

Three Roman vessels from Old Jewry/ Cheapside, London, EC2

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Introduction

In August 2011 MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) carried out a watching brief on the excavation of two dropshafts (henceforth 'the site') at the junction of Old Jewry and Cheapside in the City of London.¹ The approximate centre of the site was at NGR 532552 181145. During this work, an assemblage of Roman pottery and glass datable to *c.* AD 60/1–75 was recovered from deposits in dropshaft 2. This article discusses this assemblage, focusing on three interesting vessels which shed some light on taste and patterns of consumption in Londinium, complementing the evidence recovered during major excavations in the area.²

The early Roman deposits

Although outside the area of earliest Roman settlement, which was on the east side of the Walbrook, the site (Fig. 1) is only *c.* 40m to the north of the main Roman road running westwards from it. Excavations at No. 1 Poultry (ONE94) have demonstrated that this road was probably constructed in AD 48³ and that a side road (ONE94 R2), branching northwards, and running within *c.* 15m of the site, was added after *c.* AD 55.⁴ By AD 60/1, a suburb was developing around these streets. The recovery after the Boudican fire of this part of Roman London was not immediate, but the plot to the south of the site was one of the first in this area to be rebuilt *c.* AD 65.⁵ This timber building was swiftly replaced by a long-lived and more substantial masonry building (ONE94 B18/48), probably *c.* AD 70–75: at around the same time there is evidence for the establishment of a road running off to the north east (ONE 94 R4) and associated structures in the area directly to the north east of the dropshaft (Fig. 2).⁶

The vessels discussed in detail here form part of a larger assemblage of 226 sherds of Roman pottery and 7 sherds of Roman glass collectively datable to the

late Neronian–early Flavian period, *c.* AD 60/1–75, and contemporary with these developments. This came from two closely related contexts of cessy material characterised by the presence of rubbish in the form of pottery and food waste as well as a small quantity of charcoal and building material.

These deposits were 1.3m thick and directly overlay natural sand and gravel at a depth of 7.7–8m OD, several metres lower than the level at which natural deposits were encountered during nearby excavations. Though no cut edges were observed, this suggests that rubbish was being dumped in a large feature cut into the natural, such as a quarry pit, which was wider than the dropshaft. This feature would have lain behind the roadside buildings and the contents are probably derived from

one or more of these structures.

Three Roman vessels

From amongst this assemblage three vessels, two of glass and one of pottery, are of considerable intrinsic interest.⁷ Vessel 1 is a yellow/brown free-blown glass vessel with an upright rim and a figure of eight neck fold above a convex upper body (Fig. 3). The rim is 64mm in diameter and its edge is decorated with a horizontal opaque white marvered trail. To judge by its size and form it is most likely to have been a drinking cup. The type has not previously been recorded in London, indeed no exact parallel is known elsewhere in the Roman world. However, it is clearly part of a broader tradition of strongly coloured vessels, often decorated in a contrasting colour, produced in the



Fig. 1: the location of the site

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early to mid-1st century AD and predominantly found in Claudio-Neronian contexts in Britain.⁸ The distribution of vessels of this type shows a marked concentration around northern Italy, Switzerland, Southern France and the Adriatic coast and vessel 1 may well have been made in this area.⁹

Similar folds are known on other vessels of this period¹⁰ but comparable rim trails are very rare in this country. An exception is an upright rim fragment with a white trail from a blue vessel of uncertain form found at Balkerne Lane, Colchester.¹¹ Both features are better represented within continental assemblages where they appear on a range of vessel types and are combined in two 1st-century blue glass vessels with convex bodies, figure-of-eight folded necks and white marvered trails on in-turned rims from Fréjus, France¹² and Vindonissa, Switzerland.¹³ Despite the difference in form, these provide the best technological and stylistic parallels for the Old Jewry cup.

