

The later Roman occupation at Wilderspool

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THE Roman sites at and near Wilderspool were extensively excavated by Thomas May at the turn of the century¹ and more recently the evidence has been reviewed by Thompson.² The principal occupation of the area took place in the late first and second centuries A.D. However, Thompson noted a certain amount of coin and pottery evidence which led him to suggest a limited re-occupation 'in the late third and early fourth century'.³ The author recently had cause to look through the whole of the extensive collection of material from Wilderspool now housed in the Warrington Museum⁴ and it is the purpose of this note to bring together the evidence for the duration and nature of the later occupation of the site as it is revealed by that collection.

The large collection of pottery from Wilderspool is derived mostly from May's excavations and from chance finds in the nineteenth century. It consists almost entirely of late first and second century types. There are, however, a small number of pieces of later date. Of these, the black-burnished ware series is most informative and seems worthy of illustration (Fig. 1):

1. Dish, *Gillam*⁵ type 329 (A.D. 190-340). This vessel *may* have reached the site during the second century occupation but it may equally belong to the later occupation.
2. Flanged and grooved bowl. A typical third century form cf. *Gillam* type 226 (A.D. 200-240).
3. Flanged and grooved dish or bowl, *Gillam* type 314 (A.D. 220-360). The collection also contains at least one other flanged and grooved dish or bowl in black-burnished ware.
4. Cooking pot, *Gillam* type 146 (A.D. 280-350).
- 5-9. Five examples of flanged and beaded bowls, *Gillam* type 228 (A.D. 290-370). There is also at least one flanged and beaded bowl in a fabric other than black-burnished ware.

The mortaria in the Wilderspool collection follow a similar pattern. Besides large quantities of first-second century pieces, there are a few later ones. Mrs. K. F. Hartley who has studied the mortaria in detail kindly informs me that the later pieces consist of:

- (a) One Oxfordshire mortarium which probably reached the site in the second half of the third or during the fourth century.
- (b) Seven Mancetter/Hartshill mortaria of third century date.

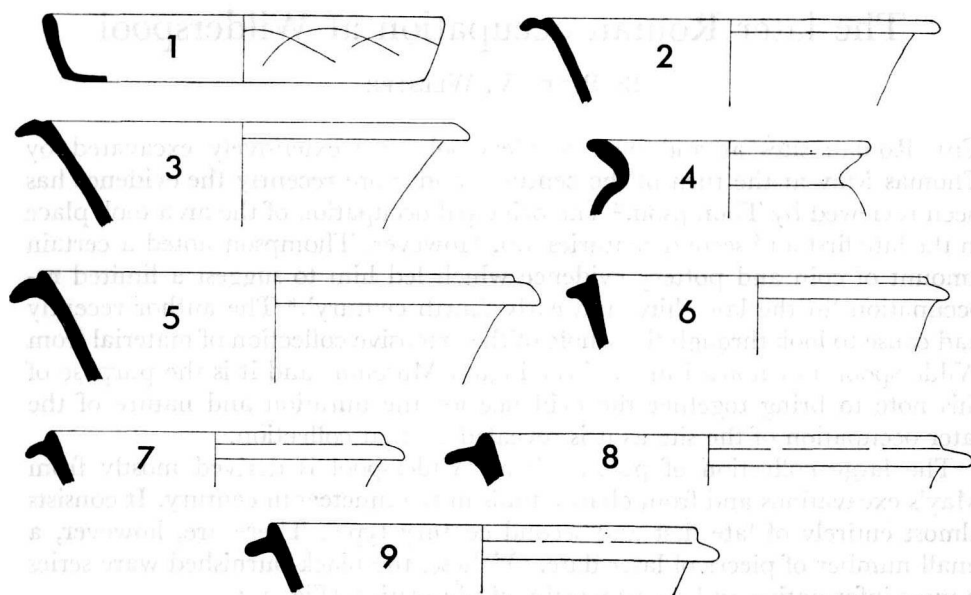
¹ Reports appear in *L.C.H.S.*, vols. 48, 50, 52, 55, 56 and 58, 1896-1906, see also T. May, *Warrington's Roman Remains*, Warrington, 1904.

² F. H. Thompson, *Roman Cheshire*, Chester, 1956, pp. 67-87.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴ I am most grateful to the Director of the Museum, Mr. J. R. Rimmer and his staff for their help and co-operation.

⁵ cf. J. P. Gillam, *Types of Roman Coarse Pottery Vessels in Northern Britain*, 3rd edition, Newcastle, 1971.



(c) Sixteen Mancetter/Hartshill mortaria of third–fourth century date.

(d) One hammer-head of unknown origin but third–fourth century date.

In addition to the coarse pottery detailed above and about four other pieces which might belong to the later occupation, there are two coins of Constantine I (A.D. 306–337) recorded from Wilderspool.

There would thus seem to be slight but definite evidence for continuing occupation of the site from the early/mid third century until the early fourth. The evidence is not sufficiently clear to allow us to decide whether there was a break in occupation between the late second and mid-third century as Thompson suggests or merely continued small scale occupation of the site after the decline of the earlier community. Certainly occupation continued until the first decades of the fourth century and on the whole continuous but small scale occupation is perhaps to be preferred. However, the most striking thing about the evidence for the later occupation of Wilderspool is the paucity of finds compared with the great mass of material from the earlier period.⁶ On the evidence available, it would seem that the area of the industrial complex of the late first and second centuries must have been almost entirely deserted from the early third century onwards. The evidence of later occupation could well represent the refuse from no more than one rather meagre dwelling on the site of what had previously been a very thriving community.

⁶ Two late coins as against 72 of the earlier period, about 3 dozen late or probably late sherds as against several hundredweights.