

Notes

A ROMANO-BRITISH FACE POT FROM DRAYTON WOODS, BANBURY, OXFORDSHIRE

This vessel was found by a Mr C. Richards of Banbury while walking in 'Drayton Woods' at Easter 1962. The exact findspot is not certain, but the location of the vessel in Banbury Museum suggests that this was the Drayton just to the north-west of Banbury, rather than the larger place of the same name near Abingdon in south Oxfordshire. There is no Drayton Wood as such, but woods within Wroxton Park, immediately to the west of Drayton (SP4241), are presumably what was meant. The vessel was presented to Banbury Museum¹ and was drawn to the writer's attention in early 1993 by Oxfordshire Museums, who were engaged in reorganisation of the Museum's collections. Thanks are owed to them for permission and encouragement to publish the piece.²

The face pot (Fig. 1) is remarkable both as a fine piece in its own right and also because it has (unusually for vessels of this kind) a very close parallel, from Holme-on-Spalding Moor, East Yorkshire, recently published.³

The Drayton vessel is incomplete. It consists of a single large sherd with a smaller, joining fragment, with a total weight of *c.* 218 gm., from a fairly small vessel with a rim diameter of about 100 mm. The maximum surviving height is *c.* 130 mm. The breaks all around the circumference of the sherd appear to be fairly fresh and are unlikely to have occurred in antiquity. Assuming that the damage did not occur within the museum it seems reasonable to conclude that the vessel was broken at or shortly before the time of discovery.

Fabric

The fabric is generally a dark reddish brown to black (it ranges from 5YR 2.5/1 on the top of the rim, through 5YR 2.5/2 to 5YR 3/3 and 3.5/4. The interior surface is lighter, *c.* 5YR 4.5/6). It is hard and well-fired and is characterised principally by moderate to abundant angular and subangular clear and off-white quartz temper. These grains are regularly up to *c.* 1.5 mm. in length, and occasionally up to 2 mm., but the majority fall in the size range 0.5–1 mm. Occasional rounded red iron ore inclusions also occur. The method of manufacture is difficult to assess since most of the surviving part of the vessel has had hand-made elements of the face attached to it, with consequent formation of irregularities in both

¹ Accession number BM537.

² Particular thanks are owed to Jonathan Wallis of Oxfordshire Museums for his help, also to Gillian Braithwaite for helpful discussion of the face pot, and to Gill Hale of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, who produced the illustration from drawings by the writer.

³ P. Halkon, 'Romano-British face pots from Holme-on-Spalding Moor and Shiptonthorpe, East Yorkshire', *Britannia*, xxiii (1992), 222–8.

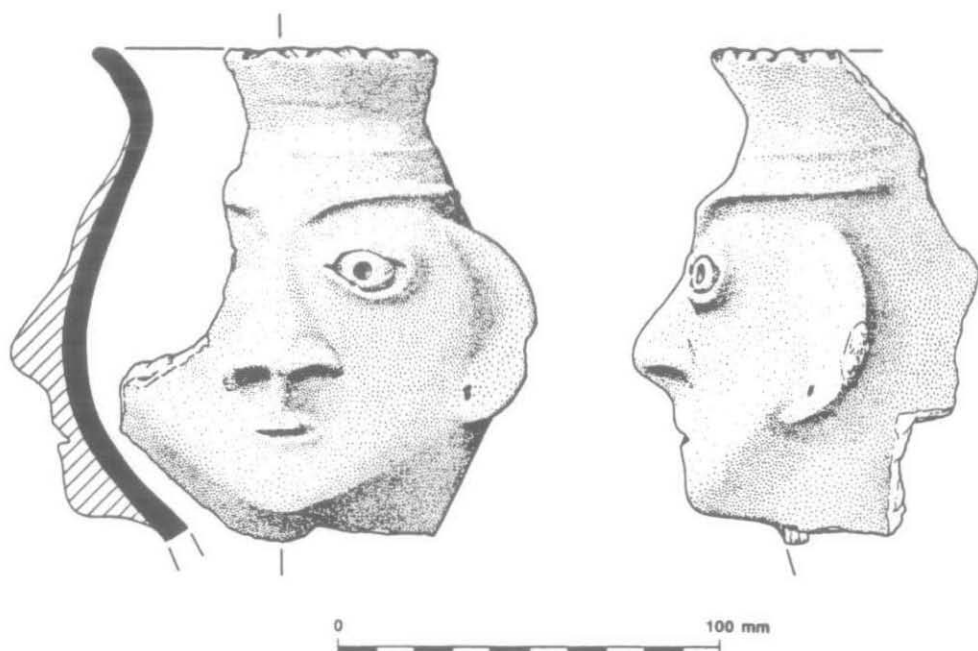


Fig. 1. A Romano-British face pot from Drayton Woods.

internal and external surfaces. There is thus no conclusive evidence of wheel throwing on the extant fragment. It may be noted that the Holme-on-Spalding Moor vessel is described as 'partially wheelthrown'.⁴

Surface treatment and decoration

The vessel is burnished overall, including on the internal surface of the rim. On the sharply moulded parts of the face the burnishing is not very smooth and individual narrow facets can be seen. The modelled detail was added as separate pieces to the surface of the vessel. Most of it is in quite high relief. Above the prominent, pointed chin the mouth, which is quite small, with little definition of the lips, is formed by a deep cut. The nose is well modelled and extremely prominent, with the nostrils appearing as indentations on each side of a substantial central ridge. The eyebrows are also prominent and run continuously from the bridge of the nose to above the ears. In shape they are remarkably reminiscent of the eyebrows on some early 1st-century helmets of Imperial-Gallic type.⁵ The ears, which are in high relief, are stylised, crescent shaped and finely pierced with a small hole *c.* 1 mm. in diameter. The surrounds of the eyes bulge noticeably. Within them the eye itself is sharply defined, possibly with a knife, though it is also possible that the surround was added later. The iris/pupil is a deep impression made with a rounded implement (stick?) some 4 mm. in diameter.

⁴ *Ibid.* 223.

⁵ H. Russell Robinson, *The armour of Imperial Rome* (London, 1975), 45.

Apart from the face the only other decorative feature is notching on the rim of the vessel. The notches are alternately to left and right and may have been made with a small twig or a tool with a rounded section. They were not formed with a fingertip, fingernail or knife.

Discussion

It is regrettable that so little is known of the findspot or circumstances of discovery of the Drayton face pot. It is not known if the vessel comes from a Roman site, but the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record has no indication of significant Roman finds in the Drayton area. The context can therefore tell us nothing about the date of the vessel. The character of the surviving sherd, with its new breaks, indicates that at least a very substantial part of the vessel must have been in situ at or shortly before the time of discovery. A possible scenario is that the pot was complete and that it was associated with a burial, though far fewer such vessels have been found in graves than might have been expected.⁶

The parallels with the Holme-on-Spalding Moor vessel are so striking as to leave no doubt that the two vessels were products of the same workshop, and were arguably produced by the same potter. The fabrics appear very similar (on the basis of the published description),⁷ the form of the vessel, including the unusual and distinctive straight everted rim with notched decoration on its tip, is common to both, and the faces are very similar both in their broad conception and in many small details, including piercing of the ears, which is unusual in British face pots.⁸ At present the consensus of opinion on the Holme vessel is that it is probably of 1st–2nd century date and perhaps of relatively local origin.⁹ All that can be said about the Drayton vessel is that the fabric certainly does not suggest an Oxfordshire origin. It could therefore have come from a source as far distant as East Yorkshire, though if so, the mechanism by which it arrived in north Oxfordshire can be no more than the subject of wild speculation.

P.M. BOOTH

⁶ G. Braithwaite, 'Romano-British face pots and head pots', *Britannia*, xv (1984), 123.

⁷ *Op. cit.* note 3, 223.

⁸ *Ibid.* 225–6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

A PAINTING BY MICHAEL ANGELO ROOKER

The Museum of Oxford has recently acquired an interesting and unexpected source for Oxford topography at the time of the advent of the Oxford Canal:¹ Michael Angelo Rooker's oil-painting of old Hythe Bridge and Oxford Castle (Fig. 1). It has been assumed that this was the painting exhibited by Rooker at the Royal Academy in 1779, no. 271, as *The Castle Hill at Oxford*, but closer study of the setting reveals it to be later. The painting is unsigned and undated.²

¹ The painting was acquired in July by Oxfordshire Museums, Oxfordshire County Council, for exhibition at the Museum of Oxford, with the help of grants from the Victoria and Albert Purchase Grant Fund, the Greening Lamborn Trust, Oxford, and the Oxford Preservation Trust, having previously been offered for sale at Sotheby's.

