

RECYCLING AND REPAIRING METALWORK AT ROMAN SILCHESTER

By NINA CRUMMY

ABSTRACT

The lives of several small Romano-British metal items from recent excavations at Silchester were extended either by adaptation into another form or by repair. They represent the careful preservation of objects owned or made by lower-status individuals in a period often characterised by conspicuous consumption and disposal.

Recycling in the Roman period could take two forms. The first is typified by the collection of broken glass (cullet) or scrap metal for melting down so that other glass vessels or metal artefacts can be produced (*e.g.* Pérez-Sala Rodés & Shepherd 2008; Dungworth 1997), and the second by the conversion of broken objects into new objects, such as the use of pottery sherds to make lamps (Willis 2004, §8.5.2) or, more often, spindlewhorls, game counters or pot lids (Crummy 1983, 67, 93–6). The University of Reading's excavations at Silchester on *Insula IX* (Fig. 1) alone have produced about 200 adapted pottery sherds and four adapted tile fragments, and more will probably emerge as post-excavation work continues.

Conversion extends and enriches the biography of an object, and there are many instances of this form of recycling in the very Late Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon periods, such as bracelets reworked into finger-rings and coins into amulets, spangles or other dress accessories (Swift 2012; Crummy 2010, 60–74; White 1988, 101; Walton Rogers 2007, 195, 198). A more unusual 3rd to 4th century example from *Insula IX* is the transformation of a bracelet into a nail-cleaner. Part of a worn penannular strip bracelet with rudimentary snake's head terminal and feathered edges has

been flattened (but is still slightly curved) and has had a notch cut out of the broken end (Fig. 2, 1). The nail-cleaner has certainly been used in its new form, as the points are well worn, as is the short median groove that runs for a short distance up the strip. A perforation at the terminal is original to the bracelet but could have served as a means of suspension if the nail-cleaner formed part of a set. This object can be compared to a large nail-cleaner from Camerton, Somerset, which was made from a mid 1st century strip-bow brooch, its sides cut into a tapering ornamental form (Fig. 2, 2, shown at 1:2; Wedlake 1958, fig. 60, 11; Eckardt & Crummy 2008, 136, no. 193).

Extending the life of an object can also be effected by mending it, although small repairs may not always be obvious and are perhaps most evident on repointed hairpins, pots with metal rivets or larger patches or the pin mechanisms of brooches. Repointing can usually be spotted because the pin or needle is left short, slightly unbalanced if the head is large, and the new point is often asymmetric (Crummy 1983, 20–25, 27). About 50 pottery sherds with lead or iron rivets still in place, or with rivet-sized holes, have been noted on *Insula IX*, and in a domestic or working context they appear practical and mundane. It has, however, been suggested that repaired pots deposited in graves may reference sickness, death and regeneration, such as a flagon in an early burial at Farley Heath with a large lead plate stapled over the base and some way up the wall (Cool & Leary 2012, 315; Bird 2013, 152–6).

Brooch repairs are comparatively rare, or perhaps just more rarely recorded. Examples include a one-piece Colchester brooch found in an Late Iron Age grave at Watlington, Oxfordshire, with its original integral copper-



