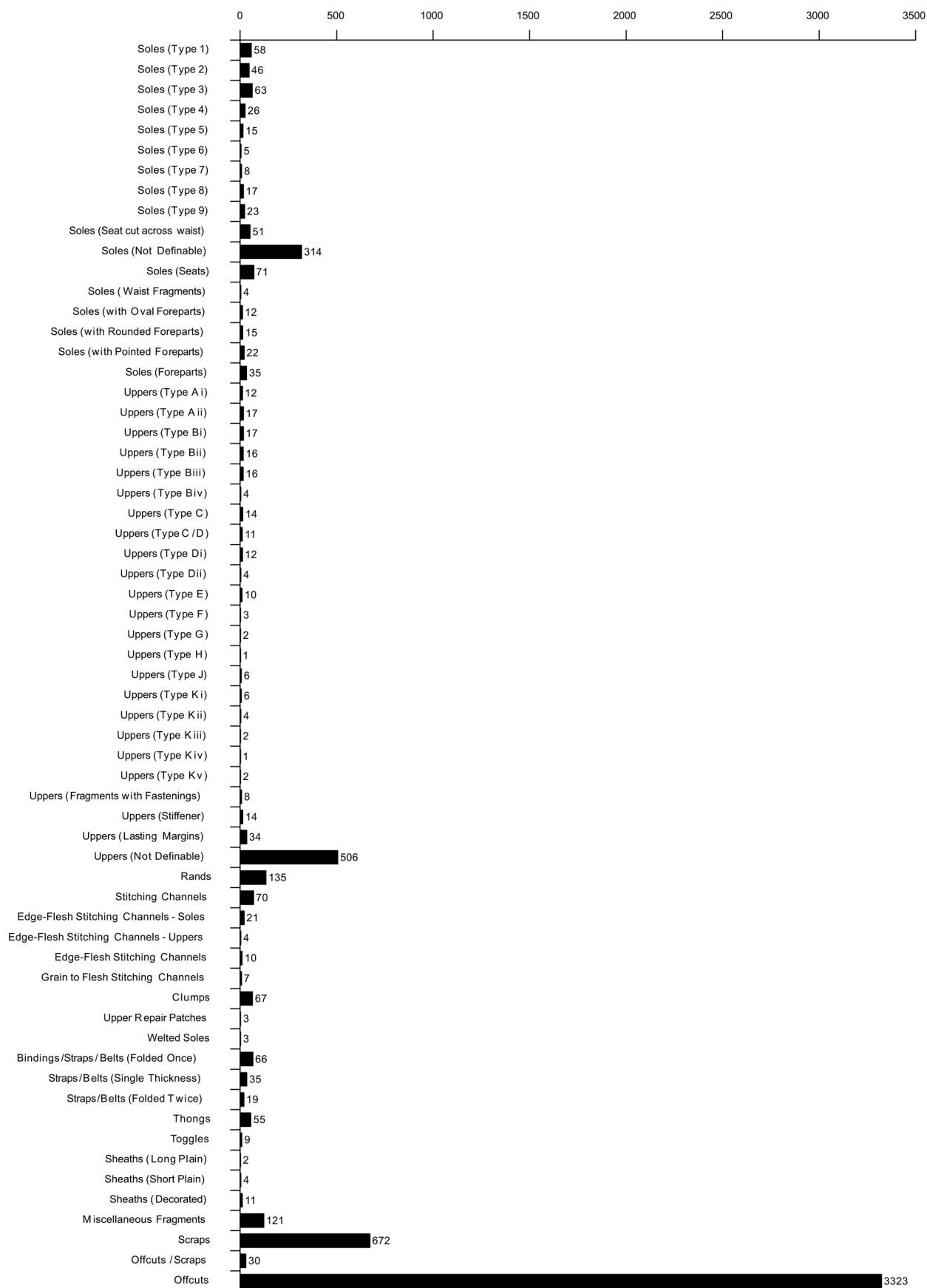


THE LEATHER



Illus 102 Bar diagram showing the frequencies of different categories of leatherwork recovered from Perth High Street Archaeological Excavation.

Introduction

Clare Thomas with the late N Q Bogdan

Over 6000 fragments of leather were found, including shoes, straps, sheaths, offcuts, scraps and miscellaneous articles. Most of the shoes were very worn, and many had been cut, probably for the reuse of a less worn part. The presence also of large quantities of offcuts and scraps suggests that the assemblage is largely composed of waste material from cobbling, ie the repair of old shoes and the manufacture of new ones from old leather.

The leather was distributed over the whole site, with large concentrations in pits and middens, especially in the later layers. Leather items as a whole appear to increase throughout the occupation of the site, in common with other finds categories, although the numbers of sole and upper fragments fell considerably during Period III (first half of the 13th century). However, it should be borne in mind that these apparent differences may be at least in part due to the physical extent of the deposits themselves: for example evidence for Period I was only recovered from Areas 1–4, while that for the later Periods II and III also included Area 9. Evidence for Periods IV and V was even more extensive and included Areas 7 and 10.

Shoes form the largest single category of objects, with many matching soles and uppers, a few of which are still joined together. Evidence survives for methods of construction and repair. Soles can be divided into nine types and uppers into ten, respectively, some of which belong predominantly to particular phases, for example, Sole Type 3 to Period IV (second half of the 13th century), and Upper Type A to Periods I and II (first and second halves of the 12th century respectively).

