HELEN MCCARTHY – MORTARIUM SHERD FROM ELY ROMAN VILLA

INTRODUCTION

My choice of the Roman mortarium combines my love of Rome, cookery and the home. My Grandmother's home was close to the Ely Racecourse, so my brother and I would play on the fields every weekend. We were always told that the 'grassy tump' was the site of a Roman villa, complete with mosaic! This fact always intrigued me, and I have carried the interest right through my life.

From my research, I have learned that initially, mortaria were imported from Gaul. Some were even stamped with the potter's name or symbol, enabling archaeologists to track their makers movements from place to place. It is fascinating that we can actually view a stamp and follow a potter's journey. Mortaria were often heavy and transporting them was not practical, so eventually they were made locally in Britain.

To gain the relevant information to display this item, I was able to refer to the many books and archaeological magazines I already have. I also visited the Central Library in Cardiff to supplement the information. We displayed our items in a glass cabinet, with particular thought for children, as the exhibition was in half term week. Along with the basic labels inside the cabinet, we each wrote a 100-word panel, briefly outlining our relevant historical periods. These were situated next to the cabinet. We numbered our items 1-6, and each wrote a 1500-word, more in depth description of our artefacts, for an accompanying guidebook. This was also translated into Welsh. As a group, we also felt that a map and a timeline would enhance our exhibition. The map would enable visitors from outside Cardiff to understand where Caerau and Ely are in Cardiff, and we felt a timeline was important as the wide-ranging periods we are dealing with are from Neolithic, right up to Medieval.

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GUIDEBOOK ENTRY – ROMAN MORTARIUM SHERD

The Roman General, Julius Caesar, is known to have led two failed military expeditions to the shores of Britain in 55 and 54BC. However, it would not be until AD43 that the Roman army, under Emperor Claudius, would succeed in conquering Britain, after landing on the south east coast of England. It would take them another thirty years to invade and fully conquer Wales though. Before the Roman conquest, there were five Celtic tribes occupying the area that is now present-day Wales, – the Deceangli and Gangani in the north, the Ordovices in the central part, the Demetae in the south west, and the Silures, occupying the south eastern area, including Cardiff. After many Roman attempts at conquering the Welsh tribes, AD54 finally saw the capture and removal to Rome of the Silures leader, Caratacus, and his tribe were finally defeated in AD74.

Roman occupation of the whole of Wales continued for a further three hundred and sixty years. The building of roads, linking all of Wales to the rest of Britain, enabled the Roman forces to enforce their control, and despite the fact that Wales was used mostly for military purposes, there was an inevitable blending of both cultures, particularly in areas nearer to the Roman forts. In the more rural areas, their influence was probably less so, and the local people continued to live as they did before the Roman invasion, for example keeping their own language and religion. However, it cannot be disputed that conquest of Wales brought about many huge changes to the area. These included the widespread use of coins as currency, and the extensive mining of local minerals throughout the country, such as tin, copper, lead, and even gold in North Wales. This industry enabled them to trade with other countries. They also brought their Roman influence to local Celtic religion, art, architecture and domestic lifestyle.

Even though the Romans built many fortresses throughout Wales, there are records of approximately twelve Roman villas throughout the country. The Roman Villa situated in Ely, Cardiff, was initially excavated in the 1890's by John Storrie, the then Curator of Cardiff Museum. His excavation revealed wall foundations, mosaic floors and coloured wall plaster, obviously belonging to a substantial Roman villa. However, it was not until 1922 that the eminent archaeologist, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, investigated the site more thoroughly. He established that it was a building, rectangular in shape, with wings at either end, enclosing a cobbled courtyard. He believed the house probably dated from the first half of the second century, and that the likely occupants would have been a well-to-do Romano-British family. It was common for local people to adopt Roman ways, and some couples may well have inter-married, blending their individual cultures.

Amongst the listed archaeological small finds found in that excavation, were a number of coins, horseshoes, bone pins and even human remains (www.coflein.gov.uk). Also listed were items of pottery, including some Samian ware, which is a fine, earthenware pottery, along with some coarse, or roughly made, domestic pottery. The coarse ware was mostly kitchen items, including a sherd (piece) of mortarium, that is shown on display here.

The local, Celtic tribes had been using their own pottery items for over four thousand years, but production was only on a small scale. However, after the Roman conquest, pottery started to be produced on a larger scale.