² The attribution to Rooker is confirmed by Patrick Conner, author of *Michael Angelo Rooker, 1746–1801* (London, 1984), to whom I am grateful for help and encouragement. The identification with the painting exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1779 appears in the Sotheby's sale catalogue, *British Paintings 1500–1800*, 13 April 1994, p. 106, no. 96.



Fig. 1. Painting by Michael Angelo Rooker.

Rooker, born off Drury Lane the son of a pantomime actor and engraver, although a Londoner all his life,³ may nevertheless be regarded as the father of modern Oxford townscapes, owing to his contribution to the *Oxford Almanack* over a period of twenty years. From 1769 to 1788, working in conjunction with his engraver father until 1776, he was responsible for the series of Almanack illustrations of Oxford buildings which so influenced later illustrators such as Turner.⁴ The Almanack pictures highlight his love of detail and keen interest in very new buildings, as well as in those about to be demolished: he painted several versions in oil of the rebuilding of South Bridge at the time of the demolition of Friar Bacon's Study in 1779, one of which was also exhibited at the Royal Academy in the same year.⁵ Already active as an artist as a very young man in the 1760s, he served an apprenticeship under Paul Sandby, joined the Royal Academy as a student in 1768 and hoped to become a painter of landscapes in oils, but fame and

³ Conner, *Rooker*, 24-5.

⁴ Conner, *Rooker*, 106-7. The Rookers' contributions to the Almanack are described and illustrated in H.M. Petter, *The Oxford Almanacks* (Oxford, 1974), 73-8.

⁵ Conner, *Rooker*, 109.

success eluded him and he is not recorded as having painted in oils after the 1779 exhibition.⁶

The painting in oils on linen canvas measures 535 mm. wide by 434 mm. high and is framed in a gilded wood and gesso display frame to which it has recently been re-secured using nails and cork spacers. The five-member wood stretcher has a vertical cross-piece. The reverse of the painting shows a recent glue paste lining onto medium tabby weave canvas; the tacking edges of the lining are glued onto the stretcher and the lining has been stained a dark colour. There has been a very small amount of recent retouching over the right-hand and top stretcher bar marks, and in the centre cloud of the sky, some strengthening of the boat sail, and some retouching to disguise frame rebate abrasion on the top and bottom edges.⁷

Two yellowed paper labels are stuck to the back of the stretcher. At the top, 'Old Hyde Bridge and Castle Mound, Oxford. By Samuel Scott' has been typed on an archaic machine; below, a very wasted printed label says 'William Innes (late James Wyatt), Printseller, Carver, Gilder and Frame-Maker' (a lower line is indecipherable).

The picture itself shows Oxford Castle Mound viewed from the north-north-west, clad in youngish trees, separated by an interval of about its width again from St George's Tower from which runs the Castle wall. Between Mound and Tower and in front of the Tower are the steep gabled roofs of about half a dozen houses of which only the upper halves are seen; smoke curls from two of the chimneys.

To the right of the cottages and in front, an indeterminate stone wall crosses from the right, possibly the stonework of a bridge to the south, as an arched opening is just visible at the bottom. This background is relatively dim and overshadowed by storm clouds of mauve-grey banking from the east on the left.

The setting sun, which appears as a golden glow to the right of the picture behind the houses in Fisher Row, highlights in the middle ground of the picture a triple-arched stone bridge, the Old Hythe Bridge, spanning the placid river in which it and all the foreground figures are reflected. To the right, the west bank of the stream is a brown muddy slope up which a large rowing boat has been partly dragged, while half a dozen smaller, identically painted green and white pleasure boats are moored at the river's edge. A fisherman about to cross the bridge walks along a raised stone-built causeway, before the row of houses on Fisher Row; the garden, garden gate and garden wall of the most northern cottage are seen behind. A red-cloaked woman crosses the bridge, while a bearded man in black hat pauses at the summit.

