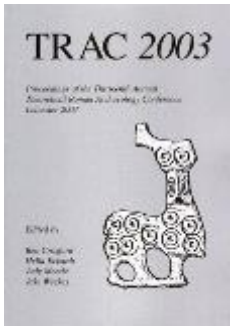


**Paper Information:**

Title: Some n
Notes on Spoons and Mortaria
Author: H. E. M. Cool
Pages: 28–35

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2003_28_35
Publication Date: 26 March 2004

**Volume Information:**

Croxford, B., Eckardt, H., Meade, J., and Weekes, J. (eds) 2004. *TRAC 2003: Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Leicester 2003.* Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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# Some notes on spoons and mortaria

*H.E.M. Cool*

One of the perennial questions that people who study Roman Britain face is to what extent the large quantity of finds we recover reflect real changes in the ways of life of the population. Was the material culture a veneer easily peeled away, or is it the sign of a fundamental shift in the way they behaved? If it was the latter, how far down the social system did it go? Were 'Roman' fashions and ways of behaving something that only the elite adopted, or did the bulk of the population aspire to them as well? Was this uniform across the country, or did it vary from region to region?

One way of exploring this is to look at utensils associated with eating. Food consumption is not something we do just to stay alive, though naturally that is an important consideration. It is something that is very strongly culturally conditioned. What is appropriate to eat, when it is appropriate to eat it and who you can eat it with are all things that differ between societies. Many authors have noted how deep-seated behaviour relating to food and drink is, probably because the rules governing it are one of the earliest things anybody learns (see for example Goody 1982: 151; Bourdieu 1984: 79). It follows that if we see the introduction and subsequent common use of a utensil that can plausibly be associated with eating, then we may well get insights into social change as it could indicate new methods of cooking or new forms of table manners. This paper is an exploration of how such an enquiry might be made using spoons and mortaria of the first to second centuries AD. Both are new introductions that can be associated with Britain becoming part of the Roman Empire, and their use by the native population might suggest changes in former habits.

## *Spoons*

The commonest spoon form of the first and second centuries in Britain is the round-bowled form normally known by the Latin name *cochlear* (Crummy 1983: 69 Type 1). These spoons are found widely throughout the empire. Their association with dining is established by their presence in metal tableware services such as that found at the House of the Menander at Pompeii (Painter 2001: 69 nos. M71–82). They are also sometimes found in association with jewellery and toilet equipment, as in the case of a group of items from the House of Aulio Trebio Valente at Pompeii which had probably been kept together in a wooden chest (Stefani 2003: 337, 343 no. IV.329). Spoons could, therefore, have been a multi-function utensil but here they will be regarded primarily as an eating utensil, a function that gains some credibility from contemporary literary references (Martial quoted in Painter *op.cit.).*

In Britain the form has been found in copper alloy, bone and, rarely, in lead alloy. The range of materials means that they would have been available to all levels of society and not been restricted to the richer elements. There was sufficient demand for these spoons for the type to have been made in Britain. This can be deduced from the fact that there are several groups with distinctive decorated bowls found in Britain which are virtually unknown elsewhere (Sherlock 2000; Jones and Sherlock 1996). At least one of these is certainly of mid

to late first century date (Sherlock 2000: 369 no. 8; Webster 1989: 66 no. 40). The distribution of the decorated spoons made in copper alloy is interesting and may provide some insight as to what they were used for. They are found throughout southern England and Wales and have a distribution that cuts across the strongly regional patterns that can be seen in many items of personal ornamentation and toilet equipment such as brooches, hair pins and nail cleaners (Mackreth 1996: 300, 1995: 959–61 nos. 10–18; Cool 1991: 175; Crummy and Eckardt forthcoming). It is possible, though cannot of course be proven, that had these spoons regularly been used as toilet implements, the normal regional distributions could have been expected as they might have been made by the same craftsmen that were making the other personal items. This might lend some support to the belief that in Britain they were primarily eating implements.

