

A SLATE PALETTE FROM THE ROMANO-BRITISH SITE AT OLDBURY FLATS, SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE

By J.R.L. Allen¹ and J.C. Davidson²

¹ Department of Archaeology, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading RG6 6AB.

Email: j.r.l.allen@reading.ac.uk

² Department of Archaeology, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading RG6 6AB.

Oldbury Flats and what remain of the adjoining Holocene wetlands on the east bank of the middle Severn Estuary are the site of a substantial, dispersed Romano-British settlement with Mesolithic-Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age antecedents. Here the uneven sub-Holocene bedrock surface lies at a relatively shallow depth, before dipping southwest-ward into the deep palaeovalley of Oldbury Pill. Excavation and collecting in the intertidal zone over a period of decades has revealed a wide variety of evidence regarding the Romano-British settlement and its industrial activities (Green and Solley 1980; Allen and Fulford 1987, 1992; Allen and Rippon 1997). Among that evidence are tantalising clues which suggest the presence in the settlement of at least one high-status building.

The present note augments these clues by recording a stone palette found stratified together with other occupation debris in a deep ditch (British National Grid Reference ST 607932) exposed on the eroding marsh-edge cliff immediately to the south of the large palaeochannel that ranges across the exposed bedrock surface and the wetland area (Allen and Fulford 1992, illus. 2, 5; Allen and Rippon 1997).

The palette is incomplete - perhaps about half (60 mm) is present - and measures 65 mm in width and 7.3 mm in thickness (Figure 1). A continuous bevel 8-12 mm wide along occurs along the unbroken edges of the unworn side. Across the inner edges of the bevel clusters of numerous short, narrow grooves had been scored, as though by some hard object while being shaped. On the conspicuously worn opposite side is a smooth, semi-oval depression about 1.5 mm

deep severed by the broken edge. The object is made from a hard, compact, black slate in which tiny, reflective flakes of mica are conspicuous and very abundant under the hand-lens. There are no traces of either lamination or fossils.

Palettes are widely distributed but fairly rare among Romano-British portable finds and are mainly reported from towns and high-status sites. Dobson and Jarrett (1958) give an early listing, and examples have more recently been described from such centres as Colchester (Crummy 1983), Verulamium (Frere 1984), Caerleon (Zienkiewicz 1986), London (Barber and Bowsher 2000), Wroxeter (Ellis 2000), Alcester (Booth and Evans 2001) and Roman Shepton Mallet (Leach and Evans 2001). They have been made from a wide range of rock types, from Purbeck marble, Kimmeridge shale and compact fine-grained sandstones, to various slates and tuffs and imported marbles. At very few of the settlements from which palettes have been recorded does the material appear to be local. The geological source of the Oldbury palette is uncertain, but the general character of the rock points to the Palaeozoic and older rocks of Wales and southwest England. Like the example from Oldbury Flats, most described palettes display signs of wear on one side and a bevel on the opposite, unworn face. The purpose of the bevel may have been to allow the palette to be slotted as a lid, with the bevel outside, into a metal or wooden box in which small items could be kept. It is generally considered that palettes were used for preparing either cosmetics or medicines (Milne 1907), but it is also possible that mixed on them were carbon-based inks, such as were in extensive use at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall (Bowman 1994).

