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GERMAN MARBLED FLAGONS IN ROMAN BRITAIN

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The pottery described below provides a further contribution to our knowledge of wares imported into Britain during the later Roman period.¹ The vessels are all flagon or jug forms in a distinctive fabric with marbled slip, and are identical with types found in the Rhineland.² The German parallels for individual flagons were recognized by earlier students, and the opportunity has now been taken to collect evidence for the distribution of the ware in Britain. Selected sherds have been examined petrologically in order to establish whether they are imports from Germany, rather than copies manufactured locally, and to determine whether they come from one or more production sites.

The fabric

The fabric is very hard, smooth and slightly sandy, with characteristic inclusions of brown argillaceous material clearly visible in a fresh fracture. The surface treatment consists of a patchy matt slip on the exterior, with a highly distinctive marbled effect probably created by the use of a sponge. The slip is normally shades of orangey-red (Munsell 10R 6/6 to 5/8) but sometimes verges on buff (7.5 YR 7/4) or brownish-black (7.5YR 4/2 to N2/). Occasionally there are simple roundels or other motifs in white (10YR 8/1) overpaint on the shoulder. The core and inside surface varies from creamy-buff (7.5YR 8/4) to light red (2.5YR 6/8).

Thirteen sherds, from London (6), Southwark, Canterbury (5) and Dover, were thin sectioned and examined under the petrological microscope. All thirteen contain a groundmass of frequent subangular quartz grains within the size range 0.30mm and below, together with a scatter of slightly larger grains, normally set in an optically anisotropic matrix of light brown fired clay. Also present are flecks

of mica, a little plagioclase and potash felspar, some phyllite, clay pellets, and always a few grains of augite per slide. Occasionally pieces of siltstone and sandstone can be seen, as well as amphibole and volcanic glass. The range of inclusions common to all and the similarity of texture strongly suggest that they were all made in the same area.

The presence of volcanic glass points to an area of recent volcanic activity, and three regions at once come to mind: the Eifel-Rhenish region of Germany, the Massif Central of France, and central and southern Italy. In order to determine the likely source, a heavy mineral analysis was conducted on two of the sample sherds. In both cases this produced a suite of minerals dominated by frequent grains of augite, with lesser amounts of titanite and basaltic hornblende. This assemblage closely matches volcanic suites of heavy minerals obtained from Rhine sediments between Mayence and the Dutch border, and from the Lake of Laach in the Eifel.³ It also strongly supports the implication from the distribution of the pottery that it was manufactured in the Rhineland (see below).

Gazetteer of British finds (The abbreviations 'Gose' and 'Pirling' are used for the typologies quoted in note 2)

1. London

- a. Walbrook nithraeum, from a group dated to the second half of the third century. Rim and neck of a collared flagon, Gose type 262. (information from the excavator, Professor W.F. Grimes)
- b. Angel Court, from a group of late fourth-century or mid - late Saxon date. Rim and top of neck, collared flagon, Gose type 262 (T.R. Blurton, Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol Soc., 28(1977), fig. 11, no. 358; described as Oxfordshire ware).
- c. Tower of London, Inmost Ward, from a late fourth-century group associated with coins of the 390s.

- i) Neck and shoulder, collared flagon, with white painted roundels; as Pirling types 71 and 72.
- ii) Part of neck and handle, collared flagon.
- iii) Part of neck and shoulder, probably a one-handled jug as Pirling type 70; decorated with white roundels alternating with three dots.
- iv-vi) Shoulder, footstand and bodysherds, probably all from collared flagons. (Information from the excavator, G. Parnell)

2. Southwark

Swan Street, from a Roman ditch fill of the second half of the third century. Rim and neck, collard flagon, Gose type 262. (SLAEC, Southwark Excavations 1972-74 (1978), fig. 220, no. 1867; identified as a possible German import)

3. Ospringe

From the Roman cemetery, in a grave group with no dating evidence. Complete collared flagon, Gose type 262. (W. Whiting et al., Report on the Excavation of the Roman Cemetery at Ospringe, Kent (1931), pl. xxviii, no. 263)

4. Canterbury

a. Rosemary Lane, from a Roman ?ploughsoil containing a coin of Crispus, AD 323-4.

- i) Shoulder sherd, probably from a collard flagon as Pirling type 72. The white-painted decoration consists of a letter E followed by a dot; there is a single example of a type 72 from Krefeld-Gellep with an inscription, VIVAS TV (Pirling taf. 97, no. 3ab).

- ii) Body sherd, flagon or jug. (P. Bennett et al., Excavations at Canterbury Castle (1982), 133; additional information from N. Macpherson-Grant)

b. St. Margaret's Street. From late Roman levels, including one with four coins of the late third century and twelve of the fourth.

