

A Romano-British Graffito of a Ship from Gillingham, Kent, UK

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Keywords: Roman; ship; graffito; Britain

Abstract: This note discusses a graffito on a pottery sherd from a site in Kent, UK and argues that is the first contemporary depiction of a Romano-British vessel.

Graffiti depicting ships and boats are well-known from a variety of cultural contexts (for instance Dhoop *et al.*, 2016; Zamarkoupi, 2016: 62; McCormick and Kastholm, 2017). From Roman Britain graffiti depicting marine subjects are surprisingly rare, with the *pharos* scratched on a tile probably the best known example (Brodribb 1982). There are also depictions of marine subjects on media such as gemstones, mosaics and pottery but, as far as the authors are aware, no graffiti depicting Roman ships have been published from Britain. The intention of this note is to bring to wider attention a discovery made some years ago in Kent.

During 2005 and 2006 Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd undertook a major excavation at Grange Farm, Gillingham, Kent (UK) close to the southern edge of the Medway Estuary. The excavations revealed a complex sequence of archaeological deposits and, most importantly, significant evidence for Roman period settlement. This included: ditched enclosures, a roadway leading down to the river, a large aisled timber building and a mausoleum. This occupation seems to have begun in the first century AD and continued into the fifth century AD.

From the fill of a third-century ditch a fragment of a Black Burnished 2 (BB2) dish was recovered (Davies *et al.*, 1993: type 5J). These vessels were manufactured locally in kilns that were part of a major pottery industry located on either side of the Thames estuary (Monaghan, 1987, type 5E1). The form vessel under consideration is not particularly chronologically distinctive but a late second- or third-century date seem appropriate.

The surface of the sherd depicts what is plausibly interpreted as a ship in a post-firing graffito (Figs 1 and 2). Only the forward part of the hull survives. This is depicted as a curving line, rising to what would be a high prow. Within that line a convex space is defined by another curved line. A single mast rises to a square sail. Interestingly, this sail is depicted over a very slight swelling at the rim of the vessel. It seems possible that this was intentional with the artist attempting to represent the sail filled with wind. To the right of the mast there is another short vertical line protruding from the hull.

The graffito recalls depictions of ships on Iron Age coins, which show single masted vessels with high prows (Van Arsdell, 1989: No. 1989-1), or even the ships with their small sails depicted on Low Ham mosaic from Somerset (UK) (Cosh and Neal, 2005: 254-255, figs. 248 and 249). Of course, the graffito is a simple depiction but it is, perhaps, one drawn from life. Vessels like the Blackfriars I ship (Marsden, 1994: 33-96) must have been a common sight in the Medway and Thames Estuaries transporting, among other things, the locally produced BB2 pottery as far as Hadrian's Wall (Tyers, 1996: 186-189, fig. 233). Perhaps these local vessels were the inspiration for this, our only contemporary depiction of a Romano-British ship.

Acknowledgements

The archaeological work was commissioned by CgMs Consulting Limited on behalf of Taylor Woodrow and Persimmon Homes. Peter Moore was project manager for the excavations, which were supervised by Guy Seddon.

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Fig 1 Photograph of the graffito © Strehon Duckering, Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd

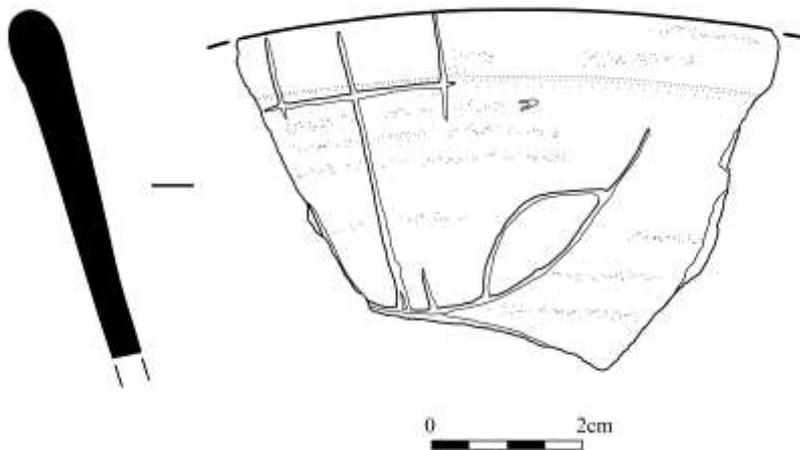


Fig 2 Line drawing of the graffito © Cate Davies, Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd