

A POSSIBLE SAXON SMITHING SITE AND FURTHER EVIDENCE FROM SOU 29, SOUTHAMPTON

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with contributions by P ANDREWS and B BIDDLE

ABSTRACT

This short article publishes a radiocarbon date from SOU 29 phase IC and offers a reinterpretation of that phase. These contexts have already been reported on in the Proceedings (Smith et al 1984). Also published below are a Thermoluminescence (TL) date and an approximate Thermoluminescence (TL) date from an Iron Age context on SOU 29. The reader should consult the original article for full site location and excavation plans.

A RADIOCARBON DATE FROM CONTEXT 889 AND A REINTERPRETATION OF PHASE IC

During the excavation of the area sealed by the medieval rampart, several radiocarbon samples were taken. Only one of these (to the present author's knowledge) was sent for age determination to the AML. The sample comprised a small amount of charcoal from context 889, phase IC. The uncalibrated result was 1480 ± 70 years bp at the 68% confidence level (HAR-4648; full details are held in the excavation archive). This has been calibrated by A J Clark according to the Stuiver 1982 curve to AD 430-650. If, however, one were to take a cautious view of the radiocarbon date, then this phase could belong anywhere between the Romano-British and Middle-Saxon periods (see Baillie 1985, 11-23, for arguments concerning the treatment of radiocarbon dates). The complete lack of any Romano-British material from the site renders this attribution unlikely. However, the possibility of a Middle-Saxon date cannot be

completely ignored as the lack of any Middle-Saxon artefacts need not in itself be significant. There is also archaeological evidence for eighth- and ninth-century smithies less than two kilometres away in Hamwic. In the original article no secure dating of phase IC was offered. However, the possibility of that phase belonging to the Iron Age was allowed for. The contexts in phase IC produced only three sherds of pottery. One was a mid-late Iron Age sherd from context 854; the second was a shoulder of a fifth-third century carinated bowl from context 876; the third sherd was an undated rimsherd, also from context 876 (Smith et al 1984, 43-4; fig 5.7, 5.11 and 5.10 respectively). This latter sherd is the one referred to in the original article as being 'either Iron Age or Saxon in date' (*ibid*, 41). Therefore, although the dating evidence is by no means overwhelming, it is possible that phase IC could date to the Early or Middle-Saxon periods. If so, the stratigraphic sequence observed on SOU 29 and interpreted as phase IC assumes fresh importance.

The stratigraphic sequence in phase IC requires some further explanation than was offered in the original article. (A matrix for this phase is given in Table 2.) Phase IC (Fig 1) comprises a series of layers, post-holes, a shallow pit, and a linear feature. The sequence commences with a number of post-holes and a shallow pit cut into context 893 (Fig 1.B). Two of the post-holes (1003 and 1013) marked the southern edge of the layers 883-92 (compare Fig 1.A with Fig 1.B). A further set of smaller post-holes (contexts 895, 897, 899, 1002, 1003,

