

Life In Londinium: Review of Roman Finds Group Meeting, 30th September 1996

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The Autumn meeting was an informative and informal series of talks hosted by the Museum of London, centred around an update of finds from recent excavations. The museum has been very busy lately, it seems. We heard all about the new Roman London Gallery from Jenny Hall, with Trevor Bingham revealing the trials and tribulations of constructing an accurate model of the forum and surroundings to scale, complete with carefully placed animals and passers-by to distract attention from the less well documented features. The model itself, now in position, is a thing of beauty and a joy forever, or at least for a few years... in any case, we are told that the updated galleries have improved visitor understanding no end, and they have obviously been thought out with care, forming an ideal setting for the many new objects on display.

Some of the new finds were presented by Angela Wardle and Martin Dearne. Angela whizzed us round three London sites, 1 the Poultry, Regis House and Bishopsgate. The Poultry site, in Cheapside, looks set to considerably extend our knowledge of Roman furniture with the recovery of a circular shale table top and leather fragments of what is probably upholstery. A calcite vessel from Regis House was a particularly unusual find. A wide variety of imported objects has been found in Roman London, re-emphasising its cosmopolitan nature. Martin told us a fairy tale, about three little pigs, or rather three not so little pigs. The lead pigs recently recovered from the Regis House excavations (the first known from London) are important finds in the context of Romano-British lead production as a whole. Inscriptions on the pigs show that they came from the Mendips production area. They are thought to have been sent in a single consignment to London. Two were cast in the same mould and the other shared a mould with an extant Mendips pig. Alas, the story didn't have a happy ending: Martin recounted, with tears in his eyes, how the big bad wolf of recycled lead use in London may have vanquished those first tentative forays to the big city, or at least grabbed a large part of the market, leaving the pigs cowering under the floorboards in a Thames-side warehouse.

Two other crafts were examined in the afternoon session, again illustrated by recent London finds. John Shepherd told us that there is now glass-working evidence from fifteen sites in London. Experimental work to achieve an appearance on 'Timeteam' (sorry John - of course, to look at the working and products of a reconstructed furnace) was dazzlingly successful, with the reproduction of a technique for melting large amounts of glass. The Guildhall Yard site has apparently produced a massive amount of glass vessel and glass working debris. By comparing mystery bits of glass found in these and other dumps with the products of experimental glassblowing, they have been revealed as likely waste products from the production of narrow-necked vessels. Staying with the vessels theme, several

new casks from the Poultry excavations were the inspiration for Damian Goodburn's contribution. The favoured materials for barrels are apparently either larch or silver fir, and the wine in the barrels was probably produced on the Rhine. A taste for retsina can be deduced from resin in small crevices on the inside of casks recently found. Tool-marks on the barrels give useful information about construction techniques, found to be significantly different from medieval methods, and prehistoric landscapes can even be reconstructed from the barrels, as the Roman coopers were often using wood from five to seven hundred year-old trees.

Catherine Johns finished off the day with an update on Roman jewellery. Skilfully avoiding too many brooches - 'enough typology to make you feel ill' - her focus was mainly on precious metal hoards. A recent find was a late Hellenistic finger-ring imported into Britain in the pre-conquest era, the earliest such object known in Britain. Some distinctively Romano-British pieces are now beginning to appear, such as 'horse & rider' brooches. The date range of other types of decoration such as pierced work can be pushed earlier with the evidence from dated hoards.

Perhaps the main point that emerged from the day was that Roman London was fully integrated into the network of Empire-wide trade, with imports from both the adjoining provinces in north-western Europe and from further afield. From a broader perspective, the meeting was particularly interesting in that we saw things from the point of view of the visitor to the museum as well as the specialist. Bridging the gulf between the two is an increasingly important part of the archaeologist's work, as we become more conscious of the need for justification to a wider audience. The Museum of London proved that this can be done without a loss of academic purpose. Finally, if you want a bedtime story told to your children, you could do worse than ask Martin Dearne.