

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN POTTERY

AH 33

Roman pottery is often divided into two broad categories - **coarseware** and **fineware**.

Coarseware (sometimes called Kitchenware) refers to cheaper pottery vessels usually for use in the kitchen and locally-made. Such vessels were often made of a coarse, grainy clay and have thick sides. They were either unglazed or have a simple plain glaze. They were usually made close to the place where they are found.

Fineware (sometimes called Tableware) refers to more expensive pottery vessels, often decorated, which were used for dining purposes, or storing oils and perfumes. Such vessels are generally made from fine clay and may have a rich glaze or fancy moulded patterning. Some such pottery - though not all - was imported from the continent.

Within the majority of households it is likely that coarseware vessels were used for both preparing *and* serving food. In slightly wealthier households the more valuable fineware pottery may well have been used on special occasions.

Samian Ware

Samian Ware is the most famous of the Roman finewares. It is not glazed; the glossy red colour is caused by the iron oxide in the clay. Most of it 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. Some Samian pots were decorated with moulded patterns, others were left plain. Both of the examples in this box show signs of moulding.



Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN POTTERY

AH 33

Blackware

Samian wasn't the only fineware used in Roman Britain. Several fragments of fine pots in this box have a black shiny surface - this kind is known as blackware.

Perhaps the best example of this kind in this box is the fragment of an indented beaker, with an incised band around the middle. A lot of this kind of pottery was made in the New Forest, which may well be where this example originates from.



Above: A complete New Forest blackware beaker, found at Calleva Atrebatum note the narrow base.



Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN POTTERY

AH 33

Narrow Bases

Several of the fragments in this box come from pots which originally had a very narrow base. The most remarkable is the slender terra-cotta pot, which looks something like a miniature *amphora* - the large storage jars that were common on Roman Britain. *Amphorae* came in several designs, most of which had a pointy base, and could not have been freestanding. In practice, *amphorae* were stood upright by being leant against a wall and by having their pointed base sunk into the soft earth. A surprising number of tableware pots and beakers from this period have almost equally narrow bases. Presumably there must have been quite a few breakages and spillages! The very small narrow-based pot in this box does stand upright on its own, but it would have been very precarious. It may well have stood in some kind of rack. It was probably an *unguentarium* - a flask for perfumed oils and creams.



Fragments of Courseware Pots

Most of the coarseware fragments in this box come from the rim of various kitchen 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. Some of the coarseware fragments come from shallow pots, others seem to be deeper. Different shapes of pot would have been used for specific purposes - some for cooking beans, for example, others for storing milk - though the details are now lost to us.



Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN POTTERY

AH 33

Signs of Manufacture

Probably all of the pots in this box, whether coarseware or fineware, were made on a potter's wheel. The spiral ridges which can be seen inside several examples were made by the fingers of the potter as the wheel span and the clay was pulled upwards to form a bowl. The outer surface of the pot would be smoothed once the pot was finished, but the inner surface could not be reached.



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. There are slight traces of scorching at the lip of this lamp where the burning wick would have rested.



Tesserae

Tesserae - the small pieces that were used to create a mosaic - were made from a variety of materials. Two sizes of *tesserae* can be found in this box - three small pieces and a single larger piece. The smaller pieces tended to be used in finer, elaborately patterned mosaics - the floor of a grand dining room, for example - while the larger piece would probably have been used to create a more workaday floor, such as a kitchen or corridor, often without any pattern whatsoever. The *tesserae* for patterned mosaics came from a variety of sources. White *tesserae*, as here, were often cut from hard chalk. The commonest source of red/orange *tesserae* was sawn up tiles, brick or pot. Black/grey *tesserae* were cut from different types of stone, often some kind of limestone.

