

Mirrors in Roman Chester

By G. Lloyd-Morgan

Although Colchester has produced the largest number of Roman mirrors from any one site in Britain, the Chester collection is the second largest in the country. Unfortunately many of these pieces are fragmentary and incomplete, but the number of types represented, and the range of dates, from the first to the third or fourth century A.D., makes the group an especially interesting one.

There are two incomplete examples of rectangular mirrors, the simplest and one of the most common forms produced. Four other fragments may be from this type of mirror, or the simple disc mirror, which like the rectangular pieces were finished on the reflecting side only, and then cased in wooden boxes or frames. Any irregularities at the edge and back were thus concealed, and the brittle, high percentage tin bronze alloy of the mirror was protected from damage. These types of mirror are most common in the first century - pre Flavian fragments have been found, for example, in the Roman fort at Usk, and many other sites in Britain have produced mirrors of this type. It is possible that some pieces were handed on as heirlooms, and were only lost or buried in the second century.

Hand mirrors are represented both by fragments of mirror discs and by handles. The baluster handle from Princess Street (pl. 4) is one of the earliest examples from Britain and one of the largest. The arms which supported the mirror disc show clearly the stylised form of birds' heads that are first seen in the elaborate silver mirrors from Pompeii and Herculaneum. It can be directly compared with examples from Northern Italy, such as Volterra, Museo Etrusco no. 934, and Turin, Museo di Antichita, unnumbered, length 13.5 cm., and can be dated to the middle of the first century A.D.

The other form of handle represented at Chester has an open loop-shaped grip. Multiple loop grips are found in Campania from the end of the first century B.C. The small and delicate single loop form, however, frequently occurs on simple hand mirrors found most commonly in Flavian period graves in the more northerly provinces of Western Europe.

The fragments of a mirror disc with a border pattern of circular holes, from the Nun's Field excavations of 1964, are of a well known first century type (pl. 5). The piece is of some interest, as fragments of wood can still be seen adhering to one face. This suggests that the mirror had been placed in a wooden box, either separately or with other toilet articles, to protect it from damage.

One of the pieces from the Infirmary Field Cemetery may be a hand mirror, as it is reported to have been found with a lead handle. If this is so, then it is an extremely rare find, as there is only one certain parallel which comes from the large cemetery in Regensburg, Museum der Stadt A 1856. This has a club-shaped handle attached to the mirror by a lead frame. A damaged piece from Kastell Pförring, now in a private collection, may possibly be of the same type. The Chester example is rather fragile to hold the weight of the mirror disc and it is possible that the two pieces are unconnected.

A second fragmentary mirror from the Infirmary Field is distantly related to the celebrated Wroxeter mirror. Like that piece, it would have had a handle across the back of the disc, though of a much simpler form. The group to which it belongs is characterised by a low convex moulded border on the back. Only three other examples have been found in this country, two at Corbridge, and a complete example in a grave at Verulamium. This has been provisionally dated by the associated pottery to the second or third century A.D. This date is confirmed by finds on the continent, and, from the distribution, it appears that the type was made within the province of Lower Germany, possibly in the region of Nijmegen.

Another rare find is the lead frame for a glass mirror now lost (pl. 6, 7). Only two others have been found, one at Ospringe in Kent, and the other at Verulamium. A number of glass mirrors were found at Ospringe, and near Reculver and there is a single example from a grave group at York.

The main source of these mirrors would have been Cologne, the centre of glass working in the region. A number of mirrors of similar type have been found in the Rhineland. Unlike some of these examples, the British pieces do not have an inscription added to the design, but are decorated with simple geometric patterns. The Chester mirror cover has a stylised rosette in each corner



