Lyme Regis Museum
History of Lyme in Museum Objects
No. 3: 100 BC to 100 AD, Replica of Bronze Mirror from Uplyme
Replica loaned by Mr Derek Denning, the original is in the British Museum Reg. No.1971 0401 1

By Max Hebditch

The front of the replica mirror – this surface would have been polished to provide the reflective surface. Note with the cat’s face at the base of the handle, one eye in the original was still filled with red enamel

Brief description
The original is made of a bronze sheet 1mm thick, reinforced on the edge by a folded-over bronze strip, to which is attached a bronze handle which had been cast in a two part mould. The front would have been polished. On the back is an incised double lyre design, drawn by a compass of which the scratch lines are visible, infilled with a three stroke basket pattern. The design of this example of late Iron Age art is difficult to see because of corrosion. It was only after it was cleaned by conservators at the British Museum that it was revealed. The original is 371mm long including the handle, 255mm in width and weighs heavy, at 799g. The thickest part of the handle is 17.9mm.

Discovery associated with the Holcombe Roman Villa
The mirror was discovered in 1971 during excavation of the Iron Age and Roman site at Higher Holcombe Farm, which itself was first discovered in 1852. This settlement is located on a spur on the west side of a valley draining into the river Lim at Uplyme. The dig was being undertaken because the site, first discovered in the middle of the 19th century, had been damaged by ploughing.
Mock-up showing the otherwise difficult to see design on the back of the mirror

The back of the replica of mirror, showing the intricate double lyre design and the cat’s face design at the base of the handle
Other examples
About 60 mirrors like this are known from fragments and a dozen or so are complete. They are all from southern Britain, including several from Dorset and the South West. The nearest is a handle from Bridport. The mirror from Holcombe is similar in design to one from Desborough in Northants. It was probably not made locally.

Dating these mirrors in relation to the Roman advance
These mirrors generally date to the 1st century BC or 1st century AD. This is the period after Caesar’s invasion in 55 BC and before the Roman conquest of Britain begun in AD 43. The other side of the English Channel was already part of the Roman Empire. Particularly further east in Britain, in the territory of the powerful kings of the tribes of the Catuvellauni, Atrebates and Trinovates, there was a lot of contact with the Roman world through cross-channel trade. At this time places like Silchester, in the territory of the Atrebates, were developing as towns and subsequently became administrative centres for the tribe (civitas capitals) under Roman rule. An example from cemetery at Nijmegen in Holland was probably taken there after AD 67 by a soldier who had been in Britain.

What was the mirror to Roman taste?
This late 1st century poem by Propertius mocks the pretensions of a native Briton who might have owned a mirror like this:

Nunc etiam infectos demens imitare
Britannos, ludis et externo tincta nitore
caput?

Ut natura dedit, sic omnis recta figura est:
turpis Romano Belgicus ore color.

Illi sub terris fiant mala multa puellae,
quae mentita suas vertit inepta comas.

Deme; mihi certe poteris formosa videri;
mi formosa satis, si modo saepe venis.

An si caeruleo quaedam sua temporu fuco
tinxerit, idcirco caerula forma bona est?

So now, you crazy girl, you’re taking your
style from painted Britons? Having your
fun, dolled up with a foreign tint on your
gleaming head?

Nature's look is always right; a Belgic
colour is disgusting on a Roman face.

If a silly young thing dyes her hair to
change it, I hope she’ll suffer horribly in
the Underworld!

Throw the stuff away; you’ll look lovely
to me anyway – lovely enough if you
come often enough.

Really if Miss X likes to dye her temples
blue, does that mean the blue look is nice?

The translation was included in the first publication of the mirror in Fox & Pollard (1973) p 23, note 6.
In this view from the Cannington Viaduct looking north the Iron Age and villa settlements lie on the shoulder on the left in the middle distance in the angle of the modern field hedges – just beyond an almost hidden small valley. There is nothing to see on the site today: it is on private land, so please only observe from public roads. Cannington Farm is on the right and is named on the map below.

The same view in map form, the pink arrow marks the site in Field No 445. Extract from the Uplyme Tithe Map of 1841 in the Devon Record Office, where someone has marked the site with a pencil cross.
The archaeological context at Holcombe
The mirror was found face down in a pit, near some Iron Age round houses, beneath a later stone house with stone foundations. There were a few hints that it might have been in a sack. The pit had been deliberately filled – so the mirror was not accidentally lost. On sites in grain growing areas like the chalk lands of Wessex these sort of pits were used for storage of grain, but sometimes also for ritual purposes including burial, although there is no evidence of that here.

