

AN UNUSUAL ROMAN SHERD FROM THE
UPCHURCH MARSHES

By J. M. C. TOYNBEE and I. NOËL HUME

INVESTIGATIONS, conducted in 1949-54, into the archæology of the Upchurch Marshes made it necessary to examine large quantities of unstratified pottery both Roman and medieval. Although the object of the field-work was to establish the nature and extent of occupation on two specific sites,¹ it was thought prudent to retain all surface finds that might conceivably have had a bearing on the problem. One of these unstratified sherds provides the subject of this paper.

The topography of the Medway marsh sites has already been discussed² and it is therefore sufficient to recall that certain stretches of the mudflats are littered with potsherds washed from rubbish pits and occupation-layers by tidal erosion. The fragment under consideration had, apparently, been exposed in this way and lay on a bank divorced from the main pottery-bearing area by nineteenth-century sea-defences. This was not a site on which finds were frequently made, although three late-second-century hoards had been found in the vicinity within the last hundred years. Two were recovered in 1864,³ one lying only 120 ft. north of our sherd's find-spot, while the third was not recovered until 1952.⁴

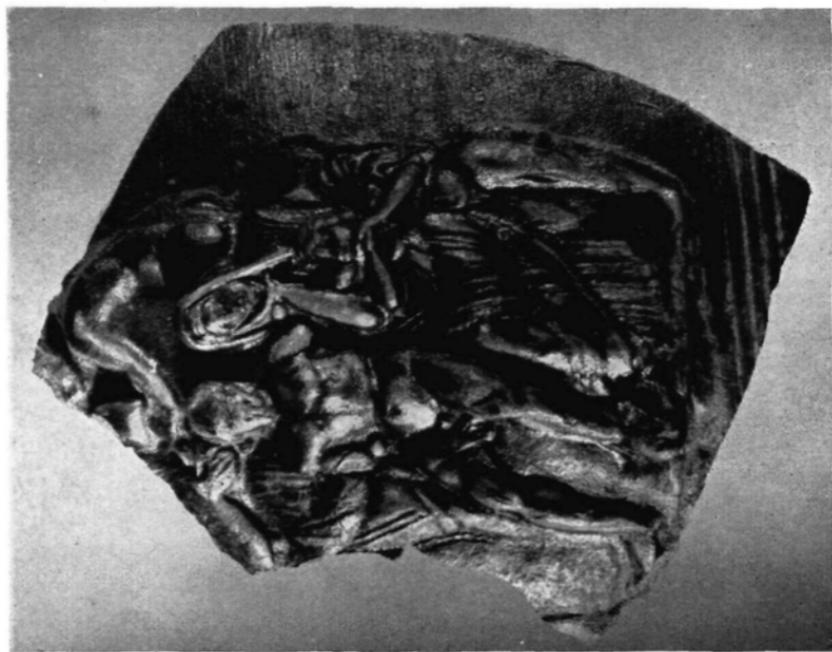
The sherd, Pl. I (1), lay face down on a much-eroded surface accompanied by a small number of Romano-British pottery fragments of indeterminate date. One fragment, however, proved to be of a well-known form and of a ware variously attributed to Upchurch, London, and Weymouth. The vessel from which it came, of grey ware with a high, black surface-gloss, was decorated with incised parallel lines and concentric semicircles, and copied Drag. 37 in shape. Such bowls are attributed to the first quarter of the second century. But this chance association cannot be accepted as dating evidence for the sherd under consideration. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the absence of wear on all the fragments suggests that they had not lain exposed for any length of time and that they may, therefore, have been washed

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, LXVIII, p. 72ff.

² *Arch. Cant.*, LXVI, p. 103ff.

³ George Payne, *Collectanea Cantiana*, 1893, pp. 74-76.

⁴ *Journal of Roman Studies*, XLIII, p. 127.



(1) Pottery fragment from Uppchurch Marshes (Height 2.75 in.).



