

Seals of Approval: Archaeological Evidence for an Aspect of Regulation in the Textile Trade in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era

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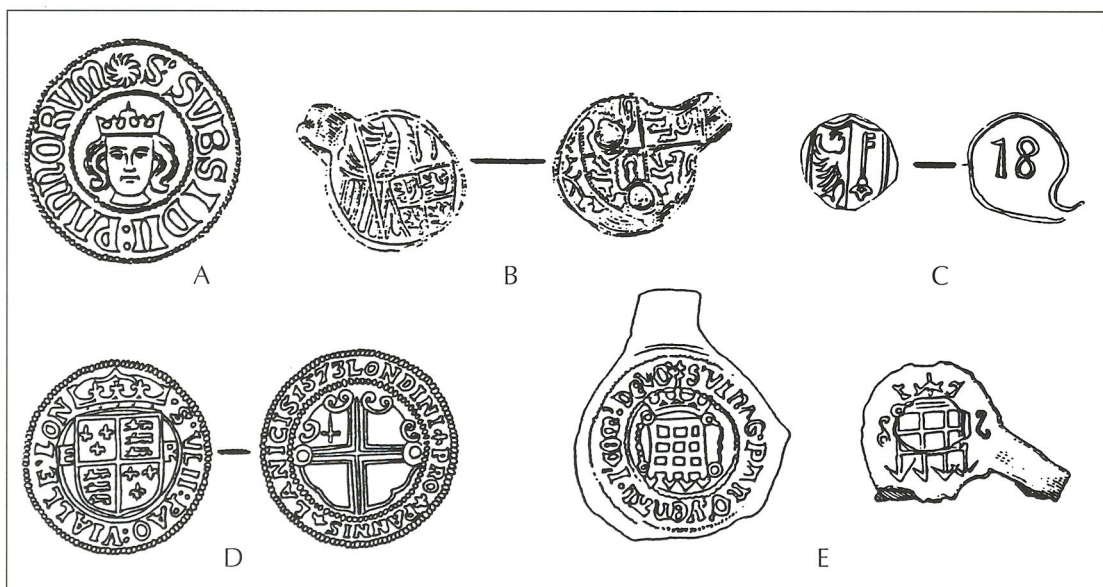
Material culture; cloth seals; textile trades

Introduction

This contribution deals with a widespread series of archaeological finds that can throw unexpected light on details of the medieval and later cloth trade in Europe, up to c.1810. Seals of lead were put on individual, newly woven textiles to indicate that each had been examined by some local authority – a representative acting for a local guild or on behalf of a potentate, and the quality been found adequate for the market according to the current standard. The seal was stamped with information similar to that still given today by hallmarks on pre-

cious metals – the place of origin and, if appropriate, the manufacturer and standard, according to the legislation in force.

The same basic idea appears in a completely different sphere in the New Testament, when Christ, describing his own mission, says “Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth into everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for Him hath the Father sealed” (John 2,27; St Paul uses a similar image three times – 2 Corinthians 1,22; Ephesians 1,13; 2 Timothy 2,19 – quite apart from several mystical references in the Book of Revelations). Such biblical associa-



Cloth seals, all at 1 : 1 (drawings Nick Griffiths). Top line: A) King's head device from an english seal matrix of copper alloy, mid (?) 14th century – no surviving lead seals are known with this stamp. B) Medieval Hainaut seal with figure of a man in a long garment, perhaps holding a banner, and a shield with the four lions rampant of the arms of Hainaut. C) London find of a seal from Geneva – date uncertain (?16th/17th century). Lower line: D) London seal for woollens, mid/late 16th century – this one is dated 1573. E) Crown over portcullis English county seals of the late 16th century – Devon (left) and probable contemporary counterfeit (right).

tions would presumably have lent this aspect of mundane regulation an immediate authority from what was to the medieval mind the highest possible source. The humble cloth seals themselves, attached to the textiles on the market stall, would have been as familiar to medieval buyers as the datestamp on perishable goods in the supermarket is to customers today.

