

A ROMAN PATERA FROM OLNEY

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A first-century bronze patera of Italian origin found in ditch-digging near Olney, the first of its type to come from a civil occupation site, is described and discussed.

In the autumn of 1977, John Adams, whilst ditching at Olney Hyde Farm, noticed a bronze bowl in the bucket of his mechanical excavator. Though he failed to find anything more that day, he returned the following day with his metal detector and located amongst his spoil the bowl's handle and foot-ring. Further search did not bring any more objects to light. Later Mr. Adams brought his find to Bradwell Abbey Field Centre for identification, where it was recognised as a bronze patera of Roman date.

The find spot¹ was subsequently visited by Dennis Mynard and Roy Adkins of Milton Keynes Development Corporation's Archaeology Unit. The impression in the side of the ditch where the bowl had come from was still visible. The bowl had been lying on a surface which was observed in the side of the ditch as a long thin layer of small stones, running for over a hundred metres. It had not been contained in a pit or other feature, and none was visible along the total length of ditch excavated. Roman pottery and tile were found in association with the stony layer, and more pottery, with tile and building stone, was scattered on the ploughed surface of the field to the south. Unfortunately none of the sherds is closely datable, but the ensemble is more likely to be third or fourth-century than earlier.

The patera was placed on loan to Bradwell Abbey Field Centre by the late P. Reynolds, then owner of Olney Hyde Farm, and Mr. Adams, the patera's finder.² It is now on display, after restoration in which the bowl was returned to its original shape and the handle and foot-ring replaced in their original positions.

The patera (Fig. 1) has a shallow bowl 235 mm wide by 40 mm deep. Its curving side culminates in an everted, slightly hooked, rim. On the inside a raised central boss, or *umbo*, is surrounded by shallow concentric grooving. On the outside there are concentric grooves on the reverse of the *umbo* and below the rim. A hollow for a lathe chuck is visible on both sides of the bowl, indicating that it was finished on a lathe after casting.

The foot-ring, 90 mm in diameter, was cast separately and fits around the indentation of the reverse of the *umbo*. The hollow handle too was cast separately. Both foot-ring and handle were originally soldered to the bowl.

The fluted circular handle, 115 mm long, culminates in a pointed dog's head with swept back ears. It was attached to the bowl by an elaborate escutcheon, on which some line and dot decoration is just visible. The overall length of the patera is 340 mm, and overall height 51 mm.

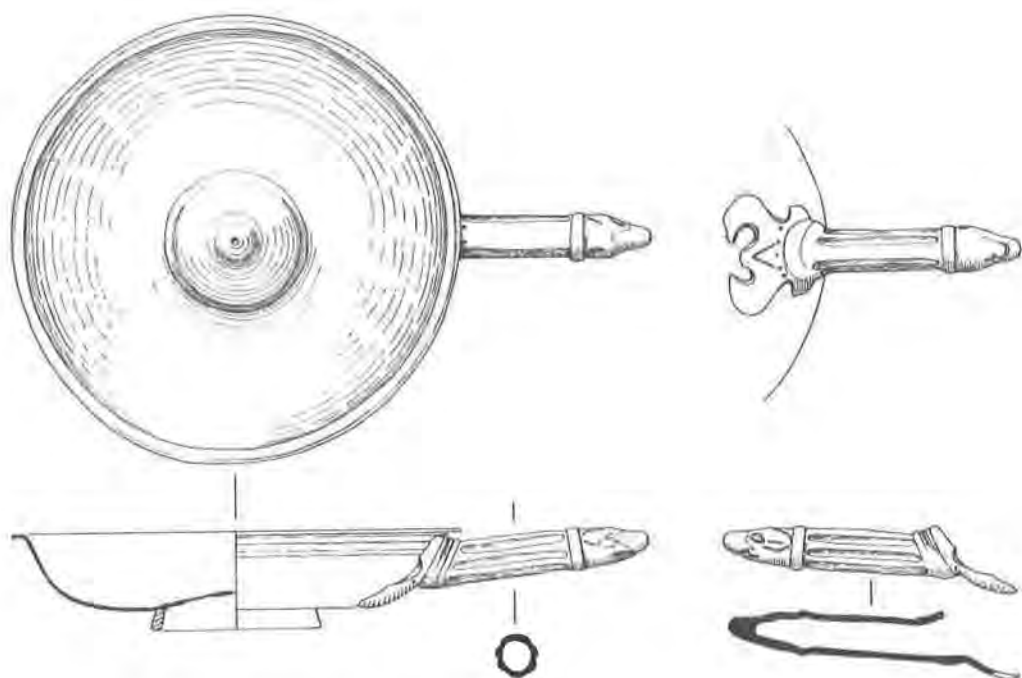


Fig. 1. Olney: Roman bronze patera from Olney Hyde Farm (¾ scale).