These spoons do not occur in large numbers in any one site assemblage, but they do occur regularly. The need was to devise some way of showing their incidence in site assemblages. The solution adopted was to compare their numbers to those of another artefact that was comparable in terms of size and the materials it was made from. The control artefact had to be common and it also had to be something that on typological grounds could be dated to the first and second centuries so that unstratified material could be used as well as that from well-dated contexts. This latter requirement was important as it meant that large groups could be assembled. The control artefact selected was the hairpin as these are made in both copper alloy and bone, and have well-dated typologies (Crummy 1979; Cool 1991).

The methodology was to extract the numbers of hairpins and round-bowled spoons from site assemblages where more than 15 hairpins and spoons were present (an arbitrary cut-off point). A site was defined as a place and not an individual excavation. It is appreciated that this may mask variability, but with initial broad brush analysis, it is often necessary to accept this as there is a need to identify broad patterns before going on to explore finer detail. The sites were assigned to one of five broad categories, which it was hoped would pick up a settlement hierarchy and possibly different segments of society. There were two urban and three rural categories. The urban category consisted of towns (*coloniae* and *civitas* capitals) and small towns provided with defences (following Millett 1990: Table 6.4). The rural category consisted of roadside settlements, settlements away from roads that appeared to be villages, and individual villas and farms. The last mentioned category was problematic because very few sites had produced enough finds to pass the 15 object threshold. The percentage of spoons in each assemblage was calculated and the results are shown in Table 1 ordered according to the percentage of spoons present. The source of the data is given in Appendix 1.

As can be seen in the table, if the only two villa sites that could be used are excluded, then this ratio picks up an urban/rural difference very well. This mirrors the difference between the two environments that can be seen in other areas of material culture. It is clear, for example, that active choice in the selection of both pottery and glass vessels was being exercised by the inhabitants of rural communities. Arguments that what is found on rural sites is just the result of limited availability and supply collapse when rural assemblages are examined in detail. There is a regular and disproportionate selection of particular forms on such sites, even when other forms would have been available from the same sources and marketed with them. One may note, for example, the regular selection of decorated samian bowls rather than plain samian cups and dishes, and the preference for large glass bowls rather than their companion jugs (for references see Cool and Baxter 1999: 92–3). One might hypothesise that people in the urban environments were much more open to change in even very fundamental matters

such as eating, and that people in the countryside changed their habits much less quickly. There is clearly a need to explore this over a bigger data set, not least to discover whether the Gorhambury pattern is normal for a villa. One might suspect not given the rest of the table. It does suggest that even simple methodology such as this using common artefacts might be useful in exploring the scale and location of social change.

*Table 1: A comparison of the incidence of spoons and hairpins (for the data sources see Appendix 1)*

| *Site* | Type | Spoon | Hairpin | Spoon % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gorhambury | Villa | 7 | 19 | 37% |
| Alcester | Small Town | 6 | 19 | 32% |
| Dorchester | Town | 4 | 18 | 22% |
| Cirencester | Town | 10 | 52 | 19% |
| Colchester | Town | 21 | 117 | 18% |
| Leicester | Town | 7 | 39 | 18% |
| Verulamium | Town | 12 | 77 | 16% |
| Canterbury | Town | 3 | 21 | 14% |
| Wanborough | Small Town | 5 | 52 | 10% |
| Chichester | Town | 1 | 14 | 7% |
| Chells | Rural | 1 | 15 | 7% |
| Stonea | Rural | 1 | 19 | 5% |
| Scole | Roadside | 1 | 21 | 5% |
| Wilcote | Roadside | 1 | 28 | 4% |
| Baldock | Roadside | 1 | 27 | 4% |
| Staines | Roadside | 1 | 27 | 4% |
| Gadebridge | Villa | 0 | 15 | 0% |

