

ARCHAEOLOGICAL
LEATHER GROUP
NEWSLETTER

37 March 2013

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CONTENTS

- 2 Editor's note and Announcements
- 3-6 Article by Marloes Rijkeljkhuizen
Two mystery objects and a calfskin glove: exceptional leather finds from Gorinchem, the Netherlands
- 6-7 *The Stafford Shoe Window*
by the Editor
- 7 *Museum of London collections online*
by Jackie Keily
- 8-9 Article by André Veldmeijer
New Project: Leatherwork from IFAO's Mission to Fustat
- 10-12 News of Museum Exhibitions,
Excavations, Conferences and
Courses
- 12-13 *Who reads books anyway?*
by the Editor
- 14 Notice of books and articles
- 15-16 Book reviews by June Swann
- 17 Treasurer's Report
- 18 The Newsletters on CD and
Committee contact details

Two mystery objects and a calfskin glove: exceptional leather finds from Gorinchem, the Netherlands

by Marloes Rijkelijhuizen

Introduction

In the late medieval city of Gorinchem, the Netherlands, several leather objects were found during excavations in the historical centre (excavation by Hollandia Archeologen). The site has housing structures attested from the 13th century onwards plus a horse mill that functioned from the second half of the 15th century until the beginning of the 19th century. The leather finds were mainly shoes and shoe-parts but also fragments of one or two purses, two sword scabbards, a knife sheath and a piece of a leather strap, possibly from horse-gear. The exceptional finds are two mystery objects from the second half of the 15th century and a glove from the late 14th century.

The mysterious objects

Two leather objects, similar in shape but of different sizes, are presently, due to the lack of a clear function, described as containers. The first and larger object (Fig. 1) is made of thick adult cow leather. In order to obtain a rectangular piece of leather, it was necessary to sew two pieces together. The leather was then folded lengthwise and the edges of the long sides were sewn together with a closed seam, resulting in a cylindrical tube-shaped object. The tube was somewhat flattened and divided into two longitudinal compartments, a narrow and a broad one, by a leather thong laced through both layers of the object. The container is at least 55 cm long, but is not complete and therefore the exact length is unknown. Whether the lower end was tapered and open or closed also must remain a mystery. The upper end is not complete, but several fragments show that a whip stitch was partially present, which could be part of some closing mechanism or an attached closing flap. A leather lace was probably present, based on the size of the stitching holes and the presence of a leather lace in the smaller object.

Though the exact shape and size of the smaller object cannot be determined, it must have had a length of at least 41 cm. It is probably made of

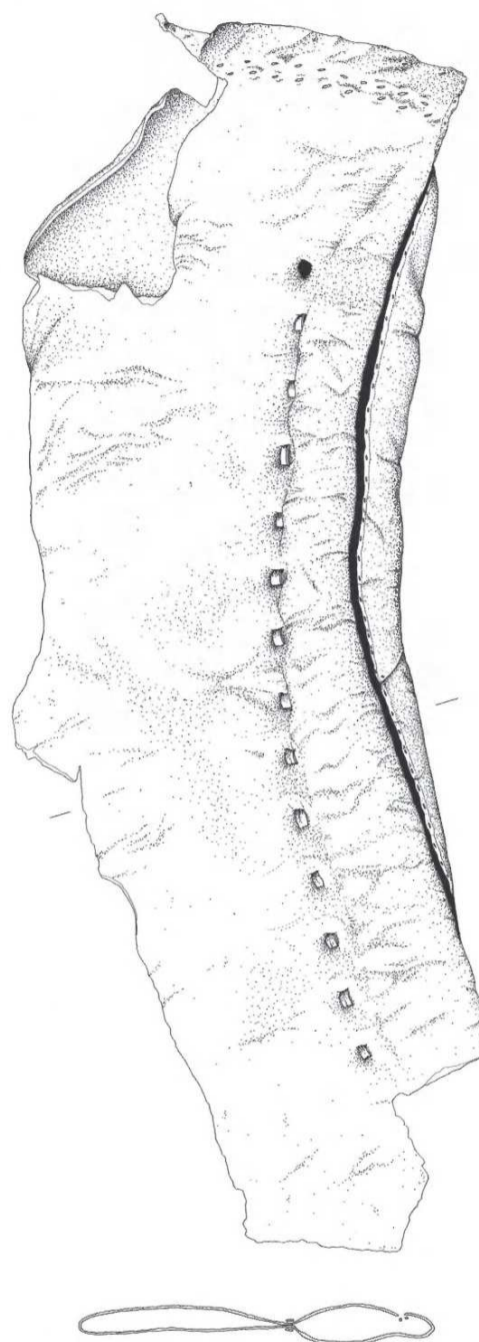


Figure 1. The larger of the two mystery objects.
Drawing: Raf Timmermans.