[By courtesy of the German Institute in Rome

(2) Detail from a Sarcophagus in the Lateran Museum, Rome.

AN UNUSUAL ROMAN SHERD FROM THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

from a nearby pit or layer. It should be added that no such source could be discerned in the vicinity of the sherds.

The important Upchurch fragment possesses an elaborate moulded decoration and is of a fine-quality ware unexpected on sites where the normal Samian forms were rare and of sufficient value for even the poorest examples to be riveted when broken. All the same, the presence of two jewellery hoards and of roofing and hypocaust tiles, indicates that a small number of reasonably prosperous families lived in the neighbourhood.

Initial attempts to produce parallels for the Upchurch sherd met with little success; and when the fragment was shown to members of the staff of the British and Victoria & Albert Museums it was suggested that it was not of Roman date, but had probably formed part of a vessel produced in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. This unexpected verdict naturally made us hesitate to publish the sherd, for although it was found with Romano-British associations it was recalled that the marsh sea-defences had been constructed largely from eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century domestic refuse. It was possible, although extremely improbable, that the sherd had been washed from these recent deposits. The fragment has, however, subsequently been examined by various other authorities, among them Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Mr. W. F. Grimes, Dr. D. B. Harden, Dr. P. Corder, Mr. B. Hartley, Miss M. V. Taylor, Miss J. R. Kirk, and Miss G. Simpson, all of whom accept it as Roman, while differing in their identification of the ware.

The dull-red fabric is coated with a dark metallic slip varying in tone from grey to bronze, the moulded group appearing brown or bronze on the points of highest relief, while on the body the slip, being of uniform thickness, looks grey. The closest parallels in fabric and technique have been found at York,¹ Silchester,² and Alchester,³ but it will be seen that the quality of the moulding in these cases is inferior to that of the Upchurch fragment. This may be explained by the hypothesis that the moulds for the pan-masks, pine-cones, and gladiator that adorn the fragments from the above sites were taken from clay originals, while the Upchurch group was derived from a metal prototype.

The fabric of all these sherds has been described as "Samian" with a metallic slip, possibly in the style of Libertus of Lezoux. But this identification is accepted only by a minority of those who have examined the Upchurch fragment. The divergence of opinion in this respect raises the much larger problem of the correct use and interpretation of the terms "Samian" and "Terra Sigillata". While the former

¹ *Antiquaries Journal*, XXXIV, pp. 67-68, Pl. XV. Mr. Mitchelson is astray here in describing the fabric as Castor ware.

² T. May, *Pottery Found at Silchester*, Pl. XXXV, 1-4.

³ *Ant. Journ.*, VII, p. 172; (b) Fig. 5, 22.

AN UNUSUAL ROMAN SHERD FROM THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

is generally used to describe all Gaulish red-gloss wares, the latter is often associated only with "Samian" forms ornamented with moulded decoration. Yet "Terra Sigillata", when used in its true but wider sense, must embrace all pottery ornamented with figures in relief whether moulded, *en barbotine*, or applied. To this extent it would be reasonable to describe the Upchurch fragment as "Terra Sigillata", while refusing to accept it as "Samian".

It has been argued that certain potters may have accidentally or intentionally produced black "Samian" wares. While this would be the natural result of firing in a reducing atmosphere, it could have no bearing on the metallic-slipped products. Such wares were not fired in reducing kilns, for although the slip is dark in colour the clay itself remains red. It may, therefore, be assumed that the production of metallic-slipped wares was the result of the potter's deliberate policy and was in no way connected with variations in the firing of "Samian". On the other hand, the potters of the Rhineland were adept in the production of beakers of a basic red ware coated with a brown or black metallic gloss. It is more natural to seek parallels for the Upchurch fabric among these wares than to classify it as the work of an unconventional "Samian" potter.

