

7. THE LEATHER

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7.1 Introduction

The leather report discusses 97 separate items, comprising mainly shoes (56), but also including six straps, three miscellaneous fragments, 22 offcuts and ten scraps. The shoe leather is represented by soles, uppers and rands, and is distinguished by the excellent state of preservation of thread in the sole–upper seams, and by a complete felt lining. A limited range of sole and upper styles can be recognised; parallels for these suggest a date in the 12th and 13th centuries.

7.2 Shoes

Fragments of possibly 56 different shoes survive, including one boot complete with sole, upper and felt lining, six sole and upper fragments still joined together, and another complete upper. Nine examples have rands attached, and 13 have thread surviving, usually in substantial quantities.

7.2.1 Construction

All the shoes are of turnshoe construction, in which the shoe is made inside out, by stitching the lasting margin of the upper to the edge of a single sole. The shoe is then turned the right way round, with the grain side on the outside and the sole/upper seam on the inside.

The soles have all the characteristics of turnshoe soles: edge–flesh stitching channels with a stitch length of 4–6mm; flesh sides are uppermost. Most of the uppers have typical lasting margins with grain–flesh stitching channels; four examples, however, have an edge–flesh stitching channel (Cat nos 2, 6, 7, 18). This is most unusual. There appear to be only two published parallels – from London and from Schleswig. The examples from London are of early to mid-12th-century date, and were found with shoes with the more normal grain–flesh lasting margin. Grew and de Neergaard suggested that they should be ‘regarded as transitional between the earlier thonged and the later sewn traditions’ (Grew & de Neergaard 1988: 48, figs 84, 85). Schnack dated the use of such seams at Schleswig to the 11th and 12th centuries. (Schnack 1992: 35–6) The use

of narrow, wedge-shaped strips of leather, or rands, to strengthen the sole–upper seam and make it more waterproof is demonstrated by six examples where they survive sandwiched between sole and upper, as well as three instances where a fragment of rand is still attached to a sole (Cat nos 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14).

Fragments of upper were joined to each other by butted edge–flesh stitching channels, with a stitch length of 3–4mm. Top edges of uppers were protected by being oversewn or by having topbands or bindings, such as the three fragments found with Cat no. 1, added to them.

The use of low semi-circular heel-stiffeners is indicated on two uppers by tunnel-stitching on the inside of the quarters; in one case, the stiffener itself survives (Cat nos 8 and 19). Such stiffeners were frequently used to reinforce the quarters, although they were often triangular in shape. A study of all the evidence for stiffeners from Perth High Street revealed that the semi-circular ones belonged predominantly to the 12th century, while the triangular ones were mostly of mid-13th- to mid-14th-century date (Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 230).

7.2.2 Repairs

Seven soles have tunnel-stitching, indicating that they have been repaired with clump soles (Cat nos 1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12). The foreparts of two of these have been repaired at least twice; one example appears to have originally been repaired with two small patches, which were subsequently replaced by one large one (Cat nos 3 and 4). Tunnel-stitching above the lasting margin of an upper suggests that its sole had been patched (Cat no. 21). Eleven other clump soles survive separately (Cat nos 44–54).

Such repairs are a very common feature of medieval soles. Several soles from Perth High Street had cracked further along the edge of a clump sole, and had thus required additional remedial attention.

Tunnel-stitching indicates that two uppers were also patched (Cat nos 3 and 22). Evidence for this form of repair is unusual; Perth High Street for instance only produced four patched uppers, out of a total of 652 upper fragments. There are several explanations. Firstly, uppers would not have

deteriorated as quickly as a single sole. Secondly, such patching would be very visible and obtrusive. Thirdly, by the time an upper required patching, the sole was probably beyond redemption. Fourthly, uppers may have been repaired more subtly, by the insertion of new or reused parts – this may explain some side-pieces.

7.2.3 Thread

Thread survives in the sole-rand-upper seam of 12 items, and in the butted edge–flesh seam which joins two fragments of upper together (Cat nos 2–7, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 21, 24). The thread is exceptionally well preserved. Initial examination suggests that this is cowhair, which is most unusual.

The normal thread was linen, but only one possible example of its use was found at Perth High Street. Woollen thread, on the other hand, was found on 42 soles, which ranged in date from the 12th to the mid-14th centuries, with two particularly large groups from the second half of the 12th century and the first half of the 14th century. Examples from London, York and Winchester belong to the 10th and 11th centuries, while the shoes with similar thread from Dungiven date from the late 16th or early 17th century (Henshall & Seaby 1962: 119, 129, 135; McGregor 1982: 138, 140; Thornton 1990: 707–8; Vince 1991: 219, 221; Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 149).