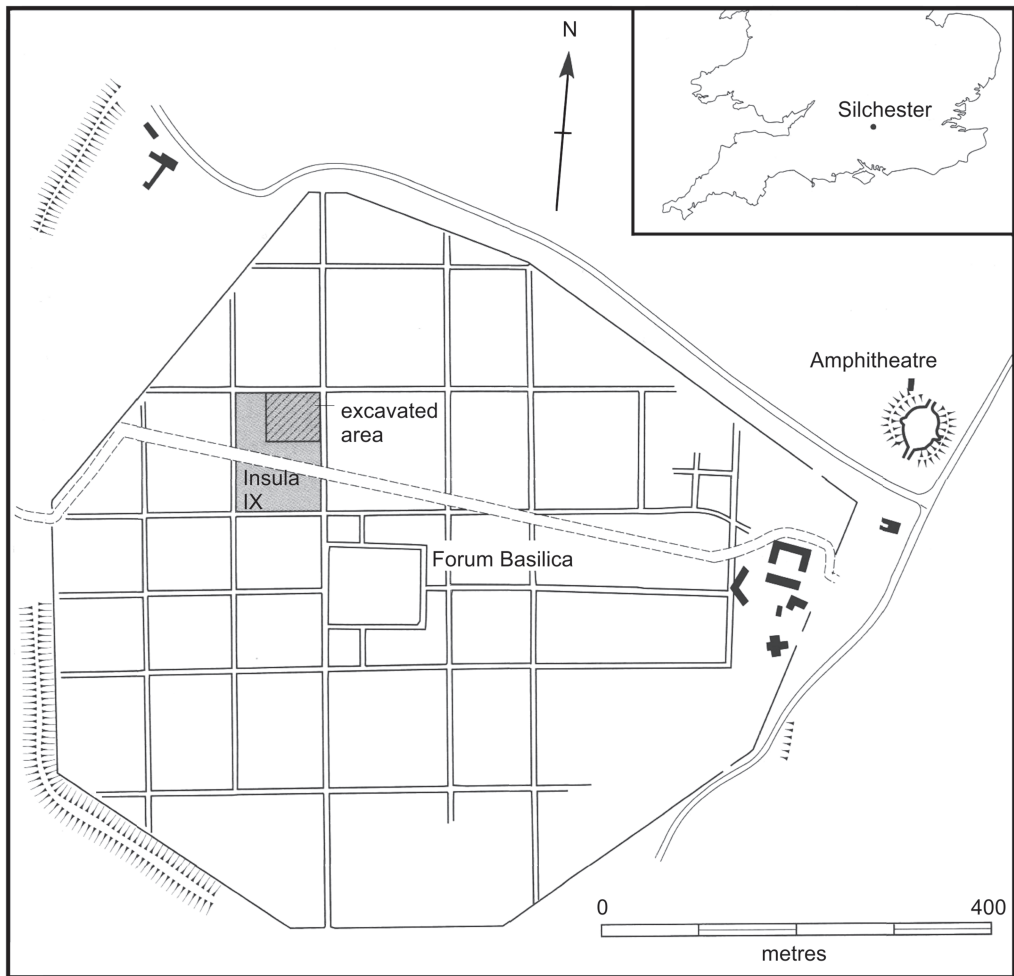


Fig. 1 Silchester, showing *Insula IX*. Image copyright University of Reading

alloy spring and pin replaced by one of iron wire, and a composite brooch from Church Hole Cave, Nottinghamshire, that had lost both spring and pin – the former probably removed when the latter broke – but a replacement pin was provided by winding copper-alloy wire around the axial bar, the necessary tension being provided by the twists in the wire and by resting the upper end against the back of the brooch head (Case 1958, 141; Branigan & Dearne 1992, 66, fig. A1, 1).

Four brooches from *Insula IX* have been repaired, all probably of early Roman date,

although an iron penannular brooch may perhaps be a residual Late Iron Age item (Fig. 2, 3). The large form of Fowler's Type C, with the terminals rolled up at right angles to the plane of the hoop (1960, 152), its date range spans the conquest period (Mackreth 2011, 207). Occurring in both iron and copper alloy, this example has an iron hoop but a thin copper-alloy pin that must be a replacement; all other penannulars of this form have pins in the same material as the hoop (*ibid.*, 207–9).

The repair to a copper-alloy one-piece brooch belonging to the Nauheim Derivative

