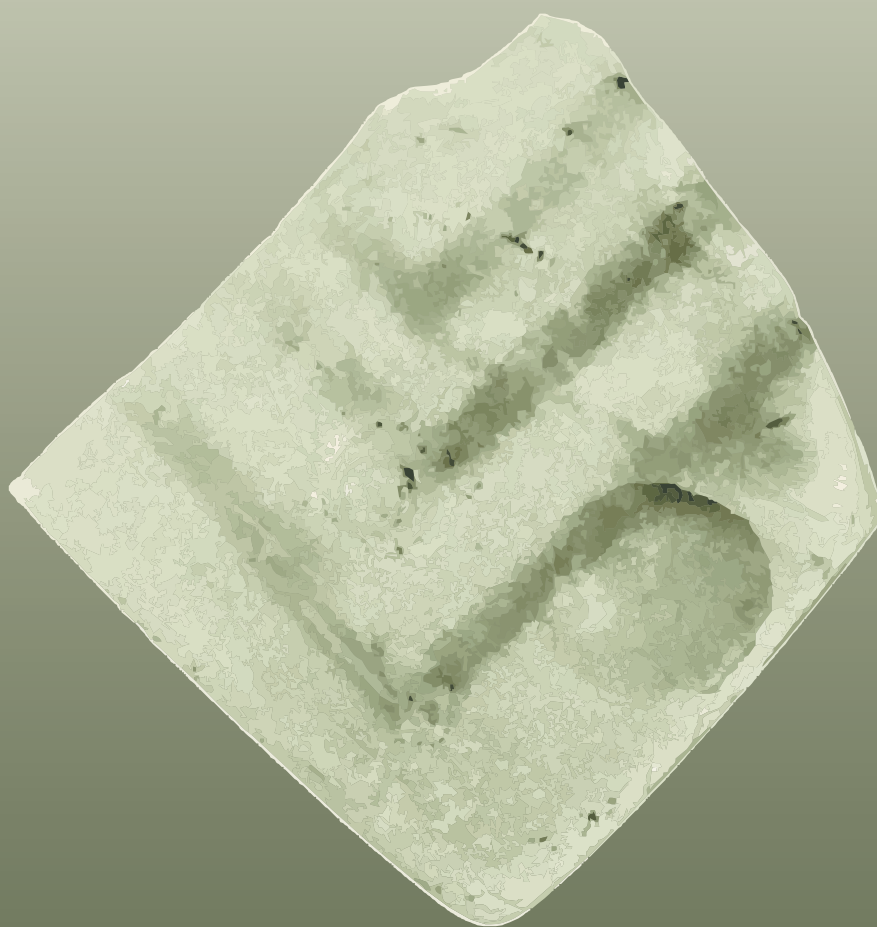


# Landscape Evolution in the Middle Thames Valley

## Heathrow Terminal 5 Excavations Volume 2

### **Glass and Amber**

**(Section 10)**



*by Lorraine Mephram*

## SECTION 10

### GLASS AND AMBER

*by Lorraine Mephram*

*with additional observation by Alison Sheridan*

#### **Glass**

A small quantity of Romano-British and Saxon glass was recovered. Romano-British glass comprises two beads (respectively, waterhole 605215 and posthole 659068 within Roman building B6), and two tiny fragments of vessel glass (respectively, medieval ditch 617141 and early/middle Saxon midden deposit 538329).

The bead from waterhole 605215 is an asymmetrical annular form (diameter 13mm) in semi-translucent pale green glass (Fig. 1, **ILL. 1**). According to Guido, this bead type is overwhelmingly Roman in date, although a few are pre-Conquest. Their currency spans the Roman period (Guido 1978, 66).

The two vessel fragments are both in pale greenish glass, but are too small and undiagnostic to assign to specific vessel form.

Two beads, and 29 fragments probably deriving from a third (translucent blue), all of probable early/middle Saxon date, came from adjacent pits 525295 and 525340. The two complete beads (one from each of the two pits) are both small (diameter 2mm) disc forms in opaque pale green glass; this is not a particularly chronologically distinctive type. The fragments of the probable third bead (from pit 525295) are in translucent blue.

