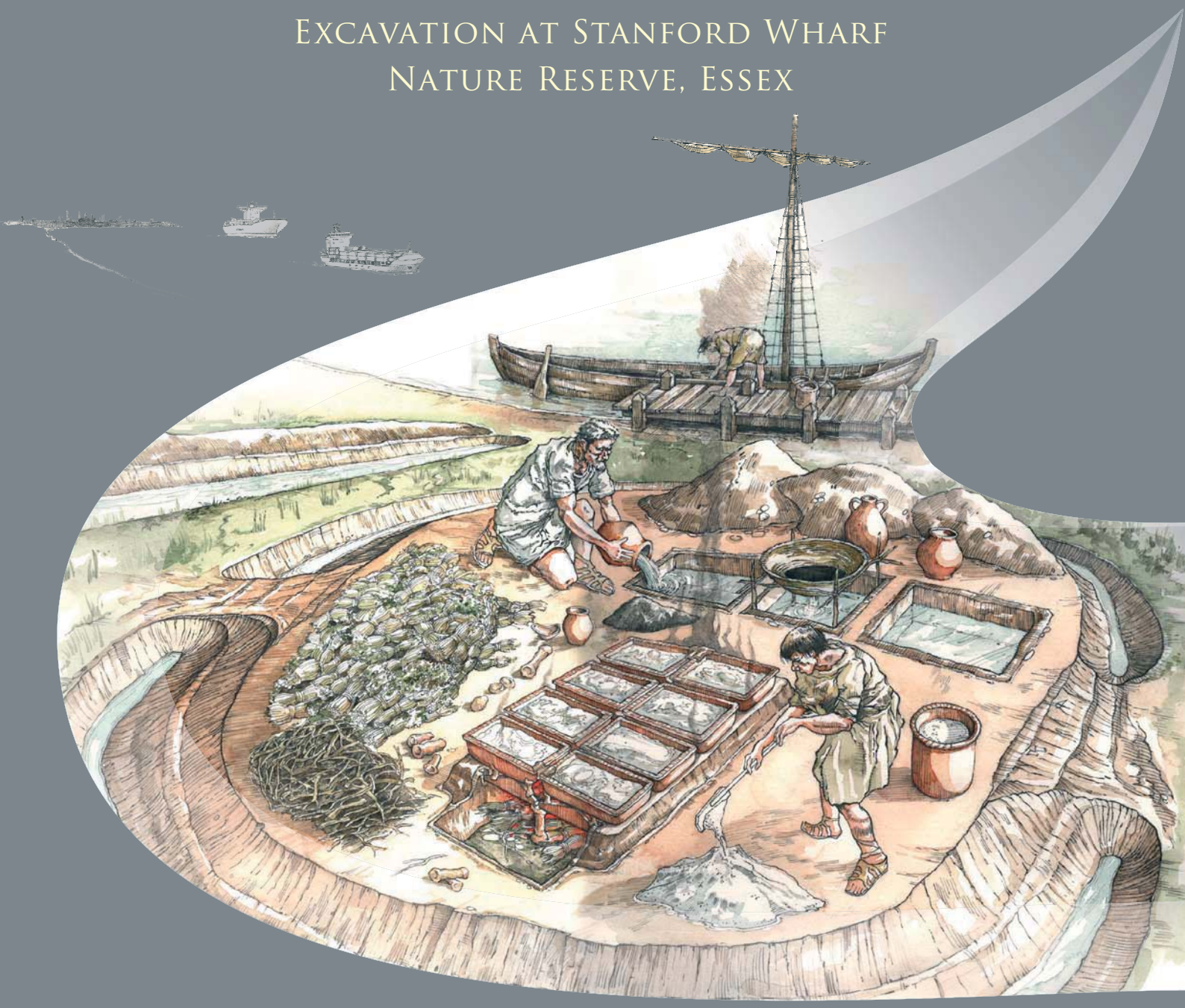
London Gateway

Iron Age and Roman Salt Making in the Thames Estuary

Excavation at Stanford Wharf Nature Reserve, Essex



Specialist Report 13

Leather

by Quita Mould

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Introduction

The broken remains of a leather insole from a shoe of nailed construction of adult size (Fig. 13.1) was found in primary fill 1248 of pit 1249 located in the north-east corner of enclosure 9502. The pit was phased to the late Roman period (LR1). Pottery in the pit suggests that it was in-filled in the 3rd or 4th century.

The leather was extremely fragile and had been lifted from site in a soil block on a rigid plastic support and the block stored damp in polythene within an air tight storage box. It was necessary to remove the surrounding soil matrix (clay and peaty soil with some small stones) to reveal the leather and clean the upper surface. Photographs were taken and the outline of the object drawn on plastic film. The decision was made to remove the leather from the supporting soil block below to reveal the lower face of the broken object in order to obtain the maximum information. The fragmentary item was very friable and only small fragments survive, along with other organic material recovered with it. The fragments were stored wet supported between two layers of polyurethane foam in a self-sealing plastic bag within an airtight storage box.

All measurements are in millimetres (mm). No allowance has been made for shrinkage. Any shoe sizing has been calculated according to the modern English shoe-size scale; continental sizing is given in brackets. The shoe terms employed are those in common use in the archaeological literature.

Leather species were identified by hair follicle pattern using low-powered magnification. Where the grain surface of the leather is heavily worn identification is not always possible. The term bovine has been used as it is not always clear whether worn leather is from a mature cattle hide or immature calfskin. However, shoe bottom components and repairs are assumed to be of cattle hide in most circumstances.

Summary

The insole was damaged at the forepart and this area was displaced slightly to the left, with the toe and much of the outer edge of the insole broken away. It was broad in shape tapering slightly toward what remained of the wide seat with no defined waist. A series of very small worn areas running along the surviving right side mark the line of nailing along the inner edge. There was no evidence for constructional thonging visible at the waist and seat. In order to establish whether other bottom unit components were present it was necessary to remove the insole fragments from the soil. No other bottom unit parts were present. Cherry pips, plum stones and a piece broken from a curving lathe of wood lay directly in contact with the underside of the insole, indicating that the insole was placed on its own in the pit and had not been part of a complete (or near-complete) shoe when it was discarded. Two complete ceramic vessels (SF1594 and 1596) found in the same pit raise the possibility that a structured deposit was placed in the pit to mark its closure. The insole comes from a left-footed shoe, which is a common item to be included within a structured deposit. The fact that there is no evidence that a complete shoe was deposited in the pit but only part of a shoe, and a broken part, however, suggests it to be the result of casual domestic rubbish disposal rather than part of a deliberate act of closure.

Description

Leather insole from a shoe of nailed construction, left foot, adult size. SF1595, context 1248. Remains of an insole from the bottom unit of a nailed shoe or possibly a nailed and stitched shoe. The forepart is broken away and displaced slightly to the left. The toe and the area of the little toe joint, the centre of the tread and much of the outer edge and lower seat area are now missing. The tread area is broad, the insole tapers slightly to the wide seat with no distinct waist. Four small, worn areas along the inner edge mark the position of nailing. No evidence of construction thonging visible. Leather worn bovine 2.27mm thick. Surviving length 240+mm, width lower tread 80mm, ‘waist area’ 76mm. The insole comes from a shoe no smaller than equivalent modern adult size 4(37).

Figure 13.1: Leather shoe from pit 1249

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