A HOARD OF LATE ROMAN PEWTER FROM FLEET MARSTON.

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This note reports the discovery of a hoard of pewter, associated with a known Romano-British settlement at Fleet Marston, found by metal-detecting close to the projected line of Akeman Street. The hoard was recovered in a fragmentary state; the minimum vessel count indicates an assemblage consisting of twelve vessels (four plates, six cups and two bowls), but in only five cases did sufficient remain to reconstruct the entire vessel form. The discovery is discussed in the context of later Romano-British ritual depositions of pewter hoards, although no conclusion has been reached concerning the circumstances of deposition of the Fleet Marston hoard.

Introduction

On 16th April 1995 Mr Tom Clark reported to the County Archaeologist that he had found and partially removed a hoard of pewter which he had discovered whilst metal detecting at Putlowes Farm, on the Fleet Marston Romano-British site. The site was visited on 18th April by Museum staff, and arrangements were made with the landowner Mr Jarvis to excavate a small area around the hoard and remove the rest of the metalwork. This further work was carried out on 20th April by a small team of County Museum Archaeological service staff, CMAG volunteers, and Mr Clark. Assistance with removal of the upper part of the overburden and subsequent backfilling was given by Mr Jarvis.

The hoard was discovered a little way to the west of a minor tributary of the River Thame. The projected line of Akeman Street as shown on Ordnance Survey maps passes some 5m to the southwest of this spot, although there is no trace of the road on the surface. The field is under permanent pasture: such is the quality of the grazing that the field has not been ploughed in living memory. There is, however, ample evidence of ridge and furrow over the entire field. The geology at this point is Ampthill Clay (BGS report no WA/90/61C); there is alluvium a little distance to the east along the margins of the stream which forms the eastern field boundary. The precise location has been omitted from this account in order to deter unauthorised access and/or looting.

Various finds of Romano-British material have been made in the vicinity. The spread of R–B material extends west-northwest from the stream along the line of Akeman Street for approximately 0.9 km, and also south along the line of the lane to Putlowes Farm. A linear settlement, perhaps a "small town" of Burnham's Class 1 (linear "ribbon" sites; Burnham 1987) is suspected.

On discovering the hoard, Mr Clark had dug a small circular pit some 0.5m in diameter and 0.4m deep, and removed the fragmentary remains of four small vessels, together with small fragments of pewter thought at the time to belong either to the small vessels or to one of the larger plates. He also made a sketch of the material in situ. All vessels had been inverted. Two iron objects were also recovered.

The excavation

A small area of 3 × 2m was excavated around the pit dug by Mr Clark. The topsoil and the layers beneath were scanned with the metal detector for further metal items. The first 0.2 m was removed by machine; the remainder was excavated by hand.

The following stratigraphic sequence was recorded:

0.0 – 0.26m	101 Topsoil: Very dark greyish brown fine, crumbly, slightly sandy loam.
0.26–0.31m	102 Layer of small rounded and angular stones in loamy sandy silt matrix.
0.31–0.43m	103 Relatively stone-free silty clay loam
0.43–0.55m	104 Angular stone (mainly limestone), typically 0.05–0.10m, but up to 0.20, in matrix of silty clay loam
0.55m (top)	105 Coarse sandy clay with c10% small stones, occasional pottery sherds on surface of layer.

The vessels lay on the surface of 104, and according to Mr Clark were overlain by 102. There was no trace of any cut associated with the hoard, but any traces of a pit may have been destroyed by bioturbation and/or the initial exploration undertaken by Mr Clark.

Given the proximity of the hoard to the projected line of Akeman Street, and the possible identification of the stony layer 104 as a road surface, attempts were made to discover the extent of layer 104 by augering in the vicinity of the excavated area. It was not possible to complete this work within the time available; the results were inconclusive but appeared to show that the limestone extended over an irregular area which extended at least 12m to the SW of the excavated area, and away from the projected line of Akeman Street. There was no evidence for a road ditch, although the frequency of augering would not necessarily have revealed such a feature. In the excavator's opinion, the stony layer might be more appropriately interpreted either as building debris (perhaps from a structure close to the road frontage) or as the result of sorting by medieval ploughing. In addition, it is difficult to believe that a hoard would be buried on top of a road surface which is likely to have been in use for a considerable time after the Roman period, and which for much of its length remained (although not, it must be admitted, in this particular section) as a major landscape feature until the present day.

