



# The Colchester Vase: A Master Potter at Work

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## ABSTRACT

*Decorated en barbotine with arena scenes and with an inscription cut pre-firing, the Colchester Vase is a late-second-century product of the local pottery industry. Of exceptional quality, it may have come from the workshop to which the named potter Acceptus iii belonged. It appears to record a performance in the town, and was used as the cremation urn for a non-local male of 40+ years.*

**Keywords:** Acceptus iii; Colchester; colour-coat; gladiators; kilns; samian

## INTRODUCTION

Colchester's West Cemetery, as defined by M.R. Hull, lies along Lexden Road, which is more or less equivalent to the Roman road running to London (FIG. 1).<sup>1</sup> John Taylor (1807–67), proprietor and editor of the *Essex Standard*, built West Lodge just off the Lexden Road in 1848 and owned the wider West Lodge Estate, where, as it was developed, he found 22 grave groups. He campaigned for the establishment of Colchester's civic museum, and when it opened in 1860 the Taylor Collection formed a major part of the first exhibition.<sup>2</sup> One burial group, found in 1853,<sup>3</sup> consists of four vessels: a small flagon of Hull's form 156A found resting in a samian dish of form Dragendorff 36, and a large colour-coat beaker or hunt-cup (the Colchester Vase) containing cremated remains and covered by an inverted, unstamped mortarium of Hull's form 501B (FIGS 2–3).<sup>4</sup> The beaker had been inscribed before firing. As part of Colchester Museums' *Decoding the Dead* project, the burnt bone has been identified as that of a non-local male of 40+ years; details of the analysis and of the inscription can be found in the companion paper to this study of the vessel.<sup>5</sup>

The group of vessels suggests a date for the burial in the late second or beginning of the third century A.D. The samian dish is in Lezoux ware (LEZ SA 2 in *NRFC*), has the usual ring of

<sup>1</sup> Hull 1958, 250–9.

<sup>2</sup> May 1928, 290–4, pls XCI–XCIII; Montagu Benton 1927, 282, 285–6; Rudsdale 1960, 9; Phillips 1985, 4, 62.

<sup>3</sup> The date is erroneously given in *RIB I* as 1848.

<sup>4</sup> Price 1869, 7–9, pl. 2, figs 1–3; May 1928, 293, Grave 14/13, pl. XCII, 14; Museum Accession number COLEM: PC.727–730.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll (cremated remains), Montgomery *et al.* (isotope analysis) in Davis and Pearce, this volume.

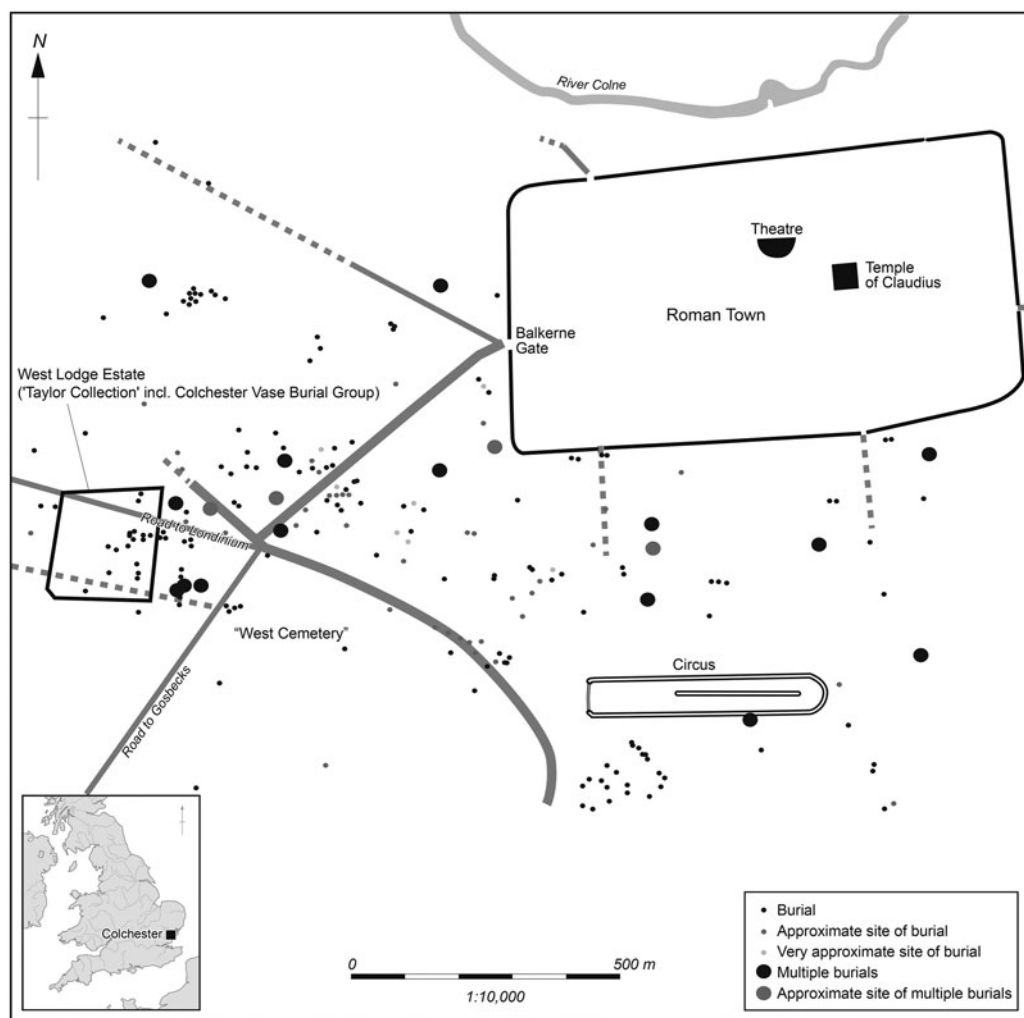


FIG. 1. Location map. (Drawn by S. Lambert-Gates; © University of Reading)

barbotine leaves round the rim, and dates to the Antonine period.<sup>6</sup> In the context of this burial the rim design may refer to the wreaths awarded to victors in the arena and circus, but evidence from other burials in southern Britain suggests rather that Dragendorff 35 and 36 dishes with leaves on the rim were used as grave goods evoking the funerary wreaths that adorned the dead.<sup>7</sup> The flagon is in a buff fabric, one of the local miscellaneous oxidised wares not sufficiently distinctive to be a separate fabric, with grooved handle and three rings cut at the neck. The form has been found associated with several kilns and was clearly both popular and long-lived; it is dated from the Hadrianic period to the early third century.<sup>8</sup> The mortarium is in a cream fabric with dense

<sup>6</sup> Hull 1963, 96, describes the form as 'exactly as' his fig. 78, 1; *NRFRC*, 32–3.

