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Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 88/97

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Summary

A box containing jewellery and coins was found in a Roman grave by the Museum of London Archaeological Service. The box itself is only represented by iron and copper alloy fittings, including a lockplate, hinges and decorative corner brackets. The organic component remains only as traces in the corrosion products of this metalwork, but is sufficient to suggest the original construction of the box. The casket was made from wooden boards simply nailed together, then covered with leather and the decorative metalwork applied. At least two different species of wood were recognised in the construction.

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The reconstruction of a Roman jewellery box from Mansell Street, London

Jacqui Watson

Introduction

Metal casket fittings were found beside the right leg in a Roman grave during excavations at the Mansell Street cemetery in London. They were then lifted in a block, to keep the fittings and contents in their correct position, for excavation in the Museum of London's laboratory by Mary Davis in 1988. She excavated the casket from its base to the lid, producing plans of the different layers and suggesting how it had been constructed, these have been incorporated in her portfolio for her Durham University Diploma. The assemblage was brought to my attention by Dana Goodburn-Brown to identify the wood remains and make any comment on its construction.

The casket has both copper alloy and iron fittings and contained a number of items including jewellery and coins. The wood and leather has been preserved by iron corrosion products rather than copper ones, and are extremely friable. The metal items in the box have also preserved large chunks of wood not associated with the box fittings. The coins in box cover a date range of 199 to 268.

Reconstruction

In her report Mary felt that the box had been made from a single piece of wood for the base, one piece of wood was also used for the front and this formed the front two corners. The sides were joined to the front with simple butt joints. The back corners were also made with butt joints. She thought that the sides were attached to the base with copper alloy studs. Her plans and reconstruction drawings indicate that the box was approximately 240mm long, 170mm wide and 90mm high with a lid 25mm thick.

The box appears to have been made from several woods *Fraxinus* sp. (ash), *Salix* sp. (willow) or *Populus* sp. (poplar), and *Acer* sp. (maple) or *Betula* sp. (birch). The front appears to be made from willow or poplar, and the side near the right knee to be of ash. The maple or birch fragments are not directly associated with any of the fittings so their position in the box construction is not known. The basic box appears to be made of boards with the main surface area cut in the tangential plane, which could be a result of sawn timber. The basic box was then covered with leather. The leather was probably glued to the wooden base, and the black deposit on some of the separate wood fragments may be all that remains of this material.

Lock mechanism

(161)- the copper alloy lockplate with large keyhole (fig.1) was mounted on leather c.2mm thick (fig.2). The wood has a tangential surface with a recessed area approx 35 x 40mm which accommodates the height of the keyhole and probably housed the lock mechanism. All the organic materials are preserved in iron corrosion products presumably from the lock mechanism. Wood identified as *Salix* sp. (willow) or *Populus* sp. (poplar).

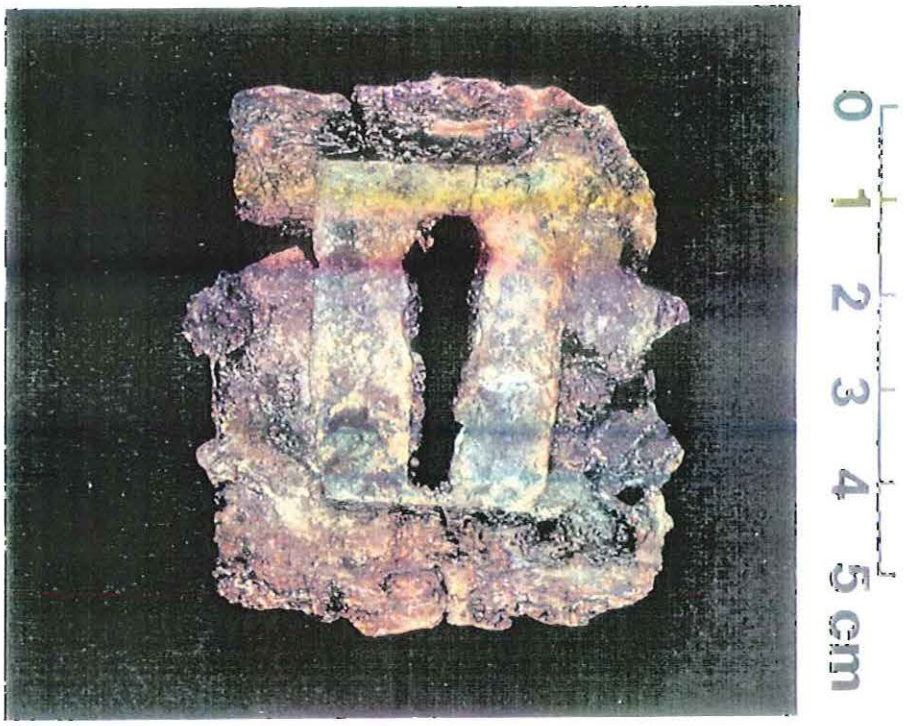

Figure 1. Copper alloy lockplate with leather and wood preserved beneath it.

