

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 48/88

FINE WOOL WADDING IN A ROMAN STUD
FROM CASTLE STREET, CARLISLE.

Penelope Walton

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Summary

Short lengths of fine crimped wool were found packed into the dome of a large copper alloy stud from Roman levels of Castle Street, Carlisle. Fine wool of this type first appears in North-West Europe in the Roman period and may represent the wool of the 'Tarentine' strain, brought into the north by the Romans.

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A layer of raw wool has been packed inside the dome of sf 173, a large, plated, copper-alloy stud. The wool is still in its original 'staples' (the clumps of fibre into which a fleece naturally falls); some staples are 10mm and others 15mm long. This may not represent the full length of the original fleece, as neither root-ends nor fibre tips are present; the best-preserved fibres are cut at either end.

To the naked eye the wool is fine and tightly crimped, approximately two crimps per 10mm. Measurement of the diameters of 100 fibres, at x400 magnification, gave the following figures: range 15-34 microns; mode 22; mean 23.0 \pm 3.9; coefficient of skewness +0.37 (indicating a symmetrical distribution in the measurements); there were no medullas and no pigment present. These measurements indicate that the wool belongs to the finest of the seven fleece-type categories identified by Dr M.L.Ryder, that is, the 'true fine' type (Ryder 1969).

Similarly fine wools have been found in textiles from Roman sites in Britain and Germany (Ryder 1969, 508; Ryder and Hedges 1973, 360; Ryder in Wild 1977, 34-37). A few examples have also been recorded from Scandinavian graves, although only in textiles believed to have originated within the Roman Empire (Bender Jørgensen and Walton forthcoming). Fine wools have been reported

in pre-Roman textiles from Denmark, but these have proved to be the undercoat from a more primitive kind of fleece (Ryder and Hedges op.cit.; Ryder 1983; Walton forthcoming). The true fine type has not as yet been recorded in N.W.Europe before the Roman period, nor has it been found in any native textiles from beyond the Roman boundary.

Dr J.P.Wild has suggested that Iron Age fleeces in Britain were improved by the Belgae, and that the Romans added to their stock with fresh strains from the continent; he points out that the best British wools were probably from the much-valued Tarrentine breed, which Columella considered to have the finest wool in the ancient world (Wild 1970, 10). The wool from Carlisle comes from just such a fine fleece and it is surprising to find this high quality fibre being used, apparently, as wadding in the back of a stud. The staples are, however, very short and may represent left-over clippings from the shearing-room floor.

References

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