#### **Amber**

A single amber bead came from pit 547316 (Fig. 1, **ILL. 2**). This is an incomplete example of a flat, rectangular spacer bead with four V-perforations, a fairly typical Early Bronze Age type. The potential date range for amber spacer beads is wide –

perhaps a millennium overall - although this is at least partly due to a lack of precision in the radiocarbon determinations (Beck and Shennan 1991, 75). It is suggested that the spacer beads at least may have had an initial primary phase of circulation while some pieces remained in circulation for a considerable time after this (*ibid.*, 76).

Amber finds of this date have not previously been documented in the London area (*ibid.*, fig. 6.1), and the closest parallels for this object appear to lie in the rich 'Wessex' Early Bronze Age burials of Wiltshire such as Upton Lovell (Annable and Simpson 1964, no. 227). There is no indication that the Heathrow bead had any funerary associations, although this cannot be entirely ruled out. What is more certain is that this was an object of some social significance, through a correlation of amber with contexts which on other grounds would be considered as high status. Moreover, amber could be regarded not just as a luxury/prestige item but also as symbolic of something more esoteric, even mystical, by virtue of its distant source and unusual properties. Amber, as well as jet, have been attributed magical powers and used as amulets in more recent times; in the Bronze Age such ornaments could have been part of some kind of 'supernatural power dressing' as much as status symbols in the real world (Sheridan 2003).

***Additional observations on the amber object*** by Alison Sheridan, National Museums Scotland

This object (Fig. 2) is of exceptional importance since it may well be a fragmentary skeuomorph of the Early Bronze Age Wessex 1 gold lozenge ornaments as seen at Bush Barrow, Wiltshire (Needham *et al.* 2009) and Clandon, Dorset (Needham & Woodward 2008). It is unparalleled among prehistoric amber jewellery: its pattern of boreholes does not correspond to the borings as seen in Early Bronze Age spacer plate necklaces (Beck & Shennan 1991), but they do make sense as decorative borings. The X-ray image (Fig. 3) and the photo-microscope images (Figs 4–8) show how skilfully they have been executed; the X-ray also reveals that a round-tipped drill must have been used. The width of the boreholes is around 2.2 mm, and where a cross-section of a borehole is visible in one of the fracture surfaces (Fig. 4), faint traces of rilling are visible, reflecting the swivelling of the drill bit and suggesting that a bow- or pump-drill may have been used. Similarly faint rilling is also visible in some of the other boreholes (Fig. 4a). In order for the object to have worked as a skeuomorph of the

gold lozenges, it would have had to be made in two halves, each of triangular shape and abutting along their bases, with the boreholes having being drilled from the base of each triangle. The Heathrow object would have ‘worked’ by light passing through the reddish amber, showing up the boreholes clearly. The two hypothetical halves would have had to be mounted in some way, but they do not need to have been held up to the light to reveal the borehole pattern: with newly-worked jet, the jet would have been translucent and the holes clearly visible. (Oxidation has decreased the amber’s translucency over time and has dulled the colour on the surface, but in the fresh fracture surfaces the original brilliance and the deep red-orange colour of the amber are clearly visible: see for example Fig. 5)

There are signs of wear to the Heathrow object, in the form of polish at the apex of the triangle (Fig. 6), and it may have broken in prehistory (although the freshness of the fracture surfaces relate to more recent breakage, during excavation) since an attempt had been made to re-use it as a pendant. A crudely-drilled transverse hourglass perforation, up to 5.5 mm in diameter, had been started but abandoned between two of the original borehole lines (Fig. 7).

Pale grey material found inside the boreholes (Fig. 8) was analysed (by Susannah Kirk, National Museums Scotland) using the electron microprobe facility on the NMS scanning electron microscope, and was found to be sediment (i.e. material that had entered post-depositionally) rather than any deliberately-added material.

The object offers a fascinating insight into interactions between people in the Thames Valley and the elite of Wessex during the first couple of centuries of the 2nd millennium BC. There is a parallel for skeuomorphism of the Wessex gold lozenges, in the form of a fine jet lozenge found at Carlton Colville, Suffolk (Fig. 9; Pitts 2007). This object is as exceptional among Bronze Age jet ornaments as the Heathrow object is among Bronze Age amber ornaments.