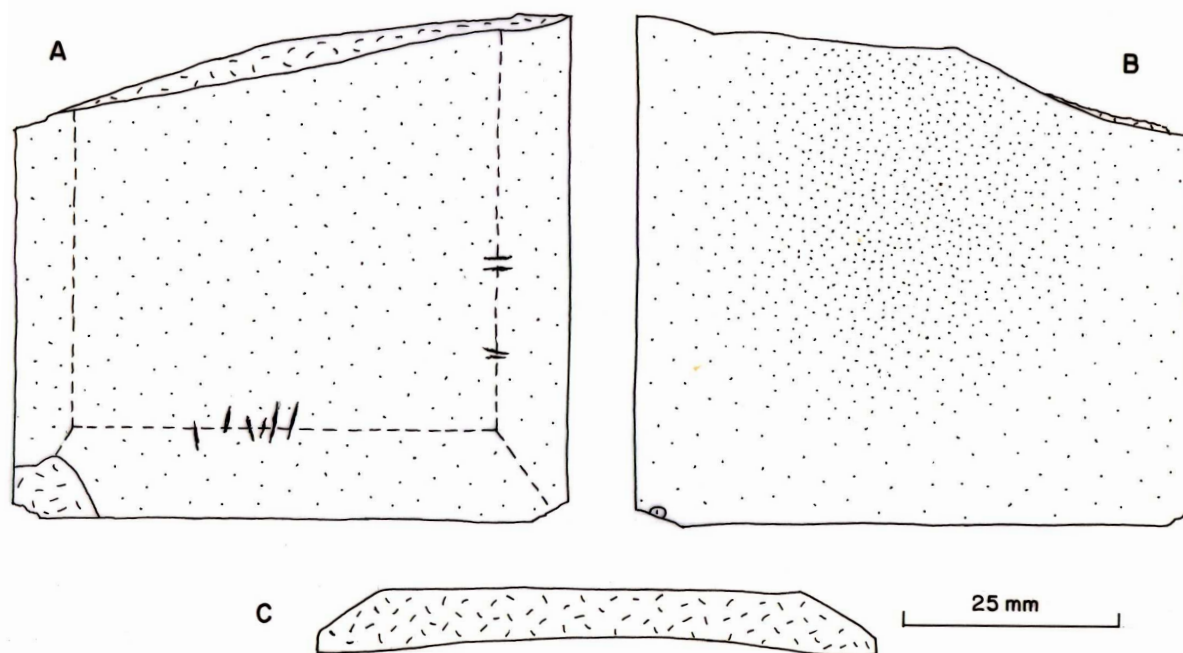


Figure 1. The palette. A - outer side, B - worn inner side, C - cross-section.

Whatever was being handled, however, was abrasive. Depending on lithology, some palettes could occasionally have served as whetstones for small knives.

The palette we describe is the latest stratified discovery to hint at the presence of at least one high-status establishment in the Romano-British settlement at Oldbury Flats. In addition to roughly squared stone building blocks, these are a rare glazed beaker (Allen and Fulford 1987, fig. 12.1; Allen and Fulford 1992, illus. 23.2); part of a copper-alloy bracelet (Allen and Fulford 1992, illus. 25); a copper-alloy seal-box (Allen and Fulford 1992, illus. 25); a bracelet of Kimmeridge shale (Allen and Fulford 1992, illus. 26.1); part of a moulded ridge-tile/roof ornament of Bathstone (Allen and Fulford 1992, illus. 26.3); a carefully dressed, conical shaft of local quartzitic sandstone (Allen and Rippon 1997, fig. 2); and fragmentary comb-decorated flue tiles (Allen and Fulford 1987, 1992). Not previously reported are stratified finds of small beads of blue glass. There is anecdotal evidence of the find of a copper-alloy bracelet at Oldbury Flats. It is tempting to see the substantial palaeochannel which crosses Oldbury Flats and the wetland as the reason for the establishment of a significant settlement there, perhaps functioning as a minor port.

REFERENCES

- Allen, J.R.L. and Fulford, M.G. (1987) Romano-British settlement and industry on the wetlands of the Severn Estuary. *Antiquaries Journal* 67, 237-289.
- Allen, J.R.L. and Fulford, M.G. (1992) Romano-British and later geoarchaeology at Oldbury Flats: reclamation and settlement on the changeable coast of the Severn Estuary, southwest Britain. *Archaeological Journal* 149, 82-123.
- Allen, J.R.L. and Rippon, S.J. (1997) A Romano-British shaft of dressed stone and the settlement at Oldbury on Severn, Gloucestershire. *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 115, 19-27.
- Barber, B. and Bowsher, D. (2000) *The Eastern Cemetery of Roman London. Excavations 1983-1990*. MoLAS Monograph No. 4.
- Booth, P. and Evans, J. (2001) *Roman Alcester Series, Vol. 3, Roman Alcester: Northern Extramural Area*. York: Council for British Archaeology Research Report No. 127.
- Bowman, A.K. (1994) *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier. Vindolanda and its People*.

London.

Crummy, N. (1983) *The Roman Small Finds from Excavations in Colchester 1971-9*. Colchester Archaeological Report No. 2.

Dobson, B. and Jarrett, M.G. (1958) Excavations at Binchester in 1955. *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland* 11, 115-124.

Ellis, P. (2000.) *The Roman Baths and Macellum at Wroxeter. Excavations by Graham Webster 1955-85*. English Heritage Archaeological Report No. 9.

Frere, S. (1984) *Verulamium Excavations, Volume III*. Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, Monograph No. 1.

Green, M. and Solley, T.W.J. (1980) Romano-British pottery from Salmon Lodge, Oldbury on Severn. *Bristol Archaeological Research Group Review* 1, 30-34.

Leach, P. and Evans, C.J. (2001) *Excavation of a Romano-British Roadside Settlement in Somerset, Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet, 1990*. Britannia Monograph Series No. 18.

Milne, J.S. (1907) *Surgical Instruments in Greek and Roman Times*. Oxford.

Zienkiewicz, J.D. (1986) *The Legionary Fortress Baths at Caerleon. II. The Finds*. National Museum of Wales and Cadw