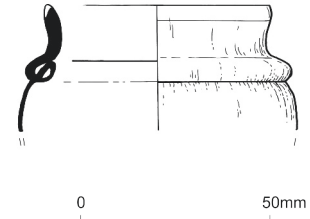


Fig. 3: vessel 1: yellow-brown glass vessel with an opaque white rim trail

This high-quality piece of glass would have been a valuable possession and expands the range of imported continental table wares known from Roman London. The other recently published sites in the Poultry study area have also produced some early glass vessels, including strongly coloured 1st-century table wares, but none of comparable quality to vessel 1.¹⁴ This may reflect the high-status character of the adjacent building (ONE94 B18/48).

Vessel 2 highlights another aspect of Roman culture in the city (Fig. 4). It is a naturally coloured blue-green mould-blown ovoid gladiator cup and can be dated to around the third quarter of the 1st century AD.¹⁵ The three conjoined

sherds are from the lower part of the cup, which has a rather narrow base. Part of the lower decorative frieze survives and is separated from the missing frieze above by a pelted border and divided into two sections by vertical mould seams. In the best preserved section two gladiators are depicted with their names written around their heads and are interposed with palm leaves, symbols of victory in the arena. The other section is less complete and shows the legs of a gladiator facing right towards another palm leaf and an indistinct object further to the left, possibly part of the arm of his fallen opponent.

Ovoid gladiator cups are rarer than cylindrical examples and this cup is of particular interest as it seems to come from a previously unattested mould.¹⁶ Some of the equipment of the gladiators is missing or blurred but we can make out details of the better preserved pair. The first is a *thraex* named [...]V[...] armed with a crested helmet, a small rectangular shield, greaves and blurred sword. The second is a *murmillio* named BVRD[O], with a crested helmet, a greave or wrapping on his left leg and a straight short sword. These two classes of gladiator were traditionally paired off against one another.¹⁷

The stereotyped layout of this scene shows that the *thraex*, posed ready to deliver a blow, has triumphed while Burdo has lowered his weapon and lost his shield. He turns away and, stepping up onto a platform or step, he raises his left arm with a finger extended. This gesture of capitulation is found widely in Roman gladiatorial scenes, for example on glass cups from Colchester and from Sopron, Hungary¹⁸ and on a mosaic in Tripoli.¹⁹

Although highly decorative, these cups were probably mass-produced pieces of sports memorabilia and are as indicative of enthusiasm for combat in the arena as of fine dining.²⁰ In London

