A Chi-Rho Graffito from Brandon House, Southwark

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ABSTRACT

Excavations at Brandon House, Southwark, uncovered a fragment of Roman pottery with a graffito identified as the Chi-Rho symbol, only the second example to be found in London. This note describes the find itself and its context, presents an overview of similar finds from Roman Britain and offers a glimpse into the significance of the sherd as evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain and its place in the dynamic religious landscape of Roman Southwark.

Keywords: Roman pottery; Christianity; religion; symbols; graffiti

INTRODUCTION

Excavations at 170–94 Borough High Street, Southwark, London – also known as Brandon House – undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd (PCA) between November 2014 and December 2015 unearthed a substantial amount of Roman pottery (over 13,000 sherds weighing more than 300 kg), but most interesting of all was a single sherd: a fragment with a Chi-Rho graffito (FIG. 1).

Brandon House is located on what would have been the edge of the Borough Channel to the west of Road 1 and to the north of the junction of Stane Street and Watling Street. Activity on site in the decades following A.D. 50 focused on land reclamation, while the last quarter of the first century saw the establishment of a variety of buildings, most of which, with some repair and modifications, remained in use through to the first half of the second century. After A.D. 150 activity declined; the buildings were partially or fully demolished and the site was sealed by a 'dark-earth' deposit.[1]

The sherd is a fragment of an Oxfordshire Red Colour-Coated type C100 mortarium, dated to A.D. 300–400+,[2] with part of the flange still present. The vessel seems to have been used, as it shows internal wear and sooting on the exterior. The graffito is located just underneath the flange of the mortarium. It is formed by a rather large capital letter P overlain by a slightly off-centre capital letter X. Roger Tomlin has kindly confirmed it to be a Chi-Rho.[3] It was found in the 'dark-earth' layer, which, not unusually, yielded a large amount and wide range of residual, contemporary and intrusive material. Unfortunately, the nature of the context obscures the origin of this sherd; however, the presence of other fourth-century artefacts suggests the possibility that activity or even occupation on site continued into this period, with the strata being lost to the formation processes of the 'dark-earth' deposit.[4] There were, however, no other Christian-related finds from the site.

THE CHI-RHO ON POTTERY IN ROMAN BRITAIN

The Chi-Rho is the oldest and most widespread Christian symbol. The earliest version, the so-called 'Constantinian' Chi-Rho, appeared as a capital letter P overlaid by a capital X[5] – like the Brandon House

1 Haslam forthcoming.
2 Young 1977.
3 Pers. comm.
4 Haslam forthcoming.
5 Petts 2003.

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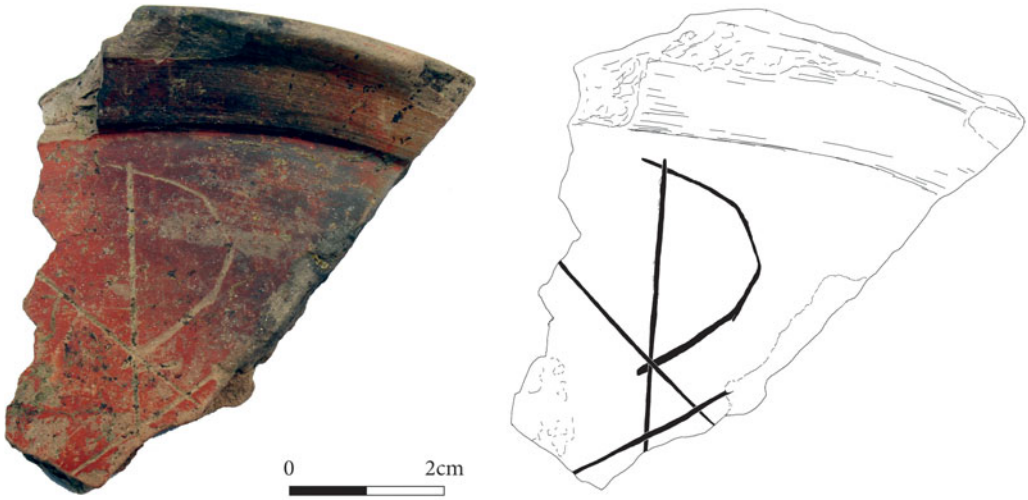


FIG. 1. Photograph (© *PCA*) and drawing (by Roger Tomlin) of the Chi-Rho sherd.

example. These letters stand for the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos*, meaning 'the anointed one'. This early form is dated to after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in A.D. 312, before which the Emperor Constantine is said to have seen the sign and won the battle under it. Although its appearance after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge led to its widespread use by the Christian community, it was also linked with the imperial house of Constantine and, indeed, the position of emperor in general.[6] A variety of objects bear the Chi-Rho, from coins to dress accessories, seals, metal vessels and lead tanks; however, it is rather rare for it to appear scratched on to pottery.

