

THE MOXOM COLLECTION

(A Romano—British Pottery Group from Brockley Hill, Middx.)

By P. G. SUGGETT, M.A.

Some fifty years ago a remarkable group of pottery was found on Brockley Hill. It was discovered by chance during landscape gardening at Brockley Hill House,¹ eight objects being recovered, or at any rate preserved (Plate and Figures). The interest of the group springs from the fact that it contains two pieces (Nos. 7 and 8) which appear to throw important light upon the development of the pottery industry in Britain during the late 1st and early 2nd centuries A.D.

At the time of its discovery the pottery attracted little attention. Like many 'curiosities' it was put away in a cupboard and forgotten. It remained unnoticed until 1948, when Mr. H. Moxom, a nephew of the finder, learning of the Society's excavations at *Sulloniacae*, brought it to light and generously loaned it to the Excavation Committee, at the same time agreeing to its publication. Since 1948, continued excavation has enabled a clearer picture to be formed of the character and history of the site, and the present time seems opportune to publish the Collection and to attempt some discussion of the pieces mentioned above.

No record appears to have been kept of the exact spot where the Collection was found, nor is there any indication of the type of deposit in which it occurred. Nevertheless local tradition and the existing layout of the grounds leave little doubt that it came from the area now occupied by the Nurses' tennis courts.

An eyewitness is reported to have said that the Collection was found 'all together' and was accompanied by two burials. The character of the pottery certainly suggests that it is a related group. But one may justifiably hesitate before accepting the statement regarding the burials, for human bones are often not easy for the layman to identify.

In 1953 an attempt was made to decide its context. Excavations were carried out between the Tennis Courts and Watling Street. These revealed the existence of a large claypit extending into the site of the Tennis Courts.² The pit contained waste pottery similar in form and fabric to the pieces in the Collections: fragments occurred in fact of vessels identical with Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

The majority of the pieces in the Collection show obvious faults. Some of the vessels are so badly cracked that one can hardly believe that they could have been of any use. Yet the frequency with which

wasters were employed in Roman times does not entitle one to regard the group as kiln waste on this score alone.

Moreover some support appeared for the view that the Collection was a burial group. Evidence was found pointing to the existence of a building (possibly a shop) not far away, and burials in the vicinity of a building, whilst not common, are by no means unknown. If these were the burials of potters, one might expect to find them accompanied by the usual tokens and mementoes of their craft.

To reach a conclusion, one must turn to the internal evidence of the pottery. The Collection contains only two closely datable pieces. The comparison between them is, however, illuminating. The bottle (No. 2) is of distinctive type, showing features which place it towards the middle of the 2nd century. The die (No. 7), on the other hand, must be appreciably earlier, since the vessels of Matugenus do not long survive the end of the previous century.³

This disparity in date is characteristic of the waste pottery found in the claypits at *Sulloniaca*. The pits are filled with kiln rubbish representing the results partly of gradual accumulation and partly of a wholesale tipping which took place in the early part of the 4th century, when the area of the potteries was being cleared ready for cultivation.⁴ As a result, pottery belonging to the whole period of manufacture (c. 70-200 A.D.) is found mingled indiscriminately together.

The Collection may safely be regarded, therefore, as kiln waste and without significance as a deposit. The pieces were no doubt deliberately selected by the finder for their completeness from a larger mass of finds. This conclusion, unexciting at first sight, is nevertheless of considerable importance, for upon it rests the interpretation of the pieces mentioned above.

DESCRIPTION*

No. 1. Square sided jug in dirty buff. Slightly narrowing neck with wide flat rim. Single sharply angled handle. Walls roughly smoothed, showing traces of knife marks. Base and one side cracked in firing. A local imitation of the familiar glass cinerary jug. Such imitations of glass and metal vessels have been noted at Brockley Hill before (e.g. 1952 *Report*, Fig. 7, Nos. 19 and 30).

No. 2. Screw necked bottle with single rounded handle. Red surface with remains of white slip. Short expanding neck and pronounced top ring characteristic of the mid 2nd century; similar examples occur at Verulamium Theatre (*Arch.* LXXXIV (1934), Fig. 10, No. 4, p. 256). Kiln ware (cf. 1950 *Report*, Fig. 8, No. 22, p. 214).

No. 3. Small wide mouthed jar. Sandy buff, cracked in firing. A common local product (cf. 1947 *Report*, Fig. 8, No. 51).

Nos. 4, 5 and 6. Thumb pots, Nos. 4 and 6 in buff, No. 5 over-fired grey. Base of No. 6 defective. All locally made. These small pots are common in votive deposits, but are not closely datable. Compare the well known series from the 'Triangular' Temple (*Verulamium*, Plate LIX, pp. 118 and 193), attributed to the latter part of the 2nd century.

