

OBSERVATIONS ON ORNAMENTS OCCURRING UPON SAMIAN  
WARE, AND SUPPOSED TO BE CONNECTED WITH THE  
GYMNASTIC EXERCISES OF THE ROMANS.

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THE curious devices and representations of mythological or popular subjects, which occur in great variety amongst ornaments in low relief introduced upon vessels of the fine red ware commonly designated Samian, have long attracted the notice of antiquaries in all countries where vestiges of Roman occupation are found. It is not within the scope of the present brief notices to offer any remarks upon the history and origin of these beautiful ancient wares, of which fragments in greater or less abundance appear to be brought to light in every locality where Roman establishments have been traced; the relics of this class found in Switzerland are not less numerous and varied in the character of their elegant and varied decorations, than those occurring in Germany, in France, or in England. The tourist-antiquary who may indulge in exploring the ancient sites of Helvetia will find in profusion, in museums and private collections, types of ornament amongst those interesting vessels, names of potters stamped upon them, with other evidences supplying fresh materials for the History of the Fictile Arts under the influence of Imperial Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Amongst designs embossed upon these examples of a ware which appears to have been held anciently in high estimation, the observer is struck with the endless variety of popular subjects illustrative of manners and usages of daily life, not less than of such as relate to mythological traditions

<sup>1</sup> Mr. C. Roach Smith has given a collection of potter's marks from specimens preserved in the Berne Museum; Coll. Antiqua, vol. i. p. 153. Orelli enumerates many marks in his Inscriptio-

ones Helvetiae, Transactions of the Antiquaries of Zurich, ii. p. 209; more fully given by Mommsen, Insc. Confed. Helv., *ibid.* x. p. 87.

and the symbolism of pagan creeds or ceremonies. Upon these *fictilia*, doubtless the familiar appliances of the banquets of the ancients,—“*Samia etiamnum in esculentis laudantur*,” according to Pliny’s trite observation,—found likewise upon the table of the more wealthy colonist even in the remotest parts of the empire, the “*divisos orbe Britannos*,” our attention is irresistibly arrested not only by the spirited design and classical taste which characterise many of these diminutive enrichments, but by their instructive details as regards familiar scenes of social life, or the more solemn myths associated with the *cultus* of the ancient divinities. It is to be regretted that the highly decorated vases of the ware which antiquaries by common consent now designate as Samian, are found almost invariably broken; even in this fragmentary condition the beauty of their workmanship cannot fail to be recognised, and we would fain comprehend fully the significance of the multiplied devices, and rescue from oblivion the technical history of one of the most interesting classes of ancient Ceramic Art.

Besides representations of ancient divinities and their symbols, sacrificial ceremonies, genii, fauns, and bacchanalian dances or processions, the decorations of this kind of ware present numerous subjects such as Orpheus fascinating the beasts, Apollo and Daphne, Actæon, Cupid, Hercules, Fortune, and the like; also the sphinx, tritons, and imaginary creatures in great variety. A curious representation of the fable of the conflicts of the Pigmies and the Cranes occurs on a fragment of Samian ware found at Oberwinterthur, figured in the *Indicateur d’Histoire et d’Antiquités Suisses*, vol. i. p. 29. Another interesting class of subjects of frequent occurrence comprises the chariot race, subjects of the chase, gladiatorial combats, the bull-fight, the exploits of the *bestiarii* and the *retiarii*, and the fearful conflicts with ferocious animals in the arena. With such and many other allusions to field sports and to the exciting amusements of the amphitheatre, to which the Romans were so passionately addicted, it were to be expected that representations of other favorite disports of a simpler character would occasionally occur, such as the dance, gymnastic exercises, the popular games with *astragali* or with *tesserae*, and the like. Examples of Samian ware might likewise be pointed out on which the *discobolus* seems to be figured.

