

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN HOME

AH 29/A

Mortarium Sherd

Mortaria were bowls which were used in Roman kitchens to mash, grind and mix food. The mortarium is the ancestor of the 'mortar', which, with the help of a 'pestle', is still used in the preparation of food today. This fragment is typical of most Roman mortaria in having a sprinkling of grit on its inner surface. This helped to grind the contents more effectively.



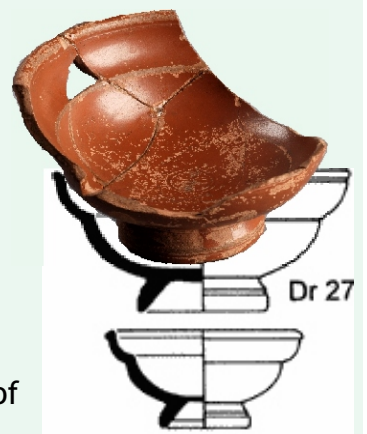
Rim from a Black Coarse Ware Pot

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. This may have been the rim from a large cooking pot.



Samian Dish Fragment

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 also probably used to serve cooked food in the dining room. The various shapes of Samian pots have been classified by a number of writers. One of the most important systems of classification was carried out by German archaeologist Hans Dragendorff (1870-1940) at the end of the nineteenth century. He categorised this kind of vessel as a Dragendorff 27. It is one of the commonest kinds and is generally thought of as a form of cup. This example has a maker's stamp pressed neatly into the centre although, unfortunately, it can no longer be deciphered. Samian potters regularly stamped their pots. This may have helped to distinguish the work of different craftsmen when they shared a kiln.



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Mosaic Fragment

This fragment is made from brick-red and yellow tesserae embedded in a layer of mortar. It is difficult to tell from this small fragment whether there was an overall pattern, or whether the tesserae were laid at random. 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.



Bone Knife Handle

Romano-British people would have used their fingers to eat with. However, if wealthy enough, they did have cutlery in the form of knives and spoons. Knives came in a variety of shapes and sizes and may have bronze, wood, or bone handles - as is the case here. A fragment from the tang of the knife blade is still embedded within the handle and the outer surface has been neatly decorated with crosshatched bands.



Pottery Phial

This kind of pot was called an unguentarium - a cosmetic pot for a lady's dressing table, or for holding oil to use at the public baths. It is made with a fine clay and makes a striking contrast with the similar, but very crude vessel, also found in this box. The thin, elegant stem and small base are common features of such vessels. This example is able to stand freely, but it would have fallen over fairly easily. Some unguentaria have rounded bases and could never have been freestanding. It is thought that such vessels may have been held in a rack.



Coarse Ware Phial

This is similar in shape to the unguentarium found in this box, though it is slightly larger, made of a much coarser clay and has not been made using a wheel. There are slight ridges running down the pot where it has been smoothed off using a stick and the inner walls are very lumpy. It's a very crude piece of work! It might have been intended as a cheap - very cheap - version of an elegant and luxurious unguentarium. However, the clay is very porous and would have absorbed some of the oil that it was meant to hold. Perhaps it was some kind of spice container for a kitchen?



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Coarse Ware Pot Rim

This is a very thick rim from a pot which was probably used in a Roman-British kitchen to store food. In some houses in Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), in rooms assumed to be kitchens, pots were sunk into the ground to act as storage containers. Lamb and chicken bones and scales from a carp were found in some of them. Another jar found on the site had the word AVEN(A) - the Latin word for oats - scratched on its side.



Sheep Jawbone

Animal bones can tell archaeologists a lot about the diet of people living in past times. Counts of thousands of bones can establish variations in diet from region to region and over time.



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 is simply decorated with four concentric rings of blips. 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. Because the top of this lamp is broken it is possible to look inside and 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. This lamp was found at Streatley.



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Snail Shells

Most species of snail are edible, if you feel so inclined. At Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) the shells of the common Garden Snail (*Helix aspersa*) have been found which show signs of being broken open to extract their contents. It is important to extract the green slime from a snail's gut before cooking, or they will taste bitter. The Roman's put their snails in milk to flush this material out, but another method is to put the snails in a bucket of flour over night.



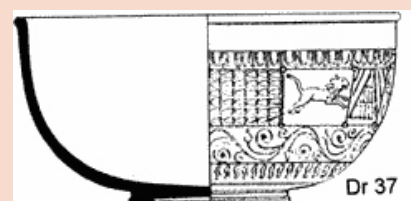
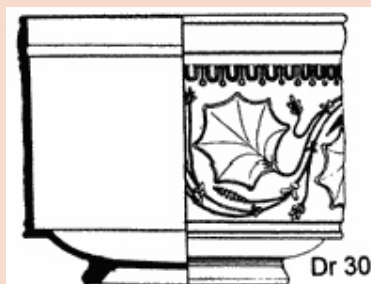
Two Decorated Samian Fragments

These two fragments show characteristic ovolo and festoon decorations. Ovolo is the term used to describe the U-shaped designs which often, as here, have a rope-like motif dangling down between them. This kind of design is usually found on either Dragendorff 30 or 37 pots (see illustrations below).



As one of these fragments is curved and the other straight-sided perhaps one came from a Dragendorff 30 and the other from a Dragendorff 37. What do you think?

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 easily be removed. 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.



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Nail

This square-shanked nail would have been made by a blacksmith. Wrought iron would be hammered into square edged rods. After re-heating the rod in a forge, the blacksmith would cut off a nail length and hammer all four sides of the softened end to form a point. Then he would insert the hot nail into a hole in a nail-header or anvil and with four glancing blows of the hammer would form the head. This shape of nail had the benefit of four sharp edges on the shank which cut deep into timber and the tapered shank provided friction down its full length. The wood fibres would often swell if damp and bind round the nail making an extremely strong fixing. Such nails were made in a variety of sizes. When the legionary fortress of Inchtuthil in Scotland was abandoned over three-quarters of a million such nails, weighing nearly seven tons, were deliberately buried in order to prevent them being re-used to make weapons. They ranged in size from 2 inches (5cm) up to 16 inches (40cm).



Reproduction Silver Spoon

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