C.F. Mawer's *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain*[7] lists and critically evaluates all published examples of small finds with a Christian connotation known at the time. There are 32 entries for pottery, but Mawer rejects most of them as their Christian significance is based on misapprehensions (e.g., the graffiti did not live up to the published claims made of them). Only eight of these are considered possible or verified Christian finds and none was found in London.[8] Five are published in *Roman Inscriptions of Britain*[9] and most in the 'Roman Britain' section of *Britannia*.[10]

Since Mawer's work was published, just two further examples of pottery with Chi-Rho graffiti have been identified, both in London. The first was discovered in the archives of the Museum of London and came from the 1970 Brentford excavations.[11] It too is an Oxfordshire Red Colour-Coated Ware fragment, with the Chi-Rho on the base. The second is our sherd from Brandon House. Three further recently found sherds were initially thought to have graffiti with Christian connotations, but these conclusions have now been revised. Based on either their date or execution, two 'complex X' graffiti from Elms Farm are now thought not to have Christian connotations.[12] The third example is on the base of a Black-Burnished Ware 1 beaker from Burial BL72 of the Lant Street cemetery in Southwark and is said to resemble a Chi-Rho

6 Petts 2003.
7 Mawer 1995.
8 Mawer 1995, category C8 pottery vessels.
9 *RIB* 2.8.2503.132–6.
10 For example, Wilson *et al*. 1975; Grew *et al*. 1980; Frere *et al*. 1983.
11 Adam Corsini (pers. comm.). For more information about the site, see Canham 1971, 295.
12 Biddulph 2015, fig. 326.25, 27.

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without a rho-loop. However, a Christian connection has now been dismissed as the 'graffito' is in fact paralleled by earlier decorative schemes on some Dorset Black-Burnished Ware 1 jars.[13]

GRAFFITI ON ROMAN POTTERY

In his study of graffiti as evidence of literacy and pottery use, Jerry Evans sees both literate and illiterate graffiti, in general, as marks of ownership and argues that X graffiti are more likely to be illiterate marks rather than the number ten.[14] Following Mawer's argument that the Chi-Rho existed as a symbol rather than a literal contraction of the Greek letters,[15] carving a Chi-Rho on a vessel did not require a level of literacy higher than that necessary to carve an X to mark ownership; this could explain the crude execution of the Brandon House Chi-Rho.

Evans also observes a strong tendency towards marking finewares, especially samian, suggesting they were more valued possessions than coarsewares, but expresses doubt that this was the case for late Roman finewares.[16] Contrary to this, only two of the verified and possible Chi-Rho vessels in Mawer's catalogue are samian; two are Oxfordshire Red Colour-Coated Ware, one is Black-Burnished Ware 1, one is an unidentified grey ware and two are uncertain. Taking into account the two newly discovered examples from London, it seems that late Roman finewares are the most common type to be marked with a Chi-Rho, all being products of the Oxfordshire industries. Nonetheless, this difference from Evans' observations is probably due to the late Roman date of the symbol; by this time, samian production and import had ceased. Also, the low number of pottery fragments with Christian symbols most likely overinflates the importance of marking late Roman finewares.

The possibility that the Brandon House Chi-Rho was carved on to the broken fragment rather than the complete vessel, perhaps to serve as a good-luck or protective charm,[17] has been rejected as the sherd is broken through the downward shaft of the letter P, suggesting the vessel broke after the graffito was already on it.

The position and size of the Chi-Rho on the Brandon House mortarium could suggest, however, that it was intended for display rather than simply marking ownership; the latter could have been done by marking the vessel on its base, like the Brentford sherd. On the other hand, since the Chi-Rho was placed underneath the flange it was visible only from a certain angle (i.e., when viewing the vessel from below). This could have aided identification of the vessel when it was placed, for example, on a high shelf, but not necessarily while it was in use.

