

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXIX

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IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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Published for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (incorporating the Cambs and
Hunts Archaeological Society) by Imray Laurie Norie and Wilson Ltd, Wych House,
Saint Ives, Huntingdon

ISSN 0309-3603

Printed in Great Britain at the University Library, Cambridge.

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SOME ROMAN MIRRORS AT CAMBRIDGE

G. Lloyd-Morgan

Among the collections of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge are five Roman mirrors. The first, a damaged rectangular mirror from Malton has been on public display for some time. The other four came to light recently among other classical mirrors, during reorganisation. Although this group is small compared to the numbers found in some other collections in this country, it represents most of the basic forms of metal mirrors that were produced during the first three centuries of the Roman Empire.

The rectangular mirror, measuring 12.9 x 9.1 cm., found at Malton in 1913 and formerly part of the Evans collection, is one of the simplest forms of mirror, which has been found in virtually every province of the Empire and outside the *limes*. Like most mirrors it was made of a brittle high-percentage tin bronze which gives a clean fracture when it breaks. To avoid damage, these mirrors were usually encased in a frame or box of wood which was probably attractively carved and decorated. A large portion of such a frame was found with an incomplete rectangular mirror during rescue excavations at St. Lawrence Road, Towcester, and measured roughly 12 x 11 cm., about 1½ cm. larger in each direction than the mirror, and was about 0.5 cm. thick. Even less common is the report of traces of a leather case found on one of the mirrors from a grave in the St. Pancras cemetery, Chichester in the 1960's.¹ Well over 40 rectangular mirrors have now been found in this country in varying states of completeness. So far the Malton mirror is Cambridgeshire's only piece. It was probably made during the first century A.D., though it could have been in circulation as a family treasure for many years before being lost.

The four new mirrors in the collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology are numbered Z.23216 a/d and are unprovenanced. They are all of continental manufacture, and although some would not be out of place on a Romano-British site, they are more likely to have been found elsewhere.

The small mirror disc (Z.23216.a), diameter 8.9 cm., with a decorative border of holes around the edge is, like the rectangular mirror, one of the more commonly found types. The edge, however, is not infrequently found damaged, and in many cases the handle which had been soldered on at the point where the holes cease, may have been lost. There is a small, though somewhat damaged, series from the cemeteries at Colchester. Two from the Pollexfen collection are now in the British Museum, the other three in the Colchester and Essex Museum. One of the earliest recorded pieces from this country, now in Norwich Castle Museum (no. 717.76.94), was found at Caistor by Norwich in 1837 and exhibited by Robert Fitch at the Archaeological

Institute on May 1st 1857.² It is a little larger than the piece now in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and has a diameter of 9.4 cm. The latter is virtually complete apart from the loss of a little of the edge and its handle. It still has traces of the silvering or tinning which was used to give the finished mirror a good reflecting surface. Hand mirrors of this type appear to have been mainly produced in Northern Italy in imitation of the large ornate silver prototypes such as have been found in Campania.³ Some smaller, less well balanced pieces may have been made elsewhere, copying these Italian imports, but so far this is no more than an hypothesis. Since the Campania pieces appear to have been made during the last years of the first century B.C. or early first century A.D., the smaller silvered bronze pieces were probably produced fairly soon afterwards, and have been found in graves in the northern provinces from the time of Claudius onwards.⁴ There is no evidence to suggest just when they ceased to be manufactured.

The large fragment of mirror disc with a serrated or radiate edge (Z.23216.b), which would have had a diameter of 14.8 cm. maximum, is a much rarer find. Only 48 have so far been recorded and none have been found in Britain. The greatest concentration, some 35, has been found in Italy, spreading into Provence, up to Carnuntum, and down the Rhine valley. A couple of examples have been found outside the *limes*, the first in one of the princely graves at Lübsow,⁵ the other, a fragment, in the Viking settlement at Paviken,⁶ which could well have been plunder from a raid on a similar early tomb. With so few examples, most of them without properly recorded contexts, it is not possible to date these mirrors accurately except by comparison with the more elaborate ones from Pompeii and Herculaneum,³ which, like the mirrors in the previous group, seem to have been made from some time during the early years of the first century A.D.⁷ Each mirror is a little different from the rest, and it seems likely that a plain disc was first cast and turned and then the border of decorative rays cut out as either taste or inclination led. The difficulties of handling the rather brittle metal and the greater length of time needed to produce these rays, rather than the simpler effects produced by drilling a border of holes, or hatching the edge of the disc, probably led fairly quickly to the discontinuation of this type of decoration. Since no mirrors of this type have been found in Britain, it could well be that they had long gone out of production before the Claudian invasion had started, even though some examples were still being used by families in the Rhineland and elsewhere until the end of the century.