No. 7. Mortarium die stamp. Well mixed buff clay of smooth texture. FECIT MATVGENV impressed along two sides in good lettering, the stamp being enclosed by the usual border of slanting lines. The design appears to have been transferred from a template of wood or other material, the potter holding the template in one hand and the clay in the other. The upper and lower faces show finger marks and the distortion caused by the pressure of the template. On the upper face appear the letters TI (also impressed before firing), perhaps the abbreviation of a personal name or a code denoting a particular workshop. The eight holes (which pass right through the die) probably had no other function than to ensure even firing and prevent warping in the kiln. An impression taken from the die is shown in No. 7a. Three letters of the name are affected by damage. The sharpness of the remainder of the lettering suggests that this damage did not occur as the result of an accident during use, but resulted from the explosion of the missing piece in the kiln whilst the die was being fired.

This conclusion runs counter to the prevailing opinion that most, if not all, mortaria of the Flavian period were imported into Britain, principally from Gaul, and that Matugenus in particular manufactured at Lugdunum.⁶ But there seems little doubt that the die is a local product and that it was thrown away with the other kiln rubbish without ever having been used. The pottery from the site confirms this view.

The abundance and condition of the mortaria of Matugenus found at *Sulloniacae* are such as to justify the belief that they were made at the kilns.⁷ Of the many stamps recovered none has originated from this die. It should be noted that the design on the die is exceptionally large, being suitable for a vessel at least 1 ft. 6 ins. in diameter. So far no mortarium of this size has come to light.⁸ Whether the die was an unsuccessful experiment, or whether a fresh die was made and vessels bearing its stamp await discovery, it is impossible to say.

No. 8 is an even more enigmatic object. Roughly made of soft red clay, it resembles a large cotton reel or bobbin. It is pierced by a hole which was bored in two sections from either end. The join