Interpretations of Christian symbols on pottery and the functions of both the symbol and the vessel it was carved on are rather wide ranging. Mawer dismisses the idea that 'simple' pottery vessels could have been part of the Eucharist and proposes a domestic function in a Christian household instead.[18] David Petts suggests that pottery vessels with the Chi-Rho and other Christian symbols are the 'less spectacular fragments of Christianity', which do not seem to have been used in 'official contexts' and could be 'simple good-luck or protective charms'.[19] Aileen Fox proposes that the Exeter cooking pot with a Rho-cross might have been used 'to take offerings in kind to the Church or meeting place'.[20] Interestingly, Mawer also rejects the idea that pottery vessels with Christian symbols might have been used in food preparation for *agape*, church festivals, or any other form of communal dining, based on the lack of evidence for such a function and the apparently limited value of these vessels.[21] It is important to note that all these interpretations are based on the perceived low value of these vessels and they are, in fact, rather dismissive of their

[13] Ridgeway *et al.* 2013, 94.
[14] Evans 1987.
[15] Mawer 1995, C8.Po.16.
[16] Evans 1987.
[17] cf. Petts 2003.
[18] Mawer 1995.
[19] Petts 2003, 163.
[20] *RIB* 2.8.2503.134; Fox 1952, 92; Mawer 1995, C8.Po.12.
[21] Mawer 1995.

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importance as Christian artefacts. Interestingly, Petts – almost contradicting his own interpretation (see quote above) – asks: 'Does the apparent cost of an object or wealth of the person or persons who commissioned it reflect the religious fervour which motivated its use . . .?'[22]

In the case of the Brandon House vessel, it may also be of significance that the symbol is on a mortarium. Mortaria are generally thought to represent the imposition or adoption of Roman food-preparation techniques, and they are thought to have been used for grinding and mixing foodstuffs.[23] In Evans' work on graffiti and literacy, mortaria are strongly represented in the study sample and mainly occur in military contexts, which, according to Evans, is possibly due to their communal use.[24] This could be significant in terms of the interpretation of the Brandon House Chi-Rho fragment: that it comes from a vessel used by a Christian community in Southwark to prepare food for communal dining.

THE WIDER RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Although the Brandon House Chi-Rho fragment was recovered from a dark-earth deposit and no other Christian finds were recovered on site, the pottery assemblage from the Brandon House excavations does exhibit evidence of activities that can be linked to ritual and religion. For example, a rather high proportion of the sherds show post-firing modifications, such as graffiti and perforations, both single and multiple. Perforations can be interpreted in several ways,[25] depending on the find context, and, despite the nature of land reclamation deposits obscuring primary contexts, none of the possible interpretations can be dismissed for the Brandon House material, including the deliberate damaging of vessels to be included in structured deposits. The discovery of numerous foundation and termination deposits related to revetments and buildings at Brandon House, most of which include semi-complete and complete imperfect vessels, and the site's liminal location at the edge of the Channel support the assumption of potential ritual or religious activities on site. These hypotheses are explored in more detail in the publication of the site.[26]

In terms of the wider religious landscape, there is no direct evidence for Christianity in Roman Southwark, but there does seem to be a great variety of cults, ritual practices and burial practices represented, including the cults of Isis, Mithras, archer-Apollo, Anubis, etc.[27] Other sites excavated by PCA in the area of Brandon House display a plethora of such practices, the best examples being the ritual shafts discovered at the Old Sorting Office at Swan Street[28] and the religious precinct at Tabard Square.[29] Fifteen wells or shafts were excavated at Swan Street, at least six of which produced evidence of ritual activity involving damaged ceramic vessels and disarticulated human and animal remains, and thus displayed a continuity of tradition dating back to the Late Iron Age.[30] The period of religious activity that is observed at Swan Street began to decline after the establishment of the religious precinct at Tabard Square, signalling a change in practices and a shift in landscapes of worship.

CONCLUSION

The answers to the questions raised in this paper are far from straightforward. We do not know who used this vessel and what the intent was behind scratching the Christian monogram on it; in fact, the very existence of this sherd raises more questions than it might ever answer. The Chi-Rho from Brandon House is, nevertheless, an important and rare find. Whilst we should not jump to wide-ranging conclusions about Roman Christianity

[22] Petts 2003, 160.
[23] Debated: cf. Hudak 2012; Symonds 2012.
[24] Evans 1987.
[25] For a summary, see Biddulph and Compton 2015.
[26] Hudak forthcoming.
[27] Cowan *et al.* 2009, 144–5.
[28] Beasley 2007.
[29] Killock 2015.
[30] Wait 1985; Beasley 2007.

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from a handful of finds, it seems that there may well have been a more significant Christian presence in the complex and dynamic religious landscape of Roman Southwark than is attested in the archaeology.

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