

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN CRAFTS & INDUSTRIES

AH 30

Glass Bowl and Lid

The only glass to reach Britain before the Romans came in the form of beads and bangles. Glass vessels began to be used regularly soon after the conquest and glassware of the finest quality was used in Britain throughout the Roman period. Very few complete vessels, though, have been found. Just as today, the Romans recycled broken glass to make new bottles and bowls.



This glass bowl and lid comes, in fact, from the Haifa region in the eastern Mediterranean. In this region, excavations have shown that late Roman glassmakers were able to produce several tons of glass (sufficient to make tens of thousands of small to medium-size vessels!) in a single operation, and archaeologists have begun to realize that glass vessels were probably more common here than was once thought. In Britain most glassworkers, on the other hand, probably made their vessels in small workshops and some may have travelled from town to town to ply their trade.

This glass vessel has been repaired. The original fragments can be distinguished by their purplish sheen or by the apparent presence of a covering of gold foil. Neither of these effects were deliberately produced by a Roman glassworker. They result from the gradual weathering that glass undergoes when it is buried for a long period in damp soil.

Rim of a Coarseware Dish

This is an example of a kind of coarseware pottery known as black burnished ware. Cheap to produce and robust such pottery was designed to withstand the knocks and the heat of kitchen-life - and if it broke it didn't matter too much as it could be easily replaced. This example, though, has a small hole drilled just under the rim, which suggests that it may have been broken and then riveted back together. This technique of mending pots was common in Roman times - small lead rivets were used to fasten the pieces back together. Another suggestion is that the hole was integral to the pot and was used to help fasten a cord around the pot so that it could be hung from a hook.



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Tile with Maker's Stamp

It is not known where this tile fragment originates from. Tile makers, like Samian potters, often stamped their work. Moon-shaped stamps like this are more often found on the continent. The text reads 'FECIT L.LVRIVSPR??VL'. The missing letters make any reading uncertain, but it may have read something like 'Made by L(ucius?) Lurius Pr(oc)ul(us?)'. Roman men usually had three names - *tria nomina* - and names and words were often abbreviated in inscriptions.



A similar unusual round tile stamp has been found at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), bearing the name and titles of the Emperor Nero, AD 54-68. This tile was found in 1904 in a cess pit at the east end of the latrine of the Public Baths. It was made in an imperial tiler, probably at Little London near Pamber. No other site has produced tiles with this stamp.

Lamp

Lamps like this were used by both the Romans, 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 example is of a kind known as a Picture Lamp. 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. 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 lamps 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. This lamp is rather worn and the image on its upper surface has become blurred, but the outline of a lion is still visible.

Axe

All Roman axes have the same basic form, although this example is rather small.



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Flagon Neck

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. There would probably have been a handle further down the neck.



Nail

This is a Square Shank nail. To make such a nail a blacksmith would hammer wrought iron into square edged rods. After re-heating the rod in a forge, he 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).



Blade

This was probably a knife for dining with, though the blade is quite small. The handle end is twisted round at right angles to the small blade. It is also possible that it may have been a razor.



Stylus

The stylus was used upon the tabula - a tablet of wood covered with wax. The pointed end was used scratch the letters onto the wax. The blunt end was used to rub out mistakes.



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Metal Needle

A complete example of a Roman needle - the design hasn't changed in 2,000 years!



Chain Link Fragment

Only half of this oval shaped link has survived. A chain like this could have been used for a variety of purposes, including forming part of a chain to hang a cauldron over a fire or even as part of a shackle for slaves or criminals - any job where rope would be unsuitable.



L-shaped lift-key

Many such keys were found at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), suggesting locks were quite commonplace. Like nails, each key would have to be manufactured individually by a blacksmith. This example has a fairly fine teeth and a heavy handle, from which a loop of metal has been bent round to form a hole so that it could be hung on a cord.



