-Roman occupation. Objects we tend to identify as 'Roman' or in a 'Roman style' appear in the earliest levels, so there is no drastic change from 'native' to 'Roman' objects, no gradual 'Romanisation' of tastes. Similarly, if perhaps predictably, copper alloy and iron are always the most frequent materials used. The types of materials used in each category were also virtually identical: the only difference appears to be a marginally greater inclination toward objects of fired clay at the sites with pre-Roman occupation. These artefacts included spindle whorls, loom weights and figurines. Objects similar to those made of fired clay also appeared at the sites without pre-Roman occupation, but were made instead of lead or stone. However, the number of artefacts of such material are so small that any comparisons are preliminary at best (Spradley 1999, pp. 39, 70–78)). So here it is apparent that we have several groups of people using more or less the same objects, which are made more or less of the same materials. Thus there is no detectable difference between the groups of sites with and without pre-Roman occupation that can be attributable to that particular characteristic. Far from being a disappointing result, this has important implications for the issue of Romanisation, hinted at in theoretical discussions for several years. In this case, by using only the small finds it is shown rather more concretely, as well as easily, that the issue is not a straightforward one. It does not boil down to a simple distinction between 'Romans' and 'non-Romans', thus questioning the validity of the debate at its current stage, and to a degree substantiating the theoretical discussions. In a rather general sense, this is just one benefit of using small finds.

Within these seemingly similar assemblages, individually there is one detectable deviation with regards to materials used (Fig. 9.1). At all but one of the sites, non-copper alloy or iron objects comprise less than one third of the total assemblage. The exception is Dicket Mead, where such items amount to over 50% of the assemblage (Rook 1987, 107–73). The slack is normally taken up by bone objects, and at Dicket Mead the third most common material is indeed bone. Materials other than copper alloy, iron or bone however, still account for one third of the total of the artefacts recovered here. Comparably, of the remaining seven sites, the highest proportion of artefacts made from materials other than these three comes in at only half of that,

17%. As the site of Dicket Mead lies on river gravels, this could partially contribute to the lower survival rate of bone objects (Rook 1987, p. 79). The people at Dicket Mead may not have been deviating significantly in what they used, but in the materials they used. What does this mean? Clearly they were doing something different from everyone else. This site is not an isolated one: copper alloy and iron objects surely must have been as available as they were for the other seven sites. At the very least, we can say that a preference different to that expressed at the other sites is manifested at Dicket Mead, and preferences betray our identities, whether they are conscious ones or not, whether individually self-inflicted or culturally ascribed. Perhaps matters would be clearer if more of the site's features were examined together, a point to which I will return later in the paper.

Keeping the overall assemblage similarities in mind, if detailed examination is undertaken, we find that there are subtler issues which can be raised about those other aspects of identity which often exist simultaneously with each other. Simply noting the amount of utilitarian items such as building studs or furniture handles which have been elaborated or decorated may reveal something about the perceived need (or even ability) to impress, the importance of display-issues which could be influenced by a number of factors, of which status and wealth are only two. Likewise, the existence of multi-layered identities can be hypothesised without undue difficulty. Superficially, the assemblages look more or less the same, yet closer inquiry reveals the occasional oddity as indicated by the two examples discussed below. Firstly, the unique occurrence of a green metal variscite ring from the main building at Gadebridge Park requires comment. With origins only known from Saxony, Austria and Bohemia, this suggests some sort of connection with Central Europe (Neal & Butcher 1974, p. 138), although whether this was at the level of the owner or the manufacturer of the ring is of course unclear. But the public use of the site suggested by the presence of a large bathing pool connected to the baths presents exciting possibilities (Neal & Butcher 1974, pp. 68–9, 75–6). Was the owner of the ring originally from Central Europe? Could it have been an army veteran with a former posting there? Or a man with a wife from the area? Perhaps it is simply evidence of trade, but what was it about this particular ring which made it so attractive? Knowing this much, one might ask whether there are other items, which also suggest a Central European connection. If so, what could be the implications for expressing gender or age differences? As a second example, at Dicket Mead, the presence of a stone Graeco-Egyptian amulet (Rook 1987, p. 162), raises questions of a similar sort. It is the only object of this kind found at any of the sites studied. Someone with a connection to Dicket Mead at least had an affinity for Graeco-Egyptian art or religion, an interest or connection which is not visible at the other sites. Why?

Thus whilst the small finds at these sites appear to represent groups of people who only express the same sort of identity (which in this case looks much like what would traditionally be called 'Roman'), they also show signs of other identities as well, existing simultaneously with each other. Perhaps with further investigation, these aspects will prove to be significant. Rather than providing immediate, concrete answers, the importance of both of these examples lies in demonstrating how easily finds enable the mind to expand in different directions from a single point of origin.

