

THE ROMAN LEAD TANK FROM PERRY OAKS

by David Petts

Context 155026

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The partial remains of a circular lead tank of late Roman date was found in the base of a late Roman waterhole at Perry Oaks. The tank had clearly been damaged or dismantled. Part of the sides and base had been detached and discarded elsewhere. The surviving side had been folded down onto the base.

Dimensions and Construction

The tank was constructed from lead sheet (0.06m thick). The surviving part of the base had two straight sides (0.66 m; 0.40 m) which had been cut in the process of dismantling the object, and a curved outside edge to which the surviving side panel of the tanks was attached (surviving circumference 0.79 m). The base was joined to the side of the tank by a thick, soldered seam. The two sheets may have been inserted into an H-bar and then soldered, though it is not possible to be certain without further investigation. The remaining side was 0.34 m high and 0.79 m long. A small hole may have been punched in the very edge of the left-hand side of the tank, but the tank is badly damaged at this point, and it cannot be verified. Holes have been found on the rims of similar tanks from Pulborough (Curwen 1943) and Bourton-on-the-Water (Donovan 1934).

Decoration

The decoration of the tank was very simple. The top of edge of the side had a simple beaded rim. The side was divided into a series of panels by a horizontal strand of cable pattern. This was in relief and appeared to be cast, rather than applied. The only panel which survived in entirety was 0.37 m wide. The use of single cable moulding to border and divide up space is typical of late Roman lead work, and can be seen on Roman coffins (eg Toller 1977, fig.4), other lead tanks (eg Flawborough, Notts.; Elliot and Malone 1999) and lead caskets (Toynbee 1964, 345–57).

Within each panel was a floating saltire or *crux decussata* drawn with similar cable strand. *Crux decussata* are also found on a similar lead tank from Pulborough and one of the pair found at Bourton-on-the-Water (Curwen 1943; Donovan 1934). The *crux decussata* may have some Christian significance, and was recognised as a Christian symbol in the fourth and fifth centuries (Watts 1991, 159–60). However, it is a relatively simple symbol, and need not carry any overt religious message.

Destruction

Attempts had clearly been made to damage or destroy the tank. Only part of the base and some of the side was present. The left edge of the side had been damaged at the top and appeared badly distorted, but below the top c 0.10 m the edge was straight and may have been sawn. The right-hand edge was distorted for its full length and the lead appears to have been torn. Both cut edges of the base show signs of having been chopped, and the impressions of an axe blade (0.05 m wide) can be seen in several places along the chopped edge. The side of the tank had then been folded down onto the base plate before being placed in the pit. One or two small holes were seen in the side plate, but these appeared along creases of the lead sheet and were probably due to post-depositional processes. The bottom left-hand side of the tank showed some signs of

sooting, though there is no sign of any melting of the metal, suggesting that any exposure to fire was only brief.

Signs of such attempted destruction are common on this class of objects (Guy 1981, 275). The remains of the tank from Flawborough had been folded in on itself in a similar manner (Elliot and Malone 1999).

Context

The tank was found in at the base of a late Roman pit or waterhole. The placement of such lead tanks in such pit-like or watery contexts is common (see Petts 2004). The examples from Ashton were found in a well (Guy 1977; Hadman and Upex 1977, 8), as was that from Caversham (Frere 1989, 319).

Date

The pit in which the object was deposited has a late/post-Roman date. This fits in with other stratigraphically secure examples of such lead tanks which appear to have a broad 4th century date.

Discussion

This object clearly belongs to a group of around twenty late Roman Christian lead tanks, found only in Britain (Guy 1981; Watts 1988). Predominantly found in the East Midlands and East Anglia this object is towards the southern edge of their distribution; its nearest neighbour was one found at Caversham, near Reading (Frere 1989).

Although, beyond the saltire shaped decoration which may be a *crux decussata*, this object bears no other possible indications of a Christian function, other members of this group are decorated with *chi-rho* symbols, *orans* figures (Flawborough; Elliot and Malone 1999) and even the probable depiction of a baptism (Walesby; Petch 1961). Their precise function is, however, uncertain. Thomas has argued that they were used for the rite of baptism by affusion (the pouring of the baptismal water over the head of an unclothed candidate) (Thomas 1981, 221–5). Watts has however suggested that they may instead be related to the rite of *pedilavium*, a ritual washing of the feet (Watts 1991, 171). Their final placement in pits and watery contexts is common, and there may well be a ritual element to their disposal in such a manner, reflecting a wider late Romano-British tradition of depositing lead and pewter objects in such contexts (Petts 2004). Its presence at the site is certainly an indicator of a small Christian community in the surrounding area, and adds to the relatively sparse evidence for Christianity in the London region.

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