Plate 4
Baluster handle no. CC 115. 1939

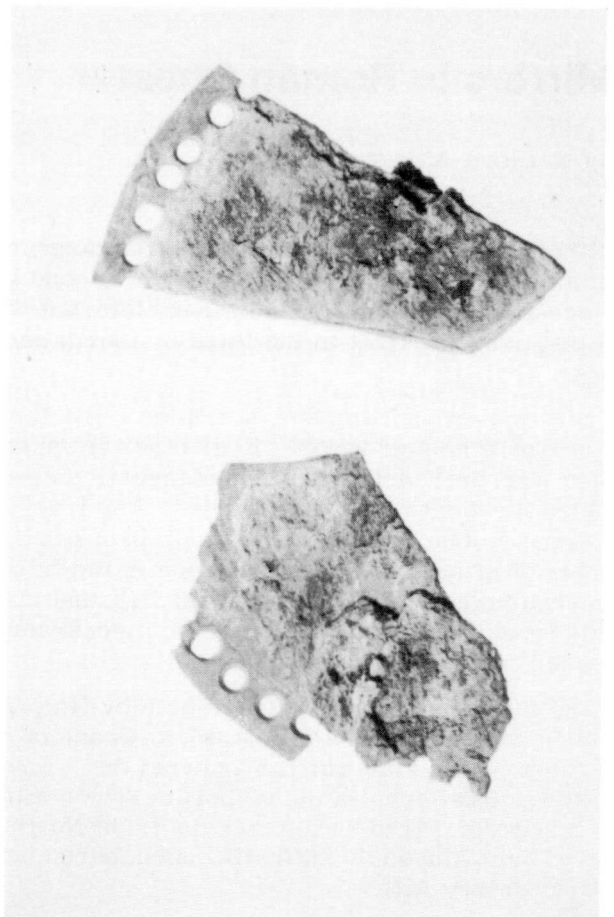


Plate 5
Hand mirror fragments

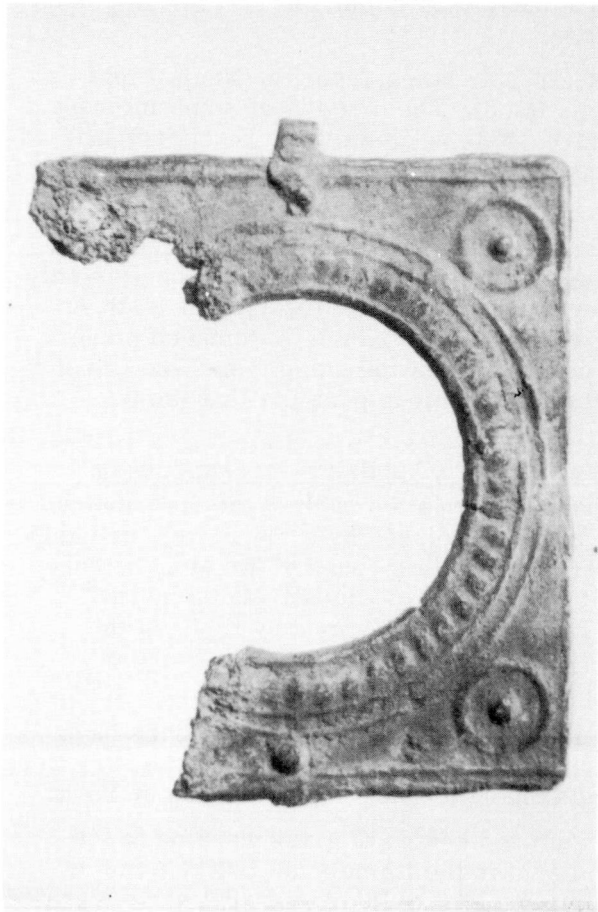


Plate 6
Lead cover for glass mirror front view

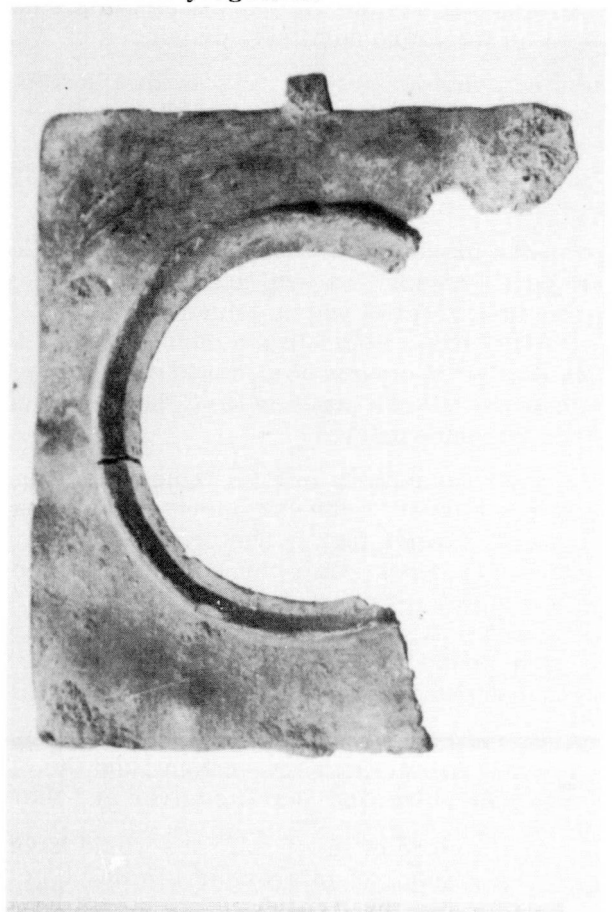


Plate 7
Lead cover for glass mirror back view

and the central opening is surrounded by a simplified ovolo pattern. Although some examples have been recorded from second century contexts, the glass mirror was most common during the third and fourth centuries. The reflection produced in the small silvered convex mirrors is near perfect, and would have been preferable to the silver or bronze mirrors which could easily tarnish or get marked. It was probably also much cheaper and more transportable.

Although mirrors were a luxury object, they were also a status symbol for the women who used them. This is borne out by the representations of mirrors on tombstones. Two examples are known from this country, both were found in Chester. One, a funerary banquet scene, shows a woman holding a hand mirror (pl. 8). The other, more well known piece, shows a lady holding a mirror with her maid servant (pl. 9). The block is probably from a large funerary monument, of the type known at Neumagen, and several reliefs show toilet scenes with large mirrors in use. Another representation on an intaglio shows Venus using a hand mirror and adjusting her locks of hair—a tasteful compliment to any lady (pl. 10).

By contrast with groups from other sites, the Chester Mirrors span much of the Roman occupation of this region. The Colchester mirrors appear to be of mainly first to second century date, and of the other major groups from excavations at Silchester and