

ARCHAEOLOGY

Roman Pewter Hoard

from our Archaeology Correspondent

TWENTY-THREE pieces of Romano-British pewter ware—the third largest hoard of Roman pewter yet to be found in Britain—together with various iron implements, some potsherds and a few pieces of leather and wood, were discovered during last summer at Appleford in Berkshire. This is one of the outstanding Roman finds of recent years and the entire hoard, except for one plate which is still in the hands of its finder, is now on show at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, where it is being worked on by Mr D. Brown, assistant keeper of antiquities. It is chiefly because of his work, the efforts of the Abingdon Archaeological Society and the farsightedness of the owners—the Amey Group Co.—that the hoard has been kept intact.

Apparently workers at the Amey Company's gravel pit at Appleford dug out last March a load of black peaty soil which they promptly discarded. During the summer, three collectors walking over the gravel workings came across five pewter utensils, four of which were taken to Mr Brown for identification. Realizing there could be more to be found at the site, Mr Brown suggested a thorough search to the Abingdon Society, which then found the rest of the hoard—eighteen more pewter pieces, some iron implements and other artefacts in a single conglomerate. The Amey Company, which owns the hoard, cooperated throughout the search and has now lent the objects to the Ashmolean Museum.

All the pewter—twelve large plates, a flagon and ten small plates and bowls—is remarkably well preserved, probably because the hoard was originally dropped in a well, all traces of which have disappeared, and has lain below the water-table ever since. There are, of course, numerous parallels for burial of pewter and other valuables in wells during Roman times, especially in the late fourth and early fifth centuries when Romano-British civilization was on its last legs.

Pewter was in all probability a Romano-British invention. Only two pieces have ever been found on the continent and they were probably imported from Britain. And even in Britain, pewter was only in widespread use in the south. All the finds so far have come from roughly south of Fosse Way, south of a line from Hull, through Lincoln and Leicester, to Cardiff. On the other hand, the steady accumulation of finds in southern Britain suggests that pewter tableware was not at all uncommon in prosperous households.

Roman pewter is, unfortunately, extremely difficult to date, essentially because its value and durability mean that it almost never turns up on archaeological sites—in rubbish pits and the like—which might provide a datable context. The Appleford hoard is probably the collection of a single household accumulated piecemeal and almost certainly at second-hand. The plain design and lack of decoration—only one plate (Fig. 1) bears any decoration—imply that the pieces could have been made at any time between the second and fourth centuries. At least one plate bears two inscriptions which are unlikely to be contemporary. One is the woman's name "Pacata" and the other reads "Verianus dedicated his purchases to Jupiter". If Verianus was a pagan, as this suggests, he probably lived before Constantine, who died in 337. Beyond

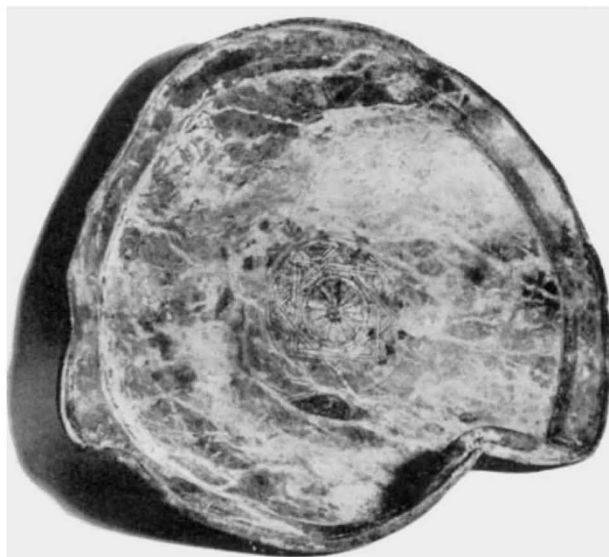


Fig. 1. Decorated pewter plate in the Appleford hoard.

that, there is no real evidence of when the hoard was hidden. The most likely possibility is that it was dropped in the well at the end of the fourth or the early fifth century, but there are no surface traces of any stone Roman building in the near vicinity of the gravel pit. This is surprising, for if the hider lived near the putative well and was sufficiently affluent to own the pewter, it seems unlikely that he would have lived in an entirely timber villa without even a stone bath. Unfortunately, the ironwork, which includes a fine cauldron chain (Fig. 2) virtually identical to that found at Great Chesterford in Essex, is no more easily dated than the pewter.

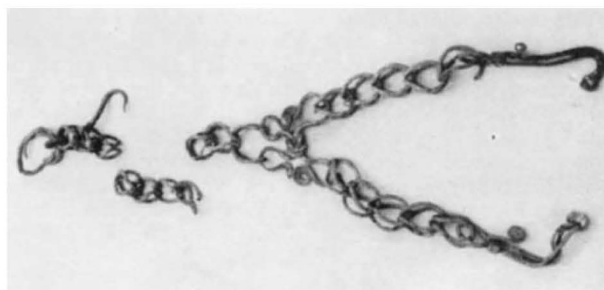


Fig. 2. Iron cauldron chain from the hoard.

(Photographs: J. W. Thomas, Oxford.)

The design of the Great Chesterford chain is in fact so similar to the chain in the Appleford hoard that they could well have come from the same smithy, but because such utensils survived for many decades this by no means implies that the two hoards are contemporary. Likewise, the other iron objects in the Appleford hoard, which include a scythe blade, knife blades, a door latch and some pieces of scrap iron, could have been made at any time in the third or fourth century, so it seems we will never know for certain why or when the hoard was hidden.