

Integrating the evidence from pottery, bones and seeds

The Site And Its Location

This research shows how faunal, botanical and ceramic evidence from a single refuse and cesspit can be woven together to shed light on the trade of exotic foods in Roman Leicester (*Ratae Corieltauorum*). The site was excavated by University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) adjacent to St Nicholas Circle (Castle Street) in 2004 (Priest 2005, 142-3) and is discussed more fully in Score *et al* 2010 "A Roman 'Delicatessen' at Castle Street, Leicester" *TLAHS* Vol. 84, 77-94.

The site is located in the south-west corner of the Roman town, on the *Tripontium* road leading to the South Gate and not far from the line of the Fosse Way entering the town through the West Gate (figure 1). During the second and third century it was occupied by a colonnaded building fronting onto the west side of the street (figure 4). Probably associated with this building was a large rectangular pit measuring approximately 1.6 x 1.8m with a depth of 0.9m. The main deposit dates to the middle of the second century although an earlier fill contained later first and early second century pottery.

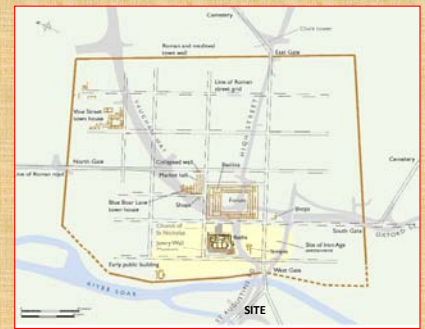


Figure 1: Location of the site within Roman Leicester (Plan produced by English Heritage)



Figure 2: Work progressing on the site



Figure 3: Excavating pottery



Figure 4: Plan of the site showing the Roman deposits and the location of the pit and the colonnaded building.

The Pottery

The pit produced an assemblage of 549 sherds with an overall average sherd weight of 37.7g (23.1g discounting amphorae) deposited in the middle of the second century. The most striking aspect is the quantity of amphorae and flagons, which account for half of the assemblage; forms which would normally account for only 8% and 1% respectively in deposits elsewhere in the town (Clark in Connor and Buckley 1999, Table 15, 121).

The amphora types present are Dressel 20, Gauloise 4, Dressel 2-4, *Cam* 186 and Fishbourne 148.3, representing at least six vessels. Baetican Dressel 20 olive oil and Gaulish Gauloise 4 wine amphorae are the most common types found in Leicester. A Dressel 2-4 wine amphora is most likely to have come from Italy, and the *Cam* 186 (Cadiz fabric) is thought to be used for transporting fish sauces (Peacock and Williams 1986, Class 17). The source of Fishbourne 148.3 amphorae is unknown, although it may be related to the *Cam* 189 "carrot" amphora, possibly associated with the transport of fruit such as dates (Peacock & Williams 1986, Class 12).

The flagons are from sources such as Mancetter-Hartshill, Northamptonshire and Verulamium (St Albans). Identifiable rims include devolved ring-necked and two-handled collared forms, representing at least 17 vessels.

In addition, 77% of the bowls, dishes, plates and platters are imported samian table wares from South and Central Gaul, representing at least 26 vessels. Forms present include Dragendorff 15/17, 18, 18/31, 18/31R, 79, 30, 37 and Curle 11 ranging in date from the late first century through to the mid-second century. Particularly interesting is the complete absence of any samian cup forms or indeed cups or drinking beakers in any other ware. This group is not a typical domestic rubbish assemblage, given the proportion and range of vessel types present. The large number of amphorae and flagons might suggest commercial premises dealing in products such as olive oil or wine which required decanting into the smaller flagons for resale. Whilst the high proportion of samian table wares would indicate dining, the complete lack of drinking vessels suggests not, and it may be that the bowls and dishes were used for displaying food products for sale.



Figure 5: Pottery from the pit

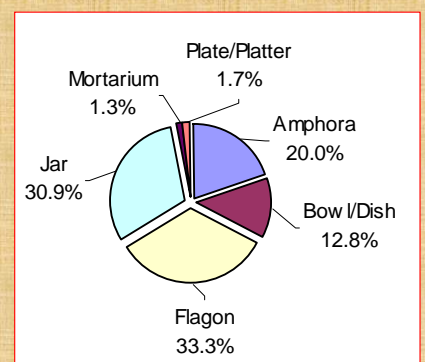


Figure 6: Proportions of vessel types from the pit (% sherds)

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Environmental Evidence

Seeds and small bones are only recovered by wet-sieving soil samples, which is routine practice in Leicester. Samples from this pit were found to contain mineralised plant remains which can be preserved by calcium phosphate in sewage. The presence of these food remains together with fly puparia, suggest that this was a cesspit and that these foods were consumed nearby. The remains included grape pips and fig seeds which are likely to be imported, whilst the other fruits, apple and cherry or plums were grown locally perhaps from introduced plants. Opium poppy is exotic and could be used to flavour food, whilst wild strawberries were also grown or gathered and brought into the town.