The Potential of Cloth Seals

The seals themselves usually consist of two discs of lead, fixed together by an integral rivet so that one disc would lay on each face of the cloth at its edge. One or both discs were struck by dies (in the manner of hammered coins) to register the appropriate information, usually the local or national heraldic arms or another readily recognisable symbol, together with a confirming legend, to indicate the origin of the textile. An incidental result of striking soft lead against the fabric was that an imprint of the textile was often left on the inner surfaces of the discs, sometimes detailed enough to read the thread count and to indicate the type of weave used long after the fibre itself has decayed (e.g. Egan 1989).

The discovery of seals during archaeological investigations and in other circumstances is inevitably haphazard and unpredictable, and the numbers now retrieved from the ground overall are not large. Of those recognised to be what they are, a proportion are in such poor condition that they are not legible. This compounds a tendency towards carelessness during the repetitive operation of the actual stamping, which meant that some were weakly or incompletely registered, occasionally being so seriously offstruck that they were totally unrecognisable. A number of the medieval cloth seals that have been unearthed in England and on the Continent remain unidentified at this stage for these and other reasons. Most textile-producing countries in northern Europe are nevertheless now represented by recognised finds. The greatest numbers to date have been discovered in London, where there are well over ten thousand, but the numbers are constantly growing in other, major European cities and also in smaller settlements and the countryside (the seagoing ships that carried textiles in their thousands to markets dis-

tant from the places of manufacture have seemingly yet to produce a single cloth seal from the Middle Ages, though a few groups are known from later sunken textile consignments). This paper to some extent updates an earlier attempt to draw together the evidence from cloth seals for English trade (Egan 1995b) but it concentrates rather more on the earlier evidence.

Syntheses of seal finds have been produced for Amsterdam in the Netherlands (Baart et al. 1977; Baart 1981; 1988) and in Scandinavia – for Denmark (Liebgott 1975, with a few supplements in Orduna 1993), Finland (Taavitsainen 1982), Lund in Sweden (Wahlöö 1987) and also Lithuania (Kvizikevičius 1998). France produced some of the earliest work on cloth seals (Sabatier 1908; 1912; Dancoisne 1885) but these pioneering efforts were undertaken before archaeological fieldwork was capable of providing close dating. There are more recent papers concentrating on finds relating to Trier and Göttingen in Germany (Kann 1985; 1986, Weber 1983; Schütte 1993). Although documentary evidence indicates Göttingen cloths were exported to many places, including England, beyond the area of origin its seals have so far only been found in Scandinavia (cf. Liebgott 1975, 40 figs. 18; 19). Discrepancy between excavated and documentary evidence is quickly established as one of the recurring themes of this paper. The historical framework is patchy, but it has, of course, the merit of intended statement for record purposes that finds from the earth can be accused of lacking. The current constraints of the evidence mean that the potential contribution to knowledge is usually at a level of fine detail, such as the individual consignment of goods, in contrast with the broad-brush picture of major trends that has emerged from extensive research work on written records of the production and movement of thousands of textiles (e.g. Carus Wilson/Coleman 1963 for English exports).

The Earliest Seals

The earliest recognised cloth seals, excavated in Amsterdam, are from Leiden from c. 1275–1300. These are significant finds at this date because trade in Leiden textiles is not attested in written sources until the 1300s (Baart 1988,

100–101 figs. 1–3). Wax was apparently used for the first English seals (none of which has survived) – perhaps from 1314, when the post of *alnager* (the cloth inspector who levied a tax of a few pence for the king for piece examined) was created. From this time onwards, no cloth specified in legislation to be subject to these controls could legally be sold on the market without an alnage seal. A small group of matrices with the king's head, probably from the mid 14th century, survive in the British Museum, but no lead seal with this stamp is known (Egan 1995a, nos. 1–3; see Fig. A). The use of wax for sealing some cloths was specified in legislation of 1468 but only lead was mentioned in 1483 (cf. *ibid.*, 2). After its first mention in documentary evidence for cloth sealing in 1380 in London (Sharpe 1907, 145; 146) and its corresponding appearance among actual finds from the last quarter of the 14th century (Egan 1991, 32; pl. 4, no. 3), lead was increasingly adopted in England as the medium for these marks through the 15th century.