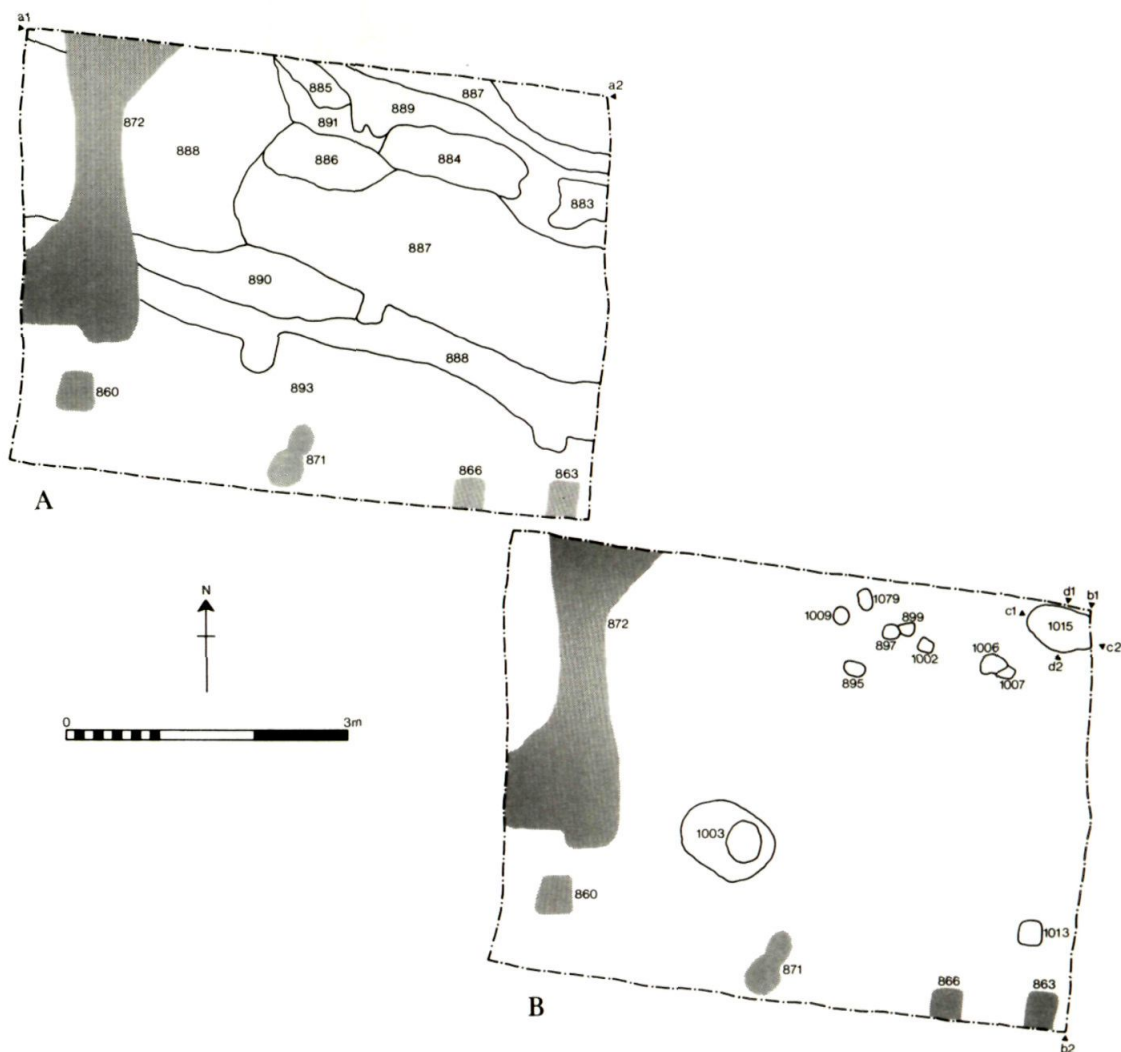


Fig 1. SOU 29 Phase IC: A, contexts 883 etc; B, features associated with smithing area.

1006, 1007, 1009) appear to have been associated with a shallow pit, 1015. Context 1015 was some 0.8m across east-west and some 0.6m across north-south (Fig 2.C). The sides of 1015 were scorched and the fill, 1014, consisted of 85% charcoal. In the previously published section, reproduced here as Fig 2.B, 1015 is shown as being sealed by 893. However, the charcoal from layers 883 etc is identical with that from 1015, and differs

considerably from the charcoal recovered from stratigraphically earlier deposits (see Biddle below). It seems probable, therefore, that despite the evidence of the drawn section, 1015 was associated with layers 883 etc. These layers were generally dark greyish brown to black clay silts. They reached a maximum depth of 0.25 m, and extended into the west, north, and east sections of the excavated area (Figs 1.A, 2.A, 2.B). They had common

charcoal inclusions, and were heavily root mottled. They also produced hammerscale and over 33kg of slag. This slag has been identified as smithing slag (G McDonnell, *pers comm*). Context 889 produced the remains of a tuyère hole (Andrews below; Fig 3). No other features in phase IC appear to have been associated with this activity. (The north-south gully, 872, cut the layers 883 etc and did not contain any significant amounts of slag or charcoal. The post-holes 863, 866, and 871 were in all probability associated with the medieval rampart. They might have been angled tie-beams linked with the possible timber revetment for the medieval rampart (SOU 29 phase IIIB, contexts 933, 935, and 961; Oxley & Smith 1986, 49–52).)