On the left, or east, the bridge abuts a steeper grassier bank where a figure in academic dress walks southward up the path to the gap in a brick wall which enters from the left and bears an obscure relationship to the stone parapet of the old bridge. The path has crossed a sluice-gate made of the same brick, and continues down the left-hand side of the painting towards the foreground, separating the river from a further stream to the left. Along the towpath between the two channels stroll two of the foreground figures, a gentleman in academic dress over buff waistcoat and breeches, and a girl in tall-crowned black hat and a white lacey cloak over her pink petticoat. Their dog, a lurcher,⁸ strolls before them and they exchange pleasantries with a similarly dressed young man leisurely paddling another of the small green and white boats near the foreshore, here lined with charmingly portrayed Marsh Marigolds.

⁶ Conner, *Rooker*, 28-30.

⁷ Conservation report by Jim Dimond, 7 April 1994.

⁸ I am grateful to Mrs Moira Haynes, Secretary of the Oxford Preservation Trust, for identifying the dog and plants.

All this is made rosey and gold by the setting sun, while on the right-hand side of the picture in the foreground, a toiling bargeman plies his pole along the western shore in the dusk; and on the far left in the middle ground, the houses of Oxford are seen grey and huddled with smoking chimneys. The feathery light green leaves and new grass, the Marsh Marigolds, the pink blossom in the Fisher Row garden, the golden evening light and smoking chimneys suggest a spring evening in April or May.

The painting, a beautiful and moving work in its own right, is also a unique document illustrating the Thames and its left bank at this spot just north-west of the Castle, at a time when improvements to Midlands communications were to alter the character of the area. Closer study of the structures at the left of the painting in the middle ground reveal, in fact, that the advent of the Oxford Canal may already have taken place at the time of painting. Remains of the sluice-gate, or lock-gate, of mellow 18th-century brick topped with a pale coping, may still be seen from the modern Hythe Bridge which replaced the old stone bridge in 1861.⁹ The anomalous section of brick wall to the left of the old Hythe Bridge in the picture is of the same build, and could more easily be explained as a heightening of the parapet of the old bridge on the east side, to accommodate a rise in the level of the road as it cleared the new channel. The newly heightened road appears as a thin, bright strip in the gap in the brick wall towards which one of the academic figures strides; and the buildings at the left-hand side of the picture in the middle ground, possibly to be identified as cottages in the grounds of Worcester College,¹⁰ do indeed appear sunken below this new road level.

An examination of two, nearly contemporary, maps of this area, one drawn before and one just after the completion of this southern end of the Oxford Canal, strengthens the case for the picture post-dating the excavation of the canal. Thomas Jeffreys' map of 1768¹¹ shows the area with Hythe Bridge and the river, and to the east, an area of meadow south of Worcester College, but no sluice-gate or parallel stream in the depicted position.¹² Richard Davis' map of 1793/94¹³ on the other hand shows an arrangement of river, lock, smaller but parallel Canal stream and triangular portion of foreshore jutting southwards, identical to what is seen in the picture.

The Oxford end of the Oxford to Birmingham Canal was completed and opened on the 1st January 1790; the Birmingham end was not completed and opened until July of that year.¹⁴ Possibly the painting was executed during the spring between the two openings, before traffic on the Canal began in earnest. As Rooker had terminated his relationship with the Almanack in 1788 this picture possibly becomes the latest of his Oxford views. As for the picture *The Castle Hill at Oxford* listed by the Royal Academy, perhaps this is to be identified with a painting in private hands in Sussex.¹⁵

LAUREN GILMOUR

⁹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv. 288.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Julian Munby, FSA, for this suggestion.

¹¹ *Plan of the University and City of Oxford* (1768): copy in Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, MP 173.

¹² More detailed plans of this area, with low-lying meadows intersected by drains, appear opposite page 439 in W.H. Stevenson and H.E. Salter, *Early History of St. John's College, Oxford* (Oxford Historical Society, i, 1939).

¹³ R. Davis, *A New Map of the County of Oxford* (London, 1793/94), Sheet XIII: Centre for Oxfordshire Studies.

¹⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv. 293-4.

¹⁵ *Country Life*, 18 April 1985, 1022. I would like to thank Julian Munby for bringing this second picture to my attention.