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item’ is the forked belt slide or ‘slide with three spurs/peaks’ (no. 11). This item is virtually identical to belt slides of various sizes discovered as part of the Welsh Late Bronze Age hoard from Parc-y-Meirch, Abergele, Denbighshire (Sheppard 1941). This hoard contained over ninety objects, most of them in pairs, fours or eights, which were seemingly part of harness equipment for at least two horses (rings, jangles, slides and so on). It appears that, initially, there were at least forty-two specimens of these ‘slides with three spurs’ from the Parc-y-Meirch hoard, which could be further divided into three smaller groups according to size (Sheppard 1941, Plate IV, nos. 42–57; Plate VIa, nos. 32–41 and Plate Va, no. 71). While the slide from Northeys does not fit exactly into any one of these three groups based purely on size, it seems fair to suggest that it is most similar to the second group of toothed strap slides. This is based on the observation that the strip on the reverse was not welded on and the object does not appear to be a ‘miniature version’ (Sheppard 1941, Plate Va, no. 71).

Objects like these, although generally very rare, are also known to have been included in hoards from Dreuilles-Amiens, Somme (slide with five peaks), and Welby, Leicestershire (Evans 1881, 403–4, Fig. 504; O’Connor 1980, 380, 388, 402–3, no. 177, Fig. 62A, 5). Furthermore, it is important to add that although the Parc-y-Meirch hoard was initially thought to be of Late Bronze Age III date (O’Connor 1980, 380), a more recent metal analysis of some of the hoard’s contents suggested a Late Bronze Age II (Wilburton) date (Needham and Rohli 1998, 101).

The six objects grouped here under ‘Miscellaneous’ are five nondescript cast copper-alloy rings (nos. 2, 4, 5, 6, 10) and a single unidentified object (no. 3) which may well have been a square fitting or ornament. Cast copper-alloy rings of varying diameters and cross sections have been found at the sites of Flag Fen and the Power Station (at least forty specimens), but it is almost impossible to speculate on their uses, which most probably range from ‘the purely ornamental to the functional (e.g. chain mail)’ (Coombs 2001, 291). However, previous metal analysis carried out on two of the plain cast copper-alloy rings, nos. 224 and 229 (Coombs 2001, 274–5, 278–9), suggested a Late Bronze Age III (Ewart Park/Carp’s Tongue) date.

The only object in this assemblage not apparently made from cast copper alloy (no. 11) appears to have been made from cast iron instead. Its shape and size suggests it is the head of a screw or nail of possibly post-medieval or modern date.

To sum up: twelve objects of ferrous and non-ferrous metalwork were discovered during excavations on the Northeys landfall and on the north-west stretch of the post alignment in the wetland of the Flag Fen basin. With the certain exception of the only ferrous object (no. 9) and the possible exception of a single unidentified object (no. 3), all items clearly belong to the metalwork assemblages of Late Bronze Age II and III (Wilburton and Ewart Park/Carp’s Tongue) and thus fit in well within the overall chronology of metalwork from the area.

The most interesting of the twelve items are the toothed belt slide and the flesh-hook terminal, both of which were found at the Northeys landfall. These are very rare items in Britain, with comparisons found only in contemporary hoards (i.e., Parc-y-Meirch, Wilburton and Isleham).

A jet bead from Flag Fen, 2004
By Alison Sheridan

The two bead fragments discussed here (SF213 (context 794) and SF240 (context 795)) came from dumped sand and gravel deposits within the upper buried soil (Horizon VII) in 2004/3 of the 2004 excavations (Chapter 3, this volume). The layers in which they were found were next to each other and were very similar; they probably represent separate basket or bucket dumps intended to consolidate soft ground at the extreme edge of the Northeys landfall. The source of the gravel would have been higher up on Northeys ‘island’. The redeposited gravels contain broken fragments of bone, pottery, numerous flints, metalwork and the two bead fragments discussed here. The presence of these finds suggests that the gravel was dug close to a settlement.

