

A REPORT ON TWO ROMANO-BRITISH VESSELS RECENTLY RECOVERED FROM WOOKEY HOLE CAVE, SOMERSET.

by

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ABSTRACT

During January 2019, cave divers conducting line-laying training recovered two vessels, one complete and intact, the other was fragmented but mostly complete. An intact single-handed flagon, the form is of late third to fourth century date, broadly similar to New Forest grey ware products. The second vessel, an Oxford Red-slipped Colour Coat flask with a globular body, tall, narrow neck and plain rounded rim with a shallow groove below the lip, dating to the fourth century.

Although unstratified, it is highly probable that the two vessels are derived from disturbed late Roman inhumation burials within the Fourth Chamber.

INTRODUCTION

Wookey Hole Cave, NGR ST 5319 4801, represents the upper course of the River Axe, and has been extensively developed in the 19th to 21st centuries as a show cave. Originally, the cave comprised a small entrance way and tunnel, circa 85 m in length, which led to four chambers. Three of the chambers are partly occupied by the River Axe, the fourth was submerged.

The Cave has been subjected to several archaeological investigations, casual finds were made by William Buckland during his visits in the 1820s and William Boyd Dawkins carried out an investigation of sorts in the later 19th century. Herbert Balch intermittently undertook excavations during the first half of the 20th century, followed later by Tratman who conducted an archaeological excavation in Chamber Four during the 1970s (Hawkes, *et al* 1978).

The bulk of finds from the excavations belong to the Iron Age and Roman periods and include a Roman Republican silver denarius issued by Marcia, c.124BC, pottery from the early Iron Age, iron weapons and tools, bronze ornaments and Roman coins from Vespasian to Valentinian II, 69AD to 392AD. Investigation of the river bed within the cave by divers in 1947-49 produced Romano-British bowls and pewter vessels, part of an 11th or 12th century cooking pot, and two late 17th century glass bottles. Human remains have been found associated with Romano-British material. A silt bank in the normally inaccessible Chamber Four was excavated over short periods from 1973 to 1977 and the remains of at least ten individuals were found accompanied by Romano-British pottery and 2nd to 3rd century ornaments. It has been suggested that the burials here, and in other parts of the cave, have a ritual element, as they were almost entirely of young people and apparently not complete skeletons. The caves might represent a significant element in a pattern of Iron Age and Romano-British cave usage which involves various sites within the Mendip Hills area. The finds suggest that Romano-British occupation began c. 2nd century, continuing to the 4th century. Animal bones have also been discovered along with simple bone jewellery and tools. Balch recorded decorated pottery from Brittany, bone and antler weaving implements, brooches, earrings, a possible sacrificial dagger and coins (Simmonds, 2014).

During January 2019 cave divers conducting line laying training recovered two vessels, one complete and intact, the other fragmented but mostly complete. The intact flagon was recovered from between chamber one and three, lying under a large rock against the right-hand wall. The vessel was photographed and removed for preservation and identification (Thomas, 2019). The flask was recovered on a later dive from the resurgence.

When recovered the flagon had an angular piece of limestone with calcite, c.30 mm in size, lodged in the mouth, it is possible this may have been deliberately placed to act as a stopper. After cleaning the pot and careful examination of the contents that had been contained within the flagon, the sediment was identified as waterborne material, a consequence of the long period of time submerged. However, the flagon might have originally contained a liquid. The sediment has been retained.

POTTERY REPORT

M. Corney

The Romano-British Vessels

1. Complete single handled flagon. The fabric is a fine pale grey and micaceous (7.5YR 7/0) but the surface is now an orange/brown due to the local soil conditions. Source unknown but probably relatively local.

The vessel is 165 mm high, wheel-made and weighs 526 g. There is a pronounced cordon on the neck immediately above the upper junction of the single two-ribbed handle. The lower part of the neck is decorated with lightly burnished vertical lines with a slight cordon below.

The form is of late third to fourth century date, broadly similar to New Forest grey ware products, Fulford type 20, dated c270-350 (Fulford, 1975: 98) and Alice Holt/Farnham Class 8, dated c270-420 (Lyne and Jeffries, 1979: 51). A similar vessel was recovered from the Fourth Chamber at Wookey during earlier investigations (Hawkes, *et al* 1978: 45, Figure 12e).

2. Oxford Red-slipped Colour Coat (OXF RS; Tomber and Dore, 1998: 176). Bottle, form C1 (Young, 1977: 148). The vessel 146 mm high, weighs 153 g, has a globular body with a tall, narrow neck and plain rounded rim with a shallow groove below the lip. The external colour coat was probably originally red-brown, however, the surface now has been obscured by a dark brown deposit.

