

A Roman dish – 1st or 2nd century AD



If you have been to look at Roman pottery in a museum you will have probably found displays full of shiny red bowls, dishes and cups. For centuries across the Roman world, from Egypt to Britain, well-to-do Roman citizens ate off this red tableware. It would typically have a uniform red or orange shiny surface, often decorated with relief modelling showing plants, animals or mythical scenes.

The dish in the picture, about 19 cm across, is Roman, probably made in the first or second century AD. Dishes of around this size, suitable for individual servings, were a standard item of Roman tableware up to around 200 AD, after which larger dishes became common in the Mediterranean area, maybe connected with a trend to more dining from shared platters.

Although similar techniques were used since Minoan times and even earlier, it was the Greeks who perfected the use of a fine clay slip coating to produce a glossy, semi-vitrified surface. They took advantage of the difference in the settling rates of the different components of their clay when mixed with water (probably adding alkali to stop the clay particles clumping together). Collecting the fraction that settled most slowly allowed them to make a slip with only the finest particles from the original clay. Coating the surface of the pot with this produced a very smooth finish and, if they chose the right clays, it became even shinier when it was fired and started to vitrify.

Firing in reduction (with almost no oxygen in the kiln) causes the iron in the slip to turn black and the Greeks used this to produce a shiny black surface, which was a key element of their well known painted vases. Around 150 BC, in the lands around the eastern Mediterranean, potters instead started firing slip-coated pots under oxidising conditions (with lots of oxygen present), making the iron in the slip red, not black. This fashion for shiny red-slipped tableware caught on and, around 30 BC, it started to be made in Italy. There is some evidence that eastern potters were moved at this time to places like Arezzo (where black pottery had previously been made) in Italy, to facilitate this change.

Demand for this new red pottery grew rapidly and as the Roman legions spread across Europe, the newly conquered and Romanised territories were keen to follow the latest fashions from Rome. In southern Gaul (France) around 30 or 40 AD, and later in central and eastern Gaul and the Rhineland, new pottery centres appeared, making this shiny red tableware. These became major exporters around the empire, taking over the markets of the original Italian potters. When archaeologists excavated the remains at Pompeii they discovered an unopened crate of glossy red pottery shipped from Gaul. A few years ago I visited the site of possibly the greatest of these Roman potteries, in southern France, at a place called La Graufesenque. The excavations have been put on display to the public and there is an attractive museum on the site. If you are ever on holiday in the Languedoc I recommend an excursion to visit this site, which gave me a great feeling for the life of a Roman potter.

As the Roman empire grew, the manufacture of glossy red tableware didn't stop at Gaul. In fact it appears that it was made by potters in most parts of the empire, though generally on a smaller scale and often not to the same quality as the big enterprises in Gaul. Excavations of a Roman kiln in Colchester have shown that it was made in England towards the end of the second century AD. More significantly, the Roman colonies in North Africa (e.g. present day Tunisia) began manufacturing similar pottery late in the first century AD. It appears that, by cutting corners in manufacturing, these African potteries were able to undercut the prices of the wares from Gaul, and during the second and third centuries AD they came to dominate the market throughout the Mediterranean region.

So where and when was my dish in the picture made? This is a tricky question to answer as the more popular designs of Roman dishes and bowls were made in many places over a long period and often shipped to all corners of the Roman empire. The most characteristic features of my dish are its broad outward-curving rim and the design of stems and leaves that runs around it. The Romans used a variety of techniques for decorating their pottery, probably the best known being the use of elaborately carved moulds to produce a raised design on the outer surfaces of bowls and cups. A different technique was used on my dish, where the design was created by laying down a thick clay slip, a bit like piping decorative icing on a cake. This technique, more generally called slip-trailing, is usually referred to as *barbotine* (the French word for clay slip) when talking about Roman pottery. At its best it can impart a deft elegance and energy to a design and some of my favourite Roman pottery was decorated using this technique, such as the English Castor (or Nene Valley) ware with hunt scenes showing deer and dogs racing around the outside of a bowl.

Antiquarians and archaeologists have been studying and cataloguing the designs of Roman pottery since the 19th century and the particular design of my dish appears in a classic book on the subject written by a German scholar in 1895. Dishes of this type appear to have been first made in the second half of the first century AD, presumably in southern Gaul, and some later ones with stamps on, giving the names of the potters, were made in the German part of Eastern Gaul. Shortly after these dishes first appeared, the potteries in North Africa also started producing them, and continued doing so until around the end of the second century. I can't be certain, but I suspect my dish was

made in Roman Africa. This is mainly because of the small foot-ring, which the African potters were known to favour – supposedly to save space in the kiln, though I find it difficult to believe there was a great advantage to be had from that.

Like most Roman pottery, this dish was almost certainly thrown on a wheel, though possibly into a mould the shape of the underside, which would speed up the manufacture and avoid a time-consuming turning stage after throwing. To avoid discoloration, in an ordinary kiln great care would have to be taken during firing to avoid smoke in the chamber. However, in an example of the technical sophistication of the Romans two thousand years ago, the remains of several kilns have been found which indicate that they had clay channels passing through the chamber, which would carry the flames and keep them separate from the pottery. It appears that these special kilns, one of which was excavated by archaeologists in Colchester, were only used for the glossy red tableware.

The previous owner of this dish was Alison Barker, a recently deceased ‘retired Barrister.. and lifetime collector of the curious’. Reading about her online she sounds like quite a character, throughout her life collecting items from Egyptian, Roman and Tudor times and ending up living in a house which was described as a private museum. One piece about her noted that “many pieces in her collection have been repaired by Alison, or what has become known as ‘Alisoned’. Alison was never far from modellers clay and a tube of superglue”. My dish has been repaired on the rim in two places, one very tiny repair and the other an infill of a missing piece 9 cm long and 1 cm deep. I like to think that this is Alison’s handiwork but, if it is, it was quite skilfully done, with shape and colour matching the rest of the piece, ensuring that it is unobtrusive.



If you have the urge to read more about Roman pottery you need to be aware that the terminology used in the literature is a bit of a muddle. Some authors call the shiny red Roman tableware ‘terra sigillata’ which, though literally the Latin for clay decorated with seals (i.e. figures in relief), is also used to describe plain pottery as well. Modern studio potters use the same term for slip prepared by selecting the fine fraction of clay in a similar way to the Romans. Other terms used include Arretine ware, for the Italian products – named after the town of Arezzo, and Samian ware, for the products of the European colonies, rather oddly named after the island of Samos in the Aegean sea. From Roman literature it appears that the Romans used the term Samian to describe any pottery, rather like we use the term china now. Currently the preferred terms seem to be ‘red gloss ware’ for the

European products and 'red slip ware' for the African products. Although the African wares may be of lower quality than some of the European wares it is worth noting that some of the European red gloss wares can have quite a dull surface and some of the African slip wares can be quite shiny. Some authors describe all of them as being part of the red gloss family of wares and I think this is probably the best approach.

Kevin Akhurst
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