Straps form a much smaller but still significant group. Some, folded once, were probably bindings for shoes and clothing, and therefore strictly speaking are not straps. The others, however, would almost certainly have been used as fastenings. These included toggles, thongs, straps of single thickness and more substantial belts, formed of strips of leather, folded twice and stitched up the centre of the reverse.

The sheaths, though few in number, are important, as 11 were intricately decorated. All were most probably civilian in character, made to hold the wearers' everyday knives. Most of the sheaths can be assigned to particular phases, the dates of which compare well with those suggested by external parallels.

At the time of the excavation, the study of Scottish medieval leather was in its infancy. In 1963, Dunbar published a welted shoe of mid-16th century date, from Skirling Castle, Peebles-shire (1963, 244–5). This was apparently followed by an 18-year interlude, until the publication in 1981 of Threave Castle, Galloway, where

a small but distinct group of soles and uppers dating from the late 14th to early 15th centuries was found (Thomas 1981, 123–6).

Since then, reports have been published or prepared on leather from Aberdeen (Stones 1982; Thomas 2001a), Kirkwall (Thomas 1982), Perth (Thomas 1987; Thomas and Walsh 1995), Fast Castle (Thomas 2001b), Jedburgh (Thomas 1995), Spynie Palace (Thomas 2002) and Whithorn (Nicholson 1997). A very large assemblage, of over 13,000 fragments, was recovered from the Bon Accord site, Aberdeen. However, approximately 75% of this consists of waste material (Thomas forthcoming d).

Many parallels are available from England. Much of the early work on English mediaeval shoes was done by Miss June Swann, keeper of the shoe collection at Northampton Museum and by John Thornton, formerly of the Northampton College of Technology. June Swann has concentrated on questions of style, John Thornton on methods of construction and repair. Thornton has published reports on shoes from many sites, including Worcester (1969a, 56–62); Shrewsbury (1961, 187, 199, 200, 205–6); Clare Castle, Suffolk (1959, 146–52); York (Goodfellow and Thornton 1972, 97–105) and Durham (Carver 1979, 26–35). The only caveat about his otherwise excellent reports is that his dating is usually based only on style, with little or no apparent reference to the archaeological context.

More securely dated reports include Southampton (Platt and Coleman Smith 1975, 296–302); Clarendon Hotel, Oxford (Sturdy 1958, 75–7); King's Lynn (Clarke and Carter 1977, 349–66); Dover (Mynard 1969, 101–4); London Custom House site (Tatton-Brown 1975, 154–67; Grew and de Neergaard 1988; Cowgill et al 1987; Egan and Pritchard 1991; Pritchard 1991, 211–41); York (MacGregor 1982, 242–53; Tweddle 1986, 237–56; Mould et al 2003), Exeter (Friendship-Taylor 1984, 323–33); Newcastle (Dixon 1988, 93–103); Leicester (Allin 1981a and b); Winchester (Thornton 1990a, b, c, d); Sandwell Priory (Thomas 1991); and Plymouth (Gaskell-Brown 1986, 53–8). A large and interesting group of leather from the Barbican ditch and Castle Moat, Oxford has also been published, but it is not very closely dated (Hassall 1976, 276–96).

Very good parallels are also available from some of mediaeval Scotland's trading partners in Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands. Shoes and other leather artefacts similar in style and construction to those from the High Street have been found in Lund (Sweden) (Blomqvist 1938, 189; 1945, 138); Bergen (Norway) (Larsen 1992); Amsterdam (Groenman-van Waateringe 1975); Haithabu (Groenman-van Waateringe 1984); Lübeck (Groenman-van Waateringe and Guiran 1978, 161–73; 169–74; Vons-Comis 1982b,

239–50; Groenman-van Waateringe and Krauwer 1987, 75–84); Konstanz (Schnack 1992a and 1994); Bremen (Schnack 1993); and Schleswig (Schnack 1992b). Other parallels are also available from Dublin (Ard Mhúseam na H-Eireann 1973) and Novgorod (Thompson 1967, 80–4; Brisbane 1992).

The surviving threads or yarns have been examined by Dr Helen Bennett and P Dtransart of National Museums Scotland (NMS); the latter's report appears in Appendix 1.

Approximately one third of the leather has been conserved, initially by the excavation's own conservator, subsequently by the laboratory of NMS. A report by Tom Bryce on the conservation of the leather appears in Appendix 2. Appendix 3 contains a discussion of the shrinkage of the leather during conservation.

A report on the identification of the animal species appears in Appendix 4. Only the conserved leather

was examined. Much of it was too worn to enable the follicle pattern to be recognised. Where the follicle patterns were clear, these were nearly all identified as cattle hide. A few examples, however, are sheepskin or goatskin.

The conserved leather has been deposited in Perth Museum and Art Gallery.

In the ensuing discussion, the leather has been considered first by category, then by type, with due reference to its chronological distribution over the site, and to external parallel. A glossary of technical terms relevant to leather has been included, as well as explanations of methods of construction. A selective catalogue follows the discussion; a full catalogue is preserved in Perth Museum and Art Gallery and in the site archive in the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh. All measurements quoted are post-conservation.