

A Romano-British Settlement at Combwich

BY H. S. L. DEWAR

ON 31 March 1937, the finding of two human skeletons in the clay pits at Combwich, belonging to Messrs. Colthurst, Symons & Co. Ltd., brought to notice the wholesale removal of a Romano-British habitation site in the course of excavation of clay for brick and tile manufacture. On enquiry it was found that possibly half the total estimated area of the site had been dug away, leaving a plot of about 120 yds. by 60 yds. still untouched.

The centre of the inhabited area was situated $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile E. of Bolham House (O.S. 6-inch map, XXXVIII, S.W.), and $\frac{1}{4}$ -mile N.E. of Putnell Farm, the Combwich Passage across the Parret lying about $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile to the N.E. The untouched flat ground surface is 24 ft. above O.D., and seems to present no sign of previous disturbance save for some shallow, modern drainage ditches.

The sub-soil is blue clay, rather similar in appearance to the clays of the Bridgwater levels, but just here particularly suitable for bricks and tiles. It is overlain by about 18 in. of dark occupational soil, and is penetrated to an observed depth of 4 ft. 6 in. by pockets and pits containing black earth, charcoal, ash, and coprolites, the whole being known to the workmen as 'dirt'.

Owing to the rapidity with which large gangs of men periodically cut and throw down the clay to the floor of the workings, stopping only to throw out the larger foreign bodies, it has not been feasible to make any very careful or systematic observations. It may be said, however, from frequent visits both during and after working-hours when undisturbed scrutiny of the 'face' was possible, that no definite stratification can be

seen for more than a few yards in any direction. The earliest occupied Romano-British surface seems to have been at the $4\frac{1}{4}$ ft. level, and is often revealed by the drying of the clay causing a constant, slightly ash-strewn cleavage line at that point.

A large number of sherds occur in 'nests', lying with their convex faces downwards at varying levels at the bottom of the dirt-pits, but pottery is also present throughout the blue clay above the $4\frac{1}{4}$ ft. level between the dirt-pits, and in the occupational soil above the 18 in. level. The blue clay lying between the pits is not distinguishable by eye from that which is found below the $4\frac{1}{4}$ ft. mark.

Patches of closely-laid stones derived from neighbouring Liassic and Triassic formations, and including large rolled pebbles from the N. Somerset beach are found at about the 1 ft. level, though occasionally deeper, and probably represent roughly cobbled hut floors. No definite hearths have been seen.

A few specimens of bead-rim, perhaps late first century, and comparable with those found at Cannington Park Quarry¹ have been recovered from one such floor, but are presumably erratic though not necessarily so, since the same floor yielded scraps of Samian ware which are not dateable.

Small representative selections of sherds from all levels were submitted to Mr. Christopher Hawkes in 1937. Among others he noted a thick, heavy base of Samian, form 31, late 2nd century, with potter's stamp, apparently *TITI OFFICIN*; a smaller rim piece of Samian, form 31, later 2nd century, or early 3rd; a small, hooked mortarium-rim, 2nd-3rd century; wall-sided mortarium-rim, late 4th century. Other specimens ranged from probable late 1st to late 4th centuries.

In 1938 part of a potter's stamp *PII . . .* (=PE) on a Samian ware base was recovered. In all about a hundred-weight of potsherds have been salvaged, and reconstructions of three vessels have been made, namely, a baby's feeding-bottle in red ware, unglazed, and with spout missing (figured on p. 132, no. 3); a flat, black dish; and a black cooking-pot with lattice design on central zone. The only piece of ornamented

¹ In the Blake Museum, Bridgwater.

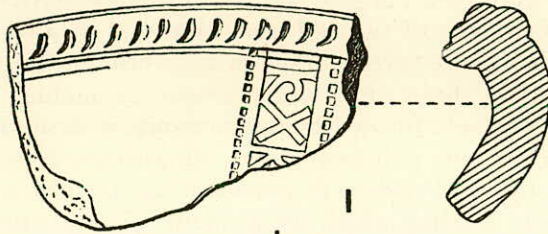
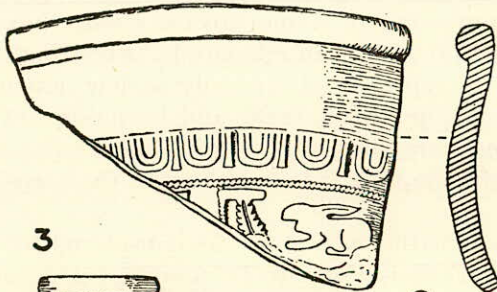
red Samian ware found on the site is a rim-piece, with egg-and-tongue pattern, etc., of the 2nd century (no. 2, p. 132).