7.2.4 Reuse

Nine fragments of upper had possibly been cut so that the less worn parts could be reused (Cat nos 2, 4, 5, 7, 19, 20, 34, 39, 43). The leather would have been utilised in the manufacture of new shoes from old ‘cobbling’ – and also in the repair of shoes and other items.

7.2.5 Soles

The 17 soles comprise five complete soles, three foreparts, two seats and seven small fragments. Ten of these can be assigned to the sole types defined in the Perth High Street report, although in some cases this is only tentative. The range of styles is narrow, consisting mainly of Type 1.

7.2.6 Type 1

Six soles are broad and straight, with either no waist or only a very slight narrowing, and with a straight-sided forepart, ending in a broad rounded or oval toe (Cat nos 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). Rather shapeless, they would have been easily cut out. At Perth High Street, they belonged predominantly to the 12th century. Other parallels range between the 12th and 13th centuries, as, for example, 42 St Paul Street and Gallowgate Middle School, Aberdeen (mainly mid-12th to early 13th century) (Stones 1982: 194; Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 164, illus 104, 107, 116, 117, 124, 139, 145, 146 and 147).

7.2.7 Type 2

Two soles are also straight, but are more shapely, with definite waists and with curved foreparts, ending in oval or rounded toes (Cat nos 1, 4). At Perth, they were mainly of 13th-century date; elsewhere, they are of 12th- to 14th-century date, as, for instance, at Kirk Close, Perth (13th to 14th century) and at Aberdeen (42 St Paul Street – mid-12th to early 14th century; 45–75 Gallowgate – 1250–1400; Gallowgate Middle School – 12th to 13th century) (Stones 1982: 194; Thomas 1988; Thomas 2001: 243, illus 183–5; Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 164, illus 118, 124, 137, 140, 146, 147).

7.2.8 Type 1/2

One sole (Cat no. 3) belongs to Type 1 or 2.

7.2.9 Type 6

One forepart with a pointed toe possibly belongs to Type 6 (Cat no. 11). These soles are broad and straight, with a central point, and with little or no waist. Parallels from Perth, Durham and London were mainly of 12th-century date (Carver 1979: 31–3; Grew & de Neergaard 1988: 52, fig 83; Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 172, illus 122).

7.2.10 Types 4/5/6

One forepart with a pointed toe is possibly of Types 4, 5 or 6 (Cat no. 10). Type 4 soles are slender and elegant. At Perth High Street, they were predominantly of 14th-century date. Type 5 soles

are similar to those of Type 4, but are less slender and have broader, more curved foreparts. The Perth examples were almost all of mid-13th- to mid-14th-century date (Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 170–2).

7.2.11 Uppers

The 33 uppers include two complete ones (Cat nos 1 & 18), four with part of vamp and quarters (Cat nos 2, 4, 5, 19), three vamps (Cat nos 3, 20, 21), seven quarters (Cat nos 7, 22–27), one side-piece (Cat no. 28) and 16 fragments (Cat nos 29–44). Twelve of these can be assigned, with varying degrees of confidence, to the Perth High Street upper types.

7.2.12 Type A

One of the complete uppers belongs to Type A (Cat no. 18), which consists of ankle boots of one-piece wraparound design with no surviving thongs or holes for thongs. At Perth High Street they ranged from the early 12th to the late 14th centuries, but were predominantly of 12th-century date (Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 196–200).

7.2.13 Type B

Seven uppers are probably of Type B, which consists of boots of one-piece design, similar in construction to Type A, but with the addition of thongs wrapped around the foot in varying patterns.

7.2.14 Type Bi/ii

Type Bi has one horizontal thong, held in place by tunnel holes and by single thong holes; Type Bii has two or more horizontal thongs. At Perth High Street both variants were mainly of 12th-century date; other parallels range from the 12th to the 14th centuries, for example, Low Petergate, York; London (Bi – first half 12th century to mid-13th century; Bii – early to mid-13th century); Bristol Bridge (13th to 14th century) and Newcastle (Bii – mid-13th to mid-14th century) (Goodfellow & Thornton 1972; Grew & de Neergaard 1988: 9–17; Dixon 1989: 177–9; Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 201–7; Thomas forthcoming).

The best evidence for wraparound thongs is on Cat no. 24, which has clear impressions from a thong on its grain surface, as well as a surviving fragment of thong and a tunnel hole.

