

In October 2014, Phil Kirk was metal detecting on a field at Kelshall in the hills south-west of Royston, when he encountered a strong signal. Digging down about 15 inches, he found the top of something bronze. Thinking initially that it might be nothing more than a modern filter from a car, it turned out to be a complete Roman jug, missing its handle. On lifting it, he spotted the handle and bowl of a bronze patera (or trulleum). Next to this lay the battered bottom half of a large jug and last of all a third jug with a trefoil mouth in four or five pieces, apparently crushed by a large flint. All four vessels came out from a hole no more than 50 cm across. Quite by chance, the broken base of the third vessel matched a bronze object found a few months earlier and about ten metres away, which had been discarded under a nearby hedge as probably a twentieth century oil funnel, but which was the top half of the jug.

Phil recognised the importance of his find and contacted Julian Watters, who at the time was Finds Liaison Officer for Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. He then contacted the museum to see if it would be worth investigating the site further. So, on a cold morning later that month, a group went up to the site and expanded the original hole to a one metre square. Early in the digging, the missing jug hand turned up, but no sign of the edge of the pit into which they had been put could be found, so we needed a larger excavation trench.

We returned to the site in November, when the farmer scraped the topsoil from an area three metres square. During the initial cleaning, the rim of a glass bottle became visible, then more shards of glass. Next, an iron lamp-holder and suspension bar turned up. Two layers of hobnails were the remains of shoes placed one on top of the other. Next, a bronze corner binding from a wooden box or tray turned up, followed by the other three.

On top of the decayed tray stood a shattered but otherwise complete shallow dish, about the size of a saucer, 14.5 cm in diameter. When first exposed, it seemed to be iridescent from decay, but as the excavator exposed more, it became obvious that it was multicoloured millefiori. The pattern was made from lozenges of fused dark purple, white, yellow, blue and red glass rods. Then a second dish with the same basic pattern turned up next to it. Both were covered with a thin fibrous carbonised deposit, perhaps the remains of a delicate cloth wrapping. Along with these were two shattered glass cups and a pair of blue glass handles, fragments of a lava object and a silver denarius of the emperor Trajan (reigned AD 98-117). Next to the box stood a collection of glass bottles. The largest was hexagonal, 23 cm across, and contained the cremated bone of a probably middle-aged (40+) man and three worn second-century coins. A second bottle was octagonal, with two long sides, a type rarely found in Britain, and two square bottles. One has the letters IA2 (IAS) on its base, a type exactly paralleled at the Roman fort at Cramond, near Edinburgh, in a ditch dated AD 208-212. There was also a rectangular bottle. All these bottles were typical Romano-British products and represent the complete range available at the start of the third century. All were shattered because the pit – a grave – lay beneath a mound of large flint nodules that had collapsed onto them, but which had also protected them from the effects of ploughing. The grave probably dates from a few years either side of AD 210, and all the finds apart from the millefiori dishes are typical of this period. The dishes are more unusual. Tests by

the British Museum show that the glass was made in Alexandria, and the colours are right for a date around 200. Archaeologists have found sherds from similar vessels at Carlisle, Wroxeter, Inveresk, Frocester Court, Eccles (Kent) and London. The importance of the Kelshall examples is that they are the only complete vessels made from this mosaic glass so far discovered.



Each dish is about 14.5 cm in diameter, with straight sides rising at 30°-40° from a small flat base. The rim edges are plain and a little uneven, suggesting that the excess glass was sheared off while the vessels were still hot. They were not blown, but perhaps pressed into a mould. The pressing distorted the lozenge design, and one of the dishes appears to have been made by combining two or more sheets of the patterned glass. Millefiori consists of rods of different coloured glass arranged in a pattern, which are then heated to fuse them together. While still hot, the fused rods – about the size of a baked bean tin – are stretched into a long rod. This can then be cut into shorter lengths, which are then fused in the same way to create a pattern. With the final pattern created, the cylinder of glass can be cut into slices, ready to be reheated and pressed into moulds to make vessels. Some brooches also have millefiori decoration, often much finer than that used to make vessels.