Young notes that this is a comparatively rare Oxford form, exclusively 4th century in date (*ibid.*). A close parallel for this vessel from a funerary context is known from the Lankhills cemetery, Winchester. Like the Wookey Hole example it is an Oxford product and from a grave dated c300-350 (Fulford, 1979: 226, Figure. 67).

Medieval Pottery

In addition to the two Romano-British vessels, two conjoining sherds from the base and lower wall of an early medieval cooking pot weighing 345 g were recovered (not illustrated). The vessel is an Upper Greensand-Derived fabric, similar to Rahtz fabric H (Rahtz, 1979; Allen *et al*, 2011), and characterised as a hard, sandy, finely gritted ware. The form is best dated 11th- to early 13th-century.

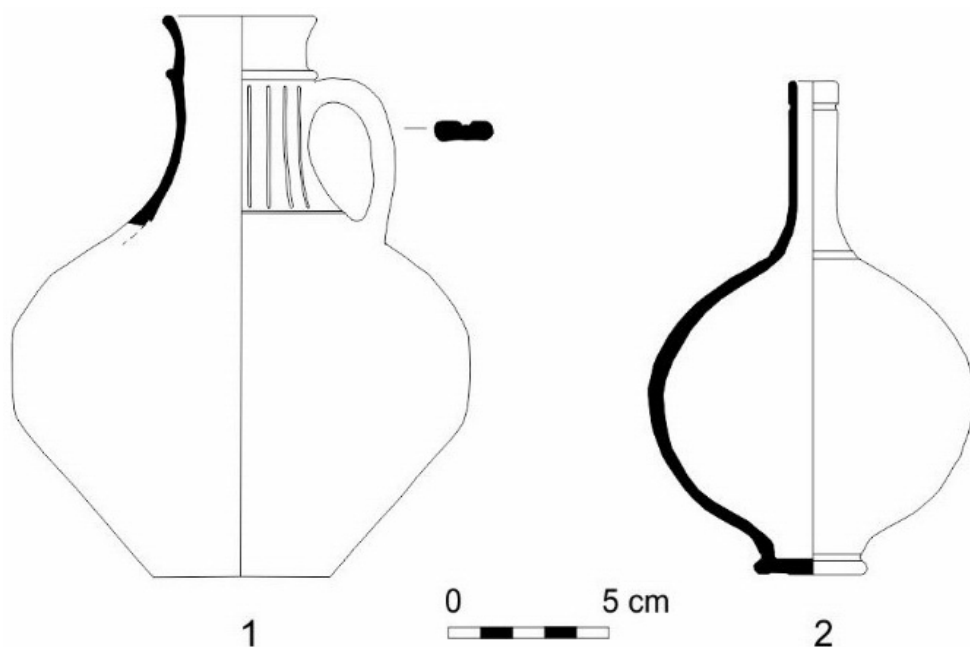


Figure 1. *The Roman pottery vessels.*

DISCUSSION

Although unstratified the two complete Romano-British vessels are of considerable interest and a possible context for their deposition must be explored. Stray finds of complete Romano-British vessels are comparatively rare and usually only occur in later Roman funerary contexts. Previous investigations in the Fourth Chamber at Wookey Hole have recovered *in situ* and disturbed late Roman inhumations, some probably associated with late Roman pottery vessels and coins as well as jewellery (Hawkes, *et al* 1978: 30).

Romano-British cave burials are known from several sites in Britain (Branigan and Dearne 1992). In a recent paper, which includes Mendip cave sites, Hutton (2011) has explored the significance of such deposits in the context of deliberate rituals acknowledging the earlier prehistoric use at these locations.

When ceramic grave goods are present, fourth century inhumation burials usually feature just a single vessel (Philpott, 1991: 110) and the association of flagons with late Roman inhumation burials is well-known across southern Britain. At Lankhills (i), Winchester, there is a clear bias towards flagons, and, more rarely, bottles, both in grey wares and fine wares (Fulford, 1979: 222). Fulford (*ibid.*) further notes that flagons become increasingly rare as grave goods after c350. At Lankhills (ii), flagons/flasks form just over 50% of all ceramic forms recovered as grave goods (Booth, 2010: 252).

It is highly probable that the two vessels are derived from disturbed late Roman inhumation burials within the Fourth Chamber. It is most likely that the burials belong to the

first half of the fourth century AD based on a comparison with other contemporaneous cemetery assemblages and, typologically the two vessels recovered fit well with this date.

It is intended that the vessels and other pottery recovered will be curated at Wookey Hole Caves Museum.



Figure 2. *The Roman flagon in situ in the underground River Axe.*

Photo: Michael Thomas.

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