England's Developing Medieval Cloth Trades Seen through Seals

Woollen cloths, often ones woven in the Low Countries from English fleeces, are among the recorded purchases for the English royal household in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, at first from Flanders (Ypres and Douai) and later from Brabant (Malines/Mechelen, Brussels and Louvain – Bridbury 1982, 37–46). To compare with this, from the 13th or 14th century are several seals found in London from imported Flanders/Ghent, Malines and Diest textiles (Egan forthcoming; Mitchiner reads the legend on some of the first of these from London as 'Ganden' rather than 'Flanden' – i.e. Ghent as opposed to Flanders – 1991, 948 nos. 2935–2937). Ghent seals were certainly present on some textiles imported into England and, unusually, they were taken at face value by the authorities to be guarantees of good quality since in 1337 cloths with the city's seals were specifically exempted from the English inspection system (Chope 1912, 570). Diest, just to the east of Louvain, may (from the archaeological finds in London) turn out to be the real origin of the cloths known in the documents under the latter name. A single Flanders seal excavated in Hull

is the only one recorded in England outside the capital from that important industry so far (Watkin 1987, 206–207 fig. 119 no. 279 – not identified in text; see Endrei 1983 for the Flemish industries). Also from northern England is a loose find of a Malines seal unearthed in Yorkshire. With this exception, which refers to 'Walter' (unidentified) on its stamp, the recorded Malines seals in England all have the name of another local potentate, Florent Berthoult (fl. c. 1275–1331). The only one of these so far published is from a deposit that is closely dated to the second half of the 14th century (Egan 1998, 262–263 no. 812), subsequent by perhaps almost a generation to the decease of the individual referred to. While this level of individual anomaly is readily explicable as an old object discarded after a few decades, it does not explain why all the London finds representing these particular imports are assignable to such a limited period (apparently only much later Mechelen seals survive in the city of origin, in the Busleyden Museum collection). A couple of further finds in London, probably from the late 1300s, are seals for Hainaut – now in Northern France (Fig. B).

Documentary sources indicate the import of about 12,000 Continental cloths per year by English merchants at the start of the 14th century (out of an estimated total of 15,000), declining to perhaps 5,000 in the 1350s (Bridbury 1982, 37). The transition in the late 14th century from English exports primarily of wool to finished cloths is very clear from the figures that have come down in documents (Carus Wilson/Coleman 1963). Between 1370 and 1400 there was a dramatic rise from fewer than 20,000 exported English cloths to over 40,000 per year (Harding 1998, 154). The first known survivals of English seals, with the head of St Paul for the City of London, can be dated confidently to the late 14th century, when the production of English cloth saw such a marked increase. Only one of these seals has been found in the city of origin (Egan 1991, 32; pl. 4 no. 3). Exports of London cloths from this period are, however, attested by parallels found in Oslo and in Kalliningrad (Königsberg) in Russia (Egan 1998, 262–263 no. 807; Linas Kvizikičius, pers. comm.). Textiles imported into England from this time onwards were primarily linens or mixed fabrics, with occasional woollens of categories unavailable from native

looms or for some reason cheaper than similar native products. A list compiled in 1419 of foreign textiles regularly brought into London at that time gives generic names for several fabrics but only indicates one specific source – ‘Reynes’, which could refer either to Rennes or Rheims (Liber Albus, 198); neither of these cities has yet been recognised among seals of appropriate date recorded in England. The import of woollens into England was prohibited by Statute in 1463 and this was made permanent in the next year (3 Ed. IV c4 and 4 Ed. IV c1).