### **Illustration catalogue (Fig. 1)**

1. Small annular bead. Object No. 20065, context 605217, waterhole 605215.
2. Amber spacer bead. Object No. 24020, context 547314, pit 547316.

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- Beck, C. and Shennan, S., 1991, *Amber in Prehistoric Britain*, Oxbow Monog. 8
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# ARCHIVE CATALOGUE OF GLASS

Site Code	Context	Obj No	Sample	Object	Completeness	No.	Wt.(g)	Findings Comments	Spot Date
PSH02	525296		15145	Bead	Complete	1	1	tiny, opaque pale green bead, ?annular	ES
PSH02	525296			Bead	Indeterminate	29	1	tiny frags of translucent blue, probably fragmented bead	ES
PSH02	525322		15142	Bead	Complete	1	1	tiny, opaque pale green bead, ?annular	ES
PSH02	529391			Vessel	Incomplete	1	1	tiny, pale greenish vessel frag	RB
PSH02	538329		15146	Vessel	Incomplete	1	1	tiny greenish vessel frag	RB
PSH02	605217	20065		Bead	Complete	1	2	Pale greenish, annular bead	RB
PSH02	659069			Bead	Complete	1	1	cylindrical, semi-opaque glass bead	RB

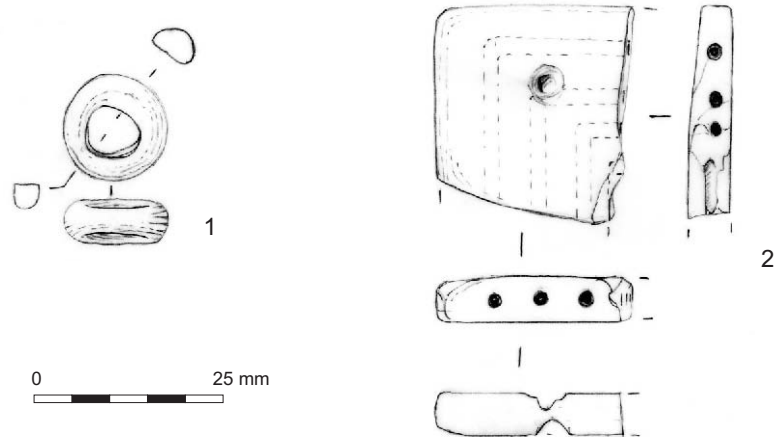
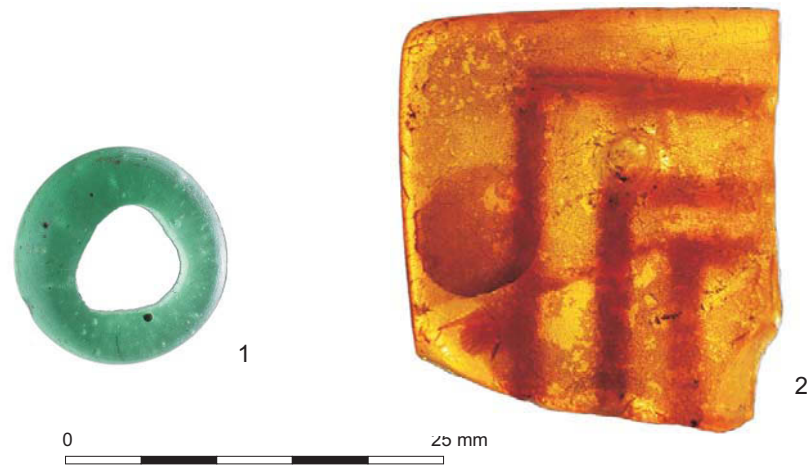


