

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN HOME

AH 29

Poppyhead Beaker

Poppyhead beakers get their name from the similarity of their shape to the seed head of a poppy plant. This example has been decorated with raised dots arranged in diamond-shape patterns. Roman pots are sometimes decorated with swirls and spots of semi-liquid clay - this kind of decoration is known as barbotine. This pot was probably used as a drinking vessel.



Flagon Neck & Handle

This must have been part of a small jug. Inside the neck the rings made by the potter's thumbs, as the clay on the wheel was pulled up into shape, are clearly visible, but the outer surface has been finely smoothed. The handle, too, has been neatly joined onto the body. Despite its size such a flagon may have been used to pour drinks into vessels such as the poppyhead beaker.



Reproduction Samian Dish

Despite the cracks, this Samian dish is a reproduction. Samian pottery was made in Gaul (the Roman name for France) and Germany. It was exported to Britain from the mid-first to the mid-third century. Samian pots were finer than many of the thicker and darker pots that were available in Roman Britain. Samian pots were used for a variety of purposes, including holding perfumes and skin-creams. They were probably also used to serve cooked food in the dining room. The rim of this dish has been decorated with swirls of barbotine.



Mosaic Fragment

This fragment is made from white and black tesserae embedded in a layer of mortar. A room intended for a mosaic was usually laid with a pounded gravel base. This was covered with a lime mortar in layers of ascending fineness. After the tesserae had been set they were grouted with a slurry of fine mortar and then ground. It is thought by some that the floor was then waxed or oiled to bring out the colours.



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Samian Fragments

Samian Dish Base Fragment

This fragment must have come from a shallow dish similar to the reproduction Samian dish elsewhere in this box. The lightly incised pattern running around the inner surface would have been made by a roller. Note also a tiny fragment of the potter's stamp - all that can be read is the letter 'R'. Samian Potters regularly stamped their pots. This distinguished the work of different craftsmen when they shared a kiln.



Decorated Samian Fragment

A vine leaf is clearly visible. Samian ware with this kind of embossed decoration was very popular. Such a pot was made by attaching a mould to a potter's wheel. Clay was placed in the mould and drawn up and pressed into the mould as it rotated. It was then left to dry for a while, during which time it shrank away from the edge slightly and so could be removed easily. After more drying it was dipped into a slip to create the characteristic shiny-red surface. Meanwhile the mould was cleaned and made ready for further use. In the course of its life a mould could be used to create hundreds of pots.

Lamp

Lamps like this were used by both the Romans and the Greeks and by many other ancient peoples. They were filled with oil, though animal fat could be used if there was nothing else. A wick protruded from the spout. Lamps of this type were made using an upper and a lower mould. The mould for the upper surface often had a picture on it - perhaps an animal, or gladiators fighting, or a god. This example, however, is plain. A thin layer of clay was pressed into both halves, which could then be joined. Once dried sufficiently, the lamp was removed and it could then be smoothed and finished off. If you look carefully at this example you can see where the decorated upper section has been joined to the lower, plain bowl. Before firing they were often dipped in a slip (a thin slurry of clay) that gave both the inner and outer surface a glaze and stopped the lamp from absorbing the oil. The base of this lamp seems to have been stamped with a maker's mark, although it is impossible make out any letters.



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Coarse-Ware Pot Rim Fragment

This is a fragment from a coarse-ware pot which would have been used in a Roman-British kitchen to store, carry or prepare food. Archaeologists can use fragments like this to gauge the approximate size of the original pot by following the line of the rim around until the circle is complete. Most cooking pots have a pronounced rim - this meant the pot could be gripped firmly when hot or slippery, or, if the pot was used for storage, it could have a cord wrapped round it and be hung from a hook keeping the contents safe from rats or mice.



Oyster Shell

A taste for oysters seems to have been introduced into Britain by the Romans. They were eaten raw or cooked and covered with a sauce. They had to be transported quickly to prevent them going bad, but even towns far from the sea coast seem to have had a regular supply. A single deposit at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester, Hampshire) contained over 1 million shells like this one. It has been suggested that such a large dump was collected together so that the shells could be ground up and used to make mortar.



Reproduction Silver Spoon

This silver spoon is a modern copy. Spoons were made of wood, bone, bronze or silver. Metal spoons were cast in a baked clay mould.



Knife Blade

This small knife was probably used for eating with. Knives like this often had a bone handle.



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Horse Teeth

Animal bones can tell archaeologists a lot about the diet of people living in past times, but horse meat does not seem to have been a regular food item in Roman Britain. However, when a horse died, its carcass would probably have been used. Horse hair, for example, was used to decorate the helmets of centurions - and bone could be used to make things like combs and gaming counters.



Cast of a Woman's Head

This cast is taken from a terra cotta head - just the sort of thing every fashionable Romano-Briton wanted to add a touch of elegance to their house!

