IDENTIFYING YOUR FINDS:
A beginner's guide to what to look for

FIRST STEPS IN IDENTIFYING AND DATING METAL FINDS

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Introduction

With the growing use of metal detectors, finds of metal objects are becoming more and more common. In a short piece like this it is impossible to cover all the types and variety of object which you might find. Here we can only tackle some of the most common questions to be asked.

What sort of metal is it?

Under most situations metal objects corrode relatively easily. The metal from which the object is made can usually be identified by the type of corrosion on its surface.

Gold	Gold does not corrode at all and will retain its shine forever. This was one of the properties which made it so prized in the ancient world as it seemed, in both a physical and moral sense, to be incorruptible. Not all shiny yellowish metal is gold. Copper alloy objects when they are new have a similar look to gold. For this reason copper was often used for decorative items in the ancient world.
Silver	Badly corroded silver objects will be covered in a black patina and the true nature of the metal will not easily be recognized.
Iron	Most people can easily identify rusting iron objects as such. However, the coating of iron oxide can often join different object together into one metallic mass. In such cases the only way to get a picture of what might lie beneath the corrosion will be by X-ray.
Copper	Copper corrosion or *verdigris* is green and often powdery.

Lead	Lead corrosion forms a white crust on the surface of the object. Another good indication that the object is made of lead is that a lead object will appear to be much heaver than you would expect from just looking at it. Lead oxide is poisonous and care should be taken when handling corroded lead objects, to ensure that none of it is ingested.

Some different types of metal object

	A gold coin of Edward III. Gold does not corrode and will look almost as good as new when found. Image courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.
	A silver coin from the medieval period. Silver usually turns black or purple in the ground. It also becomes very brittle. Image courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.
	This early medieval copper alloy strap end would have been fixed to the end of a strap or belt to prevent it from fraying. Copper alloy usually turns green in the ground. This object also has iron rivets which have rusted. Image courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

	This iron hammer is shown from three sides. Hammers of this form occur at several periods in history, but this example may be medieval. The photograph clearly shows the damage caused by corrosion. Image courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.
	This lead alloy spindle whorl shows traces of corrosion on its surface. Whorls are also made of stone and ceramic. They cannot be precisely dated because they were in use from the Roman period until after the Industrial Revolution. Image courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Care of metal objects

Every care should be taken to ensure that metal finds are treated in an appropriate manner to ensure that they do not corrode further. Detailed notes on the conservation of metal objects have been produced by Amy Cooper, the Finds Liaison Offer for South and West Yorkshire. To view these Click here. The Finds Liaison Officer is also the person whom you should contact if you wish to report a find, or need help with its identification. She can be contacted at acooper@wyjs.org.uk .

Some common types of find

Nails can come in a variety of forms depending on the job for which they were intended. These include:

- *Wrought iron nails*. These were made by hand and continued in use well past the point at which mechanization was in common use. Wrought iron nails have a tapered shaft and the head will show clear signs of being hammered out.

- *Horseshoe nails*. These can be distinguished from wrought construction nails in that they have one or two clenches instead of a rounded head. These hold the horseshoe in place. The farrier snaps or cuts this off when removing a shoe, so that any nails found with the clenches in place are probably chance losses.

- *Cut nails*. These were developed in the late 18th century as a more mechanized form of nail production. In this method nails are cut from a thin metal sheet in consequence they are not tapered like hand made nails. Heads are generally square.

- *Wire nails*. These are essentially the modern type of nail. Because they are cut from wire, rather than from strips, wire nails are round in section. Their heads are also round. The process was invented in the mid 19th century.

Horseshoes

Archaeologists disagree about when horseshoes were first introduced into this country. However, they were certainly in general use by the 9th and 10th centuries. Dating horseshoes can be difficult especially when such finds are heavily corroded. One indicator is to look at the areas around the nail holes. The nail holes in medieval horseshoes were punched rather than drilled as they are in modern horseshoes. This can lead to a slight thickening of the area around the nail hole or even to a bulge in the edge of the shoe.

Coins
The subject of coins is for too large to discuss in a short article such as this. However, there are several websites which can provide detailed descriptions of individual and other coins. These include:

Medieval Coins Group
{http://medievalcoins.50g.com/links.htm}
This is a gateway page which will allow you to access dozens of sites related to the study of medieval coins.

For help identifying other finds click here
{http://www.archaeology.wyjs.org.uk/Identifying/beginnerguide.htm
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