It is well known that Rhenish wares were reaching east-Kentish sites in the late-second and early-third centuries, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the Upchurch sites were not entirely without a share of such commodities. While we may ignore the inconclusive associations already mentioned, it would be fair to suggest that the Upchurch beaker was in use at some time in the latter half of the second century. A later date is unlikely in view of the existence of evidence pointing to the abandonment of the site towards the close of that century.¹

From the provenance, fabric, and date of the Upchurch sherd we pass to its iconography.

The fragment comes from the main zone of decoration on the curved body of a jar or beaker:² and running across the bottom corner is part of a series of horizontal incised lines and ridges, which bordered that zone below. Above these lines and ridges is the major part of an applied ovoid-shaped plaque or "medallion", which consists of a group of figures standing out in high relief against their background. The plaque was probably cast in a mould and then fixed to the vessel's side.

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, LXVIII, p. 80.

² For the shapes of the jars or beakers from one of which the sherd is probably derived, and for the arrangement of their ornamentation, see J. Déchelette, *Les vases ornés de la Gaule romaine*, 1904, I, pl. iv 66; II, pls. i (I) 72; iii, p. 185, fig. k; H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of the Roman Pottery in the British Museum*, 1908, pls. XV, XXXII, XLIV, 72; F. Oswald and T. D. Pryce, *An Introduction to the Study of Terra Sigillata*, 1920, pl. XXXI, 14; pl. LXXXIV, 4 (=Déchelette form 74).

AN UNUSUAL ROMAN SHERD FROM THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

On the back of the sherd can be seen the indentations made by the potter's fingers as he held the pot firmly with one hand, while pressing the plaque in its individual mould with his other hand against the external surface. Below, and to the right of the group, where the edges of the applied plaque are complete, the junction between plaque and pot is clearly visible. A vertical groove cutting across the lower left-hand corner of the fragment seems to represent part of the left-hand edge of the plaque, which would, in that case, have measured about $4\frac{1}{2}$ centimetres at its greatest width. The top of the group is lost; but the plaque is unlikely to have been more than from 6 to $6\frac{1}{2}$ centimetres high.

At the base of the group is a strongly projecting ledge. Similar ledges are found under other groups or single figures, applied to the sides of pots.¹ The relief of the whole scene is remarkably high, the highest point being reached in the naked male on the left, whose left knee projects about half a centimetre from the background of the plaque.

The group is composed of five figures, three in the foreground and two in the background. The nude male figure in the foreground is seated towards the front. His face is damaged and his features can no longer be clearly distinguished; but he seems to be youthful and beardless. A narrow strip of material, resembling a bandage, passes diagonally across his right thigh. His right fore-arm appears to be bent at the elbow and foreshortened, his right hand being represented by a small round blob, and a similar blob, possibly representing his left hand, is present beside the right hand of the woman to the right of him. This woman is heavily draped and veiled and is seated three-quarters towards the left in an attitude of woe, with her head inclined and her right cheek pillowed on the palm of her right hand. Her left arm and hand rest affectionately upon the back of a slender, naked boy, who clasps his hands and leans with his right elbow on her lap. To right and left of the boy's head are rounded projections which may represent wings springing from his shoulders. The designer has misunderstood the seated woman's drapery. The close-set vertical folds of the skirt of her tunic are correctly shown falling below the transverse edge of her cloak, which is wrapped round her knees. But he has incorrectly continued those vertical folds above the edge of the cloak, with the result that upper and lower garments have become hopelessly entangled and confused at this point.²

In the background behind the seated youth a draped woman stands towards the right. Her head, chest, and shoulders are gone; but we

¹ E.g., Déchelette, *op. cit.*, p. 201, fig. 28; p. 202, fig. 29; p. 206, fig. 49; p. 210, fig. 67; p. 211, fig. 74; p. 214, fig. 79, etc.

² It seems unlikely that a modern neoclassic artist such as Flaxman, would have made this mistake. For the correct treatment of the drapery, see Plate, 2.