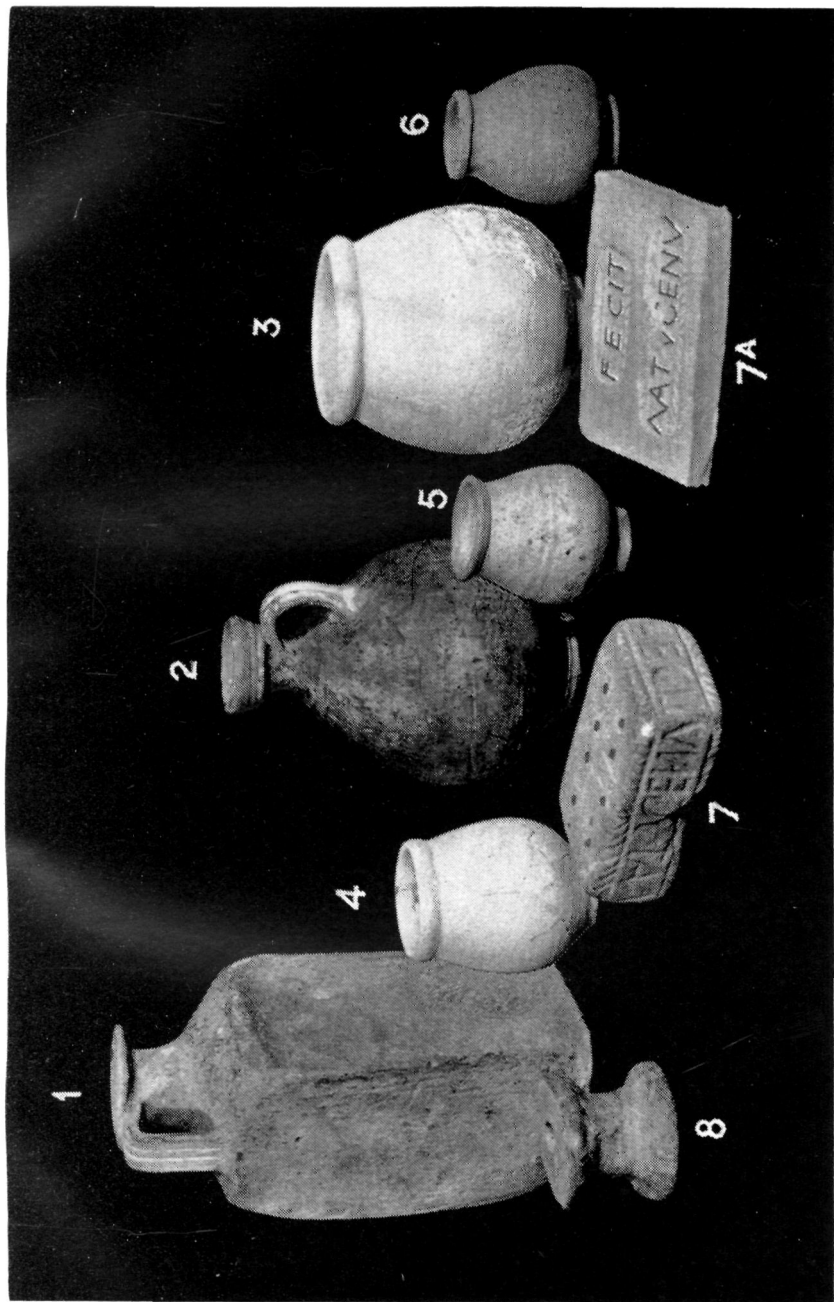
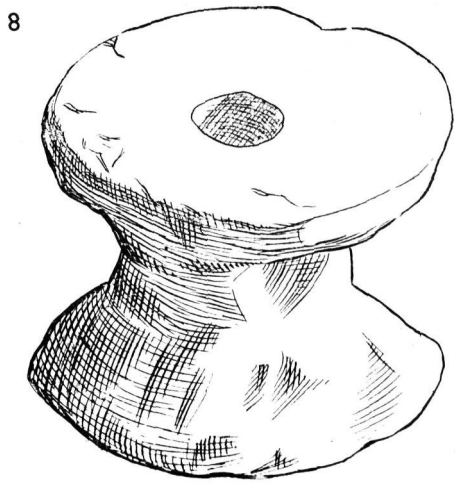
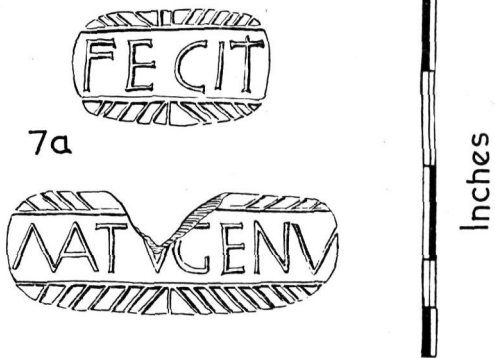
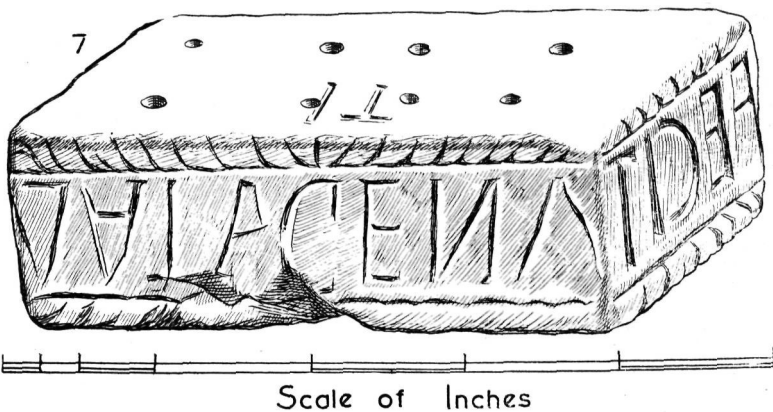


Photo by J. C. BURT

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Nos. 7 & 7a MORTARIUM DIE STAMP No. 8 THE 'BOBBIN'

between the sections is imperfect, so that a slight constriction occurs at the centre. No parallel has been traced from any other site,⁹ although by a curious chance a similar object was found at Elstree, about a mile to the north, during a trial excavation in 1948. Unfortunately the area had been disturbed and little information could be gained from it.¹⁰

The purpose of the 'bobbin' can only be guessed. Two factors, however, appear to limit the field of conjecture. In the first place the 'bobbin' seems to have been connected with pottery making, for the Elstree example was also found with kiln material. Secondly, comparison of the two pieces suggests that the hole was an integral part of the design. In the Elstree 'bobbin' the hole was bored accurately and shows signs of friction. In the present example, on the other hand, the hole, carelessly made, reveals no trace of wear. Like the other pieces in the group, it would seem to be a reject, the fault lying in the constriction of the hole at the centre. The function of this hole may well have been to allow the 'bobbin' to revolve.

One is tempted to suggest that the 'bobbin' formed part of a potter's wheel. Little is known about Romano-British potters' wheels, but the excellent finish of the larger vessels at *Sulloniacae* seems to imply mechanism of a fairly advanced kind. Some of these forms almost certainly required a fast running wheel. One method of increasing the speed of the bat (i.e. the disk on which the vessel rests during throwing) is to employ some kind of gearing. The suggestion is put forward that the 'bobbin' was used as a gear wheel for this purpose. Assuming that the wheel was of the treadle type operated by the potter himself, increased speed could have been obtained without difficulty by passing the 'bobbin' through the spindle to which the bat was fixed and connecting it by means of a belt to a drum of larger diameter attached to the driving shaft. Clay would have been a more suitable material than wood for the 'gear wheel' in view of the dampness and friction involved.¹¹

Speculation is, of course, hazardous until further examples of these objects appear. The reason why no parallels can be found may be that the 'bobbins' were local devices used for convenience in performing some simple task. A stick inserted through the hole, for example, might have served as a handle and the 'bobbins' employed in cutting out the strips of clay required for building up large storage jars.