The places of origin of many of the textiles imported into London in 1480–1481 and in 1567–1568 are known from detailed contemporary customs records (Cobb 1990, 174–188; Dietz 1972, 138–151; this information can be compared with the generalised lists of goods liable to customs import duty in 1582 – Willan 1962). The first of these series of records suggest that Brabant, Flemish and ‘Holland’ linens were the most plentiful then – industries that can all be seen foreshadowed among earlier seals recorded in England and presumed then to be for woollens (see above), and there were also some from Tournai (‘Dornick’), Ghent and Hainaut, the last of which are also arguably identifiable with the slightly earlier seals found in London (see Fig. B). A much wider range is also listed – from Brunswick, Brussels, Burgundy, Gelders, Hamburg, Hannover, Nivelles (?) (‘Niperfeld’), Osnabrück, Salzwedel (‘Soultwick’), Prussia and Zeeland – for which no seals at all of medieval date have yet been identified. The later documentary evidence from the 1560s reveals an altered, somewhat more complicated range of imports to London, with fabrics from Italy and Brittany now appearing in the records. A handful of seals found in London, a couple from Salisbury in the west of England and one from Denmark represent the very fine fustians (mixed cotton and woollen fabrics) produced at St Gallen (Switzerland) – heraldic details of the bear that is the city badge on these suggest they should predate 1475 (Egan 1979, 2001a, nos. 165–166 & forthcoming; Orduna 1995, no. 95). Other seals from Switzerland found in London from Geneva (Fig. C) and Zürich (Egan forthcoming) are of uncertain date, perhaps slightly later. From south of the Alps, one Venetian seal survives on an elaborate silk textile that was used in the burial in 1314 of a

local saint in the cathedral of Forlì (Cuoghi Costantini 1992), and a handful of others is known from London from the first half of the 15th century (e.g. Egan 1998, 263; 265 no. 813; for others found in Italy, see Rizzoli 1930, 101 fig. 136). A couple of Lucca seals, also found in London, may be 16th-century manifestations of a trade first established at least as far back as the late 14th century (Harding 1987, 214); a similar example in France is undated (Sabatier 1912, 476–477, pls. 19–20, no. 348). A possible Milan-fustian seal has been found at Salisbury (Egan 2001a, no. 156). Ulm’s fustian trade seems from excavated seals to have been overtaken in the 16th century by that of nearby Augsburg, whose distinctive issues with the letter A and the pinecone city symbol had become the most common and widespread through much of north-western Europe by the early 17th century (e.g. Taavitsainen 1982, 28 no. 6; Egan 2001a, nos. 143–154 – the first of these, with blackletter, is early in the series). A curious group of English seals stamped with a king (?Henry VII and/or VIII) seated on the throne are the only royal series not to mention a place of origin. Instead, they appear to refer to customs dues. On their backs these have the distinctive imprints from satin-weaves, probably cloths-of-gold (identified by Hero Granger Taylor and Lisa Monnas). It looks as if these were put on imported cloths of the most expensive categories in the early 16th century (regulation of imports had been one of the main duties of the first alnagers in the 14th century, though how marking was effected at that time is unknown). These impressive Tudor seals have been found in London, Salisbury, the Midlands and, strangely, on the rural site of a ruined Roman military fortress in Wales, Caerleon (Endrei/Egan 1982, fig. 7a; Egan 2001a, nos. 106–108; *idem*, forthcoming; Boon 1966).

Reflections of Mixed Fortunes in the English Trade

English exports from the 15th and early 16th centuries, well attested in documents, are in contrast very elusive in the archaeological record. There was some reduction during the 15th century in the trade in English cloths to the Baltic and other areas where the Hanse

was a force to be reckoned with (Zins 1972, 18–20). In fact the only English seal definitely of this date so far recognised outside the country of origin is a London one from Paisley in Scotland (Egan 2000, no. 1, fig. 3).

