

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN HOME

AH 29/C

Two Samian Sherds

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. Some Samian pots were decorated with elaborate patterns and figures, which were created by attaching a mould onto the potter's wheel and throwing the clay within it. One of these fragments is decorated with festoons, with images of birds inside. The other has an abstract motif.



Rim of Red Ware Pot

This storage jar has a very carefully constructed raised lip with a down-turned flange which enables it to be firmly gripped between thumb and forefinger.



Castor Ware Sherd

Castor ware (also known as Nene Valley ware) is a kind of dark-coloured pottery that was manufactured at various sites immediately west of Peterborough and which was widely distributed in Roman Britain from the mid/late second century to the late fourth century. This fragment is decorated using barbotine - semi-liquid clay dribbled onto the pot, a bit like the technique used to ice a cake! A hare's head is clearly visible. This suggests the sherd comes from a kind of beaker known as a hunt cup - a cup decorated with images of dogs hunting stags or hares.



Blade

A small fragment of a knife blade and tang - the projection by which a tool, is attached to its handle or stock. The size of the blade fragment suggests that originally it was a butcher's knife, rather than a knife for dining with.



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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. This lamp was made using an upper and a lower mould. Often the upper surface had a picture on it - perhaps an animal, or gladiators fighting, or a god but this example is simply patterned. 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 upper section has been joined to the lower bowl - the join has, in fact, started to crack!



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.



Spoon Fragment (and Reproduction Silver Spoon)

The silver spoon is a modern copy. Most Roman spoons have a decorative kink where the handle joins the bowl. Spoons were made of wood, bone, bronze, or silver. Metal spoons were cast in baked clay moulds.



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, an example of which is also included in this box.



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Complete Course-Ware Pot

This small Romano-British pot of coarse grey ware is from an unknown locality, though it may have been found in the Thames (there are traces of calcareous deposit on the inside). It is good example of a small pot which could have been used in a Roman-British kitchen to store, carry or prepare food.



Black Ware Pot Fragment

It is possible to work out the diameter of this pot by drawing out the line of the circumference as it would have been when complete. This gives a pot with a diameter of approximately 20cm. A trace of the base can be also seen, so this fragment also gives us the height of the vessel - approximately 8cm. Traces of irregular diamond shaped patterning can be seen lightly hatched onto the outer surface.



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. The lip was for pouring out the ground material, pulp or juices. At Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) a mortarium was found which appears to have last been used to mash up cherries and plums.



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Mosaic Fragment

This fragment is made from white 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 colour.



Reproduction Samian Ware Pot

Scholars have spent their careers classifying the various shapes of Samian ware pottery. One of the most significant was Hans Dragendorff (1870-1941), who published a Samian classification system in 1896. This reproduction undecorated bowl would be classified as a Dragendorff 27.