<sup>7</sup> Junkelmann 2000, fig. 74; Cassibry 2018, 8, figs 3–4; Toynbee 1971, 44–6; Bird 2013, 336.

<sup>8</sup> Symonds and Wade 1999, 475. Hull 1963, 96 describes the flagon as like his fig. 79, 9.



FIG. 2. The grave group and the scenes on the Vase, drawn by the artist and archaeologist Josiah Parish (1834–82) soon after excavation. Not to scale.



FIG. 3. The grave group: Taylor Collection Grave 14/13, Colchester Museum Accession number COLEM: PC.727–730. Not to scale (Vase height 212 mm). (Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums)

grey flint trituration grits (COL WH in *NRFRC*) and is the same form as that which carries four stamps of the potter Acceptus iii, who is recorded as working only at Colchester c. A.D. 160–200;<sup>9</sup> being unstamped, the mortarium may date into the early third century.<sup>10</sup> Mortaria are rarely found as grave goods, being primarily used for food preparation rather than serving or consumption,<sup>11</sup> and this vessel, identified by Hull as a waster,<sup>12</sup> may have been selected as a lid because of its size and wall-sided form, which slots comfortably over the top of the beaker. As discussed below, a date of c. A.D. 160–200 is also suggested for the Vase, based on the evidence regarding its production, particularly the dating for the Colchester samian potters and their links with other local fine wares.

The Vase has probably been on display since the museum was founded. Decorated with three scenes *en barbotine* and with an inscription, it was recognised on discovery as exceptional, leading to a lively discussion on the correct reading and interpretation of the inscription in local newspapers and antiquarian journals (see Appendix). It was initially thought to be a Nene Valley (Castor ware) or German product, at the time the most well-known producers of colour-coat vessels, but by the 1950s Hull had established that, along with other vessels with similar decoration found locally, the Vase was a late-second-century product of the Colchester kilns that lay in the western suburb of the town, not far from the burial.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, attributions to Germany continue to surface, influenced by genuine stylistic associations.<sup>14</sup>

Such a remarkable vessel was almost certainly a special commission, yet at the same time the other Colchester colour-coat pots with similar decoration, although less well preserved, place it within what can be perceived as a workshop series commemorating specific, arguably local, arena performances (see below). These and other aspects of the Vase's manufacture and use are discussed further by Davis and Pearce in their companion paper.

#### THE VASE

A large bag-shaped cornice-rim beaker of Hull's form 391B,<sup>15</sup> the Vase weighs 1,153 g. It is 212 mm high, 158 mm across at the rim, has a maximum body diameter of 200 mm, and measures 82 mm across the base, which shows little if any sign of wear. Damage consists of a V-shaped crack at the rim and the loss of some of the thinner applied elements; as the areas thus exposed are very clean, this may largely be due to post-excavation handling (FIG. 4). The fabric is fine, hard and light red in colour, and the colour-coat on both surfaces is a (purplish-)black or very dark brown but is paler under the base. The fabric has been identified by Dr Matthew Loughton (Colchester Archaeological Trust) as Colchester colour-coat fabric CCW1 (CZ), the equivalent of COL CC 2 in *NRFRC*, and ICP analysis has shown that this ware is made from the local clay.<sup>16</sup> The colour-coat is applied more as a thin wash, especially on the exterior, so that the colour of the base fabric shows through on high points of the

<sup>9</sup> Potters are numbered according to the *NOTS* catalogue of samian stamps: for Acceptus ii and iii, see *NOTS* 1, 48. An updated version of the full *NOTS* catalogue is at <https://www.rgzm.de/samian>

<sup>10</sup> Dr K.F. Hartley, pers. comm. 2022. Hull 1963, 96, where it is described as like his fig. 64, 3; *NRFRC*, 133–4.

<sup>11</sup> Cool and Leary 2012, table 29.7. At Brougham, Cumbria, samian mortaria with a lion-head spout provide an exception, no doubt because of the funerary symbolism of the lion (Henig 1977, 356, 358; Dickinson *et al.* 2004, 348; Cool and Leary 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Hull 1963, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Wright 1865, 463; Jewitt 1875, 37; Harcum 1925, 281; Hull 1963, 91–9; Webster 1959, 92; Toynbee 1962, 190; F. Fremersdorf correspondence in Colchester Museum archives.

<sup>14</sup> Oenbrink 1998, 157–8, esp. n. 607, with further references, 243, no. 1966.

<sup>15</sup> Hull 1963, fig. 107 only illustrates 391A, the smaller version of the form (see p. 190 for description).

<sup>16</sup> Loughton 2021. Symonds and Wade 1999, 262–74; *NRFRC*, 132; Hart *et al.* 1987; Storey *et al.* 1989, 35, 37, fig. 3.



FIG. 4. Fissures on the body of the man whipping the bear. Not to scale. (Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums)

decoration. This effect is found on other decorated beakers made *c.* A.D. 160–200 at the Oaks Drive kilns in Colchester.<sup>17</sup>

The pot was thrown on the wheel, and fine shallow turning ridges are visible on the interior. The cornice rim and rounded foot were cut after throwing, probably with wooden tools similar to those used by modern potters.<sup>18</sup> The pot would have been allowed to dry to the ‘leather-hard’ stage and then the relief decoration added. The barbotine decoration involves the piping or trailing of clay soft enough to be malleable but firm enough to keep its shape. The technique leaves little room for error and requires skill and speed if the various elements are to meld together successfully.<sup>19</sup> Barbotine is normally undertaken directly on to the surface of the pot, but on the Vase there are signs that the basic shapes of the human and animal figures in

<sup>17</sup> Bidwell 1999, 495.

