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Glorious glass from Prescott Street

Guy Hunt, Director of L–P : Archaeology, and Roman glass specialist John Shepherd reveal how a curious artefact became a star attraction during excavations of the eastern Roman cemetery.

Excavations last year at Prescott Street, near Aldgate, (see *London Archaeologist* Vol 11, no 11) were the first large-scale excavations within the eastern cemetery since the early 1990s. Among the many finds was an exceptional cremation burial containing a unique mosaic glass dish.

Excavations at the site were carried out during six months of 2008 by L – P : Archaeology. The site covered an area of around 3,500 square metres, of

which 3,000 were fully excavated during the dig. The Roman cemetery deposits lay well preserved under post-medieval soils and later basements up to a depth of around 2–3 m. The Georgian and Victorian buildings on the site had been bombed and mostly demolished during WWII, and the site had been subsequently used as a surface level car park. The lack of 20th-century redevelopment meant that deposits were relatively well preserved.

The Roman deposits fitted well within the existing picture of the activity in the eastern cemetery. The Roman remains were largely aligned to the main axis of the cemetery, a road passing close by the northern edge of the site and plot. Whilst the burials were not as dense as on some adjacent sites,¹ they did seem to follow the same plot alignments outlined by Barber and Bowsher.² In many areas of the site, there was evidence of some disturbance of the burials during the Roman period (possibly in the 3rd or 4th century). Nevertheless, 50 inhumations and around 40 cremation burials were excavated.

The mosaic glass dish itself was discovered within a cremation burial at the eastern end of the site, in an area with several other unusual burial types and structures, including a stone mausoleum and a round or possibly octagonal building foundation. The relationship between these structures, the rich cremation and the wider cemetery layout is the subject of ongoing post-excavation work and analysis.

The first sign of the cremation was the base of a cremation urn, this deposit was excavated in a routine



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TOP: The extremely rare, complete mosaic glass bowl, after restoration. The technique is sometimes called millefioré (“thousand flowers”) because it uses hundreds of small indented petals to create an intricate pattern in a matrix. **RIGHT:** The mosaic bowl *in situ* with other grave goods from this complex burial.

manner according to standard site procedures, but it quickly became apparent that this cremation was merely a secondary interment to a much more significant burial. As the excavator Ruth Rolfe began to clean down the primary cremation, a range of grave goods was slowly revealed, including seven ceramic vessels and three glass vessels, a coin and of course the mosaic glass dish itself. As well as the grave goods, it also became apparent from the alignment of metal objects in the grave that there had been a wooden container of some kind. The mosaic glass dish itself was not initially well understood. As it was of such a rare material, none of the excavation team had ever seen such a vessel on site and we initially speculated that the dish was perhaps an enamelled metal object. Alongside a concern over security, we were concerned that if this item was enamelled metal that it should not be allowed to dry out. Therefore after a call to Liz Goodman, our conservator from the Museum of London, we made the decision to lift the item. It was only when we lifted the dish and it broke that it became obvious that we had an object that was glass throughout. At this stage, we were quite convinced that the object was very unusual. Painstaking conservation work from Liz has resulted in the complete reconstruction of the dish which is currently on display at the Museum of London in Docklands.

At this stage, with post-excavation work ongoing, we can't yet offer detailed information on suspected age and sex of the occupant of this grave. Given the uniqueness of the grave and richness of the grave goods, there will certainly be further interest in this Londoner. However, the objects within the grave and in particular the mosaic glass bowl are already generating considerable academic debate.

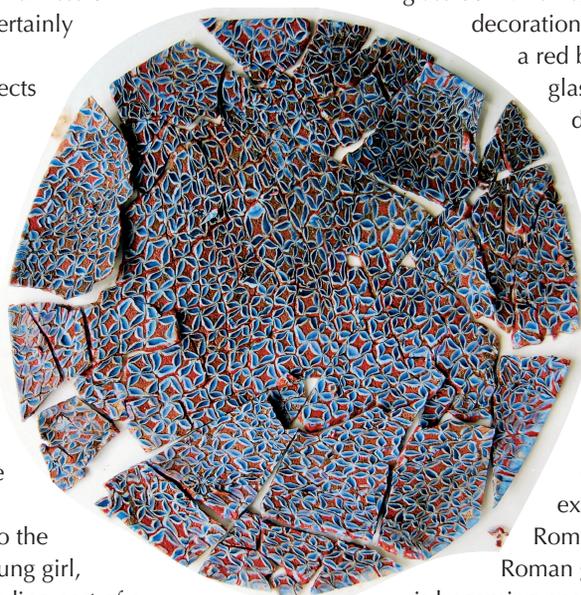
Until now, only fragmentary pieces of mosaic glass are known from the Eastern cemetery, such as an example of mosaic glass found in Grave B392.² Here, a couple of fragments of mosaic glass from a bowl were placed into the well-preserved grave of a young girl, alongside later material including part of a glass bottle of the third century. However, mosaic glass vessels are generally considered to be an early type of luxury glass dating to the early- to mid-first century. For example, finds from *Camulodonum* show that mosaic vessels were in use there before the town's destruction by Boudicca and her supporters. There are also some references in the early literature to individual multi-coloured bowls being worth many thousands of *sesterces*.

However, recent work on the glass from Augst in Switzerland by Beat Rütli has demonstrated that



LEFT: MOL conservator Liz Goodman restoring the bowl.
BELOW: Blue translucent petals, bordered with white, were embedded in a bright red opaque glass matrix. Still present when the dish was uncovered, the vermilion red appearance diminished as the water-saturated glass dried out.
 Photos © Guy Hunt

mosaic glass may well have continued to be made, though in smaller quantities, beyond the late first century – perhaps as late as the third century. This is where the London bowl fits into this exciting new development – the other vessels from the cremation date to the late second and third centuries. Whilst this bowl might be a 150- or 200-year-old survivor from the earlier period – though this in itself would be both rare and fascinating – it is more likely that it is contemporary with the associated objects and so is a rare example of a late-second or third-century mosaic glass bowl. Perhaps of interest, the



decoration – blue quadrafoil design in a red background, is also used for glass inlays and wall decoration, which are also thought to be later Roman in date rather than from the earlier tradition.

Taken with this evidence and a conversation with Jenny Price, Roman Glass specialist at the Museum of London, it is suggested that this bowl could have been an example of this rare late Roman mosaic glass. In terms of Roman glass-making technology it is becoming possible to think of a resurgence of cast (mosaic) glass in the later Roman period. Until recently it would have been necessary to point out that “this, however, can only be confirmed by the discovery of other well-dated specimens...”. We now suspect that one of these has just turned up onto centre stage.

References

1. R. Whytehead 'The Excavation of an Area Within a Roman Cemetery at West Tenter Street, London E1' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 37 (1986).
2. B. Barber and D. Bowsher 2000. *The Eastern Cemetery of Roman London*.