Fig. 1: Glass bead and amber object

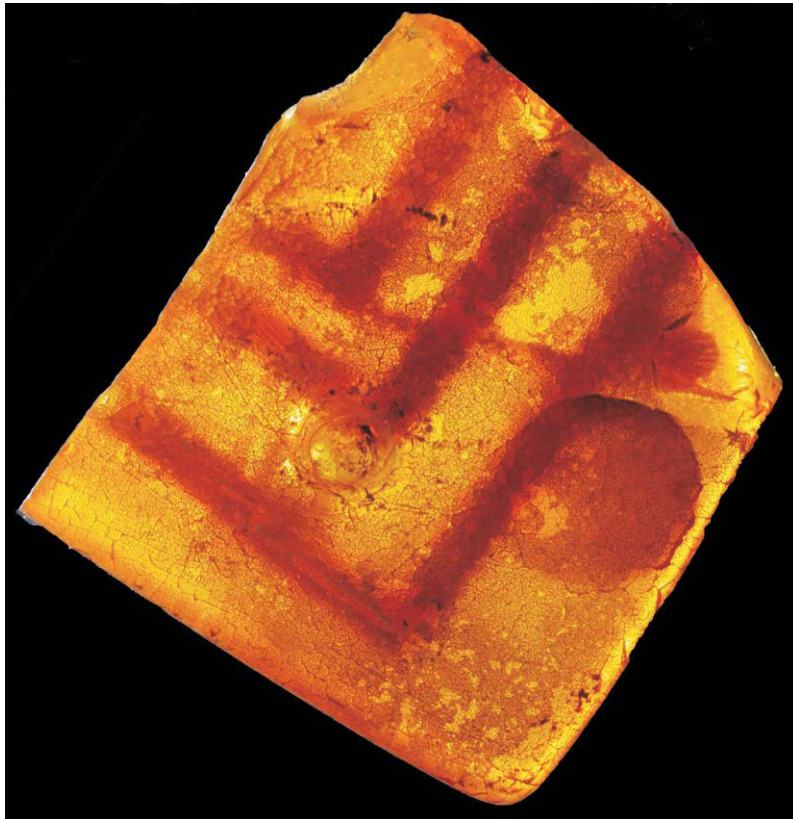


Fig. 2: The amber artefact, rotated to what may well have been its original orientation. Note the abortive transverse borehole between the middle and outermost sets of V-shaped boreholes

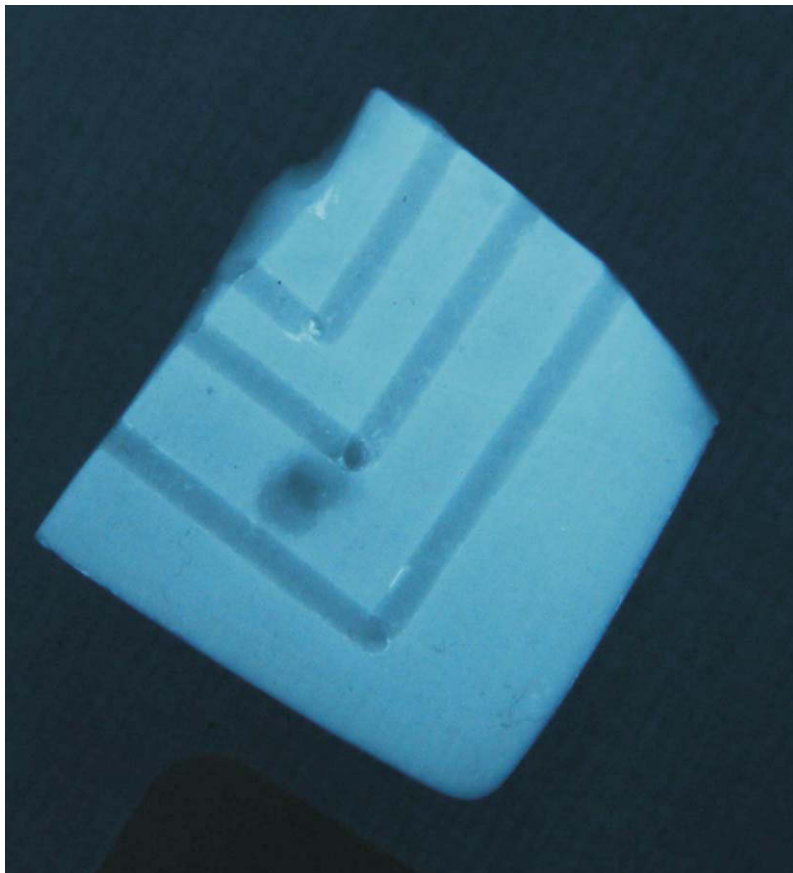


Fig. 3: X-ray showing the borehole patterns and the abortive transverse boring (image: National Museums Scotland, taken by S. Kirk)



