The development and function of platters and dishes
By Ed Biddulph

The starting point for this study was Going's statement, with regard to Chelmsford, that, 'later Roman dish forms (incipient flange-rimmed, fully flange-rimmed and deep plain-rimmed dishes) do not fulfil the same function as platters, which as a class are quite absent' (1987, 13). This idea derives from Going's observation that 'most dish forms, particularly from late Roman contexts, are comparatively small and deep', as compared to platters and earlier dishes (Going 1987, 14). The extensive pottery assemblage from Elms Farm allows us to test two basic ideas. First, that dishes and platters did not serve quite the same functions, and second, that later Roman dishes (that is, those dated mid 3rd century onwards), became smaller and deeper, probably as a result of changes in function. Differences between platters and dishes were examined using the variables of diameter and depth.

Tables 00 and 00 give the mean diameters of platters over time, based on a sample of 175 platters. Just one continental platter record belonged to Ceramic Phase 1, and so was amalgamated with Phase 2. Similarly, the single Phase 6 local platter record was amalgamated with Phase 5. There were no continental platter records for Phase 5. The results suggest that continental platters were consistently wider than locally-produced types. The mean diameter of local platters was remarkably consistent through time, although it is significant that in Phase 5, when local platters were narrowest, the standard deviation was low. There is a narrower range of diameters at this time, suggesting that the size of platters was further standardized.

	Phase 2	*Phase 3*	*Phase 4*
Mean diameter (mm)	300	275	316
S.D.	55	69	-
Number of examples	18	16	1

Table 00. Continental platter diameters by Ceramic Phase

	Phase 2	*Phase 3*	*Phase 4*	*Phase 5*
Mean diameter (mm)	225	225	226	192
S.D.	50	49	54	25
Number of examples	21	60	33	27

Table 00. Local platter diameters by Ceramic Phase

Next, the depths of 68 platters were measured, using the drawn examples, and the observations separated into Phases. Means and standard deviations were calculated (Table 00).

	Phase 2	*Phase 3*	*Phase 4*	*Phase 5*
Mean depth (mm)	22.6	24.7	25	34.6
S.D.	7.8	6.0	6.3	8.0
Number of examples	23	21	11	13

Table 00. Platter depths by Ceramic Phase

It appears, then, that platters became deeper over time. To ensure that one or two extreme values, or outliers, did not cause the difference between Phase 4 and 5 means

and the relatively large Phase 5 standard deviation, two outliers (a 10mm deep platter from Phase 4 and a 49mm deep platter from Phase 5) were excluded. If anything, this confirmed the apparent difference. The Ceramic Phase 4 mean rose to 26.5mm, while the Phase 5 mean stayed firm at 34.6mm and this standard deviation was reduced to 5.8mm.

Comparing the diameters of continental platters and grog-tempered platters, it is apparent that the imported platters are wider than locally-produced varieties, and it is this difference that accounts for the large means in Ceramic Phases 2 and 3. The overall mean diameter of continental platters from the original sample of 175 vessels is 289mm; that of grog-tempered varieties is 217mm. It is also clear that grog-tempered platters were not full copies of continental prototypes, certainly in terms of size (Table 00):

Continental prototype		*Grog-tempered copy*	
Form	*Mean diameter (mm)*	*Form*	*Mean diameter (mm)*
Cam 1	286	*Cam* 21	228
Cam 2	283	*Cam* 22	241

Table 00. Comparison of continental and local platter diameters. Based on 18 continental and 35 local vessels taken from original sample of 175 platters

While local potters copied some elements of shape, the difference in diameter suggests that local potters may have been unable to reproduce full-sized platters. The skills and equipment required to produce fine, wide, shallow platters were perhaps not sufficiently advanced during the late Iron Age in southern Britain. The production of comparatively small vessels, while approaching the right shape, may have been the limit of the technical abilities of local potters. Rigby noted that potters local to Verulamium produced versions of imported platters, but manufacturing techniques meant that production was comparatively small-scale and the forms less standardized than their continental prototypes (1989, 152). The diameters of the local platters from Heybridge suggest that production was just as standardized, at least in terms of size.