two pieces of cowhide sewn together at one end. As with the larger example, the container was then divided into two compartments by a leather thong. The leather thonging is not present along the whole length of the object and is absent at the top end. On both sides, another leather thong was knotted behind the dividing row of thonging. Between the leather and the

thonging another piece of leather was included in the thonged seam, perhaps for strengthening and to prevent tearing. The purpose is unclear, but it could have also been used for suspension or attachment of the object. Because large parts of the object are missing, it is unclear if the container was larger at its upper end and tapered towards the bottom or if it was cylindrical. The width of both compartments could not be reconstructed. A leather lace was sewn to part of the top end with a whip stitch. This could be associated with a closing mechanism or closing flap.

A few similar objects, which have been identified as large containers, are known from literature. In the Netherlands, a fragment of a large container was found in Haarlem. The size of the fragment was 14 to 25 cm, but the overall size and shape is uncertain, though it was also made of thick leather (Goubitz 2007/2009). In London, three cylindrical leather containers recovered are dated to the second half of the 16th century. The largest container is 67.5 cm long and 15.5 cm wide. Two smaller containers are c. 29.5 cm long and 7.5 cm wide. A function as a container for weaponry such as swords, bow and arrow or a fire-arm was considered, but thought to be unlikely by the author because the containers were too short for arrows and not strong enough to hold heavy weaponry (Egan 2005). In Damascus several containers made of leather or a combination of wood and leather were recovered from the excavation of a specifically military context. These have been interpreted as quivers. The leather examples have a length of 29.6 to 43.8 cm (Nicolle 2011).

It is possible that the two objects from Gorinchem, although similar in manufacturing method and appearance, had completely different functions or different contents. It remains to be determined if these objects could in fact be used as containers, since in both cases the lower end is missing and we cannot be certain if it was open or closed. The 'containers' are dated to the same period as the horse-mill at the site. Could they be related to the horse-mill in any way? The narrow width of the second compartment of the large container and of both compartments on the smaller one suggests that a rope or perhaps a small pole could have been passed through. Use-wear on the larger object shows that it was curve shaped, perhaps by a rope. These observations provide a possible new interpretation of the 'containers' as an item of horse-gear: per-



Figure 2. 15th century depiction of a horse collar. From: *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (month of October).

haps as a piece of a horse collar (Fig. 2), or a means of protecting the ropes connecting the horse collar to a mill beam. No similar finds however have been found so far.

A calfskin glove

Among the leather finds from a latrine originally used as a well, with excellent conditions for preservation of organic materials, was a right handed glove made of thin calfskin (Fig. 3). The pattern was cut from one piece of leather and sewn inside out with a closed seam (flesh-grain stitching). The flesh side of the leather faced inwards. The thumb was made from a separate piece of leather and is now missing. Only a few 14th century gloves are known, one example is from Switzerland (Volken & Volken 2006) and another from Sweden (Fredricksson & Zerpe 1982). From later periods more gloves are known (for example Groenman-Van Waateringe 1988; Schnack 1998; Egan 2005), yet gloves are still a rare find. In the Netherlands, the thumb of a glove was found in Kampen (Barwasser & Goubitz 1990) and goatskin gloves have been recovered at both Dordrecht (Goubitz 2008) and Middelburg (Goubitz 1994).

Leather gloves may have been used for different purposes, for example to warm or protect the hands but they could also function as status symbols. Gloves feature in paintings, especially from the 16th century onwards, often being worn by high-ranking individuals. It is unknown for what purpose this glove was used. The glove is too thin to have been used for heavy work and no



Figure 3. Calfskin glove.
Photograph: Marloes Rijkelijhuizen.

signs of abrasions are present. More research is necessary to shed light on its function and on the owners of gloves. This almost complete example provides a supplement to our knowledge on gloves from this period.

Acknowledgements

This article has been edited by Marquita Volken. I wish to thank the excavators and the people who helped me find references and alternative ideas on the function of the mystery objects or who sent me examples of excavated leather gloves. Thanks to Tim Hoogendijk, Toos Busch, Roy Thompson, Marquita Volken, David Nicolle, Al Saguto, Arne Focke, Raf Timmermans.

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