Bi-conical jugs: an example of regional Romano-British pewter production within Mendip?

Richard Lee

Extracted from the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for 2015.

Volume 159

© 2016 Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society and the authors.

Produced in Great Britain by Short Run Press, Exeter.

1SSN 0081-2056

BICONICAL JUGS: AN EXAMPLE OF REGIONAL ROMANO-BRITISH PEWTER PRODUCTION WITHIN MENDIP?

RICHARD LEE

SUMMARY

In this article, the distribution of pewter biconical jugs within Mendip will be analysed. Of particular significance is whether biconical jugs reflect an actual regional pattern of production and consumption. The focus of this study will be Mendip, a generic term for east Avon, bordered by Gloucestershire, Somerset, and the Mendip Hills in the west (Lee 2009, 31).

Sixty-two examples of pewter (an alloy of tin and lead) jugs are currently known from Roman Britain. A typology has been developed for this group which have provided three broad classifications for pewter jugs (Lee 2009, 193-203), biconical jugs, narrow mouthed ring necked jugs and globular jugs.

BICONICAL JUGS

Biconical pewter jugs were first identified by Barker (1901; modified by Ashby 1907). Their ovoid profile was created by two cast pewter cones, one inverted, that were soldered together to comprise the body. A footring, handle and neck were attached separately.

Twenty one examples of biconical jugs have been identified from Roman Britain (Fig. 1). The majority of known biconical jugs were found in Mendip with examples known from Box (Brekspear 1904), Chew valley (Rahtz and Greenfield 1977) and Bath (Cunliffe 1988). The eastern limit for the distribution of biconical jugs is marked by finds at Silchester (for example Lee 2009, fig. 90) and in the Thames valley, for example Cliveden



Fig. 1 Map of the distribution of all finds of pewter biconical jugs



Fig. 2 A map of all sites known to have produced pewter moulds for casting biconical jug components

(Wedlake 1958). The northern limit is probably marked by finds from Caerwent (Ashby 1907). One biconical jug is known from Stokesley but this can be suggested as atypical, perhaps an 'export' (Greene 1955, 118-119). The Western limit for the form remains unclear, but biconical jugs can be suggested as having been identified in Cornwall, suggested by possible finds from Caerhays and Bossens (Stanley 1870).

PEWTER PRODUCTION

Romano British pewter production is known to have occurred across Britain (Lee 2009, 25-50). The distribution of known biconical jugs mostly falls within an area of southern Britain bordered by 3rd-4th century Romano-British pewter production sites in the urban centres of Silchester (Blagg and Read 1977) to the east, and Gloucester (Garrod and Heighway 1980) and the villa at Witcombe (Blagg and Read 1977, 274) to the north.

A number of pewter production sites that contain pewter moulds also occur within the distribution range of biconical jugs. In Mendip production sites are known at Lansdown (for example Bush 1907), Nettleton (Wedlake 1982), Camerton (Wedlake 1958), Brislington (Barker 1901) and Wick (Scarth 1884). Pewter production is also suggested in finds of ingots and debris from Gatcombe (Branigan 1977), Frocester (Price 1983, 62), Kenn Moor (Rippon et al. 2000) and the Oldbury Flats (Allen and Fulford 1992).

Although numerous, the known pewter production sites all follow a pattern of expedient pewter production that was peripheral to other industry and marginal in nature. For example, in the metalworking industries that developed in the 3rd-4th centuries in Camerton (Building XVII, Wedlake 1958, 83-84) and Nettleton (Buildings IX and XXI, Wedlake 1982, 68-74), pewter casting occurred in reused structures, and consumed largely local materials. It is therefore probable that although production occurred across Mendip and the southwest, it was on a small scale that sporadically responded to a limited local demand.

Production moulds for biconical jug components have only been identified from four sites (Fig. 2), Silchester, Gloucester, Witcombe and Lansdown (two additional examples have perhaps been identified from sites at Brislington and Westbury). Three moulds were used to produce neck components for jugs (Mould no. 25 from Silchester and mould 26 from Witcombe Blagg and Read 1977; mould 23 from Gloucester Garrod and Heighway 1980 and possibly mould 9 from Lansdown, Lee 2009, 152, 156). One mould was used to produce the upper biconical cone of a jug (mould 13 from Lansdown, Lee 2009, 157-158). These moulds are not suited to the production of narrow mouth jugs. The Lansdown mould fits the profile of the upper cone of a type 1 biconical jug well (Lee 2009, 193). The Witcombe mould, and possibly a further example of this type from Westbury (Blagg and Read 1977, 274) also seem to be most closely related to type 1 biconical jugs. Conversely the Gloucester and Silchester moulds and perhaps mould 9 from Lansdown could have created neck components for either biconical or globular jugs (Lee 2009, 193). It is notable that no biconical jug mould occurs outside the known distribution range of biconical jugs. The correlation between these production sites and the distribution of biconical jugs does appear meaningful, suggesting known biconical, and probably globular, jugs were amongst the output of pewter production workshops in Mendip and Hampshire.