No thongs survive on Cat no. 1; instead it has three slits for thongs, on the quarters; traces of stitching round these holes suggests that thongs had been stitched to the inside of the quarters. This upper is now very fragmentary, but most probably originally comprised one large piece, a small leg flap and a topband. It has a matching felt lining, which appears to be made of one piece of felt. Any joins in the felt seem to have been obliterated, possibly by compression of the fibres. The nearest parallel for a felt lining is from Perth High Street, where fragments of felt were found inside a Type J boot. Unfortunately, the latter was unstratified (Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 224–5). There is evidence for linings from Schleswig, but these were of leather, and were only associated with high boots (Schnack 1992: 118). Grew and de Neergaard refer to mentions of shoe linings in medieval wardrobe accounts, but note that ‘few such linings survive in archaeological deposits and none from London’ (Grew & de Neergaard 1988: 49).

Cat no. 29 also has a thong, which has been threaded through a tunnel hole and a single slit; on the flesh side, it ends in a wide tab. Cat nos 4, 22 and 23 have single thong holes, which are most probably for wraparound thongs.

7.2.15 Type Biii

Cat no. 23 is probably part of a boot with vertical thonging, threaded through tunnel holes. These vertical thongs were apparently used to secure wraparound horizontal thongs. This type of fastening was also mainly of 12th-century date at Perth High Street. Other parallels ranged from the 12th to the 13th centuries, for example, Aberdeen, London and King’s Lynn (Clarke & Carter 1977: 352–4, fig 165, nos 19, 23, 24; Grew & de Neergaard 1988: 14–15, fig 15–16; Thomas 2001: 243; Thomas & Bogdan 2012: 207–10).

7.3 Straps

The six straps include four bindings or topbands, a thong and a strap of single thickness (Cat nos 57–62).

7.3.1 Bindings or topbands

The bindings are narrow strips of leather folded once and stitched where the edges meet (Cat nos 57–60). They are very similar to the fragments of topband belonging to Cat no. 1. Such bindings were commonly used not only on the top edges of uppers but also on the edges of items of leather clothing.

7.3.2 Thong

The thong consists of a tapered strip, with a slit at the wider end; it is most probably some form of fastening (Cat no. 61).

7.3.3 Strap of single thickness

The strap is made of a single thickness of leather, and has an irregular row of slits parallel to each long edge (Cat no. 62). These slits were purely decorative and may have been further enhanced by being stitched. Such straps had many uses; some may have been joined together to form girdles.

7.4 Waste material – offcuts and scraps

The assemblage also contains 22 offcuts and ten scraps.

7.4.1 Offcuts

The offcuts consist of six thin strips, three triangles, four rectangles, one circle, one trapezium, one vamp-shaped item and six irregularly shaped fragments (Cat nos 63–84). Thickness, apart from delaminated pieces, varied between 1mm and 4mm; most were 2–3mm thick. Over half the items were worn. At least four offcuts appear to have been made from reused leather; one of these, Cat no. 77, is probably part of an upper which has been made into a repair patch. None of the offcuts resemble typical shoe-cutting waste.

7.4.2 Scraps

The ten scraps are all irregularly shaped and worn (Cat nos 85–94). One is possibly a delaminated sole

fragment, while another three may originally have been parts of uppers (Cat nos 86–9).

7.5 Miscellaneous fragments

Three stitched fragments could be parts of either shoes or other items (Cat nos 95–7).

7.6 Conclusion

The parallels for the sole and upper styles quoted above suggest that the assemblage is of 12th-century date. This argument is reinforced by the presence of the unusual edge–flesh lasting margins. On the other hand, the Type 2 sole and the Type Bii uppers could extend the date span to the 13th century. The narrow range of styles indicates that the leather is probably all of the same date.

This assemblage is distinguished by the felt lining and by the excellent state of preservation of the thread in the sole–upper seams. Only one parallel is known for the felt lining, and no other use is recorded of cowhair as shoe thread.

The leather is all very worn, with much evidence for repairs. Repairs are a common feature of medieval turnshoes; the single sole would not have lasted long. However, the extent to which these shoes had been patched is most striking. It is also noticeable that all the waste material is worn. None of it suggests working of new leather, only the reuse of old material.

This assemblage is almost unique, in that it is not from an urban site. The only other Scottish medieval assemblage from a non-urban site is that from Threave Castle, and that was of later date – late 14th to early 15th century (Thomas 1981: 123–6). It is just possible that the simple form of the shoes, especially the wide, shapeless soles, may be attributable to the presumed occupation of the owners – mining – in which case the date could be later than 12th century. Shoe styles, especially sole styles, vary and recur; accordingly, the dates quoted above should be taken as a guideline only, not as fixed certainties.