The phase IC sequence can be interpreted as representing a smithing area. Post-holes 1003 and 1013 were probably the remnants of the southern wall of a structure which may have partially or completely surrounded the smithing area. The main layers 883 etc respected this alignment. Contexts 895 etc might have supported a screen or 'fence' around at least one smithing hearth. Context 1015 might have been such a feature, and was the only context of that type within the excavated area. It was probably used in the following manner. Charcoal would have been heated in the feature, a shallow pit dug into the ground, and a suitable working temperature achieved and maintained by using bellows to blow air through a tuyère onto the bed of

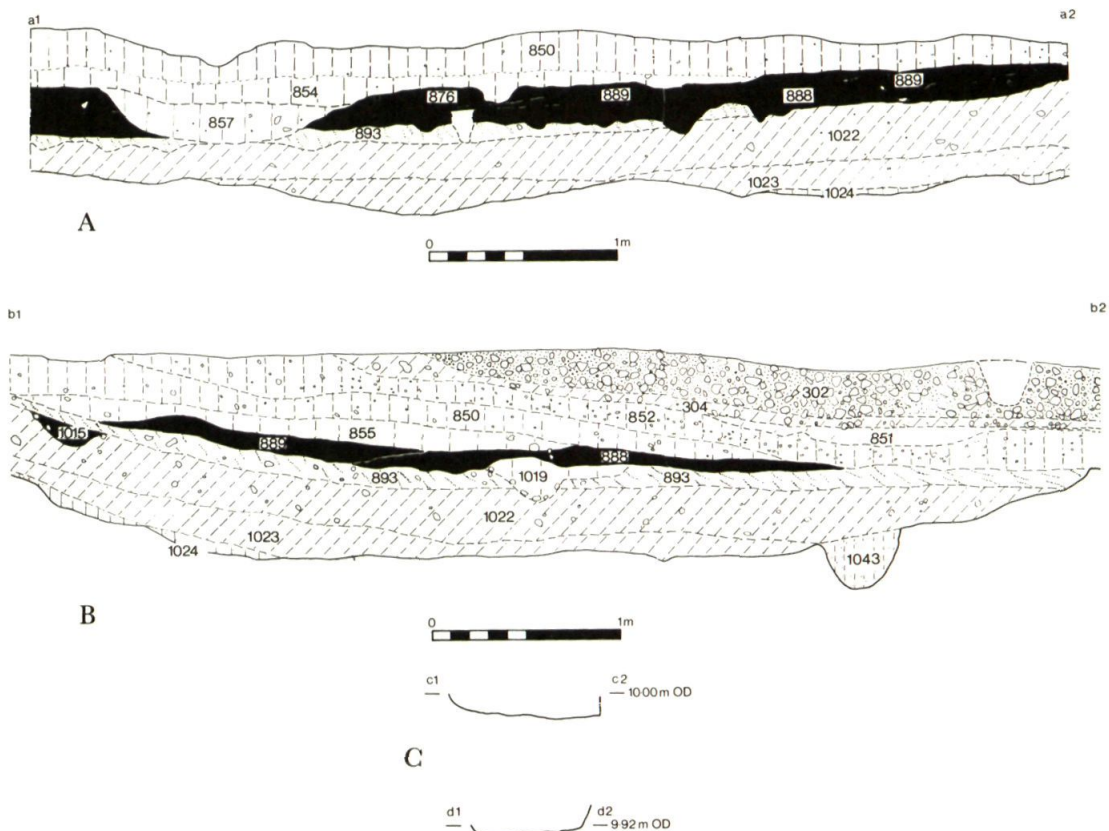


Fig 2. SOU 29 Phase IC: A, south-facing section through contexts 883 etc; B, west-facing section through contexts 883 etc; C, profiles through context 1015.

charcoal. The iron blooms, bars, or rods would have been heated in the hearth and then worked on an anvil. Similar groups of features and associated iron-working debris have been excavated at Six Dials, Southampton, where they are dated to the eighth and ninth centuries (Andrews *pers comm*). The interpretation of the charcoal given below by Biddle supports the argument that this area was a smithy and not a domestic hearth.

The Plant Remains from Phase IC by B Biddle

Soil samples from some of the Iron Age and Early Saxon contexts from SOU 29 were processed using hydrogen peroxide flotation, and the flots were sieved through a 500 µm mesh, and the residues through a 1 mm mesh (see Cottrell forthcoming). These were then sorted for environmental and other remains.

Only two of the seven samples from the phase IC layers produced any plant remains other than charcoal (Table 1).

All of these species could have been growing in the vicinity of the site while it was in use. The absence of cereal grains may either mean that this area was well away from any habitation, or that it was being kept free of domestic rubbish. The other material sorted as seed

any non-oak charcoal in these layers, making it seem likely that the oak was being specially selected and prepared for the smithing process.