Bone Pin

Thousands of such pins have been found from Roman sites across Britain. Women often wore their hair in complicated styles that took a long time to do. These pins were probably used to keep plaits and loops of hair in place. This example has lost its point and has a simple roundish head. Pin heads were sometimes even carved into tiny human heads.



Spindle Whorl

People in Roman Britain would not generally have bought ready-made items of clothing from a shop. Most clothing would be made by women in the home, unless you were rich enough to own slaves who could do the work for you. Wool was the commonest material used. Thread was made by using a distaff and a spindle. A clump of fleece was attached to the wooden distaff - a sort of stick - which was supported in the left hand. The end of the thread was tied to the spindle, a rod which ended in a heavy whorl, which helped the spindle to rotate as the spinner span the thread through the fingers of their right hand. After the thread was spun, it was woven into cloth using a large vertical loom. Many spindle whorls like this have been found. The spindle itself tends to decay, being made of wood, but the stone whorl is more durable.



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Samian Sherds

Samian pottery was made in Gaul (the Roman name for France) and Germany. It is not glazed; the glossy red colour is caused by the iron oxide in the clay. It was exported to Britain from the mid-first to the mid-third century. Samian pots were finer - and probably 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 also used to serve cooked food in the dining room, while the courser pots were probably used in the kitchen. Some Samian pots were decorated with moulded patterns, others were left plain. One of these fragments is from the base of a bowl or cup and shows the maker's stamp. Unfortunately it is not possible to make out the complete name. Potter's stamps had a variety of purposes, including distinguishing the work of different workshops when work from a group of makers was fired together. The other example is from a highly decorated bowl. A satyr - a half-man half-goat creature - can be seen, along with a fragment of a running hare.



Mosaic Fragment

This fragment shows an area of 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. It is thought by some that the floor was then waxed or oiled to bring out the colours. White tesserae like these were often cut from blocks of hard chalk.



Casket Binding

This would have helped hold together a wooden casket and if the box was intended to hold cash may have added to its security.



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Coins

Without coinage it would be hard to live in towns. How would you obtain food if you did not have your own land? Coins began to appear in Britain slightly before the Romans arrived here although these pre-Roman coins do not seem to have been widely used to buy things. Roman coins often show the head of the emperor on one side and a symbolic figure on the other. Quite a few coins were also issued which showed the emperor's wife.



Top Left: Emperor Licinius I, who ruled AD 308-324 (from 313-324 Constantine also claimed to be emperor - he had Licinius murdered in 324). The reverse shows the god Jupiter, with an eagle at his feet and a statue of Victory held in his right hand. The text reads IOVI CONSERVATORI AVGG - 'Jove Protector of Emperors'.

Bottom Left: Emperor Domitian, who ruled AD 81-96. This coin is very worn! Domitian took an active role in managing the imperial economy and after his assassination he left the treasury with a surplus, the result of a harsh but financially sound administration. He was an ardent supporter of traditional Roman religion and closely identified himself with Minerva and Jupiter. The reverse shows Jupiter.

Top Right: Emperor Maximianus, who ruled for three turbulent periods between AD 286 and 310. He was murdered in 310 after he tried to have his son-in-law Constantine I murdered. The reverse shows a winged figure of Victory.

Bottom Right: Emperor Constantius II, as Caesar or Deputy Emperor. Constantius II was the second son of the Emperor Constantine. He seems to have been made a Caesar in 324. When his father died in 337 he instigated a coup and divided up the empire with his brothers. The reverse shows two soldiers and two standards. The initials TRP under their feet indicate that this coin was minted in Trier in Germany.

The three tiny coins are minims or minimissimi. They date from the fourth century. Many emperors were tempted to reduce the amount of gold or silver in their coins. Also, forgers made cheap copies of official coinage. By the fourth century the system for producing official coins was breaking down and the result was the minting of tiny coins like these, which had a very low value. After the Roman authorities left Britain the system for producing coins disappeared. Without central authority - and without a coinage system - it became difficult to live in towns. Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) was abandoned altogether.