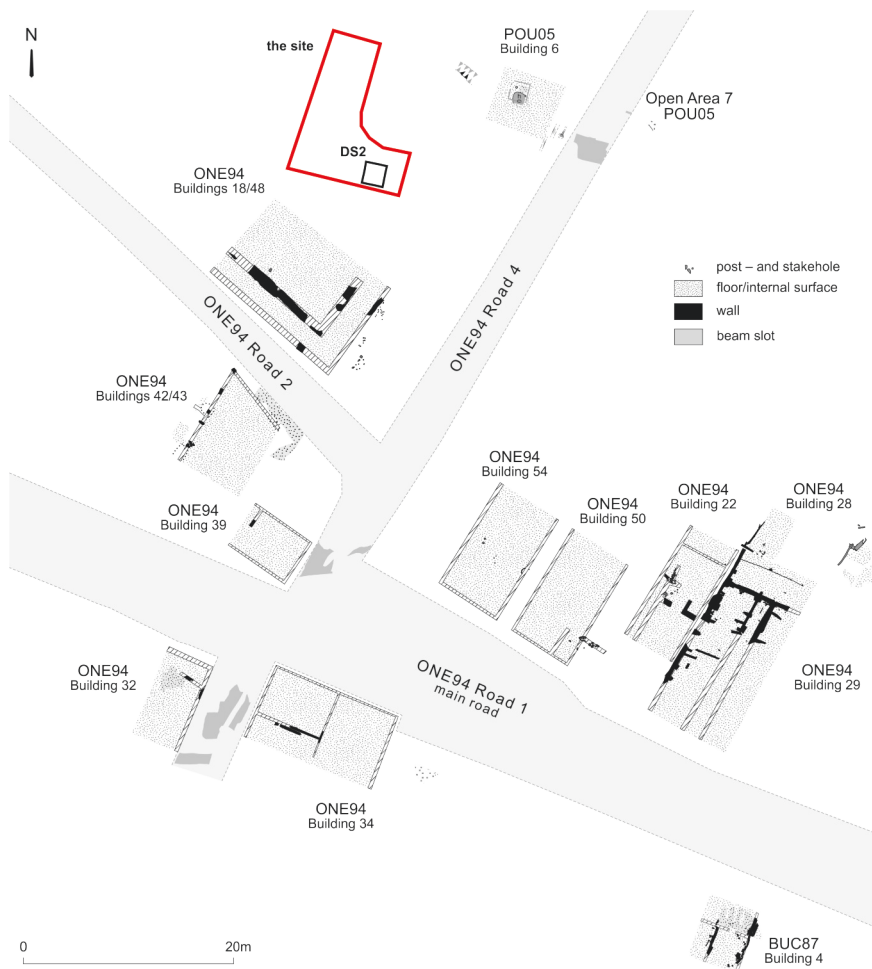


Fig. 2: the surrounding Roman archaeology, c. AD 70–75, as revealed in previous excavations

fragments of sport cups have also been found associated with fairly modest dwellings.²¹ The variety of objects decorated with gladiator imagery attests to the widespread popularity of the games in the City and it was at around this time, c. AD 75, that the London amphitheatre was established.²²

The Romanised tastes indicated by these glass vessels are complemented by the pottery finewares. Fragments of colour-coated wares from Lyon and Central Gaul probably from drinking beakers or cups are distinctively decorated with roughcasting (clay and quartz pieces scattered over the surfaces) and a variety of red glossy samian wares (cups, platters, and elaborately moulded decorated bowls), as well as a rarer fragment of a Terra Nigra platter from Gaul. The array of samian ware cup types, Dragendorff forms 24/25, 27, and 33 as well as a Ritterling 8, are also indicative of the late Neronian to early Flavian dating.

Alongside these imported tablewares were a range of transport vessels (amphorae) which confirm the use of imported wine, olive oil, and fish sauce in meals. It is normally argued that this dominance of imported material in early Roman London reflects

