

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN COOKING & EATING AH34

Mortaria Fragments

A *motarium* was a bowl which was used with a pestle - perhaps a stone - to grind herbs, spices, grains and other ingredients during food preparation. Grit was added to the inner surface before firing to help the grinding process. *Mortaria* were usually made of thick, heavy, coarse pottery (as in the example top right). The lower example is made from rather finer clay. It has been suggested that this kind of *mortarium* was used in cheese-making, rather than for grinding, as the grits would have encouraged the growth of the necessary bacteria. This finer sherd comes from an excavation at Mackney Court Farm, Brightwell. The origin of the first sample is unknown.



Oyster Shell

Oyster shells are found on almost every Roman site in Britain. They show us how efficient the transport links were, as oysters would quickly have become unfit to eat unless they were transported in water, perhaps in tanks, which would have been very heavy. If they were transported out of water, delivery would have had to be very rapid! It is possible that this shell came from the Victorian excavation of Silchester, near Reading. We know that in one deposit on that site over a million oyster shells were found. These shells were probably not just rubbish, discarded after eating, but were collected, stored, crushed and used in the tanning of leather or for making mortar.



Animal bone

This fragment of bone was excavated from a Roman site in Reading. It is part of the shinbone of an ox or cow. It is probable that ordinary people ate relatively little meat, but it was an important part of the diet of the Roman soldier. Dairy products, leather, bone, horn and glue were also provided by the ox.



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Pottery Sherd, Castorware

This piece of fine pottery, perhaps a part of a dish or beaker, may also have come from Silchester. The Victorian archaeologist has written 'IN II' on the back. This is the abbreviation for Insula II. An *insula* (Latin for 'island') was a block within a town created by the rectangular grid of streets, which may have included several dwellings, shops or workshops within it. As the areas were excavated, they were numbered in this way on the site plan. Each find was then marked with its location.



Castorware (also known as Nene Valley ware) is a kind of 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. In particular, it refers to brown or black coated tablewares which are decorated with a thick paste trailed across the surface to create patterns and images (also known as barbotine).

Pottery Sherds, Samian

These pieces may also have come from the Silchester excavation. The Victorian archaeologists discovered very large quantities of broken pottery and decided only to keep those pieces they considered interesting or significant. Samian ware was the finest and most fashionable dining pottery, imported from Gaul (France). It is not glazed; the glossy red colour is caused by the iron oxide in the clay. Its shiny red surface meant that it was easy to keep clean, whereas food would adhere to rougher surfaces and more porous clays would absorb cooking smells and flavours. The base of the example shown on the upper right is marked with the potter's stamp, it reads ...OCCULUS F... When complete it may have read [D?]OCCULUS F(ECIT) which, in English, means. 'Docculus made this'. It is the base of a drinking cup. The decorated piece (lower right) was probably part of a bowl.



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Pottery Sherd - Amphora

Amphorae were large storage pots which were used by both the Greeks and the Romans to transport liquids such as wine and olive oil, and dry stuffs such as olives and lentils. They came in a variety of shapes and sizes, though on average they were about 1 metre tall and could contain about 28 litres of liquid. Some *amphorae* were tall and thin, and most had a pointed base that would have made it difficult for them to stand upright. It seems that when in use the end could be sunk into the ground, or the *amphora* would be leaned against a wall. They were sealed using clay, cork or wooden stoppers and wax or pitch. This piece is said to have come from the excavation of a Roman site.



Knife Blade

Knives with wooden or bone handles were used for the preparation of food and in the dining-room. Spoons of metal or bone were also used, but not forks. Fingers were used for most foods. The provenance of this piece is not known. It has been lacquered for conservation.



Coarseware Pot

This pot was transferred to Reading Museum Service from the stores of the Museum of London in March 1996, when it was considered more appropriate for it to return to Berkshire. It is labelled as a find from 'Near the Abingdon Rd. Station, Berkshire 1840'. We do not know which town in (old, pre-1976) Berkshire Abingdon Road was located in, but is thought that it was discovered when a railway line was being built. It has been glued together some time ago, and is almost complete. It may have been used in the kitchen for mixing or cooking, or as tableware.