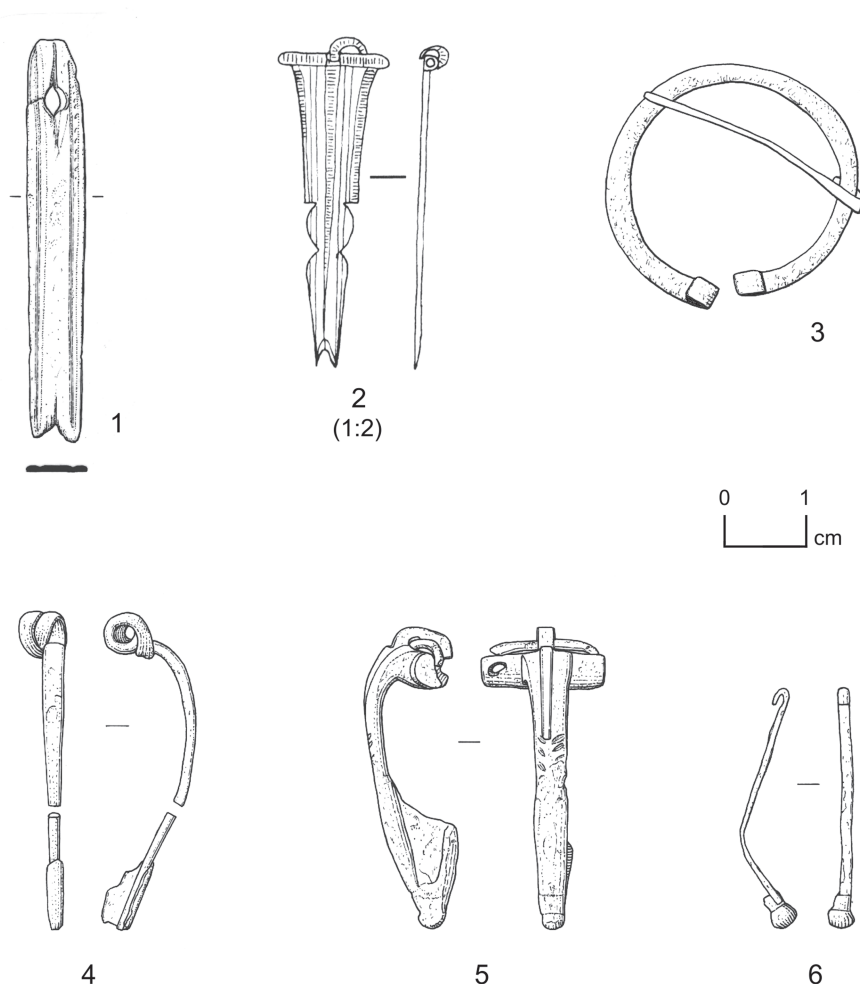


Fig. 2 Adapted and repaired objects. 1 and 3–6, from *Insula IX*, drawn by Brian Williams. 2, from Camerton, drawn by Jennifer Foster. Images copyright University of Reading

series with solid catchplate is slightly more complex (Fig. 2, 3). Quite short, with a simple four-coil bilateral spring, internal chord and narrow tapering bow, the brooch lies within Mackreth's ND 3.b3, a catch-all group of undistinguished examples (2011, 17–18, pls 8–9). In general copper-alloy Nauheim Derivatives date to within a range of *c.* AD 43–80/5, with most examples probably belonging to the first two post-conquest decades (Stead & Rigby 1986, 123). Large numbers appear to have arrived in Britain with the Roman army, and the wire-bowed form (more correctly

Drahtfibel Derivatives) are so closely associated with the military on the continent that they are sometimes referred to as *Soldatenfibeln* (Ettlinger 1973, Type 4; Riha 1994, 57). The series occurs widely over much of southern and central Britain, but there were distinct pockets of popularity, the conquest-period territory of the Atrebates being one (Crummy 2012, 122). They form a large part of the brooch assemblages from Winchester and from Silchester's forum-basilica site (Rees *et al.* 2008, 33; Corney 2000), and on *Insula IX* the copper-alloy examples alone form 20% of the

total assemblage and 59% of the immediately post-conquest assemblage. Their simple form, with few bearing any decoration, implies that they cost very little and were easily replaced when broken; they have even occasionally been referred to as 'poor men's brooches' (Stead & Rigby 1986, 123). Economic value is always relative, and when the catchplate of Figure 2, 3 broke it was removed and a new one cut from sheet metal was brazed onto the bow. As what remains of the replacement lies well up the bow, the new plate was somewhat longer than the original, thereby strengthening the join and improving the serviceability of the catch.

A copper-alloy Colchester BB derivative brooch (Fig. 2, 5) is a rare form on *Insula IX*, with only four recovered, less than 1% of the total assemblage. Dating to *c.* AD 60–80, the type is characterised by a double lug behind the head to secure both the external chord and an axial bar that strengthened the spring, a crest running down the upper part of the bow, and the absence of cavetto mouldings down its sides; this absence distinguishes the form from the B derivatives that date to *c.* AD 50–70 (Crummy 1983, 12). Where Nauheim Derivatives were both widespread and the brooch of choice among the Atrebrates, Colchester B and BB derivatives were both widespread and essentially Catuvellaunian/Trinovantian (Rees *et al.* 2008, 33; Mackreth 2011, 51–6). The Silchester brooch is doubly unusual. Not only are B and BB derivatives seldom found within the town, but this example has a small foot-knob and bears incised chevron decoration on the lower part of the bow, features that set it apart from other brooches in this group and imply the influence of the western Polden Hill series with its more varied decoration, often making use of chevrons or lozenge-shaped relief 'leaves' (Mackreth 2011, pls 47–8). Its form thus combines an eastern spring mechanism with western decorative style that is appropriate to Silchester's central location and hints that the brooch may be a local product. Its rarity, and possibly local origin, could have been the main reason why a hole was drilled through one side-wing to secure the spring, perhaps when the axial bar slipped out or when one end of the chord and/or spring broke.