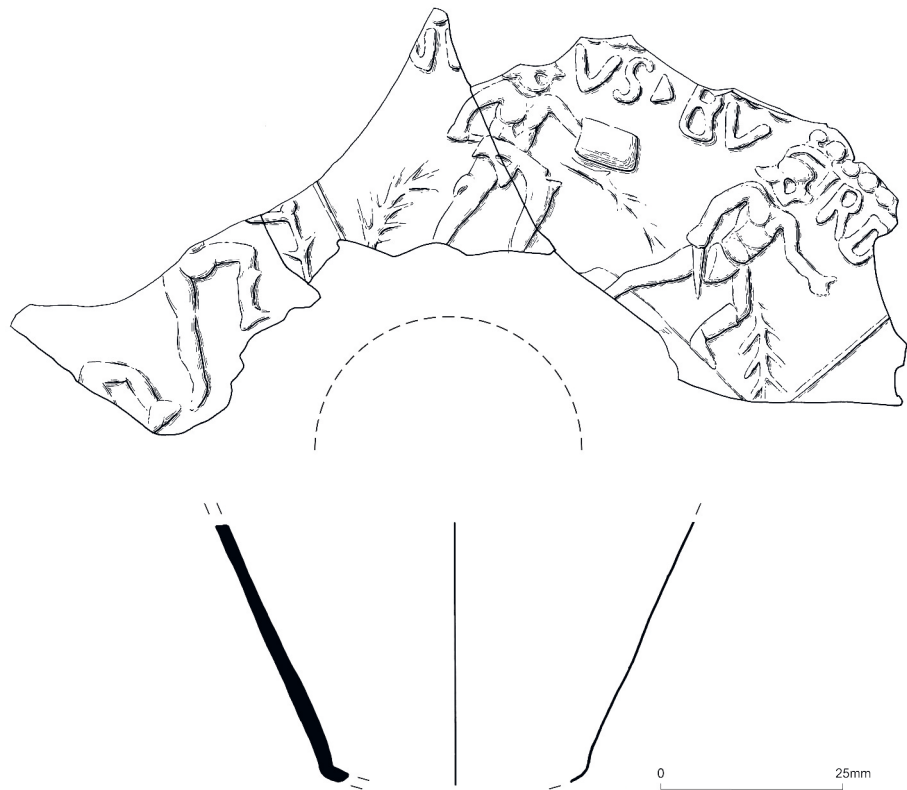


Fig. 4: vessel 2: naturally coloured green-blue mould-blown glass cup with gladiator decoration

cooking and eating habits comparable to those found on the continent, probably practiced by a largely immigrant community.²³

The Romano-British pottery does include some fine ware vessels (small fragments of both a butt and carinated

beakers), however, in the main part these native wares are utilitarian domestic items. The dominance of jars is clear with bead-rimmed types, typical of the period, identified in sand, shell and grog-tempered fabrics. The rim of a bead-rimmed jar with a square section²⁴ still has clear signs of burning and sooting patches caused from its use over an open flame during cooking.

Vessel 3 is one of two ceramic mortaria from the Old Jewry assemblage made in Verulamium Region White Ware (Fig. 5). These gritted ceramic bowls are generally interpreted as being used for grinding and mixing, probably of herbs and spices with olive oil. However, a variety of alternative functions as diverse as cooking vessels, cheese-making and the processing of pigments have also been suggested. These ideas can only be properly tested through systematic survey of form, wear patterns and residue analysis. It has been noted that mortaria did not have a vital role in Roman cookery but Britain was an unusually heavy consumer of them.²⁵

This example is stamped and almost complete (only the right-hand section of the flange is missing). The left-hand