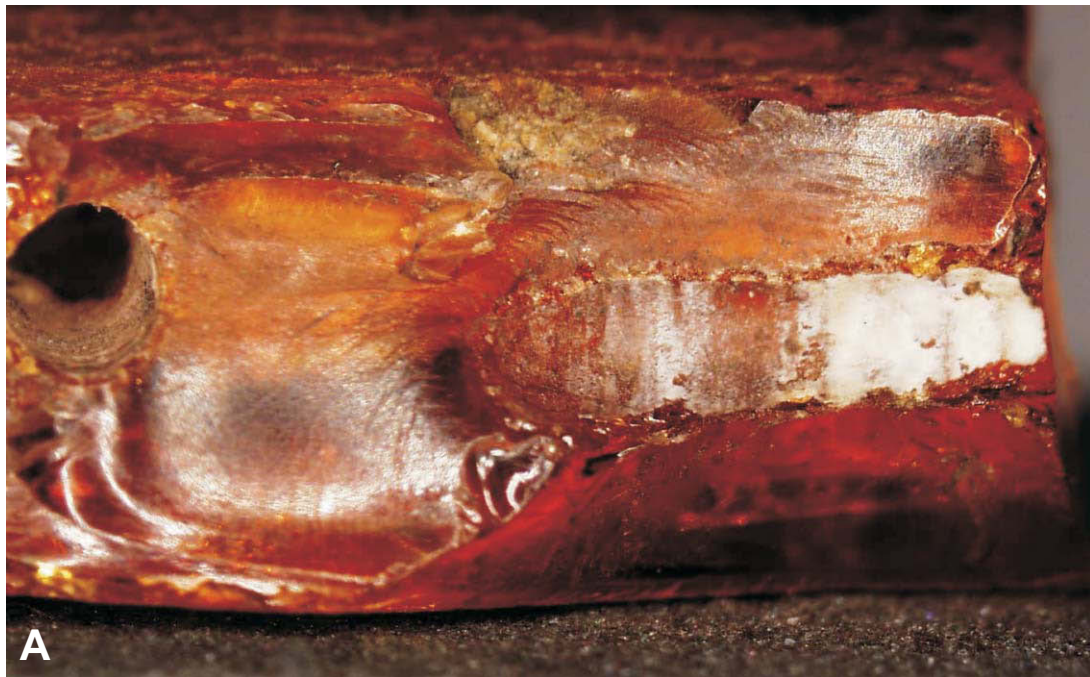


Fig. 4(a-b): Faint traces of rilling exposed in a fracture surface that had broken across a borehole: the right hand image shows a close-up of the rilling. Faint rilling is also visible down the borehole on the left hand image (micro-photographs: National Museums Scotland, taken by A. Sheridan)