The ornamental details, however, upon certain Samian fragments which it is the particular object of the present short notice to bring under consideration, may be connected with the popular Roman exercise of ball-play. There occur not unfrequently, amidst minor accessories, such as foliated decorations, rings, discs, garlands, and other conventional or capricious details introduced in intervening spaces with others of more obvious import, little objects which, as has been suggested with a certain degree of probability, may have been intended to represent some kind of *follis* or *folliculus*, so much in vogue amongst the Romans in their gymnastic disports. It will be seen by the accompanying woodcuts that the object in question is not of spherical form, like the *pila*, or ball proper, of the use of which several ancient representations exist. It is of cylindrical shape, apparently tied tightly round at both ends; and it is obvious that such an appliance, of light elastic material, or possibly constructed by means of a frame-work covered with skin or parchment and inflated, might supply a substitute for the balls of ordinary fashion, and afford means for exercises the more popular, it may be, because more difficult than those with the spherical *pila*. In the absence of any positive evidence regarding the peculiar fashion of the *follis*,<sup>2</sup> it may deserve consideration that the term is used to designate a bag, a purse, or the like. Thus Vegetius mentions "*folles, hoc est saccos in quibus militum pecunia condebatur.*" A kind of air-cushion also, on which guests were sometimes seated at table, was termed *follis*;<sup>3</sup> and by analogy of form it appears not unreasonable to suppose that the *follis* provided for the game under consideration may have been of oblong shape, such as the object occurring on the Samian fragments here figured.

The evidence is abundant that the Romans indulged daily in various exercises previous to the bath, as salutary both for mind and body; this *exercitatio* was customarily practised by all classes; the consul, the statesman, and the emperor

<sup>2</sup> Mercurialis has given an illustration from a coin of Gordian III., in which it has been supposed that the game with the *follis* is represented. De Gymn., p. 126. The ball is spherical, of large dimensions; the players appear to wear a guard on the right arm, to enable them

to strike the ball with greater effect. The subject of ancient ball-play has been treated in great detail by M. Burette, *Memoire pour servir à l'histoire de la Sphéristique*, Mém. Acad. des Inscr., t. i. p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Lamprid. in *Heliod.*, c. 25.

indulged in such recreation ; those who neglected such gymnastic discipline being accused of indolence. Suetonius observes of Augustus,—“ *Exercitationes campestris equorum et armorum statim post civilia bella omisit, et ad pilam primo folliculumque transiit ; mox nihil aliud quam vectabatur et deambulabat.*”<sup>4</sup> Valerius Maximus relates that Q. Mutius Scævola the augur excelled in playing with the *pila*, and was accustomed to have recourse to such recreation after the fatigues of public life. Indeed, one of the most popular exercises was the game of ball, highly extolled by Galen, and of which Roman authors mention many varieties, the *pila*, *follis* or *folliculus*, *trigon*, *paganica*, &c. The *pila* seems to have been a ball of small size ; the *follis* was of larger dimensions, and filled with air ; the *paganica* was stuffed with feathers. Thus we read in Martial :—

“ *Hæc quæ diffiili turget paganica pluma,  
Folle minus laxa est et minus arta pila.*”<sup>5</sup>

The *follis* or great light ball was struck by the fist or the arm, which is supposed to have been sometimes furnished with a kind of glove. This kind of disport was, however, regarded as of a lighter sort, not requiring any severe exertion ; thus Martial speaks of it as suited alike for boys and old men :—“ *Folle decet pueros ludere, folle senes.*”<sup>6</sup> It may be questioned, as writers on this subject have remarked, whether the words of Trachalio, in Plautus,—“ *Extemplo, hercle, ego te follem pugillatorium faciam, et pendentem incursabo pugnīs,*” may not refer to a distended skin, by which the *pugiles* exercised themselves, as the gladiators did with a post. There have been preserved various representations of ancient ball-play, as given by Mercurialis and other writers on gymnastic exercises ; a remarkable illustration of a game with several balls was also found in Italy in a painting on a ceiling.<sup>7</sup> We are not aware, however, that any well ascertained representation of the *follis* or *folliculus* has hitherto been pointed out.