By contrast the Iron Age contexts produced not only a greater range of seeds (see Biddle forthcoming) but a greater range of charcoal, including a fragment of softwood charcoal (probably pine), fragments of bark, and twigs, suggesting small open fires rather than a confined forge fire.

A Note on the Tuyère Hole, item 559, context 889 by P Andrews

Several pieces of refractory material were recovered from context 889, a layer which also contained abundant charcoal and smithing slag. One piece has been identified as a fragment of hearth-lining perforated by a tuyère hole (Fig 3). The hole, approximately 18 mm in diameter, would have held the tuyère of the bellows, whilst the hearth lining would have acted as a heat shield protecting the bellows. The inner face of the hearth lining is heavily vitrified, but shows no evidence of slagging. This is consistent with the iron-working activity having been smithing rather than smelting.

Table 1. Archaeobotanical Material from SOU 29 Phase IC

TAXA	SYNONYM	889	892
<i>Polygonum cf arviculare</i> L	Knotgrass	1c	—
CHENOPODIACEAE sp		1c	—
<i>cf Scandix pecten-veneris</i> L	Shepherd's Needle	1c	—
<i>Gallium apparine/mollugo</i>	Bedstraw	—	1c
<i>cf Juncus</i> sp	Rush	3c	—

remains proved, on further investigation, to be small soot balls.

A very distinct difference was noted between the plant remains from the phase IC contexts and those from the Iron Age contexts, especially when the charcoals were compared. All of the charcoal from the phase IC layers is oak (*Quercus* sp) and is mostly in regular chips of about 10–30 mm in length. There is no bark or

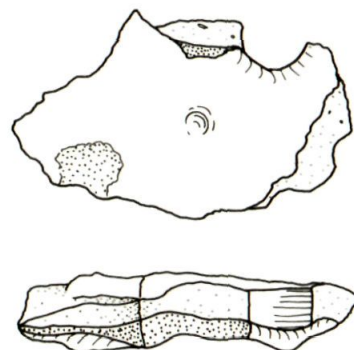


Fig 3. SOU 29 Phase IC: tuyère hole. Scale 1:2.

A TRM and a TL date from context 1072, phase IA SOU 29

In February 1984 building work commenced on the Maddison Street site which had been

excavated by S R Smith in 1980–1. All the foundation trenches were, where possible, observed by either P Andrews or J Oxley. The first foundation trench coincided with an excavation baulk at the north end of SOU 29. This baulk contained the unexcavated northern half of context 1072. The freshly-exposed section of 1072 revealed a layer of burnt brickearth *in situ*. A J Clark, then of Department of the Environment (DoE) Ancient Monuments Laboratory (AML), was contacted and promptly turned out to take samples for TRM and TL age determination. A J Clark writes that the TRM age determination (AML 841418) gives a date for the last firing 'between 120 and 220 BC at the 68% confidence level. The result is also compatible with a date of about AD 800, but a Durham University approximate TL date on the fired clay (Dur TL 38–IAS) gave a result of AD 160±360 (200 BC–520 AD) at the 68% confidence level, which indicates that the earlier date is more likely' Full details are held in the archive.

These dates confirm the dating of the phase IA activity to the third to first centuries BC suggested in the original article on the basis of the ceramic evidence alone (Smith *et al* 1984 43–4).

CONCLUSIONS

The dating evidence for phase IC is tenuous, and too much reliance should not be placed on

a single radiocarbon date. However, the possibility exists that the phase IC sequence represents an Early-Saxon, or perhaps Middle-Saxon, smithy. If one allows this possibility then SOU 29 becomes one of a very few excavated and published sites of this type and date. It suggests either hitherto unattested Early-Saxon occupation on the Southampton peninsula or Middle-Saxon occupation beyond the limits of Hamwic. It is clear that the remainder of this feature lies to the north, west, and east of the SOU 29 excavation. Only further excavation in these areas will resolve this chronological uncertainty. Importantly, these areas have not been disturbed by the 1984 building programme and therefore remain sealed by the medieval rampart of the castle. This area should be protected from any disturbance or be accorded the highest priority in any future excavation programme.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Table 2. SOU 29 Phase 1C, context list and matrix