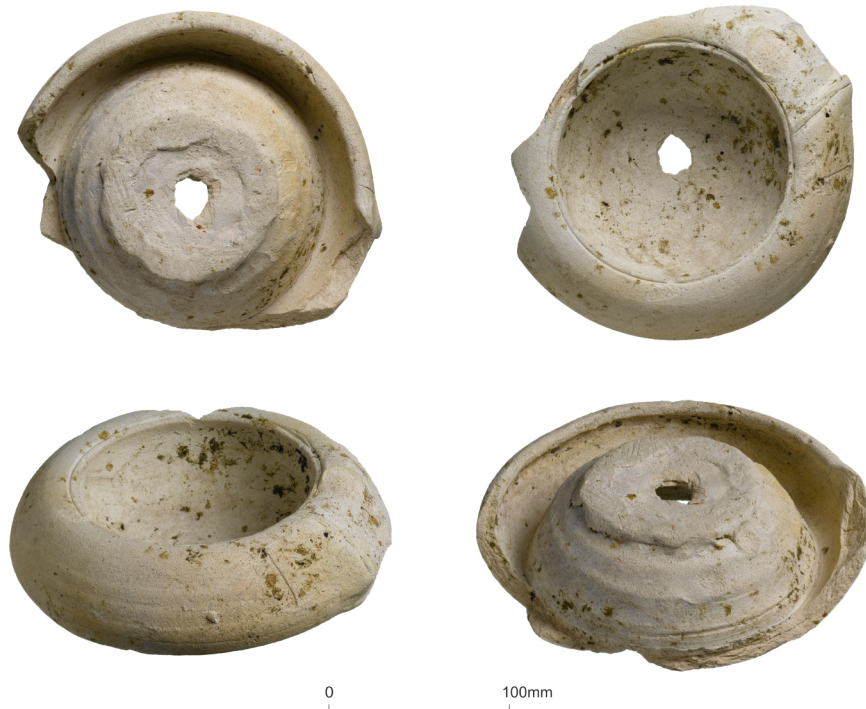


Fig. 5: vessel 3: mortarium-style bowl in Verulamium Region White Ware fabric

stamp reads as LVDD.F (with the first D reversed representing G) and identifies the mortarium as a product of the workshop of Oastrius dating c. AD 55–80.²⁶ Curiously though, the vessel shows distinct differences with the manufacturing techniques used at this workshop. It is unusually small (125mm rim diameter) and the internal surface is entirely ungritted, giving the appearance of a bowl rather than a mortarium. The base was poorly manufactured with extra clay added by hand; clear fingerprints are visible around the edges. Analysis of mortaria rim diameters show that an average measurement is usually over 200mm.²⁷ The products of the Oastrius workshop are evidently more diverse than originally thought, as two further idiosyncratic examples have been found at the adjacent site at 1 Poultry.²⁸

Conclusions

The three vessels discussed above are all in some way special, but they illustrate wider trends in the tastes of Roman Londoners and in particular they complement and expand the recently published assemblages from

No 1 Poultry. The assemblage provides a classic illustration of the diverse trading market established in this early stage of the City's development; with accessibility to high quality fine wares and importation of commodities consistent with continental styles of eating. Local producers were also producing and experimenting with new vessel types, such as mortaria, not used prior to the conquest.

The occurrence together in a single set of dumped deposits of imported glass vessels and pottery fine wares, perfectly at home on a table in Gaul or Italy, and the unusual local variant of mortaria, however, is extremely interesting and reflects the development of new distinctively 'Romano-British' consumers. It is such contrasts that make the inhabitants of Early Roman London so fascinating.

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1. A. Daykin *Old Jewry Dropshafts, London, EC2, City of London*, unpublished watching brief report (2012); for published summaries see 'Roman Britain in 2011: I. Sites explored 7. Greater London, (8) Cheapside/Old Jewry dropshafts, EC2' *Britannia* 43 (2012) 330–1; C. Maloney *London Fieldwork and Publication Round-up 2011, London Archaeol* 13, *supp.* 2 (2012) 53.
2. J. Hill and P. Rowsome *Roman London and the Walbrook stream crossing: Excavations at 1 Poultry and vicinity* MOLA Monograph 37 (2012); K. Pitt and F. Seeley 'Excavations at 36–39 Poultry, London, EC2' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (in prep).
3. Hill & Rowsome *op cit* fn 2, 22–6.
4. *Ibid.*, 71.
5. *Ibid.*, 84–5, fig 77, ONE94 B17 and ONE94 R2.
6. *Ibid.*, 90–1 fig 82, ONE94 B18/48 and ONE 94 R4; Pitt and Seeley *op cit* 2, fig 15.
7. The <accession> and [context] numbers for these vessels are as follows: vessel 1 <4>, [15]; vessel 2 <1-3>, [15] and vessel 3 <8>, [16].
8. For a general discussion of this tradition see H.E.M. Cool and J. Price *Roman vessel glass from excavations in Colchester 1971–85*. Colchester Archaeol Rep 8 (1995), 56–60.
9. *Op cit* fn 8, 56
10. For example a similar rim from Nijmegen, Netherlands and cited parallels of Claudio-Neronian date in C. Isings 'Glass from the Canabae Legionis at Nijmegen' *Ber Rijksdienst Oudheidkund Bodemonderz* 30 (1980) 321–2, no 895 and fig 27 no 6.
11. *Op cit* fn 8, 60–1, no 257.
12. S. Cottam and J. Price 'The early Roman vessel glass' in Ch. Goudineau and D Brentchaloff, *Le Camp*