The hoard

The uppermost visible vessels were removed from the ground by Mr Clark, who also provided details of the position of the vessels when in situ. The lowest two vessels (both plates) were lifted by museum staff and separated in the laboratory.

The hoard was believed at the time of discovery to consist of six pewter vessels: four cups and two plates. All the vessels were inverted, with the cups placed around the circumference of the two plates. Subsequent study of the material showed that a greater number of vessels was present than had been apparent at the time of discovery; these additional vessels were represented by fragments only and may indicate substantial post-depositional disturbance (?ploughing) to parts of the hoard lying at a slightly higher level in the ground. The minimum number of vessels is twelve: six cups, two bowls and four plates.

The vessels, and especially the cups, were all in poor physical condition. A large number of fragments were retrieved which could not be assigned to any particular vessel; however, the total quantity of pewter fragments seems to have been rather less than one would expect from the minimum number of vessels which has been calculated, and there has evidently been some depletion of the material.

In the following catalogue, * indicates that the vessel is illustrated on figs 1–2.

1* Shallow **plate**, with beaded rim. Profile probably originally similar to Appleford no 12 or 20–22 (Brown 1974), although the deformation of the vessel makes reconstruction difficult. Some faint traces of lathe marks on upper surface. Diam c.332mm; footring diameter c.120mm; original height possibly c.20mm *(SF 211)*

2* **Plate**, as no 1, but with wider diameter footring and two prominent lathe marks on the upper surface which are so conspicuous as to suggest intentional decoration. The lathe perforation is visible in the centre of the upper surface. The beaded rim is more prominent on the upper surface. The original dimensions have been obscured by deformation in the ground: diameter between 330 and 350mm;