Those who may desire more precise information on the various games to which allusion has been made, and on the

<sup>4</sup> Sueton. Aug. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Martial, xiv. ep. 45. The *follis* is mentioned likewise by Martial in one

other passage, vii. ep. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Martial, xiv. ep. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Descr. des Bains de Titus, pl. 17.

technical terms occurring in ancient authors, will find a minute and interesting investigation of the subject in the valuable work entitled "Gallus," by Professor Becker.<sup>8</sup>

Of the curious examples illustrating, as supposed, the use of this disport, one was found on the site of the ancient *Vindonissa*,<sup>9</sup> now called Windisch, a village in the canton of Aargau, situated on the banks of the river Reuss, near its confluence with the Aare and the Limmat. That city was one of the most important Roman settlements in Switzerland, the head-quarters of the twenty-first legion and subsequently of the eleventh; in their present state the vestiges are unimportant, although from time to time many relics of antiquity have been there disinterred. Of these some, of more than ordinary interest, consisting of bronze decorations of the scabbard of a sword and a collection of remarkable subjects in relief upon fictile lamps, have been published in the Transactions of the Antiquaries of Zurich, accompanied by a memoir by Otto Jahn.<sup>1</sup> Upon the Samian fragment here figured, the repetition of two somewhat remarkable figures occurs, one bearing a certain resemblance to Hercules in its nude athletic proportions, and the object with pendant lappets in which the left arm is wrapped; whilst the second wearing a kind of *petasus* and leaning upon a *cippus* might at first sight recall some familiar representation of Mercury. One of the hands of the figure last described is apparently covered with a muffler like a boxing-glove, and above is introduced, in the spaces between these personages, the object which, as conjecturally supposed, may be intended for the *foliis*. (See woodcut on the next page.)

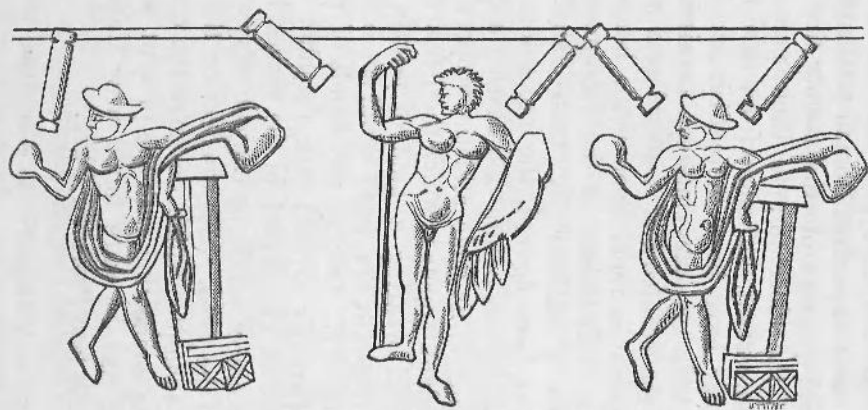
The second example, which deserves the consideration of the antiquary in connection with the present subject, occurs upon a piece of Samian ware found near Munich, and communicated by the late Professor Oken.

<sup>8</sup> Excurs. ii. sc. 7. See the translation by the Rev. F. Metcalfe, p. 398, edit. 1849.

<sup>9</sup> See a Memoir by Deycks in the annual publication of the Antiquaries of Bonn (Jahrb. des Vereins von Alterthumsfreunden in Rheinlande) xix. p. 22. Haller, in his work on Helvetia under the Romans, Bronner, in his Description of the Canton of Aargau, t. i. p. 27, and other writers, have, as it is believed, given exaggerated notions of

