A fragment from a probable Roman *Clibanus* from Catterick, North Yorkshire

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**Introduction**

The *clibanus* was one of a number of different types of portable oven or baking cover that were used throughout the Roman period. Contemporary descriptions of these objects tend to be somewhat vague, but as far as we know the *clibanus* was often made of clay, although metal ones are referred to, and it seems to have been used principally for baking or roasting meat, baking bread or cakes and for keeping dishes hot (Liversidge 1958; Frayn 1978, 30; Scheffer 1981, 107; Cubberley et al. 1988). Two basic shapes seem to have been employed. [1] A ‘cooking bell’ type, in which the food was cooked *sub testu* under an inverted bowl/dish form (Cubberley et al. 1988, Figs. 1 and 2). [2] A more traditional ‘oven’ shape which was roughly rectangular with rounded or oval-shaped corners, wider at the base than the top, which was formed like a dome, with a large entry/exit hole in the side and sometimes with double walls (Liversidge 1958). David Peacock has advised us that a number of almost complete ovens of this latter shape, though with single walls, have been recovered from recent excavations at the Roman quarry site at Mons Claudianus in Upper Egypt (pers comm). It is interesting to note that small domed ‘portable’ bread ovens with flat bases, three feet in diameter and two and a half feet high, are one of the ceramic products still being made today at the traditional pottery kilns at Pereruela, in the Zamora provence of Spain (Artigas and Corredor-Matheos 1974). However, it is clear that there was some variety in the shape of these portable Roman ovens, for Chris Going has drawn our attention to one on display at Nimes Museum which is more in the shape of an hour-glass, with two small projecting lug handles (pers comm Acc No. 907-30-44).

The only two claimed examples of *clibanis* from Roman Britain are strictly speaking ‘cooking bell’ shaped, although they are considerably more substantial than the cooking covers illustrated by Cubberley et al. (1988). Both the examples, one from Holt (Grimes 1930, Fig. 60, 9) and the other from Prestatyn (Blockley 1989, Fig. 81, 75), are slightly barrel-shaped, lacking a base and with a large opening at the top. However, Swan has cast doubt on the proposed function of the Holt example, preferring to see it as a ‘model of a circular open-topped kiln’ (1984, 36, Fig. IV). This view is possibly less tenable now with the more recent publication of the Prestatyn vessel, which contains evidence of charcoal burning on the inside surface and may be a product of the Holt kilns (Blockley 1989, 165, No. 75; dated between c AD 75–125).

**Description**

The fired clay fragment from Catterick appears to be part of the wall and base of a *clibanus*, though different to the Holt and Prestatyn examples (if that is what they are) in that it has a flat base and so was probably more on the lines of a portable oven than a simple cooking cover (Pl. 1; Fig. 1: Note 1). It was excavated from an unstratified context1 from Trench K XVII of Prof John Wacher’s excavations in 1959, which were conducted within the walled area of the Roman town. The wall of the clay fragment, which slopes slightly inwards, is 30mm thick at the junction with the base, narrowing to 26mm thick at the point of breakage (Pl. 2). An extra thin layer of sandy clay has been placed around the inner wall, presumably for additional refractory purposes, stopping some 25mm short of the base (Pl. 1). The latter is flat and about 12mm thick. The oven seems to have been made in at least two parts, as a structural joint can plainly be seen in the lower wall in the form of an inverted ‘V’ (Pl. 2). This would tend to suggest that the base was made first with the wall luted on at a later stage.

The interior of the base and the lower 20mm of the inside wall are both heavily sooted from the fire, presumably charcoal based, which would have been used to heat the oven. The sooting extends over the central portion of the broken edge shown in Pl. 1 and Fig. 1, and also over the centre of the exterior of the base. This sooting of the interior basal fracture suggests that after the centre of the base was broken, the oven continued to be used for some time, resting upon a flat surface. The nature of the sooting seems to be too specifically located to be accounted for by accidental burning after breakage.
**Fabric**

The Catterick fragment of oven is in a hard, roughly sandy fabric, of tile-like appearance, with occasional organic impressions on the outer surface of the wall and a particularly sandy layer on the outer surface of the base. The colour of the outer surface is light reddish-buff (*Munsell 10 YR 6/1*), with a darkish grey inner core sandwiched between light red outer layers. Thin sectioning and study under the petrological microscope of a small sample carefully detached from the body, shows frequent sub-angular quartz grains ranging up to 0.80 mm across, but with the majority falling in the size-range 0.05–0.30 mm, set in a dark red to grey isotropic clay matrix. Also present are some shreds of mica, iron oxide, pieces of chert, quartzite and several small fragments of a sandstone rock composed of equal-sized quartz grains, often cemented by siliceous outgrowths in optical continuity.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact source of the Catterick oven, given the fairly common range of non-plastic inclusions described above. However, there appears to be nothing present here that might lead one to suspect that the oven was imported from some distance away, bearing in mind the possibilities of a continental origin. Instead, there seems to be no reason why a local production should not be considered in this particular case. The Roman town at Catterick is situated on Carboniferous Limestone, close by to Millstone Grit formations and with Triassic Sandstones a little to the east. Much of this area is also covered by Boulder Clay (1° Geological Survey Map of England Sheet No. 41). All of the inclusion types noted in thin section also occur in this region. Chert is commonly found in the local Boulder Clays, for example, whilst the texture of the sandstone strongly suggests derivation from the Bunter deposits of the Triassic.

It seems probable, therefore, that the Catterick fragment shows the transmission of the concept of a *clibanus* of this form to Roman Britain, rather than, in this particular case, its importation from the continent.

**Notes**

1. We are grateful to Chris Going for first making this suggestion to one of us (JE). It is a salutary warning to all excavators, that were only the wall of this particular fragment to have survived, it would almost certainly have been regarded as a piece of broken Roman tile or brick.
2. Photographs by Nick Bradford, Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton; drawing by Anne Thompson.


**References**


Plate 1.

Plate 2.