## *Mortaria*

Given the pattern seen in the spoons, the pattern seen in mortaria becomes increasingly odd. Mortaria are generally assumed to be an unproblematic part of the pottery assemblage indicative of the introduction of Romanised food preparation (Tyers 1996: 116; Alcock 2001: 117–8). If the works of Apicius can be taken as a guide, then mortars were required to produce purées, pound spices, make sausage meat etc. Some of the vessels even helpfully have graffiti specifically stating that they are mixing bowls (*pelves*) or mortars (*mortaria*) (RIB II.6 2496.3, 2797.4; RIB II.7 2501.18). Recently, however, some authors have questioned this (Evans 1999: 177). Indeed, the pre-eminent mortaria specialist in Britain has pointed out that coarse pottery mortaria are far from being a ubiquitous element of material culture across the empire, and that Britain stands apart as being an unusually heavy consumer of them (Hartley 1998: 209). This might hint that mortaria are not being used in Britain simply as kitchen utensils to produce Romanised food. This hypothesis is strengthened when the distribution of these vessels is considered, for they are found not just on sites where a 'Roman' lifestyle might have been followed (forts, towns), but also on rural sites throughout the Highland zone, a part of the

province which otherwise seem very little interested in 'Roman' material culture (see for example the comments of Evans 1995: 65).

Their pattern of use can be further examined by considering what proportion of the pottery assemblage they form at different sites. This is not always easy to do because of reporting conventions for mortaria. For a long time they have occupied a privileged position in pottery studies, probably because first and second century ones are often stamped. They are often considered separately and not fully integrated into pottery reports, and until recently were not always fully quantified. Table 2 shows the proportion of mortaria at six sites where the assemblages have been quantified by weight. The assemblages all relate to the second century. The first three are rural sites from the highland zone; the second three are urban sites from the midlands and south. As can be seen, it is not just that mortaria are occurring on the remote rural sites: they are forming a much higher percentage of the assemblage than they do on urban sites, suggesting a disproportionate interest in acquiring them.

This must surely cast further doubt on the assumption that they were all used as utensils in a Romanised kitchen. Interestingly, in the early days of mortaria study the assumption that they were for Romanised cooking was doubted. The founder of modern mortaria studies, for example, suggested that the bowls were used in cheese making with the grits forming a rough surface that would provide a reservoir of bacteria to aid the curding of a cream cheese (Oswald 1943: 46). Reece too has called for their function to be questioned rather than taken as given (Reece 1988: 30–2).

The best way of establishing what the vessels were used for would be a detailed study combining residue analysis and observations of the wear and sooting patterns (if any). So far, mortaria do not seem to have been subject to modern residue analysis, and it is difficult to establish wear patterns in any rigorous way as they are usually published in quantified type series rather than with detailed cataloguing of individual vessels. In such circumstances a detailed, quantified survey of wear characteristics is not possible, but an impression of the vicissitudes mortaria frequently underwent can be gained.

*Table 2: Mortaria as a percentage of total pottery in selected second century assemblages*

| Site | Total weight | Mortaria percentage | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bush Farm, Gwynedd | 2.9kg | 15% | Longley *et al.* 1998: Table 2 |
| Parlington Hollins, W.Yorks | 7.3kg | 15% | Evans 2001: Table 8 |
| Ochre Brook, Merseyside | 7.6kg | 25.4% | Jones 2000: Table 4.3 |
| Leicester | 245.6kg | 3.9% | Clark 1999: Table 15 |
| Gloucester | 29.9kg | 5.4% | Timby 1986: Table 1 Phase A4.4 |
| Alchester | 63.1kg | 3.6% | Booth *et al.* 2001: Appendix 4 Period 5 |

It is clear that the interiors often show considerable wear. Sometimes the wear is so great that a hole has been worn through the base that has subsequently been plugged with lead (Oswald 1943: 45). There are also indications that the vessels may have been used in cooking and not just in food preparation. Sooting has been recorded on the flanges of some coarse

pottery mortaria such as at Wroxeter (Timby 2000: 239 no. M6.32), Dalton Parlours (Sumpter 1990: 139 no. 29, 171 no. 37) and Catterick (Evans 2002: 333 no. M46b). Others show clear evidence of burning prior to breakage. Examples may be noted at, for example, Wanborough (Hartley 2001: 229 no. 13, 231 no. 17), York (Monaghan 1997: 939 no. 3403) Gorhambury (Hartley 1990: 195 no. 50) and Dragonby (Parminter and Hartley 1996: 565). More examples could be cited but the sites mentioned do show that the phenomenon can be seen in many regions and on different types of sites.