Verulamium, only the later series is comparable in range and date with the Chester material. It is perhaps surprising that only one mirror has so far been identified at Lincoln, and York, prior to the setting up of the excavation unit, produced four pieces despite the excavation of extensive and well furnished cemeteries. Exeter has not so far produced any examples. Chester is thus exceptionally well endowed with these luxury items, which are not only recorded on its tombs but have been found inside and outside the castra. The range of material suggests that mirrors were imported throughout the occupation, and came from Northern Italy and later the provincial workshops of the north. It not only suggests a fairly high level of local wealth but also the strength of trade contacts between a remote legionary fortress and the main continental routes.

Catalogue of Mirrors in the Grosvenor Museum

1. Fragment of one side and a corner of a rectangular mirror 4.8 × 3.05 cm.

Deanery Fields, Chester, labelled 'B5 Rubble'

Acc. no. 219.R. 1976

2. Fragment of a rectangular mirror

1.6 × 1.9 cm.; 0.1 cm. thick

Kings Buildings, Chester, 1921

Acc. no. 220.R. 1976

R. Newstead 'Records of Archaeological Finds at Chester; Kings Buildings, Site LXXXVI'
J. Chester Archaeol. Soc., 27 part ii, (1928), 91.

3. Fragments of hand mirror (pl. 5)

3.1 × 4.5 cm.; 4.6 × 2.55 cm.; 0.13 cm. thick

The disc is made of silvered bronze with a border of circular holes of irregular size and position. The edge is uneven and the reflecting side plain. The back is turned with the usual band of three concentric circles inside the border of holes. Fragments of wood fibres still adhere to the reflecting side of the second fragment.