The patera belongs to a class of bronze bowls with fluted handles terminating in either ram's or dog's heads, manufactured in Campania until the end of the first century AD. They have not been extensively studied in their country of origin but were distributed widely throughout the western empire and traded beyond the imperial frontiers. In this country they have been discussed by C. N. Moore,³ and examples appear in studies of Roman bronze artefacts from the Netherlands, the North European plain, and Hungary.⁴ Unlike mass-produced products such as pottery, these hand-crafted bronze vessels are never identical, but examples with broad similarities to the Olney patera can be found distributed over all Europe north of the Alps. In England, the handle from the Santon Downham hoard is an obvious parallel in both size and design,⁵ as are two dog's-head paterae from the Rhineland, one in the Rijksmuseum G.M. Kam in Nijmegen,⁶ the other from Duffelward, near Cleves.⁷ Comparisons can also be made with a dog's-head patera from Környe in Hungary.⁸

The line and dot decoration on the escutcheon of the Olney patera is less ornate than most, but can also be seen on a ram's-head handle from Intercisa.⁹

Fluted-handled paterae arrived in Britain with the Roman army. Two ram's-head handles come from Roman forts: one from Hod Hill, in Dorset, occupied between 43 AD and 63 AD,¹⁰ the other from a well in *insula* IV of the supply base phase at Richborough, Kent, adjacent to the *mansio* and dated 44 AD to 85 AD.¹¹ They must rapidly have gone into circulation among the general populace, for as mentioned above, the Santon Downham hoard, considered to represent the 'stock-in-trade' of a first-

century metal worker, contains a dog's-head handled patera of this type.¹² Their arrival in Germany was contemporary; Eggers places fluted-handled paterae without *umbo*, which are considered slightly earlier than those with one, in his *Stufe B1*, which he dates 0 – 50 AD.¹³ The numerous Pannonian examples of fluted-handled paterae are also dated to the first century, but often survive to be found in second-century contexts, including the handle from Környe mentioned above.¹⁴

As Moore has shown,¹⁵ the distribution of fluted-handled paterae in Britain is concentrated in the south-east of the province, that part of it the first occupied and soonest Romanized, which would seem to confirm their early date. However, they were extremely long-lasting in use, and most examples have been found as grave-goods in the mid-second-century tombs of the Romanized native aristocracy. Some lasted even longer, for a ram's-head fluted patera handle was found with many other items of stock in the cellar of a blacksmith or metal-dealer's shop in Verulamium, dated to AD 280 – 315.¹⁶ Thus, although it seems certain that fluted-handled paterae were manufactured and distributed during the first century, it would seem that individual paterae might be found surviving in contexts dating even as late as the end of the third century. The pottery evidence from the occupation at Olney Hyde Farm suggests that this might be the case with the patera under discussion, a conclusion not contradicted by its worn appearance, as if from long use.

The function of fluted-handled paterae is unclear. It would seem most probable that they were intended for religious use, in connection with libations of wine. They are often found together with a small bronze jug or *oenochoe*, forming a set such as can be seen being offered as wedding presents on the embossed scenes decorating the silver casket in the Esquiline treasure known as the casket of Projecta.¹⁷ That the concept of their use in this way was understood in Britain is demonstrated by the appearance of a patera and *oenochoe* carved on opposite sides of an altar from Lincoln.¹⁸ However it is difficult to be certain of the use to which they were put by their provincial owners. Even Pompeiian examples have been catalogued among the general household bronzework, rather than the items of religious significance,¹⁹ and it is difficult to see the twice-repaired and heavily worn patera from Welshpool²⁰ as having been used only for libations. However, the frequent occurrence of patera and *oenochoe* together suggests in those instances at least that they were used for their intended purpose, for they have no other meaning as a pair. Suggestions²¹ that paterae might have been used as saucepans, however gentle the flame, can be discounted on the evidence of the Olney patera, for the melting solder would have caused the handle and foot-ring to fall off very quickly.

The Olney patera appears to be the first in its class to be recovered from a civil occupation site, rather than in a burial or a metal-worker's hoard. Without excavation it is of course impossible to be certain of the nature of the site, but to judge by the surface indications it seems to be one of the stone-built farms, not of sufficient size to warrant villa status, which are known from elsewhere in the Ouse Valley at Stantonbury and Loughton.²² Considerable light is thrown on the degree of Romanization in the Ouse Valley by the fact that such Roman practices as libations to the *lares*, implied by the presence of the patera, were in use even among the second rank of farmers.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

1. At the request of the owner the precise find spot is not published, but the N.G.R. is, to within two figures, SP 89 54.
2. Acc. no. 1977/190. The associated pottery and tile have Acc. nos. 1977/198 and 1977/207.
3. Moore 1973, to whose list (pp. 158 - 9) should be added the ram's-head patera from Biggleswade (Kennett 1969).
4. The Netherlands: Den Boersted 1956.
North European Plain: Eggers 1951.
Hungary: Radnóti 1938.
Tassinari 1975 does not note any from the collections of the Musée Nationale des Antiquités, Paris, but this cannot mean they are not found in France.
5. Smith 1908 - 9, 160 - 1.
6. Den Boersted 1956, no. 73, p. 28 and plate IV.
7. Fulda 1870, 78 - 9 and fig. 2.
8. Radnóti 1938, 90 and fig. XXXII, no. 5.
9. Radnóti 1938, 89 and fig. XXVII, no. 7.
10. Brailsford 1962, catalogue no. A132, p. 4 and fig. 5.
11. Bushe-Fox 1928, 31 and Cunliffe 1968, 236.
12. Smith 1908 - 9.
13. Eggers 1955.
14. Radnóti 1938, 89 - 93.
15. Moore 1973, Fig. 2, p. 156.
16. Frere 1972, No. 149: p. 138, Fig. 45 and pl. XL.
17. Dalton 1901, p. 62, pl. XVI and p. 63, pl. XVII.
18. Collingwood and Wright 1965, no. 247.
19. Ward-Perkins and Claridge 1976, no. 270, p. 274.
20. Boon 1961, 17, 23 - 4.
21. e.g. Toynbee 1964, 318.
22. Goodburn *et al* 1976, 337 - 8.

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