context part of type			description	context part of type			description
9		layer	mid grey brown clay	884		layer	35% 10YR4/2 clay silt, 35% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 30% 10YR2/1 silt loam flecks of charcoal 5mm across
10		layer					
431		post-hole					
432	431	layer					
854		layer	7.5 YR silt loam	885		layer	80% 10YR4/2 clay silt, 20% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 5% flecks of charcoal 5mm across
856	869	layer	10YR 4/3 silt loam				
857	872	layer	silt loam	886		layer	20% 10YR4/2 clay silt, 10% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 60% 10YR2/1 silt loam flecks of charcoal <5mm across
858	872	layer	10YR 4/3 silt loam				
859	860	layer	10YR4/2 silt loam				
860		post-hole	contains 859				
862	863	layer	10YR 4/2 silt loam	887		layer	20% 10YR4/2 clay silt, 20% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 60% 10YR2/1 clay silt flecks of charcoal 10mm
863		post-hole	contains 862				
864	866	post-pipe	10YR 4/2 silt loam with much charcoal flecking	888		layer	40% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 60% 10YR3/3 silt loam flecks of charcoal <10mm
865	866	post-packing	10YR 4/2 silt loam with 50% flecks of brickearth	889		layer	20% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 10% 10YR2/1 clay silt, 70% 10YR4/2 clay silt 20% charcoal flecks <10mm
866		post-hole	contains 865 864 post-pipe slopes to the south at an angle of 15 degrees				
867	871	post-pipe	10YR 4/2 with 50% brickearth and charcoal flecking	890		layer	40% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 60% 10YR4/2 clay silt
868	871	post-packing	10YR 4/2 silt loam with brickearth inclusions	891		layer	20% 10YR4/3 brickearth, 40% 10YR4/2 clay silt, 40% 10YR2/1 silt loam
869		gully	contains 856				
870		gully	equals 872	892		layer	10YR2/1 silt loam and 10YR4/2 clay silt with 30% 10YR5/4 silt loam mottles, 10% charcoal
871		post-hole	contains 868 867 post-pipe (867) slopes to the south at 15 degrees				
872		gully	equals 870				
873	874	layer	10YR 4/2 silt loam	893		layer	
874	874	layer	10YR 4/2 silt loam	894	895	layer	10YR2/1 clay silt flecked with charcoal
874		cut	contains 873 irregular cut				
876		layer	extremely mottled surface: 50% 10YR4/1, 50% 10YR3/2 charcoal 20% 10YR4/1, 80% 10YR3/2 as 876 but much darker	895		post-hole	contains 894
877		layer	as 876, 877 but with 5%-10% flecks of charcoal	896	897	layer	10YR2/1 clay silt, charcoal flecks
878		layer	10YR4/2 clay silt 15% flecks of charcoal up to 20mm across	897		post-hole	contains 896
883		layer		898	899	layer	10YR4/2 clay silt
				899		post-hole	contains 898
				922		stake-hole	contains 923
				923	922	layer	10YR4/2 silt loam

context part of type

description

944	945	layer	10YR4/2 silt loam with 25% brickearth
945		post-hole	contains 944
946		layer	contains 944
947	960	layer	10YR4/2 silt loam with 5% brickearth
959		post-hole	contains 946
960		post-hole	contains 947
1001	1002	layer	10YR2/1 silt loam, charcoal flecks
1002		post-hole	contains 1001
1003		post-hole	contains 1004
1004	1003	layer	10YR4/2 silt loam with charcoal flecks
1005	1006	layer	10YR2/1 clay silt with charcoal flecks
1006		post-hole	contains 1005
1007		post-hole	
1008	1009	layer	10YR3/3 clay silt
1009		post-hole	contains 1008
1010	1011	layer	10YR2/1 clay silt strongly flecked with charcoal
1011		post-hole	contains 1010
1012	1013	layer	10YR4/2 silt loam with charcoal flecks
1013		post-hole	contains 1012
1014	1015	layer	15% 10YR5/4 brickearth, 85% 10YR2/1 charcoal
1015		shallow cut	contains 1014 sides and bottom scorched
1019	1021	layer	10YR4/3 silt loam with 10% 10YR4/2
1020	1021	layer	flint pebbles lining base of 1021
1021		gully	contains 1020 1019
1075		post-hole	contains 1076
1076	1075	layer	
1079		post-hole	
1144	1145	layer	
1145		post-hole	

800 29 MATRIX LAYERS SEQUENTIAL RAMPART