Fish remains were also present, and both marine and freshwater species including herring, eel and perch have also been found elsewhere in the town (Connor and Buckley 1999, 326). Charred cereal remains included a few spelt wheat grains, which are ubiquitous in the Roman and Iron Age periods. However, the evidence for the consumption of fruits including imports, and fish is unknown in the area in the Iron Age despite examining over a thousand samples from each period from the county (Monckton 2004).

The remains of fruit and fish from this cesspit and others in the town, therefore represent a departure from the local Iron Age economy, and show the Roman influence on food available in the town.



Figure 7: Grape pips

(all photographs taken against 1mm paper)



Figure 8: Opium poppy



Figure 9: Cherry/plum stones



Figure 10: Fish bones and scales



Figure 11: Fig

The Animal Bones

The pit contained 198 bone fragments, 61% were cattle or cattle-sized but, butchered sheep and pig were also present in small numbers. Although a mixture of animal bone waste was represented, most notable were 16 fragmented cattle scapulae. These were fused and well grown, indicating that they came from adult animals (figure 12). They were all butchered in a similar manner, distinct from that seen in early Roman deposits at the site, where scapulae were simply chopped through the 'neck' of the bone. Most scapulae from the pit were chopped at the distal end, sometimes transecting the glenoid cavity. The blade frequently had a hole cut into it, roughly rectangular in shape. This is presumed to be a hook mark, from which to suspend the shoulder during salting, drying or smoking. In some cases, the spine was cut off and fine parallel knife cuts were noted on the neck and blade, often obliquely angled and probably produced during the slicing of the dried meat from the bone.

This manner of butchery is consistent with the smoking or curing of shoulders of beef and similar groups of scapulae have been found all over the Roman Empire. British examples are common at military sites but also occur in urban centres, including Lincoln (Dobney *et al* 1996, 26) and the General Accident site in York (O'Connor 1988, 84). This style of butchery seems to be a predominantly Roman phenomenon; the Lincoln examples are from Roman deposits, the York scapulae are from mid-second and early third century deposits, while the Leicester assemblage lies firmly in the second century. The particular concentration of scapulae in the Leicester pit is a strong indicator that the feature does not simply contain normal household waste. It also suggests that the meat was being sold off the bone from nearby premises. O'Connor's observations on the York examples are equally true here; if the cured meat had been sold on the bone then it is likely that the scapulae would have been distributed in deposits all over the town (O'Connor 1988, 84).



Figure 12: Cattle scapula from the pit



Figure 13: Clean removal of spine

Figure 14: Detail showing cut marks



Integrating the Evidence

The atypical nature of each individual assemblage indicates that we are looking at the disposal of specialised commercial rather than residential refuse into a cesspit used by people eating a wide variety of new and imported foodstuffs not available to the population a century before. The implication is that the colonnaded building is part of a row of commercial premises fronting on to the main street of what was, by then, close to the centre of a bustling town with colossal public building projects underway and enjoying a breadth of trading links within *Britannia* and the wider Empire.

The cesspit lay to the rear of these shops and it may be that it received latrine waste and refuse from one or several of these premises. The pottery indicates the possible sale of amphora-borne oil, wine and preserves together with food presentation or serving but with no consumption of beverages. The botanical evidence demonstrates the importation and introduction of a range of fruit and seeds which may have been consumed on the premises, whilst the faunal remains indicates the selling of beef carved off the bone and fish preserved in salt or as sauce. The overall impression is of a shop similar to a delicatessen.

Specialised deposits of this kind do not occur often but the opportunity to study this example has not only increased our knowledge of life in Roman Leicester but also demonstrated the benefits of an integrated approach to interpretation across a team of specialists.



Figure 15: The Pit



Figure 16: Amphorae sherds from the pit



Figure 17: Samian ware sherds from the pit

Figure 20: Summarising the evidence for foodstuffs recovered from the pit and their likely origins

FOOD	Evidence	Origin
Olive oil	Amphora	Mediterranean
Wine	Amphora	Italy and Gaul
Fish sauce	Amphora	Spain
Fruit (Dates?)	Amphora	Mediterranean
Grapes	Pips	Mediterranean/introduced
Figs	Seeds	Mediterranean
Apple	Pips	Local, cultivated?
Cherry/Plum	Stones	Local, cultivated?
Strawberry	Pips	Local, gathered
Opium poppy	Seeds	Import/introduced
Spelt wheat	Grains (charred)	Local agriculture
Fish, freshwater	Bones, scales	Local, supplied to town
Fish, marine	Bones, scales	Trade with coast
Beef, cured/smoked	Cattle bones	Import? Local, supplied to town.
Mutton	Sheep bones (few)	Local, supplied to town
Pork	Pig bones (few)	Local, supplied to town



Figure 18: Scapula showing hook mark



Figure 19: Seeds from the samples (taken against 1mm paper)

A fuller account of the material and a discussion of the site can be found in Score, V., Browning, J., Johnson, E., Monckton, A., and Kipling, R., 2010 "A Roman 'Delicatessen' at Castle Street, Leicester" *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* Vol. 84, 77-94.

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