Legislation in 1464 stipulated the use of special seals with a large letter F, standing for 'faulty', to be put on cloths that had minor defects, to make it clear that these were seconds. An assemblage of late 15th/16th century seals discovered at Salisbury are mainly of local (Wiltshire) origin. These include a high proportion for faulty cloths (Egan 2001a, nos. 43–62 etc.). Comparison with the overall picture from the more numerous contemporary seals found in London suggests, if the respective finds groups are truly representative of consumption in the two centres, that there was a greater market for seconds in the provincial county town than in the capital. Confirmation for this pattern is arguably to be seen in groups of limited size recovered in Gloucester and also at Saffron Walden in Essex.

The crowned rose with sun and fleur, the crowned rose dimidiated and conjoined with sun, and the simple crowned rose series of county seals from the late 15th/early 16th century (see Egan 2001a, nos. 8, 10, 32–33; 63–74 for examples found in Salisbury) are almost if not completely unrecorded abroad. More remarkably at this stage of investigation, the great thrust of the nation's prime export in the mid 16th century, when documents are full of how the Antwerp entrepot was helping open up Germany and other markets in Central Europe to a vigorous English cloth trade (Ramsay 1975, 1–32; *idem* 1957 & 1982), is very sparsely represented in terms of archaeological finds on the Continent. Not one English seal has been recognised in Antwerp itself. Crown-over portcullis county alnage seals, 'F' seals of similar date for faulty cloths, and others from the mid/late 16th century are beginning to emerge elsewhere in the Low Countries (e.g. van Beuningen collection, Boijmans Museum, Rotterdam), and there are a few others in Scandinavia and Russia, but many if these still require confirmation. Germany is notably almost a blank in these terms before c.1600. It is doubtful that overall more than a score, including some uncertain candidates, have so far been noted on the Continent to represent the renowned English trade of this period of expansion.

For some reason, Kent seems to have had its own special design for alnage seals in the early 16th century – a distinctive crowned rose (Egan 1991, 32–33, pl 4, no. 5 left). This county's textile manufacture does not stand out for any obvious reason in documentary sources – it was a consistent, second-league producer of traditional woollen broadcloths (Zell 1994, 153–227), but certainly not the seat of a major textile industry in national terms. No reason for this strange phenomenon among the seals has been forthcoming (thanks to Michael Zell for discussion of the point).

In 1551/2 the so-called 'Great Statute of clothing' (5; 6 Edward VI c6) brought a comprehensive legislative framework to a range of newly developed English textiles, laying down a series of specifications for various local cloths that had previously escaped such strictures. A London seal dated 1552 (cf. Fig. D) and a new county series dated 1553 almost certainly resulted specifically from this. It is probable that town-arms seals for Guildford and Reading (as found in London), and for Salisbury (found both in London and the city of origin; Egan 2001a, no. 42) also relate to this legislation. Bristol, like the capital, had long had its own issues (e.g. *ibid.*, nos. 1; 2 and there are a couple in Gdansk in the Baltic – cf. Zins 1972). The standard, late 16th-century cloth seal for English counties was a crown over a portcullis, with a Latin legend for 'seal of saleable cloths in the county of ...' (Fig. E right). With the names of several English counties – Bedfordshire (a single example), Devonshire, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kent, Oxfordshire, Somerset, Suffolk, Yorkshire, Wiltshire, Worcestershire, etc. – these are very widespread finds in England (in contrast with abroad – see above). One of the few textile-producing English counties not so far to be represented by a find from this series is – ironically for those who seek neat correspondence between the archaeological evidence and that from written documents – Lancashire, which happens to be the only one for which a contemporary reference to this device has been traced ('Her Majesty's highness' seal of lead with the portcullis impressed' as required for Lancashire cloths in a statute of 1566). As with most varieties of cloth seals, the greatest concentration of crowned portcullis issues is in London (Egan forthcoming). Norfolk's important worsted and other industries are well represented from

c.1570 onwards by small, lightweight seals, often with the castle over lion passant arms of Norwich.