<sup>18</sup> Czysz shows the use of such tools in a study of the production of plain samian ware: 1982, Abbn 24, C–D, 26, C–D, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Leach 1976, 113



the scenes were made separately and then lifted and placed on the vessel. The evidence for this consists of tiny fissures across the surfaces of the figures where they have bent to fit the curvature of the pot; they are most noticeable on the human figures, less so on the animals (FIG. 4). Others have probably been masked by subsequent ornament, which is of exceptional quality and would almost certainly have been added after the figures were in place, to avoid damage. Anderson described these figures as ‘appliqués’, apparently meaning motifs cast from individual moulds and luted to the surface with soft clay; she added that details of the costumes were ‘probably added in barbotine’, but the use of moulded appliqués does not apply here: they produce a very different appearance from barbotine, with the details all created in the mould.<sup>20</sup>

Modern potters usually apply such piped and trailed decoration using soft rubber or plastic bulbs fitted with a nozzle of the appropriate size. It is likely that Roman potters used a similar technique with fabric or leather bags that could be squeezed to release the soft clay. Horns, their tips cut at different points to give a range of diameters, would have fitted into the bags and provided nozzles for the larger elements, while for smaller motifs stoppers, probably of wood, would have held nozzles cut from bird quills of various sizes, such as those of geese and crows.<sup>21</sup>

Once decorated and dried, the Vase was dipped in the colour-coat, essentially a finer and more liquid version of the base clay, to which an alkali such as wood-ash would have been added to precipitate the coarser and heavier particles.<sup>22</sup> This would also produce a higher concentration of iron in the liquid and a corresponding increase in the depth of colour. After the colour-coat was dry, the inscription was cut below the rim, using a fine point to incise the neat and elegant lettering that is indicative of a scribal hand. Along with the fluid form of the letters themselves, the absence of fine cracks at the edge of the strokes is evidence that the inscription was cut before firing.<sup>23</sup>

The last stage was the firing of the pot. The light red colour of the fabric, visible on the lettering, on highlights where the colour-coat is thin, and where fragments of barbotine have broken away, indicates that there was a final oxidising atmosphere within the firing chamber. This was probably achieved by allowing air to enter the kiln as it cooled down.<sup>24</sup> A prior reducing stage would have been necessary, to give the colour-coat its dark shade. Analysis has shown that the Colchester wares were made from the local London Clay,<sup>25</sup> and in a reducing atmosphere the iron content would normally cause this to fire dark grey to black. However, the purplish-brown tinge of the colour-coat further suggests the effect of a final phase involving oxidation while cooling. The first stage of firing may also have involved oxidation, as the temperature in the kiln was raised high enough to bake the clay: such a three-phase system was used for the firing of Greek red- and black-figure vases, for example.<sup>26</sup> The frequency of the purplish tinged colour-coat at Colchester suggests that it was deliberate, and while the three-phase system sounds a complex method for firing colour-coat beakers in a simple kiln, Colchester’s Kiln 21, the only samian kiln so far found in Britain, argues for the presence in the town of highly experienced kiln masters.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Anderson 1980, 36; cf. Déchelette 1904, vol. 2, 192–234.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Leach 1976, 112–13; Oenbrink 1998, 98–9.

<sup>22</sup> For the preparation of clay to produce the colour-coat, cf. Winter 2003, 183–8 and Abbn 6–7.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the inscription, see Davis and Pearce, this volume.

<sup>24</sup> Bimson 1956, 201.

<sup>25</sup> Hart *et al.* 1987, 590–2.

<sup>26</sup> Bimson 1956, 201; Williams 1997, 89; Jones 2021, A1d.

<sup>27</sup> Kiln 21 has a jacketing of pipes round the edge of the firing chamber and movable pipes that passed through the floor, both designed to exclude any gases (Hull 1963, 20–34). For a discussion of the kiln type, see Schaad 2007, 219–26.

## THE SCENES

The three scenes are read from left to right, framed by vertical beaded lines, as shown on Parish's drawing (FIG. 2): two men torment a bear; a *secutor* has defeated a *retiarius*; an animal hunt. Tendrils of vegetation twine beneath all three scenes and within the first and third, conveying a sense of movement that frames the more static central scene. The gesture of submission made by the *retiarius* forms the focal point of both the scene and the Vase itself, an artistic accomplishment matched on a mosaic of uncertain date at Zliten, Libya, where the central figure on one of the two gladiatorial friezes is also a defeated *retiarius* raising his right forefinger in submission.<sup>28</sup>

The upper limits of the first and third scenes are defined by lines of applied oval beads or dots, and a continuous line defines the lower limit of all three. This type of bead is found, as noted below, on a beaker fragment stamped by Acceptus iii, one of the potters who made samian and other wares at Colchester. The upper line was never intended to be continuous, as elements of all three scenes reach to just below the rim, a maximising of the available space present on other barbotine-decorated colour-coated beakers of both British and continental manufacture.<sup>29</sup> The lower line rises beneath the *retiarius*, but is briefly continued beneath his left foot by a line of small indentations in the clay that pre-date the application of the slip (FIG. 5). These small holes may be preliminary marks for more dots that were never added when it became apparent that if their original line were continued it would pass too far beneath the animal hunt and would not meet the ends of the two vertical lines.

*Scene 1*: two men baiting a bear (FIG. 6); SECVNDVS MARIO is inscribed close to the man on the right. The men's clothing and equipment suggest that they are of different status, with the one on the left subordinate.