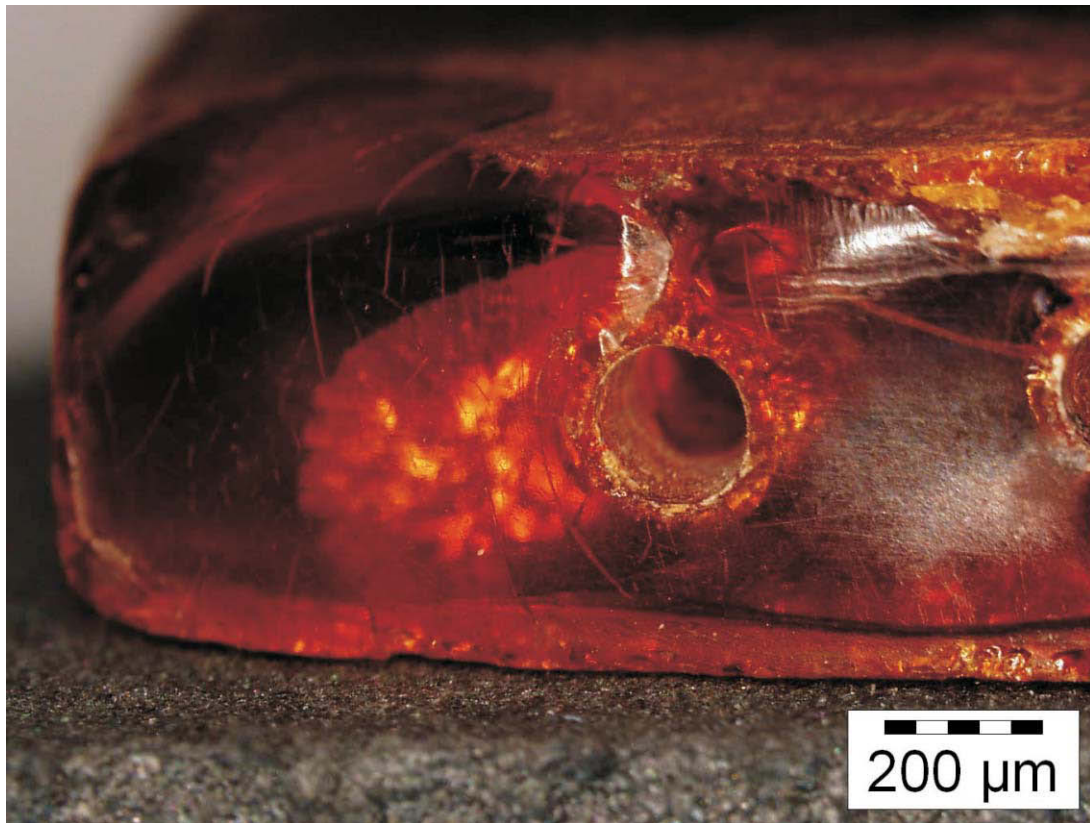


Fig. 5: Fracture surface showing translucency and red-orange colour of the (relatively) recently-exposed subsurface of the amber, which contrasts with the slightly opaque, toffee-coloured oxidised surface (micro-photograph: National Museums Scotland, taken by A. Sheridan)



Fig. 6: Polish (through use-wear) at the apex of the object (micro-photograph: National Museums Scotland, taken by A. Sheridan)



