

A hippocamp pottery mould from Plas Coch, Wrexham?

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During the course of excavation of well 7 at Plas Coch, Wrexham, a small Roman pottery mould or die was discovered, measuring approximately 90mm by 77mm, and loosely dated to the second to mid fourth century.¹ The impression in the mould clearly represents the body and tail of a sea creature facing to the left, although wear or damage to the creatures head and body led to the suggestion that the figure could be a dolphin.

A dolphin is a possibility, but the illustration, reproduced here (Fig. 1), would suggest a sea creature with apparent forelegs, neck and head. Several candidates of mythical origin are more likely, namely a hippocamp, a capricorn, a sea-bull or sea-stag. All of these mythical animals with dolphin-like tails appear alike, especially on naïve representations; the hippocamp has a horse's body, while the capricorn has long or curved horns, a sea-goat has upright, twisting horns,² the bull has short curved horns and the stag has antlers. The figure on the mould has an equine appearance, the head, ears, mane, and forelegs, together with the lack of horns suggest a hippocamp rather than any of the other sea-creatures.

In Graeco-Roman mythology, hippocampi pulled the sea-chariot of the gods Poseidon and Neptune. Hippocampi occasionally appear on decorated samian, as for example on the wares of the second-century potter Doeccus (Fig. 1b),³ and on mosaics (for example at the Roman baths in Bath, and a winged example in Fishbourne palace).⁴ Recent excavations at the Walbrook, London have uncovered a crescent shaped piece of leather decorated with a pair of opposed hippocampi.⁵ Capricorns and hippocampi also appear on the reverse of coinage of the late third-century emperor Gallienus (AD 253–268). Given the high level of Romanisation at Plas Coch, it's not surprising to find a representation of a Graeco-Roman mythological creature in this context. As well as being the god of the sea, Poseidon/Neptune was also a god of horses, and a representation of a hippocamp might therefore represent the god of horses.

Small, flat pottery moulds are not very common and could have many uses. Toynbee identified two in the early 1960s, a cupid from Xanten, Germany, and a representation of Mars from London moulded from a check-piece of a Roman cavalry helmet, which she suggested were used as moulds to make appliqué decoration on pottery vessels.⁶ The interpretation of a 'plaquette mould' is given to a small rectangular mould with the representation of Venus from the Colonia Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegeteza, Romania,⁷ and a mould with a gladiator's cuirass from the town of *Mediolanum* in central France, is published as a possible potter's appliqué mould.⁸

Ceramic plaques could be used as protective talisman hung on walls or as tile antefixes, or sold or offered at shrines. Many Romanized households would have had a domestic shrine. At Pompeii, the majority of household shrines for servants were in the kitchen to make use of the fire. Indeed, the kitchen shrine at Villa 6, Terzigno, near Pompeii, has a fresco with a pair of opposed sea-snakes.⁹

Alternative uses are as moulds used for stamping foodstuffs, in the manner of nineteenth-century butter pats with geometric and anthropomorphic chip carving, used on butter or cheese as an unofficial trademark prior to sale. Roman examples include a geometric clay mould from *Mediolanum*, interpreted as a mould for cake or bread,¹⁰ and a carbonised loaf of bread from Pompeii even bears the stamp 'Property of Celer, the slave of Quintus Granius Verus'.¹¹ Vernou has recently published twelve dies from the Lingon area in southern France, mainly chip carved, which are identified as pâtisserie moulds.¹²

Whatever the intended reason for the moulds, it is worth noting that many do not possess a handle or knob on the reverse to facilitate easy stamping though many of the French examples cited do have some sort of handle.

Although it may have been used as a pottery mould, given the fact that there is no evidence for ceramic production at Plas Coch, the fact that the dominant supply of coarsewares to the site was regional rather than local, and that the settlement was of an agricultural nature, is it reasonable to suggest an alternative use as a bread or dairy mould. It is a matter of speculation whether food with obvious religious iconography was eaten on a regular basis or made specifically for consumption or offering at religious festivals.

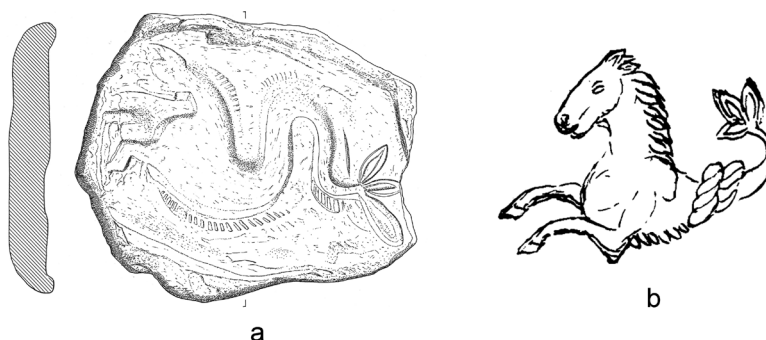


Fig. 1.

1a Ceramic mould from Plas Coch (scale 1:2). 1b Hippocamp appearing on samian ware made by the potter Doeccus, reversed (after Oswald 1936).

NOTES

1. W. J. Owen and P. V. Webster, 'Roman coarse pottery', in N. W. Jones, 'Roman-British settlement at Plas Coch, Wrexham: excavations 1994–96', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 160 (2011), 86, no. 80 and fig. 15.
2. The capricorn was the symbol of the Second Augusta Legion based at Caerleon.
3. See F. Oswald, *Index of Figure Types on Terra Sigillata, 'Samian Ware'*, Supplement to *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* (University of Liverpool, 1936) and J. A. Stanfield and G. Simpson, *Central Gaulish Potters* (Oxford University Press, 1958).
4. B. Cunliffe, *Excavations at Fishbourne, Volume I: The Site* (Society of Antiquaries, 1971), pl. 88.
5. E. M. Chapman *et al*, 'Roman Britain in 2012', *Britannia* 44 (2013), 325, fig. 14.
6. J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (Oxford, 1964), cited by H. Chapman, 'Evidence for a Roman cavalry helmet from London', in J. Bird, H. Chapman and J. Clark, *Collectanea Londiniensia. Studies presented to Ralph Merrifield*, London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, Special Paper 2 (1978), 176–9. See D. Tourgon, 'Les céramiques à médallions d'applique de type Déchelette 74: typo-chronologie, production et diffusion', *Actes du Congrès De Poitiers* (Société Française d'Étude de la Céramique Antique en Gaule, 2012), 825–50, for a catalogue of appliqués.
7. D. Alicu, S. Cocis, C. Iles and A. Soroceanu, *Small Finds from Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa* (National History Museum of Transylvania, 1994), 137, no. 1080 and pl. 8, 5.

8. L. Roussel (ed.), *Mediolanum: une bourgade Gallo-Romaine* (Musée Archéologique Dijon, 1988), 222, no. 707.
9. P. Roberts, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (British Museum Press, 2013), 250, fig. 302.
10. Roussel op. cit. (note 8), colour plate 2 (upper); p. 222, no. 710.
11. Roberts op. cit. (note 9), fig. 62.
12. C. Vernou, 'À propos de moules à empreinte pour pâtisserie en territoire Lignon', *Actes du Congrès de Chelles* (Société Française d'Etude de la Céramique Antique en Gaule, 2010), 455–60.