Lunging at a small bear bounding towards him, the curly-haired man on the left wears only a loincloth (*subligaculum*) and carries a stick in each hand. The animal's head is turned back towards the second man, who wields a realistically flexed whip. Lines running across this man's head probably represent either straight hair or a padded cap. As on other low-relief figures, his twisted pose is ambiguous;<sup>30</sup> the legs and visible foot suggest that his back is turned to the viewer, but the closed fingers and thumb of the hand holding the whip are those of the right hand of someone facing forward. The ambiguous stance of a figure on a beaker from Stonea, Cambridgeshire, is resolved by his exposed nipples,<sup>31</sup> but on the Vase hemlines at neck and wrist show that the man with the whip wears a sleeved top, while a wide belt (*balteus*) secures trews. He has padded guards (*fasciae*) on both lower legs and a thonged open-toed shoe or boot on the visible foot. There is strapping on his right forearm, and a round object tied to his right elbow may be a small cymbal or other noise-making object, intended to catch the animal's attention.<sup>32</sup> His left forearm and hand are completely covered by a smooth guard of padded cloth, a less flexible form of the *manica* worn by other gladiators.<sup>33</sup> A parallel can be seen in the padded bite-sleeves worn today by the quarry of protection dogs in training.<sup>34</sup>

Similar arm-guards and clothing, the trews ending at the knee, are worn by two *paegniarii*, mock-fighters who duelled with wooden weapons or whips, and three *bestiarii* (animal fighters)

<sup>28</sup> Dunbabin 1999, 121; 2016, 189–90, fig. 7.16a; Junkelmann 2000, fig. 72.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Hull 1963, figs 52–3; Darling 1989; Webster 1989, fig. 2, 16, fig. 3, 31a–b, fig. 5, 41, fig. 8, 72; Johns 1996, fig. 163, 103; Oenbrink 1998, Abbn 3–36.

<sup>30</sup> Jackson 1983, 91; Johns 1996, 480, fig. 174, 3. See also the *retiarius* on the Vase.

<sup>31</sup> Johns 1996, 480, fig. 174, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Nossov 2011, 29, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Junkelmann 2000, 36, fig. 21; Nossov 2011, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Gerritsen and Haak 2014, 181.



FIG. 5. Indentations pre-dating the application of the slip. Not to scale. (Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums)

on an early–mid-third-century villa mosaic from Nennig, Germany.<sup>35</sup> The *bestiarii* are armed only with whips against a bear; their guards clearly completely enclose their forearms and are secured by cross-straps. One *paegniarius* has a whip and thick knobbed stick (cudgel?) and the other a similar thick stick and thinner second one. A duelling pair on a samian vessel from Trier Werkstatt II are much the same, except that the fighter with two sticks is bare-chested and all the sticks are knobbed, as is the stick wielded by a nude figure on the Zliten mosaic.<sup>36</sup>

With neither carrying a weapon capable of killing the bear, the men on the Vase seem to combine the roles of *paegniarii* and animal handlers (*bestiarii*), rather than being arena hunters (*venatores*). They could thus be seen as part of a bloodless interlude in an arena programme

<sup>35</sup> Dunbabin 1999, fig. 84; Nossov 2011, 53; Kazek 2012, 370–1. The distinctions between the roles and garments of *bestiarii*, *paegniarii* and *venatores* are not clear-cut and changed over time, but the latter identification does not seem appropriate here: Auguet 1994, 89–90; Fagan 2011, 248; Kazek 2012, 127–31; Dunkle 2019, 78–84; *contra* Potter 1999, 310.

<sup>36</sup> Huld-Zetsche 1993, 82, M117–M118, Taf. 24, A171; Dunbabin 2016, 189–90, fig. 7.16b; Dunkle 2019, 82–3, where the figure is interpreted as a condemned convict (*noxius*).





FIG. 6. Colchester Vase, Scene 1. Not to scale (height 212 mm). (Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums)

rather than of a full-scale *venatio* ending in the deaths of beasts and men,<sup>37</sup> and they may have had a long working relationship with each other and with the bear. A curly-haired man, very like the figure on the left but with only one stick, is on another Colchester colour-coated ware beaker, where he is shown driving children or dwarfs dressed as *genii cucullati* towards a dog (FIG. 7, left).<sup>38</sup> Another curly-haired man whipping a bear is on the same beaker; he has

<sup>37</sup> Wiedemann 1995, 86; Dunkle 2019, 115; Kazek 2012, 125–41.

<sup>38</sup> Hull 1963, fig. 53, 8; Toynbee 1957, 468–9. His stance, upper body lowered and thrust forward, is meant to convey movement, as with a figure on the Zliten mosaic, Libya: Wiedemann 1995, fig. 5d; Junkelmann 2000, fig. 83.

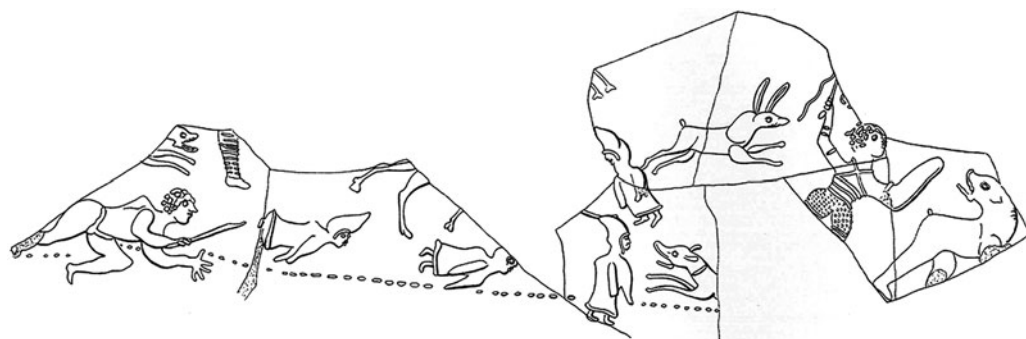


FIG. 7. Similar figures to those in Scene 1 on another Colchester colour-coated ware beaker decorated *en barbotine*. Not to scale. (After Hull 1963, fig. 53, 8)

strapping at elbow and wrist on his right arm, a smooth guard on his lower left arm, straps crossed over his chest, a wide *balteus* and textured trews ending at the knee (FIG. 7, right).<sup>39</sup> A bear also appears on a fragment of the lid of a Colchester colour-coated ware bowl (FIG. 8).<sup>40</sup> Rather than depicting standard elements of contemporary arena programmes, these vessels with their distinctive figures may reference specific local performers and events familiar to both potter and potential purchasers.

*Scene 2*: a victorious left-handed *secutor* and defeated *retiarius* with the inscription MEMNON SAC VIII VALENTINVS LEGIONIS XXX above (FIG. 9); the end of the inscription continues over the third scene (FIG. 10). The equipment of each gladiator is typical of their class,<sup>41</sup> and only some distinctive features are noted here. The quality of the decoration is such that all these features can be assumed to have been intentionally depicted.