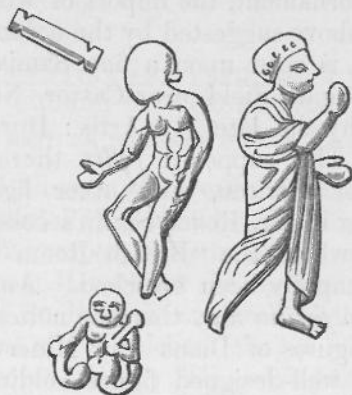
the great extent of the ancient Vindonissa. The statement has been repeated in Murray's Handbook. Numerous interesting remains, however, have there been brought to light. See Indicateur d'Hist. et d'Antiqu. Suisses, vol. i. p. 7. In vol. iii. p. 57, of the same periodical, will be found a list of potters' marks found at Windisch, and now in the collection of M. Amiet of Soleure.

<sup>1</sup> Mittheil. der Antiqu. Gesellsch. in Zürich, Band xiv. 1826.



Figures occurring on fragments of Samian Ware  
Found at Windisch, the ancient Vindonissa; Canton of Aargau in Switzerland.

In this little group a figure is seen nude, in an attitude of active movement ; the gesture of the hands according well with the supposition that the subject represented may have been a *pilicrepus* engaged in gymnastic exercise, with the inflated *folliculus* in mid-air over his head. Below is intro-



Figures upon Samian Ware found near Munich.

duced a small distorted being, holding a mace like a jester's bauble, a monstrous little Puck, probably introduced by a separate stamp on the hollow mould from which the vessel was produced ; it may have no connexion with the accompanying figures.

Other fragments of Roman ware with decoration in relief might be noticed upon which the object occurs, to which hitherto, it is believed, no particular import has been assigned. It may not be undeserving of notice that it appears usually to be placed diagonally, as if flying like a shuttlecock. Some readers probably may hesitate to accept the explanation which has been here suggested, with the conviction that, however disguised by conventional treatment, these seemingly capricious details are rarely if ever devoid of signification.

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Amongst the multiplicity of examples of Samian ware exhibited in the Temporary Museums formed during the successive yearly meetings of the Institute, examples have not been wanting upon which the singular little object



occurs, to which our attention has been invited by our friendly correspondent Dr. Keller. It has been likewise noticed upon some specimens of Samian ware discovered by the late Lord Braybrooke in his excavations near Audley End. A very interesting illustration of the introduction of this peculiar ornament, the import of which may possibly be as has been above suggested by the accomplished archæologist of Zurich, is seen upon a fine Samian bowl found, in 1821, at Normangate Field, near Castor, Northamptonshire, and published by the late Mr. Artis: *Durobrivæ* of Antoninus, pl. 50. The supposed *follis* there accompanies a representation of a triton, with other figures. Examples also may be seen in Mr. Roach Smith's collection of London Antiquities, by which the "British Room" in the National depository has happily been enriched. Amongst the multiplicity of Samian *fictilia* may there be noticed a bowl (Catal. No. 158) with figures of Diana and Minerva, Hercules and Bacchus, and a well-designed figure holding a cup; also a perpendicular vase of large dimensions (No. 157) embossed with birds, masks, and figures kneeling. Upon both, figured in the Catalogue, pl. 8, the conjectural *follis* repeatedly occurs.

Whilst we accept, as claiming our best consideration, any opinion of so acute and erudite an archæologist as Dr. Keller, in whose views in the present instance we believe that some of our learned fellow laborers in foreign parts have concurred, it must be considered that the supposed *follis*, in form ill adapted to the purpose, seems indiscriminately introduced by a distinct stamp, and may, as we apprehend, have no relation to any figures with which by caprice it has been brought into juxtaposition. Some may incline to see in it the gladiatorial *tessera*, either such as were given to the victors or used to admit spectators to the show. The figures on the fragment from Windisch may represent a *retiarius* leaning on his *fuscina*, of which the shaft only is shown, and a net over his arm, with a wounded *mirmillo* or Samnite, wearing a flat helmet, his hand wrapped in defensive armour, and held up for quarter. The details on all ancient *fictilia* are replete with curious interest.