The two fragments comprise half of a squat biconical bead. The estimated external diameter is c.25mm, and the diameter of the perforation is c.10mm; the width of the hoop is 7.4mm and the bead’s thickness 12.5mm. The exterior surfaces are straight and meet at a fairly sharp junction at the bead’s mid-height; the interior is gently convex (indicating that the perforation had been hallowed from both sides); and the upper and lower edges vary from rounded to gently squared-off. The exterior had been polished to a high sheen, and the interior has a medium sheen. Faint tool marks, in the form of shallow, multi-directional striations, can be seen on parts of the interior (albeit partly obscured by lacquer); these suggest that the perforation had been made – or at least completed – by carving. On the smaller fragment (SF240), at the bead’s sharp outer edge, striations around a small naturally embedded quartz grain suggest an attempt to remove it (or a neighbouring grain) by gouging.

There are many shallow ancient scratches on the exterior and interior surfaces and, on and bottom edges, but whether these are the result of wear or of post-depositional damage is unclear. While there are no obvious signs of wear (e.g., grooves worn by a thread), this is not surprising given the width of the perforation; but thread polish may well have contributed to the smoothness and sheen of the interior. The fracture surfaces have small flakes and chips, and in one case a hinge fracture, at their edges.

The material is black and compact, and probably Whitby jet, as indicated by several features: (1) it is slightly warm to the touch; (2) one of the flake scars is conchooidal; (3) the subsurface revealed by some of the scratches is brownish; (4) embedded quartz grains are an impurity characteristic of jet; and (5) there are a couple of small, shallow, oval-shaped surface hollows on the larger fragment (SF 213) that may indicate natural irregularities on the outer surface of the
parent pebble. Finally, the identification of the material as jet was confirmed through non-destructive compositional analysis by X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometry (undertaken by Lore Troalen, National Museums Scotland (NMS)); the bead displays the characteristic high zirconium, low iron signature of jet. While Whitby (and environs) is not the only source of jet in Britain, it is the only significant source, and it is known to have been used at various periods in the past; there is no evidence that the small source of true jet at Kimmeridge (Watts et al. 1997) had been exploited. In any case, the bead’s compositional signature is consistent with that of samples of jet from the Whitby area.

Discussion

Squat biconical beads of jet (and other materials) are known to have been manufactured during both the 2nd millennium BC (e.g., at Callis Wold 114, East Riding of Yorkshire: Mortimer 1905, Fig. 426, confirmed as jet by XRF analysis at NMS) and the first half of the 1st millennium BC (as in the hoard from Llangywillog, Anglesey, confirmed as jet by XRF analysis by Mary Davis: Sheridan and Davis 1998, Fig. 12.7). Given the nature of the pottery and metalwork found nearby at Flag Fen, and other stratigraphic and dating evidence as discussed elsewhere in this volume, it seems most likely that the Flag Fen bead is of Late Bronze Age date. The angularity of its profile echoes the shape of some Late Bronze Age bangles of jet-like material (e.g., from the Heathery Burn hoard, County Durham: Britton and Longworth 1968, nos. 9–11) and is matched, as noted above, by the (rather lop-sided) bead from Llangywillog; but other Late Bronze Age beads of jet and jet-like materials tend to have rounder sides. Many have been found as parts of necklaces, associated with beads of amber (as in the hoards from Balmashanner, Angus (Eogan 1994, plate 14) and High Throston, Cleveland (B. Vyner pers. comm.)). It is thus quite possible that the Flag Fen bead had originally formed part of a necklace.

This bead would have been a precious possession, and may well have been used as an amulet: jet, like amber, has special properties (including its electrostatic nature) and, as a stone that is warm and that can be burnt, is an anomalous material. These materials have been ascribed magical properties over the millennia and around the world (Sheridan and Davis 2002); and the fact that jet beads (or imitations in substitute materials) have been found associated with amber beads in Late Bronze Age necklaces lends support to the suggestion that they were worn not only as status symbols but also as amulets to protect their elite wearers.