- i) Two shoulder sherds, probably the same vessel, as Pirling type 72. Three white-painted bands; scrolls, a wavy line, and roundels.
- ii-iii) Body sherds, probably from jugs of Gose type 265, with sets of double grooves.
- iv-v) Two bases, flagons or jugs.
- vi-xv) Body sherds, flagons or jugs.

c. Marlowe IV

- i) Shoulder, Pirling type 71 or 72, with row of white-painted dots. Very hard-fired; the fabric is grey in the core.
- ii) Shoulder sherd, Pirling type 71 or 72, with white-painted roundels.
- iii-iv) Neck and body sherds, flagons. (Information on b. and c. from Marion Green, Canterbury Archaeological Trust)

5. Richborough

From Pit 143, which contained mostly Flavian material but included some coarseware sherds dated to the second and early third centuries. Collared flagon, Gose type 262, complete except for the base. (J.P. Bushe-Fox, Fourth Report on the Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent (1949), pl. lxxxvi, no. 379)

6. Dover

Neck and shoulder, collared flagon, probably as Pirling type 72. (Information from the excavator, B.J. Philp; J. Bird, Kent Archaeol. Review, 63(1981), 55)

7. Lyminge

From an inhumation burial. Complete collared flagon, Gose type 262, 25.5cm high. (D.B. Kelly, Archaeol. Cantiana, 77(1962), 205; additional information from Mr. Kelly)

8. Lympne

Four sherds, flagons or jugs. (B. Cunliffe, Britannia, 11(1980), 275-6)

A fragment of a footring found at Springhead may also be in this ware, although it is a more pronounced footstand than is usual with the marbled flagons; it comes from a context dated mid-second to early third century (information from R. Pollard). A one-handled collared flagon from the St. Pancras cemetery at Chichester is typologically similar to the Rhineland marbled flagons but is in a very different ware, a soft creamy-white fabric with a pinkish-tinge, almost free of inclusions (D. Down and M. Rule, Chichester Excavations 1 (1971), fig. 5.20, no. 30e).

Discussion

The first full account and typology of later German marbled ware was that by Oelmann in his report on the pottery from Niederbieber.⁴ There are two classes of the ware, but the forms, fabrics and marbled finish are normally distinct; the two wares are fully described and compared in the report on the pottery from the Kaiserthermen at Trier.⁵ The variety found in Britain, 'marmorierte keramik', was distributed widely along the Rhine and some way down the lower Mosel, but is extremely rare in the Trier region. No kiln-site has yet been found, but the distribution indicates an origin in the Rhineland, or possibly on the lower Mosel,⁶ and this is supported by the results of petrological analysis. The second ware, sometimes described as 'geflamnte' rather than 'marmorierte' from the 'flame' effect of the finish, was made at Trier and the nearby factory at Speicher.⁷ Its distribution includes the Trier area, Belgium and the Ardennes;⁸ no examples of this ware are so far known from Britain.

Of the Rhineland marbled ware, the two-handled flagon with a distinctive collar or flange on the neck - Gose type 262, Pirling types 71, 72 - is by far the commonest form in Germany, and accounts for sixteen of the nineteen recognisable vessels from Britain. White-painted motifs on the shoulder are a feature of fourth-century examples,⁹ and the only other development of the form is a tendency for some later examples to have longer necks in proportion to the body height, and less sharp carinations.¹⁰ It is dated in Germany from the late second century to at least the middle of the fourth, but since it shows relatively little typological change, and since it occurs in quantity during the first half of the fourth century,¹¹ it may be that the starting date lies more towards the middle of the third century.¹² Of the clearly dated examples from Britain, two, from Southwark and the "albrook mithraeum, come from contexts dated to the second half

of the third century, the remainder are from fourth century levels.¹³

Two other forms, both one-handled jugs, seem to be present among the British material. The first, of which there are apparently two body sherds at Canterbury, is a conical jug with characteristic pairs of grooves on the body - Gose type 265, Pirling type 65, the latter with a plain matt red-brown slip. This is dated to the first half of the third century by Gose, but was considered by Pirling to be in use at least in the Constantinian period;¹⁴ the Canterbury vessels are both from late Roman levels. The other type, found probably at the Tower of London, is a round-bodied jug with an offset at the shoulder and white-painted decoration. The closest parallel for this is Pirling type 70, which is noted as exceptional in Rhineland marbled ware although the form is common throughout the fourth century; it is dated c AD 325-375 at Krefeld-Gellep.¹⁵ The form occurs in a number of wares, including Speicher 'flamed' ware, in which it is dated from the middle of the third century on the grounds of its rarity at Niederbieber.¹⁶ The examples figured by Gose - types 277, 278, 280 and 282 - range from the second half of the third century to the late fourth, and are all from Trier or the Mosel valley. The London example comes from a late fourth century level.