AN UNUSUAL ROMAN SHERD FROM THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

have her right hand holding a bowl or casket, which has, apparently, just been handed to her by a naked male figure seen three-quarters from the back, whose buttocks emerge from behind the left shoulder of the seated veiled woman, as he bends down towards the left above the heads of the foreground figures. Only a fraction of his head remains, and between his chin and his left hand is part of some object that cannot now be identified.

Déchelette's second volume provides abundant evidence that complicated figure-scenes, some mythological, others historical, others, again, theatrical in content, were favourite themes for applied plaques among Gaulish potters. Many of these plaques were true "medallions", regularly shaped roundels or ovals framed by raised circles or by wreaths.¹ But scenes of the same type also occur on plaques which, like that on the Upchurch sherd, were less regularly shaped and lacked this sharp definition of their outlines.² The scene on the Upchurch fragment is obviously mythological, and while we cannot claim to interpret it with absolute certainty, we may say that the myth of Venus and Adonis fits the situation here portrayed better than any other legend in the familiar repertory.

Venus is veiled and mourning because her youthful lover, Adonis, the nude youth seated beside her, has returned from the chase mortally wounded. Cupid leans on her lap, offering his mother sympathy and comfort,³ and the two subsidiary figures in the background are probably attendants, who bring appliances for soothing and dressing the hunter's injuries. The hunting-dog, normally present in sculptured, painted, and mosaic renderings of this episode,⁴ does not appear here. But its absence, while robbing our interpretation of a piece of clinching evidence in its favour, is by no means fatal to it. A detail which strongly supports this interpretation is the bandage (if bandage it be) on the youth's right thigh. For it was on Adonis's thigh, according to Bion ("The Lament for Adonis"), that the boar's tusk inflicted the death-blow. On the front of a sarcophagus in the Lateran Museum an old servant sponges Adonis's right thigh, as he sits with his left arm thrown round the shoulders of Venus, who mourns beside him⁵ (Pl. I (2)).

Apart from the misconception in the drapery, the Upchurch plaque

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 235ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 208, fig. 56; p. 211, fig. 74; p. 214, figs. 78, 79; pp. 215-17, figs. 80, a, b; 81, a, b

³ Cupid leans in a similar pose on the lap of Phaedra on Hippolytus sarcophagi at Leningrad (C. Robert, *Die antiken Sarcophagreliefs* III, 2, 1904, pl. XLVIII, 154, b), Arles (*Ibid.*, pl. L, 160), Paris (Louvre: *Ibid.*, pl. LI, 161), Rome (Lateran Museum: *Ibid.*, pl. LIV, 167), and Benevento (*Ibid.*, pl. IV, 169).

⁴ Robert, *op. cit.*, III, 1, 1897, pls. II-V; S. Reinach, *Répertoire de peintures grecques et romaines*, 1922, pp. 64, 65; D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, II, 1947, pl. 11, a.

⁵ Robert, *op. cit.*, III, 1., pl. V, 21.

AN UNUSUAL ROMAN SHERD FROM THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

is an exceptionally fine piece of work of its kind—graceful, delicate, and sensitive. The medallion is, in fact, so much finer than is the case with the general run of pottery medallions of this type, that the possibility suggests itself that it was made in a mould taken from a decorated silver vessel. Probably based in the first instance on some larger composition in relief or painting, the design reflects the penetration of Hellenistic representational tradition into this relatively minor branch of everyday Roman craftsmanship. Any attempt to date the sherd by iconography alone would be hazardous. As we know, Greek themes and classical standards of design and execution often flourished far into late Antiquity. All that we can say is that the style and technique of our figured plaque would be normal at any period during the second century or in the early decades of the third.

We should like to express our grateful thanks to all who have been kind enough to examine and comment on the Upchurch fragment, particularly those whose names are mentioned elsewhere in this paper. It should be added that the sherd is now preserved in the Ashmolean Museum.