To facilitate comparison, dishes were examined, again using the variables of diameter and depth. It should be noted that not all of the 825 available vessels were from closely-dated contexts. In such cases, the Ceramic Phase nearest to the middle of the date range was selected. Thus, a dish from a context dated from the mid 2nd to mid 3rd century was assigned to Phase 7 (AD270-310). The mean diameter and standard deviation for each phase was calculated (Table 00).

	Phase 4	*Phase 5*	*Phase 6*	*Phase 7*	*Phase 8*	*Phase 9*	*Phase 10*	*Phase 11*
Mean diameter(mm)	211	200	200	214	226	215	219	196
S.D.	43	34	51	44	47	45	50	40
Number of examples	7	21	34	139	164	156	75	229

Table 00. Dish diameter by Ceramic Phase, based on sample of 825 vessels

While both the means and diameter ranges vary to some extent, the figures do not suggest an overall and sustained change in vessel diameters. To investigate whether dishes became deeper over time, all dishes whose profiles were complete, were measured (this measurement being the internal height of a vessel from the point where

the vessel wall meets the base to the rim). There were no records assigned to Ceramic Phase 4, while Phases 5 and 6 contained just three and five observations respectively and so were amalgamated. The means and standard deviations were calculated (Table 00).

	Phase 5/6	*Phase 7*	*Phase 8*	*Phase 9*	*Phase 10*	*Phase 11*
Mean depth (mm)	43.8	42.0	38.4	45.0	49.5	42.6
S.D.	9.9	8.5	13.7	17.6	18.0	13.9
Number of examples	8	21	18	21	17	28

Table 00. Dish depth by Ceramic Phase, based on sample of 113 vessels

It would appear that dishes were made deeper in Ceramic Phases 9 and 10 (later 3rd to mid 4th century), occurring at a time when flanged dishes had replaced bead-rimmed dishes at Heybridge (ref. supply). However, it should be noted that the standard deviation is highest also for these Phases. In other words, the differences between the extreme values and the arithmetic mean are largest for these Phases. As just one or two outliers may cause such differences, the extreme values in Phases 9 and 10 (one in each) were excluded. The mean and standard deviation for Ceramic Phase 9, at 42.8mm and 14.6mm respectively, then resembled those for Phase 5-8. Phase 10, however, was largely unchanged. Such apparent differences are likely to be statistically insignificant. Admittedly there was a greater occurrence of deep dishes (that is, over 60mm deep) in Ceramic Phase 10 than in any other, but the majority of dishes in this phase were under 40mm deep. There is therefore no conclusive evidence to suggest that dishes became smaller or deeper over time.

In summary, local platters, while becoming deeper over time, were reasonably similar to dishes in diameter. It is a commonly held assumption that size is one determinant of how a vessel is used; others include context, practicalities, and individualistic interpretation (Willis 1998, 113). Considering these, we may propose a model; large vessels enjoyed communal use, while smaller vessels were more suitable for individual portions. At their widest, then, platters (mainly continental varieties) were probably placed in the centre of the dinner table, from which the participants of the meal took, or were served, their food. Over time, diners tended to eat from 'individual' sized platters, with food perhaps being served from large bowls, such as the wide-mouthed C28-C33 types, and even samian bowl forms (ref. use-wear). The bowl was a relatively minor form during the late Iron Age (Ceramic Phases 1-3), but became as common an open form at Heybridge as platters during the early Roman period (Phases 4 and 5) (ref. supply). It is speculation as to why platters became deeper, but may perhaps indicate a reversion to native-style foods.

As a vessel class, the bowl declined from the mid 2nd century (Ceramic Phase 6) to be seemingly replaced by deep dishes, particularly the B4 bead-rimmed dish. While it is clear that dishes did not radically alter in depth over time, the large standard deviations reveal that there is a spread of values in each phase. Put simply, potters made both shallow *and* deep dishes throughout the Roman period. It should be noted, incidentally, that there was no 'standard' shallow or deep measurement – observations in each phase do not fall neatly into two distinct groupings – and some dishes might have been used equally in eating and serving capacities.