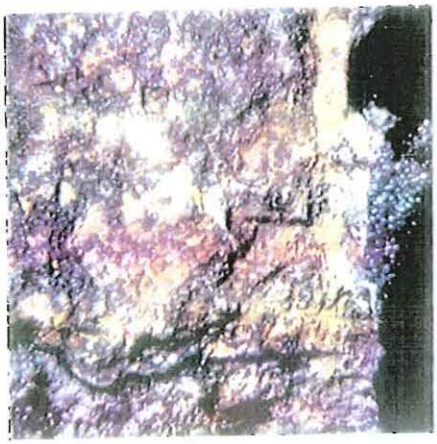

Figure 2. Leather preserved on the reverse of the copper alloy lockplate. Mag. c 4x.

Figure 3. Iron backplate with recessed area for lock mechanism, and coin.

<587> - rectangular iron plate which forms the back of the lock and part of lock mechanism, wood is only preserved on the edges and indicates the extent of the recess for the lock itself (figs. 3 and 4). This appears to be attached to the inside of the front of the box by small staples rather than nails. There is also a fragment of the hasp which joins with <589>. There is a coin corroded onto iron back plate, and this was probably inside the lock before burial.

The wood on the front of the box has its grain aligned horizontally (see <582> below), making the keyhole in a vertical position and the backplate apparently on its side.

<589> - iron hasp and lockspring which would have engaged inside the lock in a similar fashion to the lockspring from Skeleton Green Burial XXX (Borrill, 1981), but in this case the lock is functioning and can be unlocked.

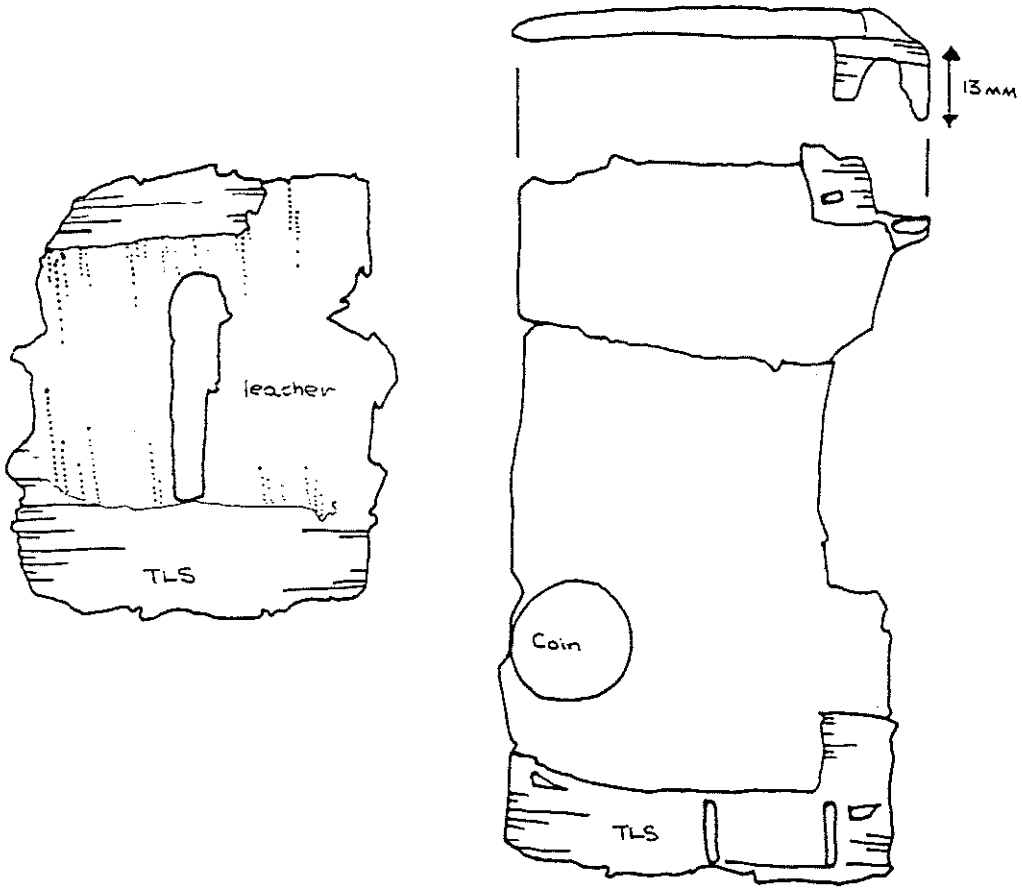

Figure 4. Organic material preserved on both the copper alloy lockplate and the iron backplate. 1:1

