

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN HOME

AH 29/D

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 - and more expensive - 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 moulded patterns, others were left plain - examples of both kinds can be found here. The sherd marked '51:34/21' may have come from Sea Mills, now a suburb of Bristol, which was the site of a Roman settlement called Portus Abonae.



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.



One Complete Course-Ware Pot

A good example of a small pot which could have been used in a Roman-British kitchen to store, carry or prepare food. Dating a pot like this is difficult. This example could have been made before the arrival of the Romans, or it may have been made in the first century AD. Some things changed when the Romans arrived, but many everyday habits and styles continued.



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Five Rim-fragments from Course-ware Pots

While the complete pot in this museum box is fairly small, most of these five examples come from larger pots. 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. Two of these examples come from fairly shallow pots, the others seem to be deeper. Different shapes of pot would have been used for specific purposes, though the details are now lost to us.



Sherd of a Pottery Strainer

Metal strainers are often found in association with equipment connected with wine drinking - cups, flagons and ladles. Presumably Roman wine often had 'bits' in it that needed to be removed! This pottery example seems more likely to have been a piece of kitchen equipment. It could have been used for a variety of purposes. For example, most cheese making involves a stage at which the cheese is stood on some form of strainer or grid to allow surplus whey to drain off. What other job do you think it might have been used for?



Pottery Phial

Although this attractive, cone-shaped pot is unglazed, it has been carefully decorated with a neat, spiralling pattern. This, combined with its small capacity and narrow opening suggests it may have been intended as a cosmetic pot for a lady's dressing table. Or, if it was to be used in a kitchen, perhaps it held a small quantity of expensive spices. What do you think? Another mystery is how the pot could have stood upright? At first sight it looks as if it has lost a broad foot, but careful examination shows that only a small fragment has been broken from the stem - the pot as we have it is virtually complete. How then could it stand upright? Perhaps it stood in a wooden rack?



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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. Many lamps, like this one, were decorated with images. This example is badly worn, but shows a spread-winged eagle, probably perched on a thunderbolt. The eagle was a common symbol of the god Jupiter, as was the thunderbolt.



Six Tesserae

Tesserae - the small pieces that were used to create a mosaic - were made from a variety of materials. White tesserae, as here, were often cut from hard chalk. The commonest source of red/orange tesserae was tiles, brick or pot. The four other grey examples are made of stone possibly some kind of limestone.



Mosaic Fragment

This fragment is made from light grey 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.



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, in 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.



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Fragment of Antler

Hunting and fishing seem to have been common pastimes in the countryside of Roman Britain, both for the necessary provision of food and as a private leisure pursuit. This fragment from, probably, a red deer testifies to such an occasion. The meat would have provided a useful addition to the daily diet and, as always, even the bones were put to good use. Fragments like this often had a hole drilled through to form a toggle for the Birrus Britannicus - the thick, hooded, woollen cloak, which seems to have been viewed by the Romans as a form of British national dress.



Silver Spoon & Bone Spoon

The silver spoon is a modern copy. Metal spoons like this one also often have a slight kink where the handle joins the bowl. Metal spoons were cast in baked clay moulds. Spoons were also made from wood, bone, or bronze. Bone spoons, like the other example, have straight handles. Although there is only a fragment here, the complete spoon must have been rather delicate.