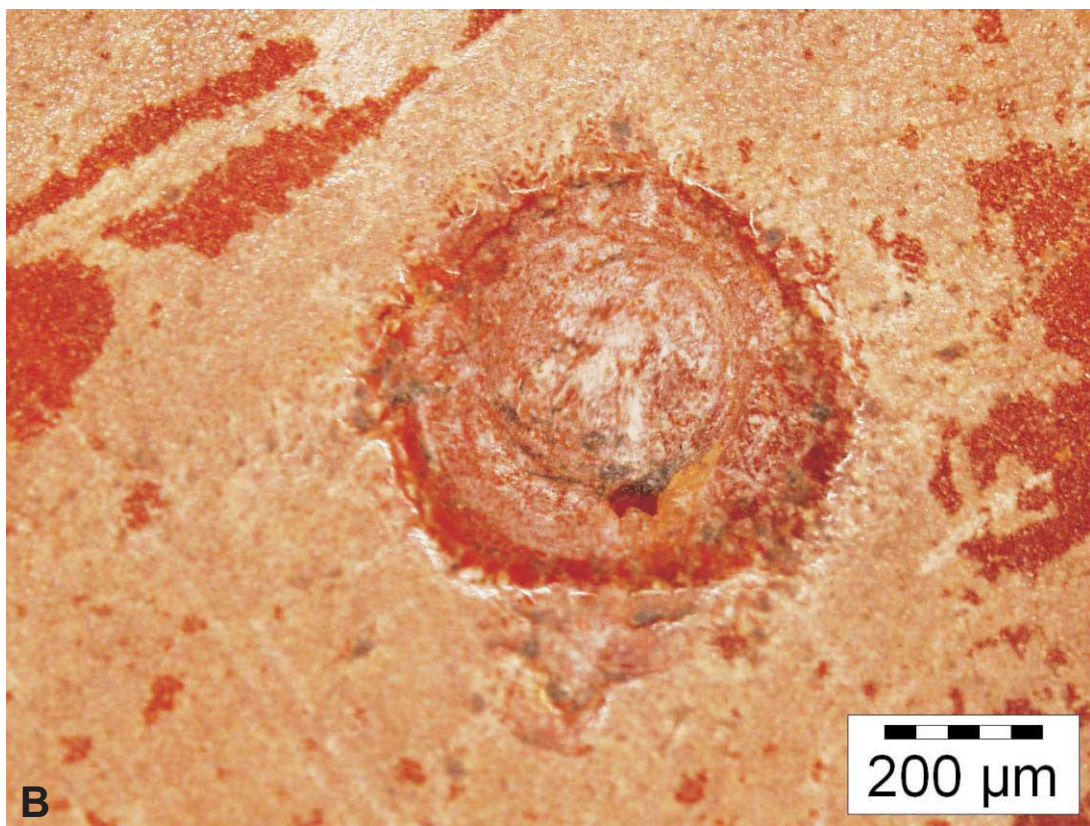
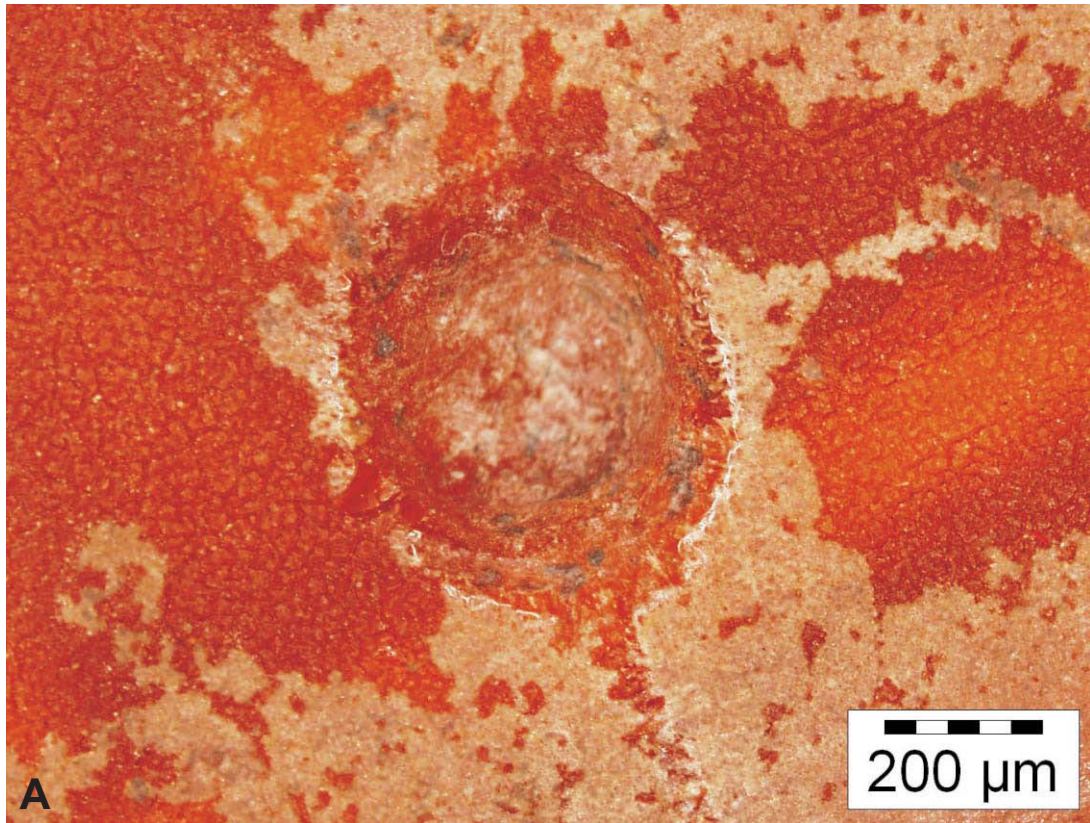


Fig. 7(a-b): Views of the abortive transverse hourglass borehole, from either side (micro-photographs: National Museums Scotland, taken by A. Sheridan)



Fig. 8: Sediment from the interior of the boreholes (micro-photograph: National Museums Scotland, taken by A. Sheridan)



Fig. 9: The jet lozenge, a skeuomorph of the Wessex gold lozenges (photograph: National Museums Scotland, taken by N. McLean)

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