CONSUMPTION

The 3rd-4th century consumption of pewter jugs does seem to reflect the small scale production of biconical jugs. The presence of both biconical jugs and moulds for making jug components, from the civitas at Silchester (Blagg and Read 1977), suggest biconical jugs were both produced and consumed locally. It is likely that Lansdown was likewise supplying pewter to Bath. Similarly, seven biconical jugs from Brislington (Barker 1901; Branigan 1972) that also produced a possible mould for producing jug necks suggest the localized manufacture and consumption of biconical jugs. The presence of a 3rd century biconical jug from Chew Valley (Rahtz and Greenfield 1977) likewise occurs in an area of pewter and lead working, which raises the possibility of local production and consumption.

It is probable that biconical jugs were involved in some form of trade that extended beyond the region in which they were manufactured, although this does not appear extensive. Such examples are possibly known from Isleham and in the 'export' of a biconical jug found at Stokesley (Greene 1955, 118-119). It is likely such trade was limited by competition from small scale pewter production workshops located outside the distribution range of biconical jugs. This perhaps explains the dominance of narrow mouth jugs (Lee 2009, 57-60) in the east of Britain with a focus in Cambridgeshire.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion the distribution of biconical jugs does reflect the presence of pewter production centres in the Mendip region (notably the counties of Avon and Somerset), and in the county of Hampshire. Biconical jugs are clearly the product of an expedient small scale industry that was producing jugs for largely local consumption.

Why biconical jugs occurred in this region at all remains an open question. Potentially they reflect access to material and a response to a c.3rd-4th century decline in other metal wares or fine wares. It is possible that different workshops may even have produced particular styles of jug. Only the further identification, and typological classification, of more biconical jugs can address these questions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, J. & Fulford, M. 1992. Romano-British and later geoarchaeology at Oldbury Flats: Reclamation and settlement on the changeable coast of the Severn Estuary. *The Archaeological Journal*, 149, 82-123.
- Ashby, T. 1907. *Excavations at Caerwent, Monmouthshire*. London: Nichols and Sons.
- Barker, W. 1901. Remains of a Roman Villa discovered at Bristlington, Bristol, 1899. Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society Transactions, 24, 183-93.
- Blagg, T. & Read, S. 1977. Roman pewter moulds from Silchester. Antiquaries Journal, 57, 270-76
- Branigan, K. 1972. The Romano-British villa at Brislington. The Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 116, 78-85.
- Branigan, K. 1977. The Excavation and Study of a Romano-British Villa Estate 1967–1976. Oxford: British Archaeological Report.
- Brekspear, H. 1904. The Roman villa at Box Wiltshire. *The Archaeological Journal*, 61, 1-32.
- Bush, T. 1907. Explorations on Lansdown, May 1907. Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 52, 152-74.

- Cunliffe, B. 1988. The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath. Vol. 2. The Finds. Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph.
- Engleheart, G. 1905. On some buildings of the Romano British period discovered at Clanville near Andover, and on a deposit of pewter vessels of the same period found at Appleshaw, Hampshire. *Archaeologia*, 56, 1-20.
- Garrod, P. & Heighway, C. 1980. Excavations at Nos. 1 and 30 Westgate St Gloucester. *Britannia*, 11, 73-115.
- Greene, D. 1955. Roman Yorkshire. Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, 38.
- Holbrook, N. 2003. Great Witcombe Roman Villa, Gloucestershire. Field surveys of its fabric and environs 1999-2000. *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society*, 121, 179-201.
- Lee, R. 2009. *The Production, Use and Disposal* of Romano-British Pewter Tableware. Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Price, E. 1983. Frocester Court Roman villa, 3rd report, 1980: The well. *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 101, 49-77.
- Rahtz, P. and Greenfield, E. 1977. Excavations at Chew Valley Lake, Somerset. London: Department of the Environment Archaeological Reports.
- Rippon, S., Aalbersberg G., Allen, J., Allen, S., Cameron, N., Gleed-Owen, C., Davies, P., Hamilton-Dyer, S., Haslett, S., Heathcote, J., Jones, J., Margetts, A., Richards, D., Shiel, N., Smith, D., Smith, J., Timby, J., Tinsley, H. & Williams, H. 2000. The Romano British exploitation of coastal wetlands: Survey and excavation on the North Somerset levels, 1993-7. Britannia, 31, 69-200.
- Scarth, H. 1884. Remains of a Roman villa uncovered in Cold Harbour Farm, near Tracy Park, October, 1865. Proceedings of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club, 1, 1-24.
- Stanley, W. 1870. Proceedings at meetings. Archaeological Journal, 27, 208-11.
- Wedlake, W. 1958. Excavations at Camerton, Somerset.
- Wedlake, W. 1982. The Excavation of the Shrine of Apollo at Nettleton, Wiltshire, 1956–1971. London: The Society of Antiquaries of London.

Richard Lee