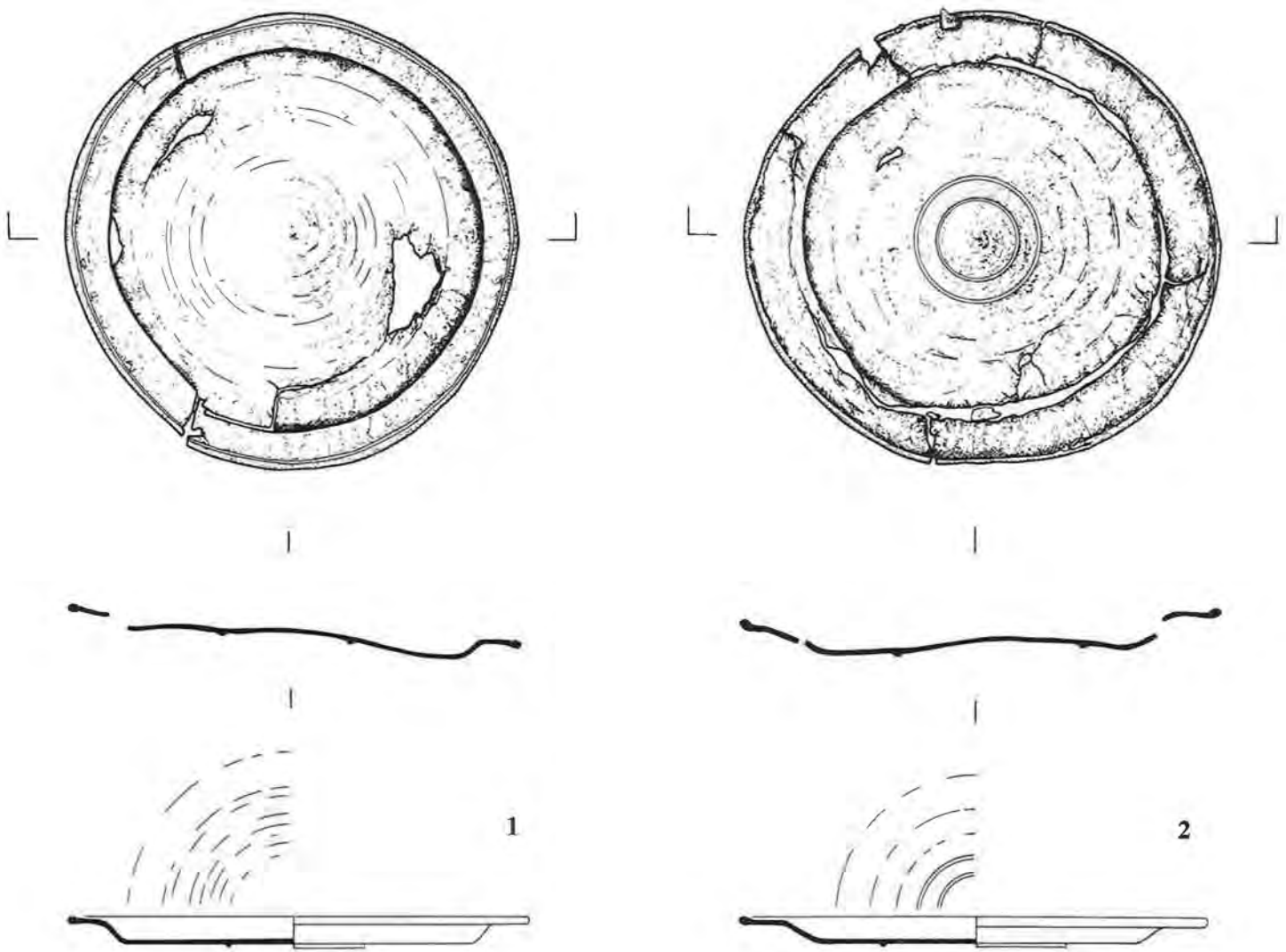

Fig. 1: 1 – Pewter plate (1:5); 2 – Pewter plate (1:5)

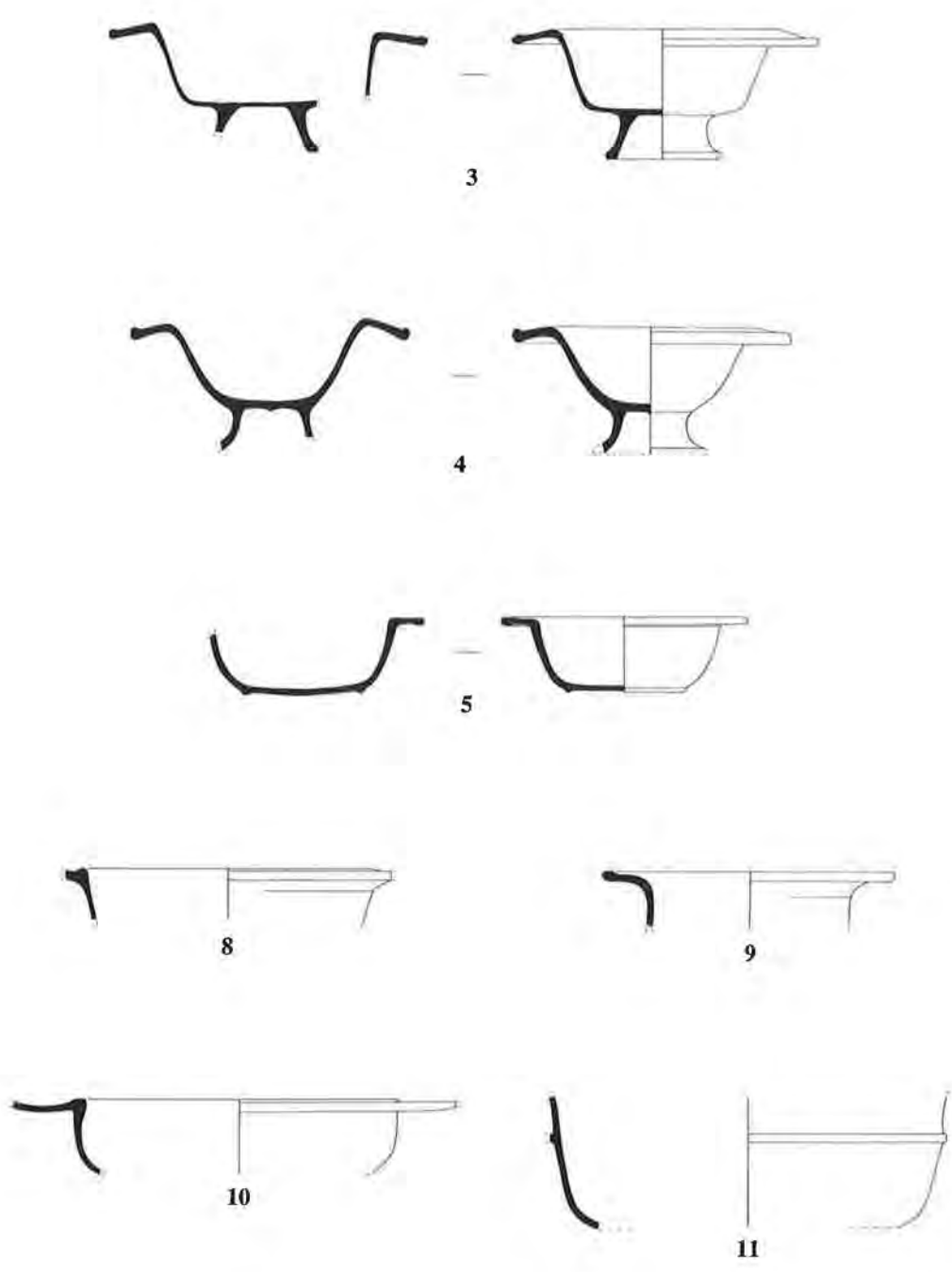

Fig. 2: 3–9 Pewter cups (1:3); 10–11 Pewter bowls (1:3)

footring diameter approximately 140–146mm; original height possibly in the order of c.20mm *(SF 212)*

There were a number of plate rim fragments which clearly did not belong to either 1 or 2, and which probably represented two additional plates; one with a slightly beaded rim and a diameter in the order of 380mm, and another without the bead and a diameter in the order of 340mm.

3* Small wide-rimmed **cup** with prominent footring. The original angle of the rim is difficult to ascertain, but the form was apparently broadly similar to samian form Drag. 35, but with a wider rim and deeper footring, soldered to the main body of the vessel. Diam approx 132mm, height approx 54mm, internal depth approx 33mm. *(SF 213)*

4* Small wide-rimmed **cup** with prominent footring soldered to the main body of the vessel, smaller than no. 3 but otherwise similar apart from a slight bead on the rim. The rim appears to be slightly more turned-down than no. 3 (cf Appleford no. 5; Brown 1974), but it is difficult to be certain whether this is due to post-depositional deformation. Diam approx 116mm, height approx 50–55mm, internal depth approx 32–36mm. *(SF 214)*

5* Small wide-rimmed **cup**. Slight bead on the rim, which is not as wide as nos 3 and 4. What appears to be a vestigial footring may be the remnant of a larger footring, but there is no evidence of soldering. Diam approx 100mm, height approx 31mm. *(SF 202/215)*

The fourth cup seen by Mr Clark was so badly damaged to be unrecognisable amongst the many small fragments of pewter brought in to the Museum. From Mr Clark's sketch, it appears to have been of approximately similar size to nos 3–5 – and probably no 8 below.

6 Footring and small part of base from **cup/bowl**, more prominently splayed than no 7 below; diameter at base of main vessel c.64mm; depth unknown *(SF 216)*

7 Footring from **cup**, slightly splayed; diameter at base of main vessel c36mm; depth unknown *(SF 217)*

8* **Cup** rim; small fragment c120mm diameter. This may be the fourth cup seen by Mr Clark at the time of discovery, the others being nos 3–5. Although it was not possible to recognise the vessel from amongst the many small fragments of pewter brought in to the museum, it appears from Mr Clark's sketch to have been of similar size to nos 3–5, but with a much smaller flanged rim. *(SF 221)*

9* **Cup** with beaded rim; incomplete profile. The rim may have been turned down, in the manner of nos 3 and 4. Diam c.120mm *(SF 224)*

There appear to have been six cups. Five of these are represented by nos 2–4, 8 and 9; the footrings nos 6 and 7 may belong to vessels 8 and 9, although the larger footring, number 6, may belong to the bowl no 10 below. The probable sixth cup is represented by an additional footring/body fragment *(SF 210)* from a small vessel which does not match any of the other footrings.

10* Fragment of **bowl**, with substantial part of profile surviving, but the base missing. One of the footrings described above might have belonged to this vessel, which may possibly have been reminiscent of samian form Curle 11, but without the trailed leaf decoration on the flange. c40mm depth; c 180mm diameter. *(SF 223)*

11* Part of flanged **bowl**; rim and flange damaged. Depth in the order of 55mm; diameter c 160mm. *(SF 222)*

Other finds

Two iron objects were found by Mr Clark in close physical proximity to the pewter vessels, although a direct association can not be proved.