The distribution of German marbled ware in Britain is apparently confined to Kent and the London area, and is considerably more restricted than that of Mayen coarse wares.¹⁷ Given the possibility that Mayen ware may have been used to transport a commodity,¹⁸ and the wide range of fineware flagons available in later Roman Britain, this restriction to the area closest to the Rhine trade route is not particularly surprising. The specifically Kentish concentration might also imply that Dover played a role in Britain's Continental trade at this period.¹⁹ Apart from the geographical limitation, the marbled flagons are found on a range of sites: major towns, cemeteries and Saxon Shore forts.

Note

Mention should be made of a second class of late imported marbled ware, that known as 'à l'éponge', in order to point out the differences between the two.²⁰ The differences apply both to form - German flagons and jugs, 'à l'éponge' bowls - and to fabric. The 'à l'éponge' fabric is usually a pale creamy-yellow (7.5YR 7/6), and much more fine textured, and the slip is particularly diagnostic: 'à l'éponge' has a good smooth gloss, the German ware is matt and often harsh to the touch. The differences in fabric are clearly demonstrated petrologically: heavy mineral analysis of an 'à l'éponge' sherd produced a suite of minerals which included kyanite and andalusite.²¹ This suggests an origin in a tertiary region such as Aquitaine, which is the source indicated by the distribution pattern.²²

Footnotes

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1. For a full discussion of other imported wares, see M. Fulford, 'Pottery and Britain's trade in the later Roman period', in D.P.S. Peacock, (ed.), Pottery and Early Commerce (1977), 35-84; this includes a note of the Rhineland flagon from Southwark described below.
2. E.g. E. Gose, Gefäßstypen der römischen Keramik im Rheinland (1950), types 262, 265, 277, etc. ; R. Pirling, Das römisch-fränkische Gräberfeld von Krefeld-Gellen (1966), typentaf. 5, types 65, 70-72.
3. F. K. H. Sindowski, 'Results and problems of heavy mineral analysis in Germany: a review of sedimentary petrology papers, 1936-48', J. Sedin. Petrol., 19(1949), 3-25.
4. F. Oelmann, Die Keramik des Kastells Niederbieber (1914), 45-53.
5. L. Hussong and H. Cüppers, Die Trierer Kaiserthermen. Die spätromische und frühmittelalterliche Keramik (1972), 17-18.

6. The Distribution and probable area of production are discussed by Oelmann, op. cit. (note 4), 50.
7. Hussong and Cüppers, loc. cit. (note 5).
8. E. M. Wightman, Roman Trier and the Treveri (1971), 201-3.
9. For a description of the various white-painted motifs, see Pirling, op. cit. (note 2), 49-50.
10. Hussong and Cüppers, op. cit. (note 5), 18, type 40.
11. There are, for example, 29 examples from the Krefeld-Gellep cemetery (Pirling, op. cit. (note 2), 74-5), a complete example with a band of white-painted scrolls from a fourth-century grave at Neuss (G. Müller, Die römischen Gräberfelder von Novaesium (1977), taf. 11, no. 5), and sherds of some 20 from the construction levels of the Trier Kaiserthermen, c AD 300-320 (Hussong and Cüppers, op. cit. (note 5), 18).
12. The starting date depends largely on the Niederbieber material (Oelmann, op. cit. (note 4)), which is dated c. AD 190-260. However, some doubt has recently been cast on accepting this date too strictly: A. King, 'The decline of samian ware manufacture in the north west provinces: problems of chronology and interpretation', in A. King and M. Henig (eds.), The Roman West in the Third Century (1981), 55-78.
13. The pit (143) at Richborough with a marbled flagon contained pottery of very mixed dates, making a date for its filling difficult to estimate.
14. Gose, op. cit. (note 2), 23; Pirling, op. cit. (note 2), 72.
15. Pirling, op. cit. (note 2), 74.
16. Hussong and Cüppers, op. cit. (note 5), 18-19, type 41.
17. Fulford, op. cit. (note 1), fig. 2.
18. M. Fulford and J. Bird, 'Imported pottery from Germany in late Roman Britain', Britannia, vi (1975), 171-181.
19. The likelihood of a civil port at Dover is noted by H. Cleere: 'Roman harbours in Britain', in J. du Plat Taylor and H. Cleere (eds.), Roman Shipping and Trade: Britain and the Rhine Provinces (1978), 36-40. For a note on the recent discovery of a waterfront at Dover, see Britannia, xii (1981), 366.
20. Fulford, op. cit. (note 1), 45-7.
21. D.F. Williams, 'Un tesson de céramique (à l'éponge) provenant du New Fresh Wharf à Londres', in P. Galliou, M. Fulford and M. Clement, 'La diffusion de la céramique (à l'éponge) dans le nord-ouest de l'empire Romain', Gallia, 38 (1980), 277-8.
22. Fulford, op. cit. (note 1), fig. 4.