

NOTE

AN OXFORDSHIRE ROMAN MILLEFIORI DISC

In 2006 generous support for the Friends' fund-raising campaign enabled the Oxfordshire Museums Service to purchase a millefiori enamelled disc found in the county and thought to date from the first to second century AD.¹ It is on display at the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock.

The bronze disc is divided into three concentric sections by bronze encircling bands, filled with decorative millefiori canes (see Plate 15). The central circle comprises a chequerboard pattern of blue-and-red squares. Each blue square cane contains tiny white squares, and each red one its own chequerboard of white-and-blue squares. The inner border is filled with two rows of blue canes with small red-and-blue central flowers, the outer with distinctive fine blue fir-tree-like motifs on a white background. It measures 49 mm in diameter. On the reverse is a bronze stud.

Although relatively rare, examples of similar discs have been found across Britain. One from Usk, Gwent,² and one from near Chepstow, Gwent,³ are effectively an identical pair and probably from the same workshop. The content and arrangement of the decoration on the new Oxfordshire example is almost identical to that of one found in a grave at Tjaereborg, near Esbjerg, in Denmark.⁴ The chequerboard central circle of the Oxfordshire disc is also almost identical in form and colour to the millefiori decoration of another find, a circular disc brooch from Alcester (Warwickshire) in which the millefiori enamel decoration is set into a leaded bronze metal disc forming the main front of the brooch.⁵ Another, incomplete, millefiori disc with the distinctive fir-tree motif was found in 2001 on the site of a villa in north Oxfordshire,⁶ in addition to the fragmentary remains of another from Chilton (formerly Berkshire).⁷

These and other discs belong to a wider series of Roman millefiori enamelled-bronze prestige items, including inkpots and belt mounts, which were manufactured in the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire in the first to second centuries AD. Their function is not known. It is possible they were from high-status horse harnesses, but the example from the Danish grave is believed to have been a bandoleer button.

The method used and the form of millefiori decoration found on both the new Oxfordshire disc and the Alcester disc brooch are typical of Roman work.⁸ This tradition of millefiori work

¹ Oxfordshire Museums Service, accession no. OXCMS: 2006.123.

² National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, accession no. 31.78. This is currently on display at the National Roman Legionary Museum, Caerleon.

³ BM, accession no. 1891, 3–27, 9.

⁴ See www.dmol.dk, id 13560.

⁵ See J. Bayley and S. Butcher, *Roman Brooches in Britain: a Technological and Typological Study* (London, 2004), p. 129, cat. no. 370 and plate 17.

⁶ Portable Antiquities Scheme database BERK-555701. It is still in the possession of the landowner, but an image of it can be seen on the Portable Antiquities database: www.findsdatabase.org.uk.

⁷ Portable Antiquities Scheme database BERK-D929C. This is in private hands, but an image can be viewed on the Portable Antiquities database, see n. 6 above.

⁸ Bayley and Butcher, *Roman Brooches*, pp. 46–51.

can be seen to continue into the post-Roman period, as seen especially in a series of 'late Celtic hanging bowls',⁹ – at Lincoln,¹⁰ for example, and at Sutton Hoo.¹¹

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⁹ Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *A Corpus of Late Celtic Hanging-Bowls, with an Account of the Bowls found in Scandinavia* by Sheila Raven (Oxford, 2005), esp. plate 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 191–9 and plate 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 258–71.



Plate 15. Roman Millefiori Disc. (*By courtesy of Bonhams.*) [Anderson, p. 219.]