Generally, local platters had similar diameters to dishes of all periods, but *were* shallower, though the difference in millimetres is perhaps negligible in practical terms. Thus, the evidence suggests that platters served a similar function to dishes. The development of samian vessels appears to be analogous. Willis (1998, 113) noted that samian dishes eventually replaced samian platters, but, while shape changed, the capacities of the vessels were similar, suggesting that there was no change to their basic functions. Thus, as long as the *capacities* of a platter and dish were identical (*e.g.* both vessels held an individual serving of food), the potential functions of both vessels were also identical.

The range of platters and dishes at Elms Farm perhaps allows us to trace evolving functions, beginning with the direct transference of Gallic (and ultimately Roman) uses, through to native adaptation, and concluding with dishes and a set of functions culturally distinct from the original uses of continental platters. Roman literature can perhaps provide an impression of these original uses of continental platters, in which it seems that social and aesthetic considerations were as important, if not more so, than practical reasons in the development of vessels. The Younger Pliny describes a 'simple' meal of several courses (3.1). The multi-coursed dinner is alluded to in another letter (5.6). In both, the emphasis would appear to be on choice for the diner and munificence on the part of the provider. Wide, shallow platters were ideal table-vessels, in which the food was presented and admired before being served. Thus, at Heybridge, the specific and restricted social context of which continental platters were a part became devolved with the probable immediate production of platters in local wares, incorporating a more individualistic and prolific use of the form, but with continental styles of dining perpetuating. These uses continued with the development of dishes.

Because dishes did not radically alter in size over time, they continued to serve the same functions until the end of the Roman period. This does not rule out the possibility that dishes *acquired* functions around the mid 3rd century, resulting in shape changes. The rapid typological development to which dishes were subject is critical to this argument. The dish acquired a flange by the mid 3rd century to accommodate functional changes (*e.g.* to support a B1 dish inverted to form a lid for cooking). By the end of the 3rd century, the incipient bead-and-flanged B5 was largely superseded by the fully bead-and-flanged B6.2. The mid to late 3rd century was, then, a period in which the design of the dish was perfected to suit its new purpose. The changing assemblage composition from Ceramic Phase 8 (AD210-260) to Ceramic Phase 11 (AD260-410) supports this hypothesis. From the mid 3rd century, two form types, the plain-rimmed B1 and B3, became more frequent, while two new forms, the bead-and-flanged B5 and B6 types, were introduced. In addition, the only identifiably new jar type was a storage vessel, as opposed to a cooking vessel (ref. supply). Ceramic Phase 10 (AD310-360) marks a sharp rise in the number of dishes, with the number of jars remaining steady from Phase 9. More dishes were required to meet their additional role. As if to underscore these observations, and revealing the increasing importance of dishes during this time, pottery-manufacturing waste assemblages from Area L, dated late 3rd to first half of the 4th century (ref. kilns), comprise 58% dishes (both B1 and B6) by EVE, compared to 38% jars.

It is entirely possible that this new role was kitchen-based. Studying the black burnished wares from northern Britain, Gillam posited that plain-rimmed dishes were

used in conjunction with flanged dishes to form 'casserole-sets' (1976, 70). Comparing the mean rim diameters of B1 and B6 dishes from Heybridge provides some statistical affirmation that these dishes – plain- and flanged-rimmed, respectively – were indeed used together. B1 dishes dated mid 3rd century onwards have an average diameter of 197mm; that of B6 dishes is 204mm. Some small difference between them is to be expected since the measurements from B6 dishes are taken from the tip of the flange on one side to that on the other. The rim diameter of the B1 dish needs only to extend beyond the bead of the B6 dish. Examples of the likely use of pairs of dishes in sets are demonstrated figuratively in Gillam (1976, fig.6.89-91).

In this study, the development and function of platters and dishes have been examined. While there are undoubtedly size differences between the two vessel classes, it is probable that they effectively served the same functions. It is more certain that dishes did not radically alter over time, but acquired, rather than changed, functions. Future studies could examine whether flanged dishes were consistently deeper than plain-rimmed dishes during the later 3rd and 4th centuries. If so, this would link shape and size and strengthen the belief that flanged dishes were made for a specific purpose. Examination of signs of cooking, for example burning and residues, might also prove instructive.