An intriguing discovery within England is of multiple finds of crown-over-portcullis seals which show from their stamps poor workmanship in the cutting of the original dies used to stamp the lead – in some cases it is possible to see that there never was any surrounding legend because the die's edge is too close to the heraldic devices (Fig. E left). This shows that these are contemporary counterfeits, which took advantage of the widespread poor striking of seals by omitting a place of origin completely (it has been calculated from finds at Salisbury that the proportion of legible to non-legible alnage seals in the late 1500s was about 3:11 – Egan 2001a, nos. 3 etc.; 78 ff., of which nos. 86–88 appear to be counterfeits – the first two of these three seem to have been struck from the same die). 'False seals' were specifically prohibited by the legislation of 1551/2. Whether the counterfeiting was just to avoid the tax, or the quality examination as well, is of course impossible to say. Probable counterfeit seals have turned up in multiple finds in London as well as Salisbury (i. e. the two English urban centres where sizeable assemblages have been examined in detail), all of which implies evasion of the system on a large scale, and not just in the hectic market of the capital. An enigmatic series of large, late 16th/early 17th century seals is distinct from all others of English origin. Often with eye-catching surface gilding, these are now known from Scandinavia, through Russia, the Ukraine, Germany and the Netherlands to the Czech Republic, and there are several in Hungary (Egan 1989, 50). They have a large rose on one side and the royal arms of England or Britain on the other. Other details, like the names of Germanic-sounding individuals (Guilhelmus Almandet(e), Hans van Efferfeldt, Hans Hann), along with simple mistakes in the English legends and heraldry, and their sparsity in England itself (only two are authenticated, one from a rural part of the home counties, the other from London) raise several questions. It is suggested that these were put on traded English cloths by foreign middlemen, perhaps Hanseatic merchants. Ironically, this poorly understood series (which gives no reference to textiles) displays the beginnings of the distribution across Northern and through Central Europe that might have

been expected for the contemporary standard alnage issues.

Seals Relating to the Medieval Cloth Trades on the Continent and Religious Houses in Britain

Mid to late 14th century finds in Amsterdam include a couple of local seals, one from Leiden and another with the curious phenomenon of the arms of Amsterdam on one side and those of nearby Naarden on the other – this apparent anomaly is interpreted from the documentary background as having come from a cloth woven in the former town and finished at the latter (Baart 1988, 101–103 figs. 4–6). Ypres and Poperinghe in Flanders are represented respectively by a handful of seals from before 1383 found in a suburb of the city of origin (Dewilde & Ervynck 1995, 13), and by a couple of finds excavated in Novgorod from traded cloths (Rybina 1992, 202–203 fig. 6.3 nos. 6,10; 6.11 – not identified in the text). Tournai's seals are not yet closely datable, but late-medieval ones are known in London, Lund in Sweden, Finland and Novgorod (e. g. Wahlöö 1987, 57–59 fig. 7; Taavitsainen 1982, 26 fig. 1; Rybina 1992, 202 fig. 6.3 – the last is a loose find assigned to the late 14th/early 15th century). Some series of seals from Arras in the late 15th/early 16th centuries have the particular merit of annually changing alphabetical control letters, in theory allowing extremely close dating (Dancoisne 1885); these are known both in France and England. The woollens of Leiden seem from numerous seal finds to have been particularly successful in penetrating the Scandinavian/Baltic markets towards the end of the Middle Ages (e.g. Taavitsainen 1982, 27 no. 2; 28 no. 8; Liebgott 1975, 39 fig. 14). The seals of the Netherlands towns of Amsterdam and Herderwick (located close to the former) also appear common in much of coastal Norway and Sweden (work in progress by Kari Berg, based in Trondheim in Norway, should clarify the picture). A series of individual, late-medieval finds in Denmark attest exports from a range of other production centres in the Low Countries and northern Germany: Antwerp, Campen, Deventer, s'Hertogenbosch, Naarden, Oudenarde, Zwolle, and Roermond and Wismar (Liebgott 1975, 41 fig. 21; 39 fig.

