

Excavation of peat block from Alvastra pile dwelling

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Introduction



Fig. 1. The peat block before investigation. Photo Hilde Skogstad, SHM

On 15 July 1930 a block of peat was cut out of Dagsmosse mire and put into a wooden box with a nailed on lid. Apart from the date (in fact two dates occur on the box 15/7-30 and 30/6-30),

archaeologists also wrote on the box 'special finds' and 'decorated vessel fragment' together with information about the excavation square, C9, and the find number, find 1. The box measured 25 x 25 x 12 cm. During his work on Otto Frödin's excavations Hans Browall was not able to excavate this block (Browall 2011, p. 25) so it remained in the storerooms of the Swedish History Museum under accession number SHM 19414. On 19 January 2016 the team of the Alvastra project (Alvastra pile dwelling – an archaeological resource) decided to excavate it. Our curiosity was originally provoked by the reconstructed vessel (Browall 2011, p. 264; SHM accession number 19414:C9,1, Fid 508145) from the same square as this peat block. This vessel is without a base. The ceramic assemblage from the pile dwelling contains very few remains of vessel bases and so in our striving to understand the ceramics of Mats Malmer's excavations we wanted to see what the bottom of these vessels looked like. We suspected that this block might help us in this striving.

Excavation

The block was removed from its wooden box. It was investigated in three different layers.

Layer 1 consisted of two lumps of peat which lay side by side on the top of the block surrounded by loose soil (fig. 1). The loose soil was removed and dry-sieved (0,5 cm mesh size used throughout). The peat in the two lumps was completely dry and it was possible to lift them off the block. They were removed. The lumps were sprayed with water and subsequently soaked in water for a few hours. It was then possible to break up the lumps and sieve the soil. The soil contained some charcoal, some wooden chips, small sticks and plant remains from the peat. These were not collected. The only finds collected were a small splitter of flint found in the sieve and find 1A, a pottery sherd which fell out of the block as soon as the box was dismantled.

Layer 2 was the layer which contained most of the large pottery sherds in situ (1B – 1I; figs 2 and 3). They were immediately visible when the lumps of dry peat were removed.



Fig. 2. Layer 2 with in-situ potsherds. Photo: Nathalie Dimc, SHM



Fig. 3. In-situ potsherds with numbering used in database (Accession number 19414:C9, F1B-I). Photo: Nathalie Dimc, SHM.

Three pottery sherds were stuck to the underside of the two lumps (Find 1L and 1M in one lump and 1N in the other).



Fig. 4. The underside of one lump of dried peat with negative impression of potsherd 1L and potsherd 1M still attached to the soil. Photo: Nathalie Dimc, SHM.

Further sherds of pottery were collected from the peat around the in-situ sherds 1B-I in the two different halves of the block area (1K and 1J).

Layer 3 The in-situ sherds were removed and the peat under them was examined. Three textile fragments were observed in the peat (fig 5 and 6). Two could be recovered in tact (fig. 6 and 7) whereas the third (fig. 5) fell apart during the process of removal. The layer consisted otherwise of loose soil which was poured into the sieves. Hazelnut shells, burnt and unburnt bone fragments and a further two potsherds were recovered from the sieves.



Fig. 5. Textile fragment in layer 3. Accession number 19414:C9, F1Å. Photo: Nathalie Dimc, SHM.



Fig. 6. Textile fragment in layer 3. Accession number 19414:C9, F1Z. Photo: Nathalie Dimc, SHM.



Fig. 7. Magnified picture of textile fragment. Accession number 19414:F1Y. Photo: Helen Persson, SHM.

Discussion

The block of peat did not contain the vessel base that we had hoped for. Instead the sherds represent different parts of the vessel including the rim, the neck, the shoulder and parts of the vessel body. Nonetheless, a large portion of the vessel was preserved and the fact that the sherds fit together has given more insight into the pile dwelling pottery material: what it looked like and how it was constructed.

The Alvastra-box-vessel is decorated with shallow, round pits (V2) applied in two rows directly under the rim. The second row is somewhat disrupted and applied in a zig-zag pattern towards the edge of the sherd and it is therefore hard to follow. A third row of pits was applied on the slightly profiled shoulder and a fourth and final row of pits was applied on the body.