On the *secutor* two textured cords hanging down at his nape and a garment line on his shoulders suggest that beneath his high-crested helmet he is wearing a leather or quilted textile cap used as padding; just such a cap reaching to shoulder level is shown on a mosaic from Spain.<sup>42</sup> His fringed loincloth has a square of bosses or studs at the back.<sup>43</sup> The studs imply that this may be a protective feature, similar to the apron worn over the groin by Roman legionaries. A folding knife handle from Besançon, France, shows a *hoplomachus* with a flap of cloth, perhaps one end of the loincloth, secured by his belt in the same position, but one from South Shields, Tyne and Wear, depicts a probable *secutor* with a pouch suspended from the back of his belt and another from Caerwent, Sir Fynwy (Monmouthshire), shows a *retiarius* with a pouch in the same position.<sup>44</sup> All three handles are of much the same date as the Vase.<sup>45</sup>

Over the padding on the Colchester *secutor*'s right lower leg a short greave runs from mid-shin to knee, and a leather or metal guard covers his left lower shin and the top of his foot; this reverses the positions where a right-handed *secutor* would wear these items.<sup>46</sup> The binding on his large

<sup>39</sup> Hull 1963, fig. 53, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Hull 1963, fig. 52, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Junkelmann 2000, 59–63; Nossov 2011, 62–8; Kazek 2012, 146–9, 170–1.

<sup>42</sup> Nossov 2011, 89–90.

<sup>43</sup> cf. Oenbrink 1998, Abbn 122–3. For arena attendants of the mid to later second century wearing fringed garments, see Dunbabin 1999, fig. 127.

<sup>44</sup> Bertrand 2021, pl. II, 32; Allason-Jones and Miket 1984, 300; Bartus and Grimm 2010, 322, fig. 4c. Stephen Greep kindly made available recent drawings of the South Shields handle.

<sup>45</sup> Bertrand 2021, 86.

<sup>46</sup> Junkelmann 2000, fig. 60; Jacobelli 2003, 87; Nossov 2011, 62, 102.



FIG. 8. A bear and stag on the lid of a Colchester colour-coated ware bowl. Not to scale. *Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums*)



FIG. 9. Colchester Vase, Scene 2. Not to scale (height 212 mm). (Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums)

rectangular shield is smooth at top and bottom but has small bosses running down the side. There are extended L-shaped ridges at each corner of the shield, and a central boss. Between the boss and the side is a raised right-facing (propitious) swastika or *gammadion*, a motif also seen on late second- to third-century brooches, with excavated examples generally coming from military sites from Hadrian's Wall to Dura-Europos in Syria.<sup>47</sup> One from Chester was found on the

<sup>47</sup> For example: Forster and Knowles 1913, 274; Petch 1927, 188; Frisch and Toll 1949, pl. 15; Böhme 1972, 43–6; Riha 1979, 88–9; 1994, 77; Heeren and van der Feijst 2017, 160–3.





FIG. 10. Colchester Vase, Scene 3. Not to scale (height 212 mm). (Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums)

floor of a barracks, and another, from Zugmantel, Germany, was found in a deposit with 55 coins, the latest being of Commodus and Crispina (A.D. 177–92/178–91).<sup>48</sup>

To this *secutor* and a left-handed *retiarius* on a plaque from Chester can be added a left-handed hammer-wielding figure on a colour-coated beaker from Stonea, Cambridgeshire, and perhaps also a gladiator on a colour-coated sherd from Colchester.<sup>49</sup> Wilmott has suggested that the Colchester

<sup>48</sup> Richmond and Webster 1951, 27, no. 6; *ORL* 8, 84.

<sup>49</sup> Wilmott 2007; Webster in Symonds and Wade 1999, 267, fig. 5.33, 12; too little remains of the latter figure for positive identification.



*secutor* was formed in a positive-image mould and was therefore reversed when applied to the pot,<sup>50</sup> but this idea has been refuted above. As left-handedness (*scaeva*) was recorded as a characteristic of some gladiators and considered to give an advantage,<sup>51</sup> this is more probably a true image of a specific fighter, and further evidence that the Vase depicts a particular local event.

Unless he too is left-handed, the *retiarius* stands with his chest facing the viewer, but his pose is again rather twisted and ambiguous. A wing of the metal *galerus* on his left shoulder projects onto his chest. His left hand holds a square of netting, all that remains of the original. Three large dots of slip (one now missing) on each lower band of strapping around his ankles may represent small bells that would alert the sight-restricted *secutor* to his location.<sup>52</sup> The belt (*balteus*) securing his loincloth is studded. The hem of the loincloth is fringed over the left leg but not over the right. His head is turned to the *secutor* and his clenched right fist is raised with the forefinger extended in submission.<sup>53</sup> The left hand was generally used for this gesture but here the use of the right hand foregrounds the gesture, making it the central, poignant focus of the scene.

*Scene 3*: an animal hunt with a dog in pursuit of a stag, and a hare and a second stag above them (FIG. 10).

While a *venatio* was often the first event in the arena, this hunt is the last of the three scenes on the Vase.<sup>54</sup> It resembles a chase in open countryside far more than it does a staged fight between men and exotic imported animals, although events setting dogs on deer with a huntsman playing a comparatively minor part also took place in the arena.<sup>55</sup>

The only predator here is a single dog, whose leading paw touches the hind leg of a stag in front of him. Above the dog is a hare running behind a second stag. All the animals are at full stretch, and the sense of movement is increased by the numerous tendrils of vegetation filling the gaps between the animals, by the way the dog has almost caught the lower stag, and by the antlers of the uppermost stag breaching the zone dictated by the upper line of beads and his muzzle breaching the vertical line. Neither stag has antlers that match on each side; instead the potter has made full use of the available space to add tines to each beam, apart from the right-hand antler of the uppermost stag, which has only the beam and bezel.