12 Iron chisel, socketed, 248mm long, blade width 23mm. Probably a mortise chisel, cf Manning (1985), B35.

13 Iron strip, incomplete, apparently broken at either end. Max. length 351mm; section 23 × 5mm. Identification uncertain

A quantity of Romano-British pottery was recovered, none of which was demonstrably associated with the hoard, and which is not described further. Only very small quantities of tile were present, and two coins, both apparently early fourth century low denomination issues.

Discussion

Although this is the first pewter hoard recorded in Buckinghamshire, such discoveries are not unusual in other parts of the country (Peal 1967; Beagrie 1989).

Pewter is a generic term given to tin alloys, usually tin with lead or copper. The earliest pewters appear to be those described by Pliny, who makes it clear that tin/lead alloys were used in

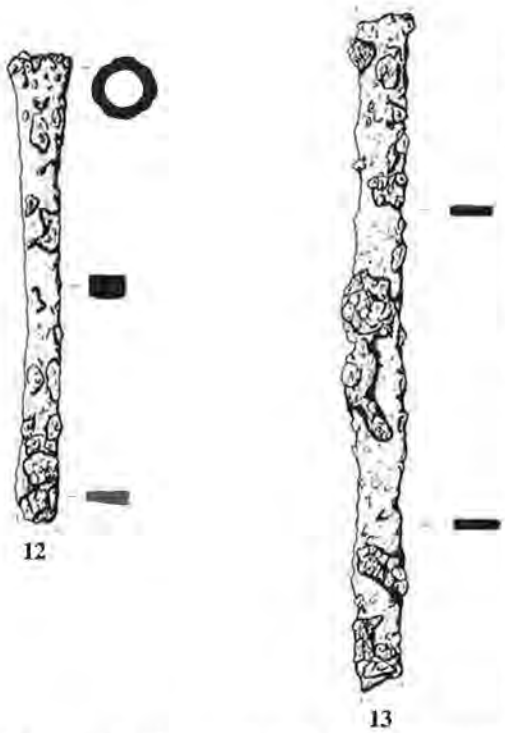

Fig. 3: Ironwork; 12 – Chisel (1:4), 13 – Unidentified strip (1:4)

soldering and plating, and that such alloys were widely available, often serving as substitutes for vessels made of silver or silver alloy. The admixture of lead and/or copper determines the physical characteristics of the finished objects. Medieval pewter was of two main types: a high grade alloy with 1–3% copper, and a softer pewter with 10–20% lead, used for hollow-wares such as candlesticks. Alloying with bismuth, which produces a harder alloy, does not occur until the late sixteenth century, whilst tin/antimony alloys (known as Britannia metal, or white metal) do not occur until the eighteenth century. The British Standard alloy is composed of 94% tin, 4% antimony and 2% copper or bismuth.

Romano-British pewters have a range of compositions. This does not appear to be related to the quality of the tin, obtained from Cornwall, which is of a high purity, as shown by the composition of surviving ingots from Roman Britain; rather, the choice of alloy seems to be related to the purpose of the vessel.

Pewter was manufactured using stone moulds, such as those found at the settlement at Camerton, Somerset (Wedlake 1958, 82–93), and which have been discovered at a number of other sites (list in Beagrie 1989). Some vessels such as platters were made from a single mould, whilst others, such as vessels with large footrings, were made in two pieces which were subsequently soldered together. The vessels were then finished by polishing on a lathe, and characteristic marks of this process may be seen on better preserved vessels – scribed arcs to centre the vessel on the lathe, and the perforation of the lathe itself, which would be plugged once polishing had been completed.

Most Romano-British hoards are relatively late (late third or fourth century), although early hoards are known from the Walbrook, London (Jones 1983) and from the Temple of Sulis Minerva, Bath (Cunliffe 1988). By their very nature, hoards are only infrequently recovered in controlled circumstances, and it is not always possible to determine the original context of deposition. Pewter hoards have been interpreted in the past as the tableware of the wealthy (or the would-be wealthy, who may have seen pewter as an acceptable substitute for silver), buried in times of crisis (eg Brown 1973); Branigan (1972) goes so far as to cite the hoard from Brislington, Avon, as evidence of the "barbarian conspiracy" of 367, despite the lack of a secure date for the context or of any convincing archaeological evidence for this event apart from (perhaps) activity at the forts of Ravenglass and Bewcastle on the northern frontier. Manning (1972) has suggested that pewter hoards were connected with religious activity, and this argument has been followed by the majority of recent researchers, including Beagrie (1989) who provides a corpus of comparative material.

