

Roman food has a reputation for its exotic – and sometime, frankly repulsive – dishes. The clichéd recipes, such as dormice in honey (*glires melle ac papauere sparsos*) or larks' tongues in aspic (*linguas alardum in aspide*, also an album by King Crimson), are found in satirical literature. The wealthy did eat dormice – Apicius's well-known *de Re Coquinaria* ('On Cookery') includes a recipe for *glires* stuffed with a pork forcemeat – but the idea of eating larks' tongues originates in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. According to Pliny (*Historia Naturalis* X.68), *phoenicopteri linguam praecipui saporis esse Apicius docuit* ('Apicius taught that the tongue of the flamingo is of supreme flavour'), although Apicius did not include a recipe for the delicacy in his book.

Of course, such pretentious foodstuffs were not everyday fare for people living throughout the Roman world. At a time when refrigeration was many centuries in the future, exotic meats and vegetables would need to be preserved – by salting or pickling, for instance – before transport. Even flamingos' tongues would probably lose their 'supreme flavour' during the journey from the Mediterranean to Britain.

Bread, made from wheat or barley flour, was a staple and had been for centuries before the Roman conquest. These same grains went into making the main drinks, *ceruisa*, a type of low-alcohol wheat beer, and *curmi*, a low-alcohol barley beer. Both types were sometimes sweetened with honey or flavoured with herbs such as henbane, a poisonous plant with psychoactive effects that can, however, cause convulsions and even death. Oats were used to make porridge or gruel.

Everyday vegetables included onions, wild garlic, turnips, parsnips, cabbage, seaweed, nettles, fennel, sorrel, parsley, spinach, beans and mushrooms. Most fruit was wild, such as blackberries, gooseberries and bilberries. We have previously seen how the local people, the *Succii*, took their name from the pigs that they bred for meat. They also reared cattle, sheep and goats, while chickens arrived from the Roman world long before Julius Caesar had been born. People seem not to have eaten much in the way of seafood or game before the Roman conquest in AD 43. Secondary products from domesticated animals included milk, cheese and sausages.

The ability to drink milk in adulthood and eat cheese is something that many humans lack; although born with it, most people lose it after breastfeeding ends in infancy and their bodies stop making lactase, the enzyme that allows them to process the sugar lactose, found only in milk. We refer to this as lactose intolerance, but it is really lactose tolerance that is the oddity. More than 85% of north Europeans (but not Icelandic people) are lactose tolerant, but the picture is very different across the rest of the world. In Africa, south and east Asia and among Native Americans (both in North and South America), fewer than 25% of people are lactose tolerant in adulthood. In northern Europe, prehistoric populations had been drinking milk since the arrival of agriculture about 6000 years ago. They developed a genetic mutation about 4000 years ago, which spread rapidly through the population. One suggestion is that during times of disease or famine, those without lactose tolerance would die as a reaction to the milk they were drinking; those with it would benefit from digesting the lactose in the milk.

In the century between Julius Caesar and Claudius, when Britons in the southeast of the island began to adopt Roman ways, they started importing new foodstuffs. They included vegetables such as peas, cucumbers, carrots and celery. Domesticated fruits included figs, apples, pears, cherries, plums, and dates. Newly planted vineyards, like one at Barkway, meant that local wines became available. People used new flavourings such as the herbs coriander, thyme, mint, basil, bay and dill, and the famous but pungent garum (a fish sauce like southeast Asian nam pla). Exotic imported items such as ginger, laser (galangal), pepper and olives added new flavours. People also began to develop a taste for seafood, and oyster shells are a common find on Roman sites, even in places a long way from the sea. Hunting game was a new pastime for the wealthy, so we begin to see venison appearing on the menu, at least for the better off.

Iron Age cheeses may have been almost as varied as modern types. Analysis of coprolites (human stools) shows that there was a type of blue cheese, while other evidence points to making cream cheese and hard cheeses. The pot seen here, dating from the last quarter of the first century AD, was first thought to be a strainer (and, indeed, was once labelled as such in a display at Letchworth Museum). However, it is a cheese press, used for draining the whey from the curds and compressing them to make a hard cheese.



The simplest way to make cheese is to heat milk and then add something to make it curdle. This could be sour cream, beer or vinegar. Next, the curds and whey need to be separated, by allowing the whey to drain away (and be stored for other uses in cooking). This can be done in a cloth bag, which makes a soft cheese. To make a hard cheese, it is necessary to press the curd to force out any remaining whey by putting it into jar, still wrapped in its cloth, and putting weights on top. This is how the pot we see here was used.

So, someone was making a hard cheese, but on what sort of site? We know from the Letchworth Museum Accessions Register that the vessel (described as a 'Bowl Colander') was 'found with shards at 2 Chimneys Sandpit March 25th 1942. 4'6" deep'. The register contains two more relevant entries: on 18 August 1952, some pottery was accessioned 'from Two Chimneys Gravel Pit', having been found in that year and in 1939, while one from 19 November 1953 records pottery 'found by F J Berry'.

Historic maps show a sand pit 175 m south of The Two Chimneys public house, which was still shown on a map surveyed in 1951. This must be the place, which is now covered by Wilbury Hills Cemetery. This is just inside Stotfold parish in Bedfordshire, although the pub became part of Letchworth in the 1960s. The Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record lists the site (number 508) and suggests that it may be a disturbed burial. This is unlikely, as Percival Westell's note on the original discovery stated that '[t]he occupation area is approximately 250 ft', suggesting that the area in which the pottery was found covered more than 75 m across, too large to be a single disturbed burial. Cheese presses are functional, everyday items that are unlikely to be put into a grave as a gift for the departed, as are the quern fragments that were also found there.

Westell's original guess that it was an occupation site is likely to be correct. Although Bedfordshire County Council commissioned an evaluation of the site, which included geophysics and trial trenching, no further Late Iron Age or Romano-British finds were made. Presumably, everything on the cemetery site lay within the outline of the sand pit and, if the occupation area was larger, it extended east across Stotfold Road. Unfortunately, no aerial photographs show activity on this side, either.

The site fits into a pattern seen across Letchworth Garden City, where almost every hilltop has produced evidence for a Roman period farmstead or village. Examples include Caslon Way on the Grange Estate, the centre of Norton village, Spring Road, Sollershott West/High Avenue and the northern edge of the Jackmans Estate. As we saw last week, individual 'sites' are simply part of a wider landscape, and we are lucky to have a lot of evidence locally for land use in the first century AD. We also know a great deal about Romano-British foodways (a useful American term covering the production, preparation and consumption of food), thanks less to the survival of recipes for things eaten by the wealthy and more to archaeological evidence, including data from animal bones and plant remains, things often overlooked by those who can only see glittery metalwork.

Written by Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews

Share this:

Email

Print

Facebook

Twitter

Pocket

WhatsApp

Pinterest

Reddit