

A Decorated Sherd at Cambridge

by Graham Webster

There is a remarkable sherd of Roman pottery in Nene Valley ware displayed in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (the Knipe Collection). It is part of the body of a large vessel in a typical creamy-white fabric with a black colour-coat (fig. 2). The decoration appears to have been applied directly to the surface in barbotine, rather than appliqué. It consists of a bearded male figure, dressed in a kind of leotard with a belt indicated by trailed slip. He is seated on a chair with cross-legs and a back curved outwards at the top (fig. 3). His right arm is bent, but the hand beyond the edge of the sherd holds an object, of which only the end survives to suggest that it may be a club or thunderbolt. His left hand is outstretched with palm upwards, as if associated with the feature above it. I am very much indebted to Dr Martin Henig for the identification of the feature as a bust of Sol with a radiate crown. On each side of the main figure are vertical lines of barbotine dots representing the edges of the panel, and there were probably other figures spaced out round the vessel. Miss Mary Cra'ster kindly measured the sherd for me and estimated a diameter of 272 mm for the lower edge. This suggests space for five figures, but only if they were tightly squeezed together. The more likely total would seem to be four. In this case a possible explanation is that the vessel carried figures and emblems of the four seasons, and that this one is Jupiter representing Summer. But this would be rather unorthodox and, as Dr Henig remarks, only possible in the 'classically ignorant milieu of Roman Britain', although the connection of Jupiter with Sol is, of course, well established (Cook (1914), 186).

The closest parallels seem to come from Great Chesterford, and were published by Roach Smith ((1857), 91-2). He illustrated two different vessels which appear to be indented beakers, in a ware described as 'of a salmon-colour, covered with a dull brown glaze, which in the most prominent parts has a reddish hue'. The figures on one of these are clearly Mars and Jupiter, the former with a spear and shield, and the latter with a large vicious-looking thunderbolt in one hand and probably a sceptre in the other. Of the other vessels, there are three non-joining sherds with only the lower halves of two figures. One is identifiable by his *caduceus* as Mercury, and the other is probably Minerva, as she carries a shield. A beaker from Verulamium, Insula XVII (*Archaeologia* 90, 1944, fig. 20,

no.1), has fragments of four figures, and it is calculated that there is room for a fifth. Only two offer any positive identification: Hercules with a bow and lion skin, and Mercury with his winged sandals. There is only one foot of the third figure. The fourth wears a Phrygian cap and a decorated skirt and carries a bow in his left hand and possibly a club or sceptre in his right. He appears to be Attis, a Mithraic intrusion into the classical pantheon, and a common enough feature of late Roman religious syncretism.

There is an indented beaker from Richborough in 'a fine grey ware with a darker grey polished surface' (Bushe-Fox (1932), pl.XLIII). There are five rather crude figures in the indentations described as 'moulded'. Two of them, similar without being identical, are male with radiate crowns and whips in the left hand representing Sol. A third male figure has a bare torso and thick belt. Another sherd has a leg and foot, which may belong



Fig 2 A sherd of Roman pottery in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge

to this or another figure, while another sherd shows a fragment of drapery at the side of which are the letters OGMIA. It is suggested that this could be the Celtic god Ogmios, who could be equated with Apollo (Ross (1967), 381).

The British examples are undoubtedly copies of the series of globular beakers with appliqué decoration made in Central Gaul, a few of which are illustrated by Déchelette ((1904), Series A, 169-187). Déchelette includes one with five figures in an arcade identified as Vulcan, Apollo and Fortuna. The other two are male and female without any attributes ((1904), 179f., figs. f-j). Another example with a hunting scene on the upper part of the beaker has eight main figure-types including Hercules, Bacchus, Ganymede, the Laocoon group, and a pair of gladiators. Déchelette gives details of eight other vessels, five of which have five subjects, but all are different with no apparent linking theme. They

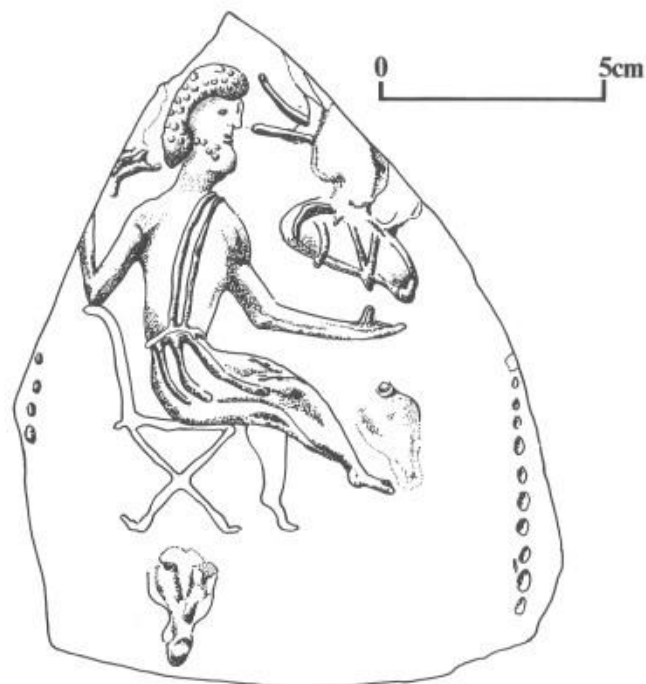


Fig 3 Drawing of the Cambridge sherd of Roman pottery

demonstrate the popularity, nevertheless, of Hercules and Venus. From this it would seem unwise to seek any particular significance in the grouping of our figures. A statistical analysis would show that some deities and subjects had a greater popular appeal than others (Audin, Vertet (1975), 121ff.; (1972)).

Figures in barbotine and paint on Nene Valley and other British colour-coated wares are not plentiful (Webster (1959), 91-95; (1966), 338-9) but there must be sherds in museum collections and from recent large-scale excavations, all of which need to be studied and published. Now that the Field Centre is well established, it may be appropriate to suggest that a full corpus of all the known material be collected and published.

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