Unlike the other two scenes, this may not be a record of a specific hunt, with the vegetation representing trees and shrubs brought in to the arena to mimic the natural world,<sup>56</sup> but a simple filling of the available space with a customary element of the games, as all these animals appear on other Colchester colour-coated vessels and the theme occurs widely on vessels made elsewhere.<sup>57</sup>

#### MAKING THE FIGURES

The torsos, heads and limbs of the human figures were all made using broad nozzles, and the placing of the limbs and the clothing on them gives them a lively effect of movement. Additional squeezes of clay on the arms and legs shape the knees and elbows. The stick-carrying *paegniarius/bestiarius* and the *retiarius* both have curly hair, formed by piling up individual dots of clay; the whip-wielding *bestiarius* has straight hair, made from individual piped lines, and an ear shaped from a small

<sup>50</sup> Jackson 1983; Wilmott 2007, 145.

<sup>51</sup> Fagan 2011, 218; Dunkle 2019, 102.

<sup>52</sup> Dunkle 2019, 112–13.

<sup>53</sup> Corbeill 2004, 52; Dunkle 2019, 130–1.

<sup>54</sup> Fagan 2011, 125–8.

<sup>55</sup> Junkelmann 2000, 73; Dunkle 2019, 84–5.

<sup>56</sup> Nossov 2011, 36; Dunkle 2019, 236.

<sup>57</sup> Toynbee 1955, 15, pl. 8; Hull 1963, figs 51–5.

curve. All three have their eyes formed from a single dot of clay set in a circle, made by impressing the end of the quill to show eye sockets, while their noses are triangles of clay, their lips two straight lines, and their chins a curve; tiny dots mark the nipples on the *paegniarius*/*bestiarius*' naked torso. The hands of all three are shown by single lines, carefully curved to show the various positions of the fingers gripping a weapon or making a gesture.

The *paegniarius*/*bestiarius* wears only a loincloth formed of three piped lines, but the other figures all wear armour or protective clothing. The binding on their various arm, wrist and leg protection is formed of single lines, but curved carefully to fit the position of the limbs. The binding on their belts is similar, but that worn by the *retiarius* has a row of dotted studs as well. The *retiarius* also wears a loincloth with a dotted fringe on one side and a plain border on the other, has three large dots at each ankle (perhaps, as noted above, bells to guide the *secutor*), and has a guard on his left hand. He wears an elaborate *galerus*: the lower chest part is simply outlined, but the prominence of the shoulder portion indicates that it was formed from an applied plaque of clay, then ornamented with barbotine dots round the interior. The *bestiarius* wears some kind of tunic, defined by a curved line on his neck, and short lines mark his thonged open boots. A pair of rings and a central dot form a stud on his elbow, bound on with short lines, and simple piping marks the outline of his protective textile *manica*.

The most elaborate figure is the *secutor*, who has a fringed loincloth with dots marking a block of studs below his belt, a greave tied by strings on one leg, all marked by single lines, and a short greave, probably again made from a shallow clay plaque, on the other, above a boot marked by a plain outline. His helmet is made from a large, piped roundel, with outlined crest, heavy dots marking the eyeholes, a decorative curve of dots and a three-sided rectangle piped round one eye. The shield is formed from an applied plaque, bordered with plain lines at top and bottom and dots down the side, and decorated with a swastika formed of simple lines with right-angles above and below; the boss consists of a ring and dot.

The weapons comprise a pair of plain sticks wielded by the *paegniarius*/*bestiarius*, and a particularly finely worked whip held by the *bestiarius*, its long lash flicking down in front of the bear. The *secutor* has a plain straight sword with a knob on the hilt, and the defeated *retiarius* holds the stump of his net, a fragment of checked straight lines, and has lost his trident, which is lying on the ground.

The animals' bodies were also all apparently made separately using large nozzles and then added to the pot. The eyes are again made with dots set in a ring. Most of the legs were formed of two lines, down to shape the paw and then back, which gives an impression of musculature; ears were also formed of two lines, shaped to suit the animal. Noses were formed with the heads, and the stags and hare have impressions to show their nostrils. The bear, hare and stags have oval dots for tails, and the bear has extra oval dots to show its claws, large front teeth, and the bristles on its back. The stags' antlers are formed from individual piped lines, rather unevenly placed; the hound's tail is formed of a long trail, and two short lines on its neck mark an incomplete collar.

The tendrils and narrow, pointed leaves that fill in the background of the animal hunt and lie at the bottom of the decoration are less competently piped than the figures, but are characteristic of colour-coat beakers with figured scenes.

#### THE VASE WITHIN THE COLCHESTER POTTERY INDUSTRY

Potters were active in Colchester from before the Roman Conquest up to the fourth century A.D., making a wide range of pottery types and fabrics.<sup>58</sup> At various times they produced fine and

<sup>58</sup> Bidwell 1999.

specialised wares, including samian, colour-coated wares and mortaria. Apart from the mortaria, which were supplied to the northern frontier in the second century A.D.,<sup>59</sup> the distribution of these products seems to have been relatively limited.<sup>60</sup> Considering the quality of some of the pots produced, especially the barbotine wares, this seems surprising; the products of potteries in the Nene Valley, which also made barbotine and colour-coated wares, were considerably more widely distributed over a longer period.<sup>61</sup>

Colchester is one of only two sites in Britain known to have made decorated samian, using moulds impressed with individual figure-types in the manner of the Continental workshops.<sup>62</sup> The two anonymous mould-makers, Potters A and B,<sup>63</sup> produced bowls that are reminiscent of East Gaulish and German products in both their general style and in individual features such as their triple-bordered ovolos.<sup>64</sup> Their work also shows idiosyncrasies, such as apparently casting some of their figure-punches from barbotine originals.<sup>65</sup> The plain wares are of standard Gaulish forms, mainly of mid- to late Antonine date, and carry the name-stamps of several potters.