Corner brackets
The box appears to have decorative copper alloy mounts on the front corners and iron ones on the back. There are possibly 3 iron corner brackets on each side at the back, or they may represent 2 on the side and 1 set joining the base to the side. Both sets of corner mounts seem to suggest the use of rebated butt joints held together with iron nails. The thickness of the back is likely to be around 18.5mm or slightly larger to accommodate the rebated edge. There is a slight variability in the thickness of the back board of up to 4mm between the top and bottom and both corners, which could be due to lack of care in trimming this piece of wood.

<582> - all the copper alloy sheeting used for corner mounts had been adhered to nylon tissue so that it was impossible to examine the organic material preserved on them. Iron nails present on the reverse of these mounts were not in all cases used to attach the sheeting to the box, but there was no evidence for them holding a joint together either. The iron attachment pins probably had separate domed heads as there were circles of discolouration in the copper corrosion on the mounts. The visible wood grain on these fittings indicate that the front of the box had its grain aligned horizontally.

Right knee corner brackets - there are two sets of brackets with part of a possible third. These indicate the type of corner joint used which appears to be a rebated butt joint. Both brackets have the remains of two sides of the box preserved on them.
1. The cross section of a board is preserved on this bracket, probably the back, is 15.3mm thick, and both sides of the box have a tangential surface.
2. The cross section of one board is 13.9mm thick, and both pieces of wood have a tangential surface.

Right foot corner brackets - again two sets of iron brackets with signs of joinery, and the possible remains of a third bracket.
1. One of the sides, probably the back, is represented by a cross section of 18.5mm, and both pieces have a tangential surface. A separate nail joined two boards together, one was 14.5mm thick and made from a ring porous wood, probably *Fraxinus* sp. (ash).
2. There is no sign of the end grain of a board, but both pieces of wood have a tangential surface.

161 - fragments of wood in a separate box, among these there are at least two pieces which have original cut edges and one has signs of a 4mm rebate. Some fragments of wood have a blackish deposit on the surface, which could be the remains of glue or resin, or just very degraded leather.

Lid
The position of these two interlocking loop-headed staples in the block (fig.5) suggest that they were probably used to attach the lid with the back board of the box. The shanks of one loop were put through the lid and the terminals folded over, this pivoted with the other loop which was mounted on the edge of the back board (fig.6). They were originally thought to have been attachments for a handle, but compared to other

examples they are rather large for this purpose. Also the handle is most likely the single ring <588> - see below. <592> indicates that the lid was around 25mm thick. In order for this arrangement to work the back of the casket would have to have been notched to accommodate the loops.

<591> - hinge or handle attachment, made from two articulated split spiked loops, one of which has the terminals folded back and the other has been put into the edge of a board.

<592> - hinge of the same arrangement as 591 with the unopened end put into a radial surface and the splayed end has a clearance of 25mm.

<588> - broken iron ring with a fragment of tangential surface wood on one side - probably the remains of the handle.

Using all the constructional information gained from this detailled examination of the casket fittings along with the excavation notes provided by Mary Davis it is possible to put forward the likely construction of this small casket in figure 7.