Nun's Field, Chester, 1964

4. ?Hand mirror

Diameter 8.3 cm.; 0.13 cm. thick

Length of handle 6.6 cm.; width ca. 2.5 cm.

The disc is of silvered bronze with bevelled edges. Both sides are plain. The lead handle is flat on one side, the other is lightly moulded. It is said to have been riveted to the disc. Newstead reports that 'below the speculum was a small quantity of decayed wood'. This may have been from a cover or box.

Infirmery Field, Chester, Grave 19 no. 4

Acc. no. 223.R. 1976

R. Newstead 'The Roman Cemetery in the Infirmary Field, Chester, part 1' *Liverpool Annals Archaeol. Anth.*, 6 no. 4, (1914), 139-141, pl. XXXIV, fig. 2.

5. Baluster type handle, in two pieces, but complete (pl. 4)
Length 13.9 cm.
The mirror disc would have rested on the side arms, made in the form of stylised birds heads, and soldered to the triangular leaf-like supports. The grip is formed by three baluster swellings linked by narrow collars.

The mirror disc fragments found in situ were chemically removed during conservation treatment.

Princess Street, Chester, 1939
Acc. no. CC 115.1939

R. Newstead, J. P. Droop 'Excavations at Chester 1939, Princess St. Clearance area' *J. Chester Archaeol. Soc.*, 34 part i, (1939) 41 no. 19, pl. X
6. Three fragments of a tear-shaped loop handle, incomplete
Length 3.1 cm.; width ca. 1.0 cm.
Northgate Brewery, phase II, Chester 1974
NGB II 1974 V 225 126.
7. Fragmentary disc mirror
Diameter 9.0 cm.

The reflecting side is plain and slightly convex. The back has a low convex moulded border inside which is a single concentric circle. There is no other decoration.

Infirmary Field, Chester, Grave 30 no. 1
Acc. no. 224. R. 1976

R. Newstead 'The Roman Cemetery in the Infirmary Field, Chester part ii' *Liverpool Annals Archaeol. Anth.*, 8 no. 2 (1921), 51
8. Lead cover for a glass mirror (pl. 6, 7)
Length 5 cm.; present width 4.25 cm.
Diameter of central opening ca. 2.65 cm.

The frame is decorated with a simple raised relief consisting of two lines at the outer edge. In each corner is a dot and circle pattern making a stylised rosette. There are three concentric circles round the central opening, between the first and second is a band of ovolo's. On one side a small projecting tab has been folded back over the edge. On the back there is a raised ring round the central opening to hold the mirror in position.

Nun's Field, Chester, 1964
9. Fragment of mirror
1.25 × 1.28 cm.; 0.2 cm. thick

The reflecting side is finished, the underside has been left rough.

Crook Street, Chester, ca. 1963-4
10. Fragment of mirror
2.98 × 3.7 cm.; 0.13 cm. thick
Amphitheatre, Chester, 1966
Acc. no. 222. R. 1976
11. Fragment of mirror
1.44 × 2.16 cm.; 0.14 cm. thick
Northgate Brewery, phase II, Chester 1974
NGB 1974 I 3 56



