

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN HOME

AH29/B

Beaker

Indented beakers like this are frequently found. They were obviously a common form of drinking vessel. This one is rather small and is made of black slip-coated Castor ware. Castor ware was made in the Nene valley, west of Peterborough. Beakers like this were made on a wheel like an ordinary beaker and the indentations made by pressing a stick at regular intervals around the sides.



Ring-necked Flagon Fragment

This is a small jug. Flagons like this, which are often made of a creamy coloured fabric, are named after the rings that run around the top of the neck. Such flagons are a very common type from AD 70 to 200. Around AD 120-200 the number of rings decreases and the top ring becomes splayed outward. This flagon may belong to this period. Inside the neck the grooves 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 strap handle, too, has been neatly joined onto the body though some of the potter's finger-prints are visible at the join. Despite its small size such a flagon may have been used to serve drinks into vessels such as the indented 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.



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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 inner and outer surface a glaze and stopped the lamp from absorbing the oil. The base of this lamp has been stamped with a maker's mark, although it is impossible to make out any letters.



Mosaic Fragment

This fragment is from a very fine mosaic. The tesserae are small and neatly cut, and there is a wide range of colours: white, black, yellow and pink. 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. The different grades of mortar are clearly visible in this example. 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.



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 was made with a fine clay and is olive green with a series of brown bands running around the shoulder and neck. 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 free-standing. It is thought that such vessels may have been held in a rack.



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Samian Dish Base Fragment

This fragment must have come from a shallow dish similar to the reproduction Samian dish elsewhere in this box. Note the potter's stamp placed neatly in the centre. Samian potters regularly stamped their pots. This may have helped to distinguish 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 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.



Side of a black Coarse-ware Pot

This fragment seems to be a fairly wide, shallow sided pot - the equivalent of a modern pie-dish.



Sherd of a Mortarium

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.



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Rim from a cream-coloured 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 which 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 storage jar.



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 and silver. Metal spoons were cast in baked clay moulds.



Sheep Teeth

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.