The fourth row of pits are of special interest here since decorative elements on the vessel bodies from the pile dwelling have not been described in the literature before (see Hulthén 1998:23, 39; Browall 2011:289). However, Browall 2011 mentions that V2 can be applied irregularly on the vessel wall (Browall 2011:261). The ceramic material found in the pile dwelling is very fragmented and spread out in the cultural layers and it is therefore very difficult to ascertain from what part of the

vessel the different sherds originally come from, and that is one of the reasons why the new material is so interesting.

Furthermore, the vessel was to a large extent constructed by means of the n-technique, except for the shoulder of the vessel that connects to the neck with a typical u-technique join - a dimension of the manufacturing technique of the pile dwelling pottery that would have been difficult to understand without the unearthing of this vessel.

The difference between the reconstructed vessel (Fid 508145) and the Alvastra box-vessel has to do with the décor. The reconstructed vessel in the storerooms was decorated with irregular rounded imprints V4 (Browall 2011:263) and the Alvastra box material with shallow pits V2. However, the biggest difference between the vessels lies in how the décor was *applied*. The reconstructed vessel has two rows of décor under the rim and two rows on the shoulder. However, the Alvastra box-vessel has two rows under the rim, one row on the shoulder and a fourth row on the body. It should be mentioned that a third sherd was found in 1930, also decorated with pits but applied differently (FID508144, Browall 2011:262).

This leads to the conclusion that there are three pile dwelling pottery vessels from the same context (square C 9) that are decorated slightly differently but within the same ceramic tradition. It is not unusual yet interesting to note.

The unearthing of the Alvastra box- vessel has given us some new insight into the material - how the decorative elements were applied, how the vessel was constructed and to some degree how the material was dispersed within the platform.

Three fragments of woven textiles were discovered at the bottom of the peat block. These would indeed be very important findings if they proved to be contemporary with the potsherds. Only one other woven textile fragment is known from Stone Age contexts in Sweden (Siech & Berggren 2002). The textile fragments should be stratigraphically older than or as old as the potsherds but the cutting of the peat block in 1930 must be seen as an intrusive episode which may have disturbed the stratigraphy in some way.

Find list

Accession number, subnumber	Find number	FID*	Keyword, type	Material	Number	Number fragments	Weight (g)	Layer
19414:C9	1A	1199177	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	18	1
19414:C9	1B	1199254	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	76	2

19414:C9	1C	1199255	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	86	2
19414:C9	1D	1199256	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	156	2
19414:C9	1E	1199259	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	6	2
19414:C9	1F	1199260	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	3	8	2
19414:C9	1G	1199262	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	16	2
19414:C9	1H	1199278	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	10	2
19414:C9	1I	1199376	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	6	2
19414:C9	1J	1199423	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	2	8	2
19414:C9	1K	1199426	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	6	22	2
19414:C9	1L	1199429	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	44	2
19414:C9	1M	1199431	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	6	2
19414:C9	1N	1199434	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	8	2
19414:C9	1O	1199440	splinter	flint	1	0	0	1
19414:C9	1Q	1199444	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	2	2	2
19414:C9	1R	1199446	bone, burnt bone	bone	0	0	0	2

19414:C9	1V	1199450	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	2	3
19414:C9	1W	1199451	ben burnt bone	bone	0	18	0	3
19414:C9	1Y	1199453	textile	textile	0	1	0	3
19414:C9	1Z	1199454	textile	textile	0	1	0	3
19414:C9	1Å	1199457	textile	textile	0	1	0	3
19414:C9	1	1199484	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	6	-
19414:C9	1K	1205704	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	6	2
19414:C9	1L	1205747	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	1	6	2
19414:C9	1M	1205759	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	2	30	2
19414:C9	1M	1205760	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	2	2	2
19414:C9	1M	1205761	vessel, pile dwelling pottery	pottery	0	0	2	2
19414:C9	1M 1M	1205762	organic material	organic material	0	1	0	2
19414:C9	1V	1205766	macrofossil	organic material	0	1	0	3
19414:C9	1P	1199443	hazlenut shell	organic material	0	8	0	2
19414:C9		1199447	shell	organic material	0	1	0	

	1S							2
19414:C9	1T	1199448	shell	organic material	0	1	0	3
19414:C9	1U	1199449	hazlenut shell	organic material	0	6	0	3
19414:C9	1X	1199452	bone, unburnt bone	bone	0	1	0	3

- FID is the find identity number in the database

Participants in excavation: Nathalie Dimc, Jackie Taffinder, Greg Tanner (members of the Alvastra project), Hilde Skogstad (conservator, SHM).

Helen Persson, textile specialist at the Swedish History Museum, has taken a short look at the textile fragments discovered.

References

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