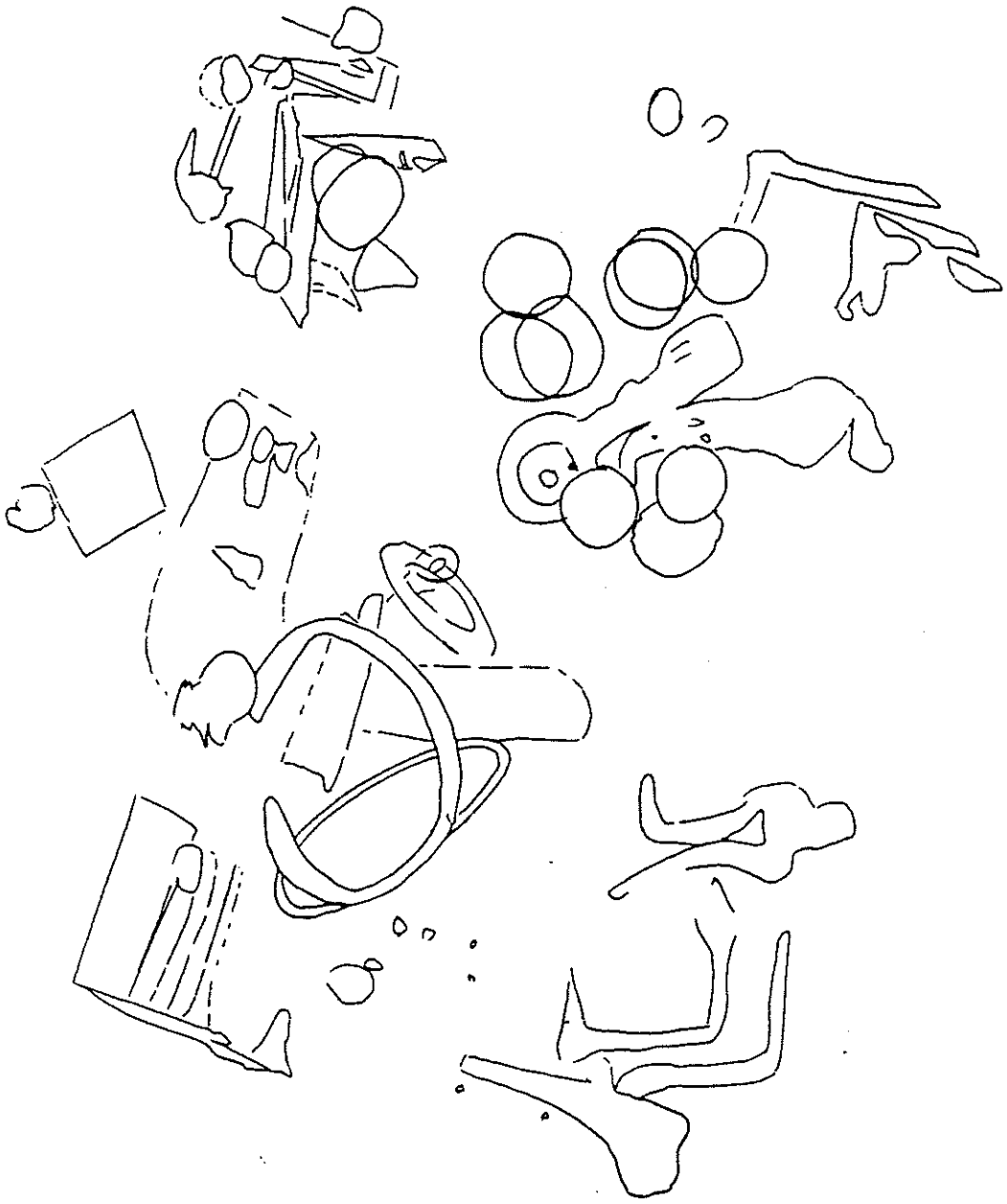

Figure 5. Plan of metalwork taken from a radiograph of the block by Mary Davis.