Poulton and Scott (1993) review the evidence for the archaeological context of pewter hoards and note that where the context of deposition can be determined it often points to what they interpret as 'ritual deposition', either in a damp, watery situation (eg Shepperton, Surrey, (Poulton and Scott *op cit*); and St Albans (Goodburn 1984)), or in a ritual shaft or well (eg Brislington, Avon (Branigan 1972), Appleford, Berkshire (Brown 1973), and various Cambridgeshire finds (Lethbridge and O'Reilly 1933)). In some cases

the pewter vessels may only be one element of a wider range of deposited artefacts, which may include ironwork and leather, as at Thatcham, Berkshire (Collingwood 1981; Manning 1972), Stanwick, Northants (Neal 1989), and Appleford, Berkshire (Brown 1973). The composition of hoards, which rarely comprise "sets" of tableware but appear to have been collections of vessels accumulated piecemeal, suggests that some of them may be objects acquired over a period of time at a shrine or temple. One of the Appleford vessels (No 24; Brown 1973, 193) bears a graffito which implies a religious donation. Other graffiti on vessels from hoards are personal names, but these, too, may belong in a votive context. The cursive inscription on one of the plates from the Temple of Sulis Minerva (Brown and Sumter 1988), dated to the second century, and the curses scratched onto pewter tablets from the same site, dated to the early third century or earlier, and perhaps also the miniature pewter cup from a Romano-Celtic temple at Harlow, Essex (Frere 1989, 303) belong to the same tradition of ritual behaviour; here, of course, the temple association is most obvious. In this connection we may also cite the condition of many of the hoard vessels, which are sometimes defective in manufacture and rarely show evidence for the wear of everyday use despite the softness of the material, and the high lead content, which would reduce the cost of materials but render vessels less suitable for use at the table; these factors all point to deliberate, ritual burial. Nevertheless, the motives of the depositors of these hoards are to a great extent inscrutable, as has been recently emphasised (Johns 1996); a votive offering need not necessarily have been made with the intention of placing the object beyond all further human use, nor need deposition in a watery context necessarily have rendered it irretrievable.

The composition of Romano-British pewter alloys is discussed by Beagrie (1989). Vessels datable to pre *c*AD 250 are rare, but where they exist, and have been metallurgically analysed, the alloy has a high tin content; the Walbrook vessels are almost pure tin, whilst two paterae from Bath are also high-tin alloys. Although these pure or high-tin alloys continue into the later period, heavily leaded alloys predominate. The poor survival of early pewter may be a reflection of a higher incidence of hoarding in later Roman Britain, resulting in differential preservation, but the low levels of alloying in the earlier vessels may have been insufficient protection against post-depositional decay, unless buried in a waterlogged context (as the Walbrook and Bath vessels were). Selection of alloys of different composition for the various parts of the vessels also occurs, with a higher lead content in the less visible foot-rings.

It is difficult to place our Fleet Marston discovery into this category of ritual hoards with any certainty. The composition of the hoard bears points of similarity with some of those cited above: the absence of matching vessels, and the apparently poor quality of the alloy. Other comparisons are less easily made – the association with other categories of artefact (unless the two iron objects are indeed associated). In particular there is no direct evidence for any association with a shrine or temple, and the burial took place away from the damp conditions around the small stream near the find-spot, a type of location often favoured for 'ritual' activities. Nevertheless, despite the lack of proof for ritual abandonment, other explanations appear to be no easier to sustain. If the material was buried as a cache of valuables with *animus revertendi*, one might expect the hoard to have contained other valuables. The careful stacking of the objects in a small pile militates against casual loss, whilst burial of items no longer considered useful – rubbish, in other words – seems an unlikely explanation for a material which was so well-suited to recycling, unless this was a craftsman's hoard, temporarily cached, in which case the absence of obvious scrap, raw materials, unfinished items and manufacturing equipment must be noted.

It may be significant that the findspot is close to a road, and relatively close to a small stream; a situation which may have been perceived as having some sort of religious significance (compare, for example, the Thornborough temple, in a comparable location; Green 1965).

Archive

The archive and finds are at the County Museum (CAS 6140; acc no 1995.117)

Acknowledgements

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