Iron Age Huts
There are two early phases on the site (shown in red on the plan above). The first of these consists of at least two circular huts, revealed by post sockets for their walls cut into the subsoil. The second phase is a small D shaped enclosure bounded by a 1.5 m deep ditch with an entrance on the east side. This cut the foundations of one hut and another was covered by a bank, if it was on the inside. The other two huts could belong to either phase.

So the early settlement, which quite possibly covered a wider area than that excavated, was occupied over a long period. At some stage the site appears to have been deserted for a time, as turf grew over the ditch. As all floors and occupation levels of the huts were destroyed by later buildings it is not possible to say for certain to which early period the mirror relates.

While dating of the round houses cannot be precise they were certainly in use in the Iron Age before the Roman army moved into the south west and continued afterwards

The Roman Villa
The mirror probably predates the next phase of four rectangular timber-framed buildings, also revealed by holes where posts had stood (green on plan). The most
substantial of these was constructed over the ditch. The finds from the latest rubbish found in the ditch suggest a date in the last quarter of the 1st century AD for their building. The only other finds in the pit in which the mirror was buried were some small fragments of crude pottery. The absence of any fragments of the finer pottery from east Dorset which were found in the earliest silt of the ditch suggests the mirror may have been buried before or at the same time as the ditch was dug.

The rectangular timber buildings were in turn succeeded by a building with stone foundations and a nearby timber aisled barn (black on plan).

This is an estate with a long more or less continuous history. So what is going on here in the 1st century AD?

The settlement and its owner
The circular huts, each about 7.5 m in diameter are very ordinary. The economy of the settlement was probably based on animal husbandry (there were plenty of animal bones in the ditch fill) with some crop-raising. Iron-smelting took place on the site. Studies of the National Trust Golden Cap estate show that this area was still well wooded at this time - essential for iron smelting - and that settlements were far apart. The terrain is much more like that of the Blackdown Hills rather than the chalk lands further east in Dorset.

However, despite the apparent ordinariness of the settlement at this time it might still be that of a local chief or landowner. High status can be demonstrated in ways other than by building, for instance by the ownership of cattle and perhaps by defining the huts as the centre of local power by the enclosing fence and ditch. The presence of the high-status bronze mirror confirms this. Because occupation at this time is sparse the estate centred on this site could be the whole valley of the River Lim. As it happens the later parish boundaries of Uplyme and Lyme Regis broadly enclose this area.

Tribal connections?
Did our local chief and mirror user belong to a tribe? We know the Roman names of the tribes in our area from 2nd century Ptolemy's Geography, who is thought to have used mid-1st century material. The ones that interest us are the Dumnonii and the Durotriges.

Ptolemy refers to the Durotriges and their polis (or city) of Dunium, which is either Hod Hill or Maiden Castle. He locates a Roman legion already based in the territory of the Dumnonii at Exeter, Isca Dumnoniorum. Both tribes are probably rather loose groups of clans, unlike those under kingly control further east in Britain. Uplyme and Lyme Regis are somewhere on the possibly fluid boundary between the two – a situation resolved by the time of the Domesday book (1086) by putting Lyme Regis in Dorset and Uplyme in Devon.

Do pottery and a lack of coin finds point to the Dumnonii?
Some clues may be found in the sherds of broken pottery found in the first silt to form in the bottom of the ditch which forms the second phase of occupation, soon after it was cut. They were like those discovered at Maiden Castle, used by people of the Durotriges before it was captured by the Roman army. There was a major manufacturing site for these types of pots in the Poole Harbour area, which continued in production through the Roman period supplying a black burnished ware to customers as far away as Hadrian’s Wall. When Holcombe was excavated these pots were thought to date to the first half of
1st century AD. But similar pots have been found in excavations at the Roman fort on Waddon Hill, near Broadwindsor, occupied from AD 40 – 50, and at the Honeyditches Roman villa in Seaton in the second half of the 1st century AD. This could give a post-conquest date for the ditch when the inhabitants may already have been importing pottery from further east, either by sea or along the new Roman road from Dorchester to Exeter which passes the north end of the Lim valley. In which case we cannot say the clan chief who lived at Holcombe was necessarily a Durotrigian.