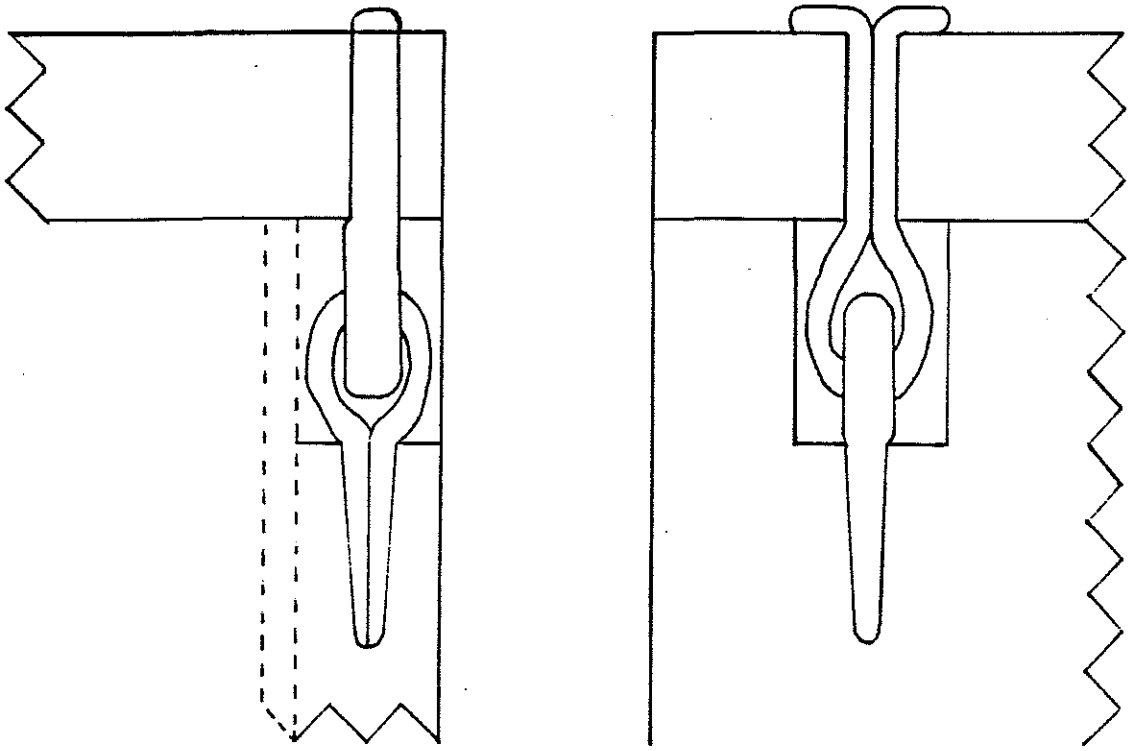

Figure 6. Probable reconstruction of hinge mechanism.

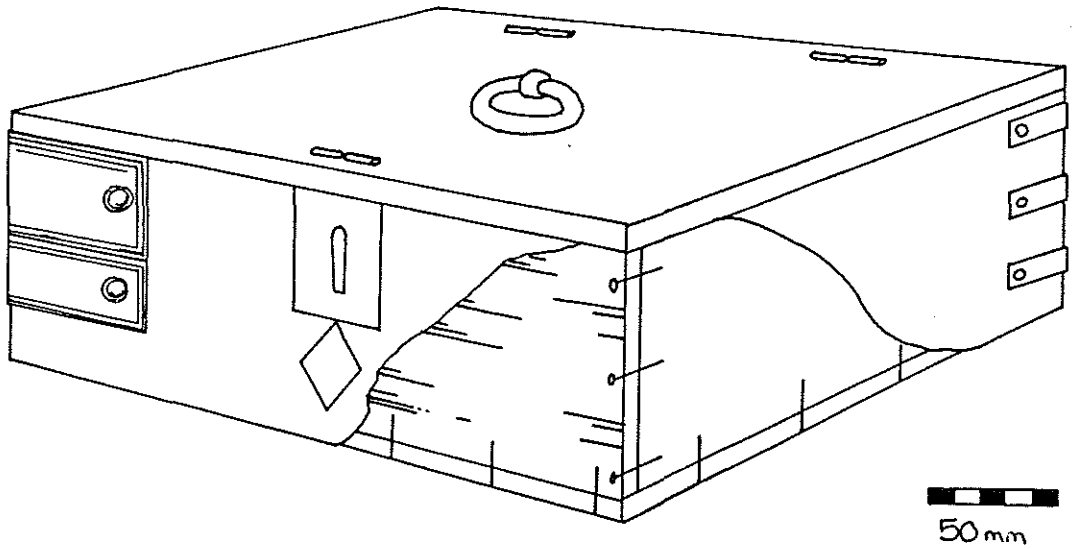

Figure 7. Reconstruction of the casket

Other examples

Most small Roman boxes appear to have been fashioned from simple butt joints nailed together, occasionally the edge of the wood was rebated presumably to make fixing easier. Nearly all have been covered with leather and then the decorative metalwork such as copper alloy lockplates, corner mounts or studs were applied. Many of these caskets were used for cremations and the construction of some is well documented in the Skeleton Green report (Borrill, 1981), with other examples from Westhampnett (Watson, 1995; Fitzpatrick, 1997) and Trier (Dewald and Eiden, 1989). Leather covered chests have also been recovered from Pompeii (Kemkes, 1981). The greatest variation between these caskets tends to be the hinge arrangement for the lid, some have true hinges, others use a variety of rings and loop-headed staples - there is no obvious reason for this variety but there is is always the possibility that it may relate to where they were made. The Mansell street box fits into this latter group, and is similar to the box from Westhampnett which has a notched lid to accommodate its hinges.

Two large non-leather covered chests from Corbridge (Allason-Jones and Bishop, 1988) and Bradwell Villa (Keepax and Robson, 1978), have dovetailed corner joints. Their construction is very different to the Mansell street casket and may have been for military use.

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