The most important potter from the point of view of the Vase is *Acceptus iii*.<sup>66</sup> He used a single die, 1a, of which 15 examples are currently recorded on plain forms. Crucially, the die has also been noted on a rim fragment from a barbotine beaker of the same form and fabric as the Vase which carries similar ovoid beads; it also appears, impressed twice on each side of the spout, on a mortarium of Hull's form 501B.<sup>67</sup> This indicates that *Acceptus iii* was part of a workshop producing a range of specialised pottery, and it is likely that some of the potters involved were immigrants from the Rhineland. Hartley and Dickinson note the closeness in style between the stamps of *Acceptus iii* and *Acceptus ii* of Trier, though the dating of *Acceptus ii* is insufficiently precise to assume they are the same man; however, *Minuso ii* (c. A.D. 155–170) moved from Trier to Colchester, and *Miccio vii* (c. A.D. 150–180) probably moved to Colchester from Sinzig.<sup>68</sup>

The presence of samian potters from East Gaulish and Rhineland workshops makes it more likely that potters specialising in other fine wares may have moved to Colchester too. Iconographic links between the Rhineland and the Vase are noted above; they are emphasised by some of the images on the samian made by Potter A, notably the padded protective clothing shown on both Vase and samian.<sup>69</sup> A further parallel with Trier is provided by bowls of Trier Werkstatt II which show bears with whip-wielding *bestiarii* in the arena, though here the bears are attacking bound *damnati/noxii*, while a bowl of Potter A of Colchester has a bear, similar

<sup>59</sup> Tyers 1996, 119–20, fig. 111.

<sup>60</sup> The distribution of the samian is mainly local and into East Anglia, while the colour-coat wares show a relatively small spread across the south-east and a scatter in the Midlands and north: Tyers 1996, 114–16, fig. 102, 167–8, fig. 207.

<sup>61</sup> Tyers 1996, 173–5, fig. 218.

<sup>62</sup> The second site is Wiggonholt/Pulborough in Sussex. Here too the distribution is local with occasional outliers; the samian was made c. A.D. 120–150 and shows links with Central Gaulish workshops: Evans 1974; Webster 1975.

<sup>63</sup> Hull 1963, 43–74, figs 20–41. No mould fragments of Hull's Potter C (1963, 74, fig. 42) were recovered, and analysis has since shown that the sherds in Potter C's style were made at Sinzig: Hart *et al.* 1987, 597. For Sinzig products, see Fischer 1969; the wares were rare imports to Britain: Bird 1999, 75–6.

<sup>64</sup> Hull 1963, fig. 40, 96 and 103, fig. 41, 115: cf., for example, Huld-Zetsche 1993, E13–E15 (Trier) and Chenet and Gaudron 1955, fig. 54 *bis* (Argonne).

<sup>65</sup> This is particularly marked with some of the animals, such as their two large bears (Hull 1963, fig. 39, types 40 and 41).

<sup>66</sup> Potters are numbered according to the *NOTS* catalogue of samian stamps: for *Acceptus ii* and *iii*, see *NOTS* 1, 48. An updated version of the full *NOTS* catalogue is at <http://www1.rgzm.de/samian/home/frames/htm>

<sup>67</sup> Hull 1963, 91, fig. 50.1, 118, fig. 64.5.

<sup>68</sup> *NOTS* 6, 104–5, 112–13. Other potters who may also have come from the Rhineland/East Gaul to work in Colchester are *Latinus iv* and *Viducus iv*, from Sinzig; *Lipuca*, from Sinzig and La Madeleine; and *Matuacus*, from Trier (*NOTS* 5, 25, 83–4; 6, 27–8; 9, 253).

<sup>69</sup> cf. Hull 1963, fig. 39.7 and .8.



FIG. 11. Potter A mould fragment for a Colchester samian bowl, showing a bear attacking a *damnatus/noxius* (accession number COLEM:1957.22). In Hull 1963 (fig. 20, 2) the drawing reverses the image to show the end product. Not to scale. (Photo D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums)

in style to that on the Vase, also attacking a *damnatus/noxius* (FIG. 11).<sup>70</sup> Barbotine wares made at Cologne also show some links with Colchester. The Cologne potters usually featured animal hunts, but they did occasionally make pots with figures wearing similar padding and armour to those on the Vase.<sup>71</sup> The forms also provide parallels: both centres produced large beakers like the Vase during the second century,<sup>72</sup> and both made the form of lidded bowl known as the ‘Castor box’ and decorated it with barbotine.<sup>73</sup>

Despite its exceptional quality, the Vase fits well into the pattern of pottery production at Colchester, and may well have come from the workshop to which *Acceptus iii* belonged. Links with potters and stylistic influence from the Rhineland can be demonstrated for the Vase, for other colour-coated wares and for the samian, while the fabric and finish of the Vase suggest a link with the Oaks Drive kilns.

#### FUTURE WORK

This paper has explored many aspects of the Colchester Vase, an approach that might beneficially be applied to other vessels and other artefacts in order to highlight the craftsmanship involved in their production. It was not, however, possible to commission any new scientific analyses. The range of analytical techniques presently available include many that are non-destructive and therefore equally appropriate for intact unique vessels as for individual sherds.<sup>74</sup> The understanding of Colchester’s pottery industry would be much enhanced were the Vase and

<sup>70</sup> Huld-Zetsche 1993, Taf. 19, A137–A139; Hull 1963, mould fig. 20.2 (images shown in reverse), see also vessel sherd fig. 23.10.

<sup>71</sup> For example, Oenbrink 1998, Abbn 73, 80, 122 and 131.

<sup>72</sup> For a group of large Cologne beakers recovered from the London waterfront, see Richardson 1986, 112–14.

<sup>73</sup> Oenbrink Abb. 30, Typus VII (lid only); Hull 1963, fig. 52. Some Colchester examples were decorated with rouletting, as were those made in the Nene Valley (Gillam 1968, types 341 and 342).

<sup>74</sup> Hunt 2016; Jones 2021, A2.

other Colchester colour-coat vessels from the same workshop(s) to be examined using one or more of these techniques, not least with regard to how the distinctive purple-brown tinge of the slip was achieved. While one possible method has been described above, analysis may identify an alternative, such as high kiln temperatures triggering mineralogical change. Such a study might also be extended to embrace other local, regional or imported colour-coated wares.