The combination of the various strands of the evidence suggests that mortaria may have had a variety of functions. It is possible to hypothesise that the function may have changed with the social group that they were being used in. The example that states it was a mixing bowl (RIB II.6 2496.3) was found in the legionary fortress at Usk and was an explicitly military item as it was the property of a *contubernium*. In such an environment its use in Romanised cooking seems reasonable. Within the early rural communities, however, there is the distinct possibility that some may not have been used in the kitchen at all. A noticeable phenomenon on such sites in the first to second centuries is that the inhabitants seem disproportionately interested in acquiring large bowls both of decorated samian (Willis 1997: 41) and of glass (Cool and Baxter 1999: 85), neither of which would have been used in food preparation or cooking. Such bowls could have served a role in those societies that may have been different to the roles they served in urban or military life, and perhaps on such sites mortaria were regarded as alternative large bowls. Clearly there is a pressing need for more data to be collected. Not only do the mortaria need to be fully integrated into quantified reports, but also wear and sooting have to be more regularly recorded. With such data it would be possible to explore their functions. Wear is consistent with their being used as mortars. So we need to know which sites have mortars that show high wear. Sooting and burning are consistent with their being used for cooking. Do sooted vessels regularly show wear as well? Are there any recurrent patterns with regard to the types of sites on which worn and/or burnt mortaria are found? At present all that is possible to do is point out the many questions that can be asked about mortaria. It is not possible to answer them.

## *A few concluding remarks*

This has been no more than a pilot study to explore whether objects associated with eating could be used to examine social change in Roman Britain. In the case of the spoons, the results do seem to show a difference between urban and rural settlements, mirroring the difference seen in other areas of material culture. In the case of the mortaria it has shown that currently, despite the large number of mortaria reports in existence, we do not really have the data to explore the matter usefully. This is a salutary reminder that the questions we now ask of our data are very different than the ones that used to be asked which often centred around "What is the date and do we know where it came from?" It is incumbent on all the specialist communities who generate the primary data of our discipline to remember this, and to revise their reporting regimes in the light of new enquiries. What these pilot studies have shown again, though, is the value of cross assemblage comparison. Such comparison provides the basic patterns about which more detailed questions can be asked.

## *Appendix 1*

Gorhambury – Neal *et al.* 1990; Alcester – Cracknell and Mahany 1994, Booth and Evans 2001; Dorchester – Woodward *et al.* 1993; Colchester – Crummy, N. 1983; Crummy, P. 1992; Leicester – Hebditch and Mellor 1973, Clay and Mellor 1985, Clay and Pollard 1994, Connor and Buckley 1999; Verulamium – Frere 1972, 1984. Canterbury – Blockley *et al.* 1995; Wanborough – Anderson *et al.* 2001; Chichester – Down 1978, 1989, Down and Magilton 1993; Chells – Going and Hunn 1999; Stonea – Jackson and Potter 1996; Scole – Rogerson 1977 and unpublished information from Nick Cooper; Wilcote – Hands 1993, 1998; Baldock – Stead and Rigby 1986; Staines – Crouch and Shanks 1984; Gadebridge – Neal 1974.

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*Acknowledgements*

My thanks to Nick Cooper for information about the Scole finds assemblage.

## *Abbreviations*

*RIB II.6,*
Collingwood, R. G. and Wright, R. P. 1994. *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain Volume II Instrumentum Domesticum (personal belongings and the like). Fascicule 6,* S.S. Frere and R.S.O. Tomlin (eds.) Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing.
*RIB II.7,*
Collingwood, R. G. and Wright, R. P. 1995. *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain Volume II Instrumentum Domesticum (personal belongings and the like). Fascicule 7,* S.S. Frere and R.S.O. Tomlin (eds.). Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing.

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