The most complete of the Cambridge mirrors is a small piece some 9.3 cm. in diameter (Z.23216.c), which was protected by a slightly larger lid, diameter 9.5 cm. It would originally have been hinged, with a small catch diametrically opposite. Of the little handles which would have fitted near the catch, on the upper side of the lid and on the concave base of the mirror, only one leaf shaped solder plate now remains. The Roman lid mirror is a direct descendant of the large bronze ones used by the Greeks from about the fourth century B.C. onwards, but, unlike their Hellenistic prototype, they are lighter, more delicate, and for the most part undecorated apart from a lightly turned series of concentric circles placed at intervals between the edge and the centre.

Unlike other Roman mirrors, the bronze alloy used was much lower in its percentage tin content to allow for easier casting and turning of the sometimes heavily convex mirror and lid. The main area of production and circulation of these pieces is southern France, with over 18% of the total coming from Vaison la Romaine.⁸ Unfortunately, very few are dated, but it seems most likely that they were made during the first century, starting with a rather heavy box-shaped lid over a relatively flat mirror disc. The mirror then became smaller and more convex, and had a small lip to prevent it falling into the depth of the lid and getting jammed, and the lid itself had a profile more closely matching the mirror. It is this form which can be seen in the Cambridge mirror, rather than the final version where the curvature of both sections is considerably exaggerated so that the mirror reflects the whole of the face within its small diameter. This final version achieved greater commercial success outside France than its precursors, with items finding their way into Italy, the Danubian provinces, the Rhineland and Britain. It is probably a mirror of this type which is shown on some statuettes of Venus, where the goddess holds it open, giving a characteristic figure-of-eight shaped outline, whilst rearranging her hair and admiring her own reflection.⁹

The final mirror among the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology pieces, is a delightful little disc mirror with a slightly eccentric outline giving a diameter of ca. 6.6 - 6.8 cm. (Z.23216.d). The reflecting side is just slightly curved, the back has a low convex moulding as a border, limited by two concentric circles. Within this are just the faintest traces of what was probably a neat little handle across the back, after the style of the mirror found in the Sempelveld sarcophagus in the Netherlands.¹⁰ The date of these types of mirror, which are made both of silver and heavily silvered bronze, as is the Cambridge piece, is uncertain as they have turned up mainly in contexts dating to the second and third century in the north western provinces, and appear in toilet scenes on funerary monuments during the same period. About 40% of the total number recorded have been found in the region of the Lower Rhine, and could well have been made there, though other examples are known from Turkey, the Kertch and Italy.

The collection of Roman mirrors from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology is thus of considerable interest, with its range of common and rarer types from workshops in Italy and the provinces, from the early first century to the second and third centuries A.D.

NOTES

1. A. Down and M. Rule *Chichester Excavations I* (Chichester 1971), p. 80, 100, Grave 87c.
2. R. Fitch, *Archaeological Journal*, 14 (1857), p. 287-8; 'Roman Speculum found at Caistor by Norwich' *Norfolk Archaeology*, 5, (1859) p. 271-6.
3. G. Lloyd-Morgan 'The Antecedents and Development of the Roman Hand Mirror', *Papers in Italian Archaeology I* ed. H. McK. Blake, T. W. Potter, D. B. Whitehouse, *B.A.R. Suppl. Ser. no. 41* (1978) p. 227-235.
4. G. Lloyd-Morgan 'Note on some Mirrors in the Museo Archeologico, Brescia', *Commentari dell'Ateneo di Brescia*, 174 (1975) p. 107-116 (p. 114 and note 26).

5. E. Pernice 'Der Grabfund von Lübsow bei Greifenberg i.P.' *Praehistorische Zeitschrift*, 4 (1912) p. 126-148 (p. 127, 140-2, Abb. 8).
6. J. P. Lamm 'En Spegeln från Paviken' *Fornvännen*, 68 (1971) p. 48-52; with G. Lloyd-Morgan 'En Spegeln från Helgö och nytt om Spegeln från Paviken' *Fornvännen* 69 (1974) p. 198-201.
7. G. Lloyd-Morgan 'A New Hand Mirror from Roman Libya' *Ann. Rep. Soc. Libyan Studies*, 7 (1975-6) p. 23-5.
8. J. Sautel *Vaison dans l'Antiquité* (Lyons 1927) Vol. II p. 298-311.
9. G. Lloyd-Morgan 'A Bronze Statuette from London Bridge' *Ant. J.* 54 (1974) p. 85-6 Pl. XXVIIIb.
10. J. Holwerda 'Romeinsche Sarcophaag uit Simpelveld' *OMROL* Suppl. 12, (1931), p. 27-48, Afb. no. j;
G. Lloyd-Morgan 'Some Bronze Mirrors in the Collections of the Rijksmuseum G. M. Kam, Nijmegen' *Bull. Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Hist.* 46, (Brussels 1974) p. 43-51, (p. 47-8, fig. 6, 7).

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Price £4.00 net for members, £5.50 for non-members

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