### 9.3 Associated Problems

Small finds cannot be used to their full potential, however, until various problems are addressed. Certainly, unless there is a change in the way finds are reported and an increase in the types of analyses done on them, the rich potential of this material for illuminating questions of identity will not be fully realised.

One word may be used to encapsulate the greatest need in finds studies: integration. This is essential in two respects, the first of which applies to the world of finds reporting itself. Contrary to what one might assume when reading site reports, finds have a number of characteristics worthy of study. Classification according to material, the preferred and often only form of reporting, is clearly the most expedient method when time is a serious factor, and some valuable analysis may indeed result (*e.g.*, Clarke 2000, p. 25). However, with respect to identity, using this method alone is restrictive to effective and thorough examination. In most cases, there are several untapped attributes which, when examined as a whole, can reveal far more information about the objects' rôles in the lives of the people concerned. Intra-site location, material, associated finds and function are but a few. For example, a few apparent furniture handles might not say much on their own, but silver-plated copper alloy handles found in an outbuilding with metalworking tools and waste in close association could result in a more rewarding analysis. All these characteristics work together to tell the story of the artefacts, and hopefully something about their users — at least, as much of the story as we, coming on to the scene almost 2000 years later can know.

So integration is important with regards to finds alone. But once this is achieved, integration of a different kind is just as essential: that of finds within the whole. Parts of the body separated from each other cannot reveal how the body works as a unit. In the same manner, small finds, as objects used in everyday life, were a part of the functioning of a community, and thus cannot be expected to communicate the whole story. When identity is under consideration, looking at the big picture is of utmost importance. Recent theory has stressed repeatedly the existence of multiple, or overlapping identities (*e.g.*, Jones 1996; Jones & Graves-Brown 1996; Tilley 1989). But evidence of such multidimensionality will never be found to the satisfaction of those concerned, if all the constituents of the whole are not considered together. Small finds did not exist in isolation on a site. They formed a part of the overall life its inhabitants, existing in relationship with other parts of the villa, town or village concerned. The peculiarities in the Gadebridge Park and Dicket Mead assemblages, for example, may be clearer when considered in light of the pottery or coin loss patterns, or layout of the site. Small finds are of much greater use in studying the identity of their users when an understanding of their relationships with pottery, coins or architecture, is achieved. In turn, examination of these other parts of a site's design is not complete unless it is integrated with that of the small finds. These constituent parts, of course, helped shape and were shaped by the site's history and location. In turn, each site was part of a region, which was part of a province. Thus inter-regional and inter-provincial comparisons of finds are of fundamental importance.

For these to be effective, there is also need of a functional classification system, which is applicable across borders, yet flexible enough to avoid rigid pigeonholing of artefacts. Crummy's system for the Colchester finds (Crummy 1983, pp. 4–5) provides a good starting point, but as seen in the above examples, lacks the capacity on its own to account for multiple or changing functions. Clearly, modification is necessary. There must be allowances for many possibilities from one object, and for the same

object to move from one category to another, in accordance with each possibility. Such methods need not be rigid, or taken as the final solution. Several artefacts are unidentifiable, or indeed deceptive to the modern mind as to their ancient function. Rather than fostering discouragement, within identity studies this ambiguity should present exciting possibilities, as opportunities to think about our interpretations in different lights and alter them if necessary. If the theory of identity as multi-layered and dynamic is accurate, then our approach to the evidence should also be multi-layered and dynamic.

## 9.4 Conclusion

Identity is a relative concept, based on the world surrounding us. Small finds, as objects which often endured or signalled changes throughout life, should be a principal means of fostering this area of study. Statistical and locational techniques such as Correspondence Analysis or other multivariate techniques are available to help reveal patterning and changes within the data (*e.g.*, Cool *et al.* 1995, pp. 1626–45), and even examination by sight alone may illuminate more than expected. In searching for the answers to questions such as, ‘what influences the pattern?’ or ‘why are these patterns detectable in one place but not another?’ identities will slowly take shape. However, the effectiveness of these techniques and issues is severely diminished without adequate reporting and publication. A few of the sites included in this study may have been more helpful if their finds had been reported more thoroughly. Coins and pottery have long been afforded the benefit of extensive recording or individual analysis. Within small finds, metalwork may be given a separate section, but often no comprehensive analysis is undertaken. One need not look far for examples: reports from Gorhambury (Neal *et al.* 1990) to Winterton in Lincolnshire (Stead 1976) demonstrate this trend. Ideally, excavators would take action to ensure that finds would be treated with the same importance given to coins and pottery. In addition to recognising that finds are important, this would require that they be treated as such from the moment they are taken from the soil, and all their details adequately noticed, and noted for future use. It only takes time and willingness to take advantage of the opportunities contained within finds reports which might result in the transformation of the corpus of data, allowing for a dynamic interpretation of the lives affected by the artefacts that comprise the data set. Once these opportunities are seized upon, only then perhaps ‘small’ finds may lose the pejorative quality inherent in their name.

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