What are these remarkable dishes doing in a grave on an exposed hilltop in Kelshall? Who had owned them? Where did that person live? One thing we can easily guess is that they were wealthy. Most Roman graves of this date might contain some pottery vessels and perhaps one or two glass vessels. Wealthier families could afford to put more things into the ground and some graves could be very ostentatious. This is the case here. Not only could they put in nine glass vessels (five bottles, two cups and two rare dishes), but also four bronze vessels (three jugs and a patera, a libation-pouring dish) and four coins.

Perhaps most significantly, the family did not put any ceramics into the grave. There was a distinct hierarchy to vessel use in the Roman world. Only the imperial family could use gold; other high-ranking families could have silver. Rich people would use bronze, which is what we see here. Aspiring families would use pewter. The silly idea promoted by so many

popular works and television series that samian ware is 'high status' is nonsense: people who used pottery were rather low down in the pecking order. Yes, samian was more expensive than other earthenwares, but it was definitely not something that the rich would use, much less put in the graves of their loved ones.

The Kelshall family made a definite statement about its position in society during the funeral. They could afford the best quality bronze and glassware to put in the grave; perhaps not putting ceramics in was part of their ostentatious show of wealth. Some of the items were imported, and we can speculate that the cloth covering of the millefiori dishes was something expensive (fine linen or silk, perhaps). Large parts of the grave appear 'empty', but probably held items that have since decayed (clothing, wooden items and so on). After the contents of the burial were in the ground and the pit filled in, it was covered with a low cairn of carefully interlocking flint nodules.

Where might the family have lived? The closest Roman settlement of any size is the town at Baldock, only 8 km to the west and visible from the hilltop. There was also a settlement between Kelshall and Baldock, at Slip End, and villas at Steeple Morden, Litlington and elsewhere. The nearness of these places does not mean that the man buried here lived in any of them, though. The grave is in an area where aerial photographs, geophysics and random discoveries show that there was a lot going on in the past and specifically the Roman period.

Kris Lockyear of University College London used a cart-based magnetometer to survey part of the field where the burial was found. It showed that the burial lies inside a large, almost square ditched area about 90 m across, with ditches up to 4 m wide on three sides and open to the east, with hints of a fence on this side. There are other, smaller and irregular enclosures to both west and east of it, as well as buildings composed of postholes and rammed clay floors, pits and at least one well. There are traces of ditched roadways around the site. The scale of the enclosure does not look domestic, nor is it military or a cemetery type. Instead, the most likely explanation is that it is religious.

Unlike medieval churchyards, Roman temple sites are not often associated with human burials. At a temple in Wynn Close, Baldock, the precinct held the graves of several newborn babies, but this is unusual. Late Roman Christian graves often clustered around what were believed to be the graves of martyrs, which could then develop a religious building such as a chapel or church, as happened at St Albans.

The contents of the Kelshall grave include a bronze patera, used in religious rituals. Might the man buried in the grave have been an important patron of the temple or even its chief priest? In the Roman world, this was not necessarily a professional post, and local dignitaries would often serve as the priests in their communities. Perhaps the man buried with the costly goods was just such a priest, perhaps even a major patron of the temple who paid for its refurbishment or rebuilding.

The range of glassware is as remarkable as the dish pictured here. It includes every type that was available at the time the grave was dug. Some of the vessels were new, but the hexagonal bottle containing the owner's ashes shows extensive wear on the base, where it

has been taken on and off a shelf over some years. Does the range hint that the owner had made his wealth as a merchant trading in glassware? This is going beyond what we can reasonably infer from the contents of the grave. Even so, we ought to be able to speculate about such things, always acknowledging that they are merely guesswork.

Written by Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews

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