7; 39 fig. 9; 38 fig. 5; 39 figs. 10–11; 38 fig. 4; 39 fig. 8; 37 fig. 2; 38 fig. 3).

The large main drain at Paisley Abbey has (with the only multiple find of seals north of the border with England) produced evidence for late-medieval imports into Scotland in the form of Valenciennes and Arras issues, one from Ulm in south Germany (paralleled by a similar, isolated find at Fast Castle, also in Scotland – Egan 1992; 2000; 2001b) and one London seal as noted above. The dating for these, as for the Ulm ones, is not precise, so it is uncertain whether the finds of the latter are from the time of the Fuggers' domination of the trade or slightly later – cf. Kellenbenz 1983). The only other imports from a monastic context in the British Isles recorded so far, unearthed at Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, also include a majority from Valenciennes (Frith 2001). While the evidence from Paisley arguably emphasises the 'auld alliance' between Scotland and France, that from Fountains could point to specialised purchases on the part of religious institutions. (A Norfolk seal from the site of Merton Priory just outside London in Surrey is the only other identifiable one noted potentially of similar date in the context of a religious house in the UK, though uncertainty about its precise date means it could be from just before or just after the dissolution.)

Wider still and Wider ...

The earliest English permanent settlement in America, Jamestown in Virginia (founded in 1607), is on most definitions firmly in the post-Tudor era. It is revealing that among the sizeable assemblage of cloth seals excavated there from the lowest deposits are a few of the 'Elizabethan' crown-over-portcullis series and others with this monarch's initials, including one dated in the 1590s. The total assignable from their stamps to Elizabeth I's reign is eight, all alnage seals (15% of the total recovered from the earliest deposits – Straube 2000, 53–55). There are also a couple of Gdansk issues, like a couple of similar finds in London perhaps for sailcloths (Egan 1995a, no. 328) – these may well have been traded through London. This all goes to emphasise the unevenness and lack of neat categorisations for the reality of the

textile trade at the level of detail archaeology habitually illuminates. For one of the archaeological icons of New-World colonisation to have about one in seven of its earliest cloth seals in arguably 'Tudor' categories provides a further warning that the individual picture will not necessarily conform with the received broad one. There are several explanations for relatively old textiles turning up in this particular context (the expense of cloths meant that they were usually traded to the customer as quickly as possible to recoup costs) – perhaps the most plausible being that the distant colonists were fobbed off with old goods that had been lying around in store for a few years (in the same way, they seem to have been issued with cumbersome 'medieval' armour close helmets that were as outmoded in contemporary European warfare as they appear to have been counter-productive in the humidity and heat of Tidewater Virginia).

Space precludes full discussion of the significance of later cloth seals. Suffice it to say that the prime traded commodity of England continues to be reflected in diverse finds of these objects in London and elsewhere in England, and more widely across Europe, as well as into the realms of the new colonies of northern and southern America and (with the East India Company trade) Asia. The picture of the cloth trade these finds provides becomes fuller during the 17th century, particularly in the last quarter, but it is less easy to track through the 18th up to the mid 19th century, when the practice of cloth sealing ceased.

Conclusion

At present, finds of lead seals from medieval textiles are fairly sparse. A generation ago, however, they were unknown. This fresh source of information on the European textile trade is gradually beginning to provide new information on a subject that is fortunate in already having a solid historical framework against which it can be gauged. The data provided by documents and archaeology are not the same, and neither source has some kind of monopoly on a single, exclusively valid truth. By making full use of both strands of evidence a fuller picture than has been possible hitherto can be constructed.

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