

CHEA18 Chalgrove, Oxon.

Fired Clay and Ceramic Building Material

By Cynthia Poole

Introduction and Methodology

A modest assemblage of fired clay amounting to 102 fragments weighing 1968g was recovered from Areas A, B and C and is predominantly Roman in date. A small quantity of ceramic building material comprising seven fragments weighing 370g was predominantly post-Roman and was recovered almost exclusively from Area B except for two pieces from Area C.

The assemblage has been fully recorded on an Excel spreadsheet in accordance with guidelines set out by the Archaeological Ceramic Building Materials Group (ACBMG 2007), which whilst not specifically designed for fired clay provide appropriate guidance. The record includes quantification, fabric type, form, surface finish, organic impressions, dimensions and general description. Fabrics were characterised on macroscopic features and with the aid of x20 hand lens.

Fired clay

Fragments of fired clay from Area A found in middle Iron Age ring gullies was indeterminate with regards to form and function. One piece (ctx 160) with two flat surfaces set at an obtuse angle was made in an orange-brown fine sandy clay containing coarse quartz and glauconite sand, small white siltstone grits 1-3mm and small flint grit. Small scraps (ctx 162) made in an orange fine silty micaceous clay with cream marl laminations and pellets had remnants of a smooth flat moulded surface burnt light grey.

The remaining fired clay is all Roman in date and was found in pit and ditch fills, all of early Roman date (Phase 3) except for one group from a phase 4 middle Roman ditch. This material consists exclusively of one form, which was made in a single fabric. These were flat plates or discs with a straight or curving edge and on some examples a triangular flange running alongside the edge. The largest surviving example (ctx 2071) measured 43mm thick and over 200mm in length. Others were thinner measuring 23mm and 19-30mm thick and pieces with an incomplete thickness all fall within this range. The triangular flanges had a flat vertical outer edge, rounded apex and sloping inner edge joining continuously to the upper surface. They measure 22, 28 and 34mm wide at the base and respectively >35mm, 54mm and 60mm high at the exterior edge with internal heights of 11mm and 16mm.

They were all made in a smooth very fine sandy micaceous clay containing occasional scattered rounded coarse quartz sand grains and rare angular flint <10mm and burnt siltstone <6mm, fired to pale shades of brown, buff, grey cream and orange. The only deliberately added inclusions were coarse cereal chaff c10mm long and crushed straw up to 30mm long, which survived as voids and impressions in the clay.

A lump of white clay or mudstone burnt to a cerise colour is a piece of natural rock, not prepared utilised clay, but is of interest as an example of the natural material that formed the basis of the main clay fabric used and probably derived from the Gault clay that outcrops in the area.

Discussion

The plates/discs were all found in area C, which is characterised by trackways and number of enclosures or fields adjacent to the tracks. They form a dispersed scatter across the area within ditch and pit fills with no particular focus or concentration of material. The character of the features and

fills provide no clue as to their primary function. The material is relatively unabraded and includes a number of large pieces though often badly fragmented since deposition suggesting they had been used in the area and disposed of relatively rapidly following disuse.

Circular discs and polygonal plates are a regional type that form a regular component of late Iron Age and early Roman fired clay assemblages in Oxfordshire, the Upper Thames Valley and the east Midlands. Examples of circular discs have been found at Alchester from early Roman contexts made in a shell tempered fabric (Booth 2001) and in a chaff tempered fabric from the Roman military phase (Poole 2018a, 172). Circular discs are also known from Watkins Farm (Allen 1990, 53), Farmoor (Lambrick and Robinson 1979, 53-4), Old Shifford (Barclay et al. 1995, 138), and Oxford (Biddulph 2005), where they are all associated with the Roman period. Rectangular plates have been found at Castle Hill (Booth 2010, 67) and both varieties of discs and plates were found at Gill Mill, where the main period of use of this form was during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (Poole 2018b, 473-5). Although some standard plates and discs have a thickened often bulbous edge, distinct large flanges are less common. Where flanges are present, it would be easy to mistake these for poorly made tegulae and clearly the Roman tile form and production has had an influence on the flanged plates. Comparable flanged examples have been found at Thame (Poole in prep) and Didcot (Poole in prep), both from Roman phases. The function of the standard discs and plates has been debated, with few conclusions reached and they are usually regarded as being related to cooking or food preparation in some manner (ref.). However, there was a suggestion at Thame and Didcot that they could be associated with pottery production. Examples from Water End East, Bedfordshire included circular, rectangular and flanged forms made in chaff tempered fragments and one was found in an early to mid-2nd century AD kiln, where it was associated with firebars and a portable pedestal (Poole 2007, 112-4, 274).

Ceramic building material

The ceramic building material included a fragment of Roman brick (196g) from ditch 1133. It had patchy burning on the rough base surface, the only one to survive and was made in pinkish red sandy fabric containing a high density coarse sub-angular - subrounded quartz sand.

The remaining pieces of tile were all pieces of flat roof tile, with smooth upper surfaces and rough sanded bases and measuring 12-16mm thick. They were made in a pinkish red, cerise or orange sandy fabric containing variable quantities of coarse quartz sand and grits, occasional red ferruginous clay pellets up to 5mm and occasional cream marly pellets and streaks. The fabric and character of the tile is similar to later medieval and early post-medieval roof tile fabrics from Oxford and probably date to the late 14th-16th century. The tile was found in two Roman pits (1098, 2242) apart from two sherds from an undated palaeochannel (1137).

Catalogue of Illustrated artefacts

1. Flanged plate: 43mm thick, >200mm long; triangular flange 28mm wide by 54mm high. Fabric AV. Pit 2073 (2071), Phase 3 early Roman

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