The fourth piece consists of a narrow

copper-alloy strip, hooked at the top and with a foot-knob with a projecting stump brazed onto its base (Fig. 2, 6). Applied foot-knobs are characteristic of Alésia, Aucissa and Bagendon (Aucissa derivative) brooches (Mackreth 2011, 130–3, 142–3), all continental products associated in Britain with the Roman army and dating to the Claudio-Neronian period, and this odd piece was no doubt intended as a repair for one such brooch. The upper stump would probably have provided the extra metal needed to braze the new knob firmly onto a broken brooch foot, and the smith effecting the repair would also have attached at least part of the strip onto the rear of the foot, perhaps even up onto the bow, as its narrow width would allow it to fit within the recessed inner edge of a catchplate.

With the possible exception of the copper-alloy pin on the iron penannular brooch, a smith must have been involved in all these repairs and money would have changed hands. For both owner and smith, mending rather than replacing a broken brooch in early Roman Britain perhaps reflects the difficulty of survival in a new province with new burdens of taxation. Similarly, in the Late Roman period the conversion of a rudimentary bracelet into an even more rudimentary nail-cleaner may not have been done at the request of the original owner of the bracelet, but by a smith who had acquired a worn and outdated piece for melting down but saw an opportunity to produce one or two (if both terminals were used) saleable items for less effort.

Among the 1500 or so copper-alloy artefacts other than coins recorded on Silchester's *Insula IX*, repairs and recycling offer glimpses of individuals taking pragmatic decisions based on their ability to pay or to turn a small profit. If items of unusual form or made from exotic or expensive materials such as ivory, gold or jet represent high-status consumer goods (Eckardt 2014) – and the large quantities of discarded personalia and other small objects found in Romano-British towns provide plenty of evidence for a general consumerist tendency towards acquisition and disposal rather than mending and making-do (Crummy 2012, 106–10) – then repairs to everyday items such as brooches represent the opposite, the preservation of essential dress accessories by

lower-status individuals who preferred to spend a little rather than lay out a larger sum for the purchase of a replacement.

CATALOGUE

- Fig. 2, 1. Nail-cleaner made from a fragment of a broken debased snake armlet with marginal grooves, traces of feathering on the margins and blunt tapered pierced terminal. L 51 mm, W 7 mm. *Insula IX*, SF 970, (1228), cleaning along south frontage of House 1 (Fulford *et al.* 2006, fig. 3), 3rd–4th century or Victorian backfill/plough soil.
- Fig. 2, 2. Nail-cleaner made from a strip-bow brooch, with part of the pin still fixed to the axial bar. L. 86 mm, shown at 1:2. Camerton, after Wedlake 1958, fig. 60, 11, Eckardt & Crummy 2008, fig. 79, 193.
- Fig. 2, 3. Late Iron Age or early Roman iron penannular brooch of Fowler 1960 Type C with replacement copper-alloy pin. D 33 mm, section 3 mm; pin L 33 mm. *Insula IX*, SF 4930, (8320), NW area; context undated.
- Fig. 2, 4. One-piece brooch with part of a new catch-plate brazed onto the bow. Upper fragment, L 26 mm; lower, L 16 mm. *Insula IX*, SF 7314, (14616), fill of pit [14617], Claudio-Neronian or Period 1 (c. AD 40/50 to c. 70/80).
- Fig. 2, 5. Colchester BB derivative brooch, missing most of the spring and chord. A perforation on one damaged side-wing would have held a piece of wire to secure the axial bar. L 39 mm. *Insula IX*, SF 2347, (3514) fill of post hole [3529], 2nd–3rd century, possibly associated with the east-west street.
- Fig. 2, 6. A repair prepared for a Claudio-Neronian Alésia, Aucissa or Aucissa derivative brooch, consisting of a long narrow strip, hooked at the top and with a foot-knob attached to the base. L 30 mm. *Insula IX*, SF 4840, (8050), cleaning over Period 2 (c. AD 70/80–c. 125/50) gravel lane surfaces.

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Author: Nina Crummy, 2 Hall Road, Copford, Colchester CO6 1BN, email: n.c.crummy@reading.ac.uk

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