Despite what has been said, the possibility remains that the hole was not after all connected with movement. Perhaps the 'bobbins' were no more than rough candle holders.¹² Just possibly they may have held

segars for indicating temperature; for the Elstree 'bobbin' appears to have been exposed to considerable heat, and a number of broken twists of clay of a suitable size to fit into the 'bobbins' were found at *Sulloniaca* in 1953. Fixed in the 'bobbins' the twists may have been fired with the pottery, rather like the cones used in modern kilns. When taken out of the kiln and broken, the twists would show the degree of firing achieved.

It has been suggested that the 'bobbins' were kiln staggers or spacers. This, however, seems unlikely, both on grounds of appearance (since the present example shows no signs of burning) and because further specimens would almost certainly have been found on the site.

NOTES

- 1 Before the property was acquired by the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital The Nurses' tennis courts were built in 1909. An aerial view of the site is shown in the 1951 *Report* (Plate A).
- 2 A Report on these excavations is to be published shortly.
- 3 Matugenus is generally attributed to the period A.D. 70-100 (*vide* Gillam and Birley, *Corbridge Mortaria*, in *Arch. Ael.* 4th series, XXVI (1948), p. 186). See also 1947 *Report*, p. 21. Oswald, *The Mortaria of Margidunum* (*Ant. Journ.*, XXIV (1944), p. 48) places him slightly earlier.
The die is certainly pre-Hadrianic, to judge by the absence of serifs at the apices of the letters A, M and N. It may be argued that this criterion, valid in the case of stone inscriptions, does not apply to the less formal lettering of mortarium stamps. But it is interesting to compare, for example, the stamp of Saturninus who is of recognised Hadrianic date (1952 *Report*, Fig. 6, No. 12a).
- 4 See 1950 *Report*, p. 216; 1951 *Report*, p. 178; 1952 *Report*, p. 261.
- 5 Mr. E. H. Barkus kindly drew Nos. 7 and 8. The Collection was photographed by Mr. J. C. Burt.
- 6 Cf. Oswald, *op. cit.*, p. 48; Gillam and Birley, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
- 7 Cf. 1947 *Report*, No. 5, p. 21; 1952 *Report*, Fig. 6, Nos. 1-7, pp. 270-71. Further examples (unpublished) were found during 1953 and 1954. Stamps of Matugenus are widespread throughout Britain and Wales; their distribution is listed by Gillam and Birley, *op. cit.*, p. 186. None of these stamps can be traced to the present die.
- 8 Allowing for contraction during drying and firing. Larger mortaria were of course made. There is an enormous vessel over 2 ft. wide in the museum at Hambleton, Bucks., and even bigger specimens occur on the Continent.
- 9 Thanks are due to numerous museum authorities for facilitating the search for possible parallels.
A number of objects superficially resembling the present 'bobbin' were found in the débris of the Bath House at Corbridge in 1909 (*Corstopitum*, 1909, pp. 36 and 39; *ibid.*, 1910, Fig. 39, p. 50). They were termed 'hand bricks,' and it was suggested that the building had been used at some time as the drying room of a pottery, the 'hand bricks' acting as stands for the vessels. Later the excavators adopted the view that they had been employed with long nails, as on several German sites, 'to provide a kind of alternative for box tiles and form passages for hot air between the walls and an outer surface of tile.' The Corbridge objects, however, measure about 4½ ins. high by 3½ ins. wide, and can hardly be regarded as true parallels.
A 'bobbin' more closely resembling the present example (except that the perforation is not complete) is figured by Corder, *The Roman Villa at Langton*, (1932), Fig. 7, No. 51, p. 38. He suggests that it might have been used for winding wool. It is perhaps worth noting that it was found not far from a pottery kiln.
Compare also the 'tournettes' found on a Belgic site at Borden, near Sittingbourne (*Arch. Cant.*, LXI (1948), Plate 1, p. 152).
- 10 Carried out by the Stanmore, Edgware and Harrow Historical Society. The information was kindly provided by the Hon. Sec., Mr. C. F. Baylis.
- 11 Thanks are due to Mr. Baylis and Mr. A. Turner for advice in this matter.
- 12 See May, *Silchester Pottery*, Plate XLVIB, for illustrations of different types of candlestick.