Plate 8

*Funerary relief of lady with mirror and
maid servant*



Plate 9

Tombstone of Fesonia Severiana with mirror



Plate 10

Venus Intaglio—original impression

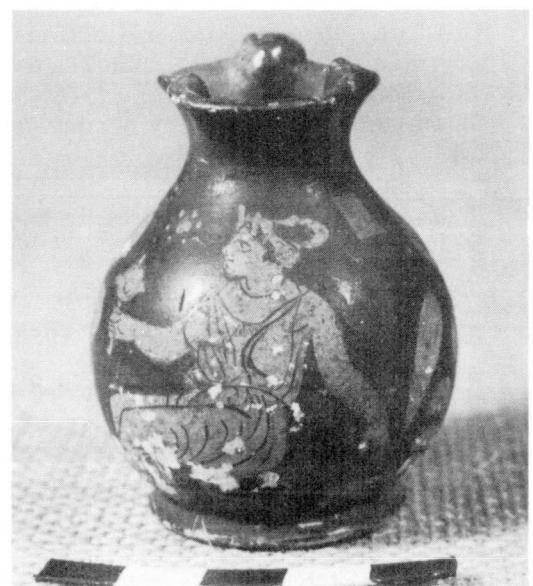


Plate 11

Apulian vase with lady holding a hand mirror

12. Fragment of mirror
2.3 × 2.15 cm.; 0.15 cm. thick
Chester, Prof. Newstead's excavations
Acc. no. 221. R. 1976

13. Semi-circular fragment

This undecorated piece may not be a mirror.

Deanery Field, Chester 1924

R. Newstead 'Report of the Excavation of the Site of the Roman Camp at the Deanery Field, Chester' *Liverpool Annals Archaeol. Anth.*, 11 no. 2 (1924) 80, no. 5 pl. VII

Unlocated

1. Fragment of polished metal mirror

Queen's Park Road, Handbridge, Chester

R. Newstead 'Record of Archaeological Finds at Chester: Edgar's Field and the Adjacent Roads, Site LXXVI' *J. Chester Archaeol. Soc.*, 27 part ii (1928), 158

2. Bronze mirror back ?

'St. Werburgh St., 7 feet below surface'

Acc. no. 132 b/1899

Representations of Mirrors in the Grosvenor Museum

1. Fragment of a Funerary Relief (pl. 8)

A lady holds a circular hand mirror in her left hand with her maid servant holding a ?trinket box to her left.

North Wall, Chester 1887

W. de Grey Birch 'Notes on a Sculptured Stone recently found in the North Wall of the City of Chester' *J. Chester Archaeol. Soc.*, 2, (1888) 25-39, pl. VI.

R. P. Wright & I. A. Richmond *Catalogue of the Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester* (Chester 1955) 49, no. 120, pl. XXXI

G. Webster *A short guide to the Roman Inscriptions and Sculptured Stones in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester* (Chester 1962 edition) 31 no. 120

G. Lloyd-Morgan 'Some reflections on Roman Metal Mirrors in Britain' *Univ. of B'ham Archaeol. Soc. Bull.*, 9 (1970-71), part ii, 19

2. Tombstone with funerary banquet relief (pl. 9)

The deceased, Fesonia Severiana, reclines holding a mirror in her right hand.

T. Hughes 'Chester in its Early Youth, or the Colony of Deva seen by the light of the Roman Remains discovered there' *J. Chester Archaeol. Soc.*, 3, (1885) 257-8 with fig.

W. Thompson Watkin *Roman Cheshire* (Liverpool 1886 reprinted 1974), 209 with fig.

R. P. Wright & I. A. Richmond (1955) op. cit., 46 no. 116 pl. XXX

R. G. Collingwood & R. P. Wright *R.I.B.*, I, (Oxford 1965) 187, no. 563

3. Intaglio (pl. 10)

A clothed Venus dressing her hair holds a circular hand mirror in her right hand.

?Chester

Acc. no. 312. R. 1975

W. Thompson Watkin (1886) op. cit., 205 and fig.

M. Henig *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites*, *Brit. Archaeol. Rep.*,

8 (1974) no. 277
(see also Henig p. 43, pl. 1 above for further parallels)

4. Apulian oinochoe (pl. 11)

Height 6.4 cm.

A seated woman in left profile holds a hand mirror in her right hand.

Style of the Iliupersis painter (ca. 350 B.C.)

Acc. no. 403. F. 1976

G. Lloyd-Morgan 'A New Hand Mirror from Roman Libya' *Soc. Libyan Studies Ann. Rep.*,
7 (1975-6) 23, pl. B

Note: Photographs 4-7, 10, 11 were prepared by Mr T. E. Ward, Grosvenor Museum.