Other finds include three worked flints, a crucible (apparently formed from the base of a larger vessel), a mould, spindle-whorls one of which, formed from lias-stone, is figured (no. 4), a whetstone, various polished stones, slingstones, fragments of baked clay tubes and various fragments of daub ; also a grooved ovoid Triassic pebble which is probably a net-sinker or a plumb-bob (no. 5, p. 132). An object, possibly unique, is a portion of the rim of a heavy storage vessel of light grey ware bearing an impression of a mortarium stamp (no. 1, p. 132) which appears to read **KXR** in retrograde, according to Mr. Eric Birley. Iron is represented by only a few much corroded fragments, while the bones, teeth and horn-cores of the usual domestic animals are abundant. Coins and fibulae are absent, and after careful enquiry it is not thought that any have been discovered.

Sundry sherds with green glaze are considered by Mr. E. M. Jope to be of British (Mendip ?) manufacture, and may be classed as belonging to the early period of the Combwich occupation.

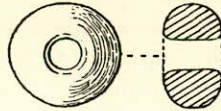
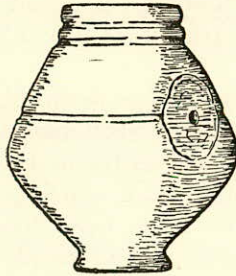
The two human skeletons cannot be held as definitely having been buried during the existence of the settlement, though their position was approximately in the centre of the village. One, probably male, very fragmentary, from which a decayed molar was forthcoming, is stated to have been found at a depth of 6 ft., but was not seen *in situ*. The second, a young adult, probably female, was measured and photographed after careful exposure by one of the workmen. It lay at a depth of 2 ft. 8 in., and was fully extended on its back, legs apart, feet to the E., the face being turned over the left shoulder. Though the adjoining clay contained a number of scattered sherds and broken vessels, nothing appeared to have been placed in direct association with the body.

Before concluding it should be recorded that a curious and rather mysterious stone was found which we shall call 'the Combwich Stone' ; it bears what may perhaps be best described as a pseudo-Ogham inscription. Its provenance is unquestionable, though the writer did not see it unearthed.

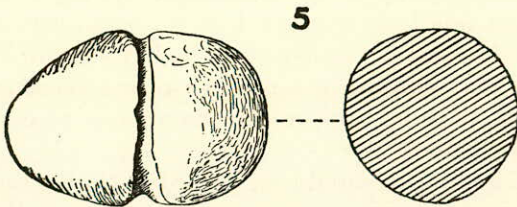
ALL $\frac{1}{2}$ 

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Antiquities from R. B. Settlement, Combwich

From Drawings by Miss V. M. Newman

The relevant passages of a letter on the subject from Mr. T. D. Kendrick follow :

‘ I am sorry to say I cannot offer any satisfactory help in the case of your extraordinary stone from Combwich. I agree that the marks do not seem to be accidentally caused (*i.e.* plough-marks or anything of that kind ; but it is equally certain that they are not recognisable Oghams In Ireland a variety of rough and illegible markings on the edges of stones is recognised under the heading “pseudo-Oghams”. These are the only carvings that seem to me to be comparable with your stone.’

We must therefore leave the Combwich stone in the Admiral Blake Museum, Bridgwater, until the day of further enlightenment.

* * * * *

Writing in 1940, with approximately an eighth part of the known occupied area still to be dug for clay, the only useful observation to be made is, that from the absence of any continuous stratification (other than the cleavage line and ash at 4½ ft.) and from the presence of earlier wares sometimes at levels higher than later ones, in addition to the occurrence of sherds in solid water-borne clay, it may be possible to deduce periodic flooding and scouring by the waters of the Parret. This would account for the disturbance of earlier deposits and the redistribution of some of their contents at higher levels, while some may have been washed into then existing water channels later to be sealed over by Parret mud.

It is interesting to speculate on the reason that induced successive generations to squat on such a greasy, low-lying surface. It was possibly a trading post, though the evidence is negative. Neither the finds nor the lay-out of the settlement suggest a military bridge-head in Dumnonia.