

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN CRAFTS & INDUSTRIES

AH 30/B

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 AD. Samian pots were finer and more expensive than many of the thicker and darker pots that were available in Roman Britain. They 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 coarser pots would have been 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 different makers was fired together. The other example is from a highly decorated bowl and shows a fragment of a running hare.



Coarse Ware Pot Rim Fragment

This is a fragment from a coarse ware pot which would have been used in a Roman-British kitchen to store, carry or prepare food. 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 easily be replaced. Interestingly, this example has traces of patterning on the inner surface, suggesting that it was a somewhat deluxe item of kitchenware. 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.



Spearhead

Spearheads like this were made by taking a long triangular piece of iron and then hammering the end opposite the point into a socket that could be fitted onto the shaft of the spear. If you look closely beneath the corrosion you can see where the metal has been folded round.



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Lamp

This type of lamp was used by both the Romans and the Greeks - and by many other ancient peoples. They were filled with olive oil, though animal fat could be used if there was nothing else. A wick protruded from the spout. The lamp in this box 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. This example, however, is round-shouldered and decorated with a simple line of spots. 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 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 the inner and outer surface a glaze and stopped the lamp from absorbing the oil. The nozzle of this example shows signs of scorching from the wick which would once have burned there.



Lettering

This is a modern reproduction of part of an inscription found in a temple in Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester). Archaeologists often find fragments like this and they have to work out what the missing letters would have been. The three Latin words shown here probably read '[c]ollat[ionibus]' '[commi]ssum' and '[peregrine]orum'. Three almost identical inscriptions have been found in this temple - all of them seem to commemorate the giving of three gifts (possibly statues) to the temple by a group of 'foreigners' (peregrinum). The difficulty of reading such broken inscriptions is made even more difficult by the fact that the Romans often abbreviated entire words with a single letter. For example, the 'D.S.' - visible at the bottom reads in full 'D.S.D.' - which stood for D(e) S(uo) D(edit).



Here is the full text of one of the fragmentary Latin inscriptions found at Silchester: '... R ... SIGNVM VICTORIAE SINE COLLATIONIBVS COMMISSVM SIBI A CONLEGIO PEREGRINORVM CONSISTIENTIVM CALLEVAE DONVM D S D'. The word *signum* has a number of meanings, including statue, image, picture, standard, signal, sign and token. In English it reads: '[...] R [...] a *signum* of Victory, without tribute from him, [this] enterprise by the guild of foreign artisans living at Calleva, a gift out of his own devotion.'

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Stylus

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



Chisel

This is called a firmer chisel - a carpenter's tool which was used for a variety of general purposes.



Nail

This is a square shank nail. A blacksmith would have made each nail individually. 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. He would then insert the hot nail into a hole in a nail-header or anvil and with glancing blows of the hammer would form a 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. These 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 ton, 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).



Weight

The Romans had a complex system of weights and measures along with coinage, this well-regulated system enabled people to trade with confidence across the length and breadth of the empire. Their system of weights began with the tiny chalcus (71mg) and included such finely graded units as the siliqua (189mg), the obolos (0.6g) and the scrupulum (1.1g). The uncia was the ancestor of the English ounce and was the equivalent of 27g. This weight weighs 23g and corresponds to no known Roman or English measure. Perhaps whoever made it was being a little bit economical with the truth?



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Four Loose Tesserae

These tesserae illustrate the range of sizes that were used in constructing a decorative mosaic. White tesserae were often cut from blocks of hard chalk, grey tesserae from limestone and red tesserae from chopped up tile. 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.



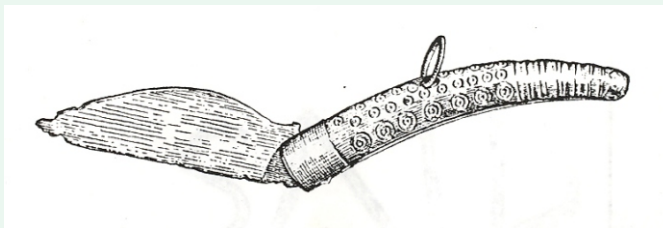
Knife Handle

This is a fragment of a handle from a clasp knife. It has been made from an antler. An almost identical, but complete, example of such a knife was found at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) in 1900 - below left.



The blade of the Silchester knife is made of iron and the cutting edge is straight and the back curved. The broad end of the antler handle is bound with bronze and the blade is riveted at this point so that it can fold into a groove which is cut along the handle length. The handle is decorated with circular patterns at one end and bands around the tapering point. This fragment clearly belonged to a similar knife. The patterning is the same, the groove into which the blade would have been tucked can still be seen and the

green staining around one end indicates that it once had bronze binding there. The Silchester knife is thought to date from the fourth century AD, so probably this example was made in the same period.



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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Mystery Object

For many years this was thought to be a ring key. Many of these keys have been found from the Roman Period a typical example can be seen on the left.