de la Flotte d'Agrippa a Fréjus. (2009) 205, no 155.
13. L. Berger, *Römische Gläser aus Vindonissa Veröffentlichungen* Gessellschaft pro Vindonissa Basel (1960) 82, no 210.
14. A. Wardle 'The Roman glass' in Hill and Rowsome *op cit* fn 2, 489.
15. J. Price and S. Cottam *Roman-British Glass Vessel: A Handbook* CBA Practical Handbook in Archaeology 14 (1998), 61–3.
16. Including vessel 2 and another recent discovery from a MOLA excavation, 4 of the 39 mould-blown sports cups known from Roman London are ovoid. Similar patterns can be seen in publications of larger collections from France and Switzerland where a range of previously defined mould types are also detailed; G Sennequier, A. Hochuli-Gysel, S. Fünfschiling, L. Berger, J. Nelis-Clément, and C. Landes, *Les verres romains à scènes de spectacle trouvés en France* association française pour l'archaéologie du verre (1998); B. Rütli, L. Berger, S. Fünfschiling, W.B. Stern, and N. Spichtig *Die zirkusbecher der Schweiz Jahresbericht 1987 der Gesellschaft Pro Vindonissa* (1988).
17. E. Köhne, and C. Ewigleben (eds) *Gladiators and Caesars: the power of spectacle in ancient Rome* (English version ed. R. Jackson) (2000) 48–52.
18. D.B. Harden *Glass of the Caesars*, British Museum exhibition catalogue, Milan (1987) 167, no 88 and *ibid.*, 169 no 90.
19. *Op cit* fn 17, 56, fig 52.
20. J. Price 'Roman vessel glass in Britain; Gladiators on glass in Roman Britain' *Current Archaeol* 186 (June 2003) 245–6 for a more general discussion.
21. Angela Wardle *pers. comm.*

22. N. Bateman, C. Cowan, and R Wroe-Brown *London's Roman amphitheatre: Guildhall Yard, City of London* MOLAS monograph 35 (2008); for recent discussions of gladiatorial imagery in London and elsewhere see *ibid.*, 129–30 and L Allason-Jones 'Recreation' in L Allason-Jones (ed) *Artefacts in Roman Britain* Cambridge University Press (2011) 221–5.
23. E.g. H.E.M. Cool *Eating and Drinking in Roman Britain* Cambridge University Press (2006) 180–3.
24. Type IIA7-8 shown in G. Marsh and P. Tyers 'The Roman Pottery from Southwark' in J. Bird, A.H. Graham, H. Sheldon and P. Townend (eds) *Southwark Excavations 1972-4* Joint Publ London Middlesex Archaeol Soc/Surrey Archaeol Soc I (1979) 533–82.
25. H.E.M. Cool 'Some notes on spoons and mortaria' in B. Croxford, H. Eckardt, J. Meake, and J. Weekes (eds.) *TRAC 2003: Proceedings of the thirteenth annual theoretical Roman archaeology conference, Leicester 2003*, Oxford, Oxbow books (2004) 28–35 and *op cit* fn 23, 42–6.
26. Full discussion of the stamp die and products of Oastrius can be found in C. Saunders and A.B. Havercroft *A kiln of the potter Oastrius and related excavations at Little Munden Farm Verulamium Museum Occasional Paper 1, Hertfordshire Archaeol* 5 (1977) 109–56.
27. *Op cit* fn 23, 44.
28. K. Hartley in Hill and Rowsome *op cit* fn 2, CD Catalogue 3, accession numbers <4620> and <5438>.
29. See also R.S.O. Tomlin 'III. Inscriptions' *Britannia* 43 (2012) 405 for comments on the inscription. His reading of BVVD[O] replaces the BVRO[...] reported by Marshall in his contribution to the unpublished watching brief report (Daykin *op cit* fn 1).