Excavations at Pilsdon Pen, an Iron Age hillfort about 15 kms away, which dominates the valley leading down to Bridport, revealed lots of circular huts but little pottery, unlike the hill forts further east in Dorset. Such sherds as were found are more like the pottery from further west in the territory of the Dumnonii, which is decorated with curvilinear ‘celtic’ lines. There are very few pieces of the pottery from Poole. The boundary between the Durotriges and the Dumnonii could well have been along the River Brit from Bridport through Beaminster and then down the River Parret to Martock and the Somerset levels. Until after the Roman conquest there is little evidence to the west of this line either of the pots the Durotriges were using or of the coins they minted. The Dumnonii did not use coins. So it is may be that the inhabitants of Holcombe were from the Dumnonii.

The effects of the Roma conquest

Following the invasion of AD 43, the Second Augustan Legion under the future Emperor Vespasian advanced through the South West. He is recorded as conquering two tribes (presumably the Durotriges and Dumnonii) in 30 battles and capturing 20 ‘towns’. He started from a big base at Lake Farm outside Wimborne, linked to a supply base at Hamworthy. To control the area there were forts at:

- Hod Hill near Blandford from AD 43-55,
- Waddon Hill from the 50s to 60s, and a
- legionary base at Exeter from 55 until it moved to Gloucester around 75.
- There was a smaller fort at Axminster at the junction of the Fosse Way and the road from Dorchester.
- There was a possible supply base at Seaton, which the discovery of one of the legion’s stamps on a tile suggests they maintained it into the 3rd century.

This must have changed life for the inhabitants at Holcombe, posing the question as to whether the mirror was buried for protection at this time of uncertainty and change, never to be recovered. As we have seen, there was apparently a period of abandonment of uncertain length, possibly at the time the army moved west, when turf grew over the silt of the ditches and before the rectangular timber building was constructed. Rubbish soon accumulated in the ditches – including imported Roman samian pottery. There is also the possibility a gap in occupation occurred at the time of Boudicca’s revolt in AD 60, when there was a massacre around this time at the hill fort at South Cadbury, Somerset. Other sites towards the border with the Dumnonii show evidence of subsequent abandonment, possibly like Holcombe. The legion based in Exeter did not go to the aid of the towns in the south east, suggesting they may have been facing an insurrection. But this is speculation.
The significance of the site

Detailed archaeological and historical studies of places, such as the village of Shapwick in Somerset, increasingly show that much of the pattern of the landscape we see today was influenced by prehistoric and Roman settlement. So what does this site say?

The occupation of this settlement continued throughout the Roman period, until the 4th century, when the bath house was built, and possibly beyond. It was very probably the principal centre of an estate comprising what are now the parishes of Uplyme and Lyme Regis. The only other Roman finds from the valley appear to be two coins of Trajan (AD 97-117) found near the Roman Road at Hunters Lodge.

Among the finds from the earliest periods at Holcombe is a piece of ‘briquetage’, fragments of a fired clay tray used in salt-boiling. It is of a type which has been found on late Iron Age sites at Kimmeridge and Hamworthy in east Dorset. So unless this fragment arrived by accident with pottery imported from east Dorset, making salt from sea water was a function of our clan leader’s estate, and perhaps continued throughout the Roman period. In AD774 a piece of land near what is now Sherborne Lane in Lyme Regis was granted to Sherborne Abbey for salt production. This has led to the suggestion that the four medieval manors of Uplyme and Lyme listed in Domesday Book have their origin in Holcombe Roman Villa as the head of a salt-producing estate in the valley.

Conclusion – the Mirror

But to return to our mirror: it could date from the occupation of the site quite late in the first century. It probably belonged to a locally quite powerful Dumnonian, who manifested his power in cattle, control of the Lim valley and the possessions of his wife. It may have been hidden but not recovered at the time of the Roman conquest or at unrest around AD60. Like the Roman army he and his family and retainers began to use pottery bought from further east and to build rectangular buildings. And his family, over four centuries, developed the trappings of Roman civilisation and maybe became Christian and their octagonal bath house maybe became a baptistery (Kent Archaeological Field School/Wilkinson, P Undated). Their buildings were first discovered by archaeologists in 1852, but local tradition calls the field in which they were was once still standing to see “Church Field”.

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