They are usually referred to as ring keys and it is assumed they were worn on a finger. However, some are too big to be worn like this and many of them may have been carried on a loop of string around the neck. They would certainly have been rather awkward to wear all day on a finger!



Most such ring keys have a simple design. Some weird looking ones, though, were clearly made for 'show', as can be seen in the illustration on the right. However, this object is not one of them. It may not be a key and it certainly is not Roman. Suspensions are raised because it doesn't follow the normal Roman pattern in which the blade of the key is attached at right-angles to the ring. It is always possible, of course, that a Roman craftsman could have created a unique design. However there are two other clues - if you look very closely - that prove it is not Roman.



Firstly, this key has been made in a two piece mould and then the two halves have been stuck together. The join between the two halves can be clearly seen as a ridge in the intricately patterned blade. The join between the two parts has been filed down in the ring section. Roman ring keys were not made in this way. The metal was heated and hammered into its basic form. The blade was then cut into shape using a saw.

Secondly, if you look very closely at the part where the blade is attached to the ring you will see, on one side, that some very faint numbers have been stamped: '248'. To see these numbers the key has to be held in a strong light and moved until the ghostly numbers are revealed. The Romans, of course, used Roman numerals - 248 would have been written CCXLVIII. Numerals such as the ones on this ring were developed in India at about the same time as the Roman Empire, but they did not reach Europe until the tenth century AD.

It may be that this object is some sort of key, but it must date from after the Roman period. What do you think?

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Coins

Top left

The text around the well-preserved head on this coin reads 'IMP C M A MAXIMIANUS P F AUG'. This indicates that it is a coin of Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximianus Herculus (about 250 - July 310), known in English as Maximianus I, who was Roman Emperor (together with Diocletian) from 286 to 305 AD. Maximianus was the only ruler with the name Marcus Aurelius so any

Maximianus coin (there was another ruler, Galerius Maximianus, living at around the same time) bearing the abbreviation MA will belong to him.



The Emperor Diocletian decided to divide the Roman empire in two because it was too large to be governed by a single emperor. Diocletian would rule the eastern half of the empire and Maximianus would rule the western part. He appointed Maximian to the position of Augustus. While they were considered to be co-emperors, Diocletian in fact was the superior. Maximianus also ruled from 306-8 and in 310 AD. He committed suicide in 310 when an assassination plot against Constantine was exposed.

The reverse of the coin bears the text 'GENIO POPVLI ROMANI' and shows the Genius (guardian spirit) of Rome with a cornucopia and patera (a broad, shallow dish used in rituals to offer wine to the gods).



It is unclear where this coin was minted. The photograph on the left shows a similar coin to the one in the box, minted in Alexandria. There were many official mints scattered across the Roman Empire, each of which issued its own design variations.

Top right

This coin shows a female head, but is too worn to identify. The wives and daughters of the emperor were often celebrated on imperial coinage. For example, the coin on the right shows Julia Domna (AD 170-217), the wife of Roman Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus.



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Bottom Left

This is a coin of Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander (AD 208-235), commonly called Alexander Severus, who was emperor between 222 and 235. When Alexander became emperor, he was young, amiable, well-meaning, and entirely under the dominion of his mother. His rule is generally thought to have been marked by attempts to improve the economic well-being of the empire, but Alexander was not a strong military leader and he was lynched (along with his mother) by the Legio XXII when he tried to negotiate with the Alemanni (a German tribe). After this mutiny Maximinus Thrax (Maximinus the Thracian, known formally as Maximinus I) became emperor - the first barbarian who wore the imperial purple and the first emperor never to set foot in Rome (he was decapitated when he besieged the city).



This coin was struck sometime between AD 231-235, the year in which he was murdered. A photograph of a better preserved example can be seen above right. It is a sestertius - the sestertius was produced as the largest bronze denomination until the middle of the third century AD.

The front shows the emperors head and has the text 'IMP ALEXANDER PIVS AVG'. The back shows the goddess Providentia, the goddess of forethought, holding grain ears over modius (a measuring pot) with one hand and an anchor in the other.

Bottom Right

This coin is too worn to be identified.

Centre

The three tiny coins are minims or minimissimi. They date from the fourth century AD. Many emperors were tempted to reduce the amount of gold or silver in their coins. Also, forgers often 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.

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Whetstone

This whetstone was used to sharpen knives, chisels and other bladed tools. It has been worn by constant use.



Wall Hook

The identity of this object is uncertain. It may be the staple of a drop hinge - that is, the bit that was hammered into the wall/frame and onto which a looped metal hinge fastened to the door itself was hung. However, the short arm onto which the door is hung normally has a round cross-section to enable the door to turn easily, which is lacking on this example. Another possibility is that it is a simple hook, designed to be driven into a wall and on which a variety of objects could be hung. L-shaped hooks with a square cross-section, which this one has, have been found at many Roman sites.



Above: A modern image showing what Calleva Atrebatum may have looked like.