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#### APPENDIX: EARLY READINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE INSCRIPTION

The Vase was recognised early on as exceptional and there was a lively discussion on the correct reading and interpretation of the inscription in local newspapers. The differing views held by the Rev. Barton Lodge, a local antiquary who was rector of the parish of St Mary Magdalen in Colchester, and Charles Roach Smith of London are repeated verbatim in the latter's *Collectanea Antiqua* IV, along with descriptions of the Vase and the other vessels in the group, with drawings by Josiah Parish, a Colchester artist and archaeologist.<sup>75</sup> In 1858 Lodge published his own interpretation and detailed description of the Vase in the first volume of the *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, where he recognised that two vertical lines of applied dots marked the beginning and end of the sequence of scenes. He wrote that the Vase was 'unique of its kind', that 'the execution of these figures is singularly good', and that the inscription was 'perfectly clear and fresh; it could hardly have been more distinct, if it had been written only yesterday'. Lodge summarised Roach Smith's interpretation of the scenes and inscription as being done by its owner after witnessing a particular gladiatorial event, while he himself believed it to be a 'sepulchral inscription, having no reference to the figures on the urn, but to the deceased whose ashes were contained in it'.<sup>76</sup>

In 1875, the Vase was among the Roman objects illustrating an article on the swastika in the first volume of *The Art Journal* by Llewellynn Jewitt, and also appeared among the Nene Valley products in his *The Ceramic Art of Great Britain*.<sup>77</sup> Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema also used the Vase, placing it in the foreground of his 1884 painting of 'Hadrian in England: visiting a Romano-British pottery', with a Nene Valley vessel depicting a chariot race sitting in an even more prominent position above it.<sup>78</sup>

The rather different approach of the heirs of W.H. Goss of Stoke-on-Trent, manufacturers of crested china, would have carried its name even further afield, although not its scenes and inscription. Jewitt and Goss senior were connected through ceramics, as the latter assisted the former with the section on the Staffordshire

<sup>75</sup> Smith 1857, 82–90.

<sup>76</sup> Lodge 1858, 130.

<sup>77</sup> Jewitt 1878.

<sup>78</sup> Lippincott 1991, 47; BM 1857,0806.1. The Alma-Tadema painting is in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.



potteries in his 1878 book. In 1910, Goss senior having died in 1906, his sons used the form of the Vase in miniature (only 44 mm high) in their run of designs based on antique items, perhaps taking the shape from the image used in Jewitt's publications. On the underside of each is marked 'MODEL OF THE FAMOUS COLCHESTER VASE IN THE MUSEUM', with the goshawk crest of the pottery above a sans serif W.H. GOSS.<sup>79</sup> The images used on the body of these small souvenirs included 'Old King Cole of Colchester', the arms of Tonbridge in Kent and Guisborough Abbey in Yorkshire, and even the elephant and temple of (later) British Ceylon. As late as 1972 a Fareham collector of Goss china wrote to the Museum asking for information on the history of the Vase.<sup>80</sup>

The Vase certainly aroused the curiosity and imagination of many who saw it, and discussions regarding the inscription continued. A note in Colchester Museum's archives from Herbert Blakiston, President of Trinity College, Oxford, is undated and cannot be narrowed down further than 1907–38, the term of his presidency. He suggested:

- 1) Memnon Sac VIII (secutor nonus), i.e. a professional fighting with
- 2) Valentinu(s) Legionis XXX, a soldier, non-professional
- 3) Secundus Mario, private gentleman hunting with his slave (no name).

After a visit to the Castle Museum in 1916, C.E. Snowden of Eastbourne wrote to the Curator, A.G. Wright:

I was disappointed, when I came home, on finding that though nearly all the other inscriptions which I saw are given verbatim in the Guidebook, that on the vase is merely referred to as 'an incised inscription, which has defied translation'.<sup>81</sup>

He asked Wright to send him a copy of the inscription, and in the meantime, hoping for documentary confirmation that the Thirtieth Legion had been stationed in Britain, said that he had written to Rudyard Kipling, who had mentioned the legion in a story entitled 'On the Great Wall' in *Puck of Pook's Hill*.<sup>82</sup> Kipling disappointed him by replying that it was only his invention.

Not knowing that the Vase contained cremated human bones, on receiving the text of the inscription from Wright, and presuming that it began with *VALENTINV*, Snowden offered this interpretation:

'Valentinus Secundus of the 30th legion dedicated (this) ninth (vase) to Marius descended from Memnon'. I am supposing that Valentinus had lost a friend Marius (who was very interested in genealogies, and thought he could trace his pedigree back to the siege of Troy . . . .); and was in the habit every year, or at certain times, of leaving a vase at his tomb. Possibly fragments of other vases might be found on the same site, where this one was discovered.<sup>83</sup>

In 1932 the editor of the *Essex County Standard*, W. Gurney Benham, challenged Wright's successor, M.R. Hull, as to why May 'seems to have avoided' interpreting the inscription in his published catalogue of the Museum's pottery,<sup>84</sup> and suggested that Hull would 'not find any great difficulty in it'. Benham himself proposed: 'Secundus Mario Memnonius NATIONE(?) SACARVM(?) (of the Scythian nation) 9th . . . . .?, 30th Legion'.<sup>85</sup> There is no record of Hull's reply, but over 30 years later, he gave the reading of the inscription as 'SECVNDVS MARIO MEMNON SALVIII VALENTINV LEGIONIS XXX' and suggested that SALVIII might represent SALVILLI or SALVINI.<sup>86</sup>

The museum archives also contain a letter dated 1951 from Professor Dr Fremersdorf, Director of the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne, who wished to know details of the Vase's fabric and glaze in case it was a Cologne product. Again there is no record of Hull's reply, but with no further letter from

<sup>79</sup> Ward 1975, 40, no. 71.

<sup>80</sup> Letter dated 4.1.72, Colchester Museum archives.

<sup>81</sup> Letter dated 4.5.16, Colchester Museum archives.

<sup>82</sup> Kipling 1906.

<sup>83</sup> Letter dated 17.5.16, Colchester Museum archives.

<sup>84</sup> May 1928, 293.

<sup>85</sup> Letter dated 10.6.32, Colchester Museum archives.

<sup>86</sup> Hull 1963, 96.

Freimersdorf in the file, and with the whiteish Cologne fabric being very different from that of the Vase,<sup>87</sup> correspondence on the subject presumably ceased.

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<sup>87</sup> *NRFC*, KOL CC.

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