The mortarium was a very popular piece of Roman kitchenware. The classical Latin word mortarium (plural is mortaria) describes a 'receptacle for pounding'. These items are basically the ancient equivalent of the modern-day mortar and pestle or food processor, that can be found in kitchens everywhere today. They appear as heavy, shallow, round bowls or basins, with prominent rims to avoid spillage, and give the user a good grip (McGeough, 2004, 233). They have a spout that enables the pounded food to be poured out after grinding. The difference between a mortarium and an ordinary bowl is the fact that before firing, either sand, grit or broken pieces of pot, called TRITRATION GRITS, are pressed into the inside surface of the bowl. This gives the finished item a rough surface that enables the user to grind or pound foodstuffs. Herbs, spices, meats and fish would be ground into sauces or pastes and poured through the spout. An example of its use, would be the preparation of a popular Roman dish called garum. This was a type of sauce that could then be added to many Roman dishes. It involved the grinding of fish intestines, salt and olive oil into a sauce with a pestle made of wood, stone or even an amphora handle (www.pompeii-food-and-drink.org).

Whilst the majority of mortaria are simple, functional pieces of pottery, some finer pieces have been found. They can sometimes have more decorative spouts, some shaped with animal heads, such as lions or birds. A mortarium found in Egypt is decorated with the form of a boy, wiping his eyes, suggesting that the mortarium was used for pounding onions, making him cry (https://www.researchgate.net).

Roman mortaria are usually made from fired clay, but examples have been found of vessels made from stone, metal and wood. They can also vary in size, with most measuring approximately 20-30cm in diameter. The earliest, and less common mortaria found in Britain, date from the late Iron Age, and have been imported from the Continent, however, post-invasion mortaria can be regularly found throughout Britain. The earliest Roman examples found in Britain have straight, or wall-sides, and come from the Roman town of Camulodunum, which is modern day Colchester. By deliberate design, mortaria are heavy pieces of kitchenware, with the earliest examples discovered in Britain having been imported from northern Gaul, present day Western Europe (Alcock, 1994, 91). Over time though, it became increasingly common, and far more sensible, for them to be made locally in Britain, and then avoid the need to transport them long distances.

Many mortaria display stamps, pressed into the clay, showing the names and dates of potters or their workshops (de la Bedoyere 2015, 64). These stamps can take the form of a maker's name, or sometimes just a simple symbol, such as a leaf. If archaeologists are really lucky, some even have dates stamped on them too. These stamps are enormously helpful in that they can help to track the movements of potters from place to place, and over certain time periods. They also help monitor the gradual spread of Romanised food preparation.

In an effort to establish the different uses of mortaria, scientists have analysed the organic residue found in some of the bowls (https://www.researchgate.net). They have discovered the remains of animal fats and degraded leaf wax. This has led some researchers to believe that they may have been used for uses other than cookery, possibly the making of medicinal mixtures or for creating cosmetic creams. There is even evidence of mortaria being used to grind charcoal and glue together, to make black paint for wall plaster decoration.

Over the last several years, the Caer Heritage Project (a partnership between Cardiff University and local residents) have carried out excavations at the Caerau Iron Age Hillfort, in the west of Cardiff. During the excavations, they have discovered large amounts of coarse, Roman, domestic pottery, including sherds of mortaria, just like the sherd from the Ely Roman

Villa. This indicates that people were living on the Hillfort site at the same time as the Villa, less than a mile away, at the same time.

Roman rule in Wales eventually ended in the second half of the fourth century. Due to domestic uncertainty back in Rome, troops were being withdrawn to help in keeping the peace at home, rather in their foreign territories. The end of their occupation took place gradually and at different times, in the various areas of Wales. This was partly because their influence had varied greatly from place to place.

The Ely Roman Villa had gone through various extensions and alterations throughout its existence, but it reached the end of its use in approximately AD325. Evidence discovered in the 1922 excavation, showed flooding as the floors were covered in silt. It was apparent that unfortunately, because the house had been built on a poorly drained field, and situated far too close to the Caerau Brook, a local stream, flooding must have occurred quite regularly.

After the 1922 excavation by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, it was decided that the Villa be covered up again for future generations to re-discover, and it was eventually made a Scheduled Monument in 1950.

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