

Two remarkable stone artefacts from Little Comberton, Worcestershire

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This account of two stone artefacts of different ages adds significantly to the archaeocultural interest of Little Comberton parish and in particular to that of the find-site centred on Ordnance Survey map reference SO967432 close to the edge of the Pleistocene course of an abandoned River Avon meander loop. Previous archaeological evidence from the site (Whitehead, 2016a, b) and from the parish (Whitehead, 2021) has been described. The artefacts also enhance the archaeological record of the environs of Bredon Hill.

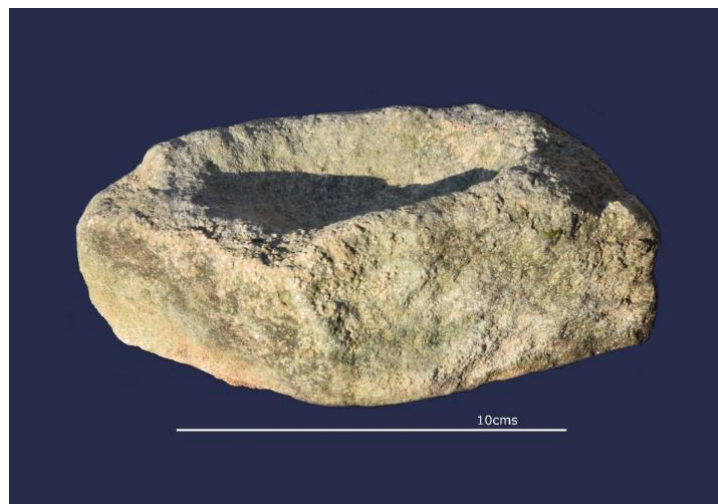
Later prehistoric stone lamp

Hand-held oil lamps are well-known in archaeological contexts throughout Europe and Asia. Mostly they are ceramic and were widespread within the boundaries of the Roman Empire where they were used well into medieval time. Olive Oil was often used as fuel for the wick.

On 18 June 2020 while clearing the bed of a canalised brook I encountered a tetrahedral piece of Inferior Oolitic Limestone (01, 02) measuring 150×95×50 mm thick. Two flat subparallel side

faces (01, 02) appear to have been pecked into shape. The base is flat and the piece fits the hand perfectly; its opposed surface contains an elongate ovoid depression 80×45×20 mm deep. It is contended that this is a stone oil lamp which could have been fuelled by rendered fat; a few facsimiles are illustrated on the worldwide web. The item cannot be a mortar as it would not deliver viable quantities of processed material. Creating the ovoid depression in a comparatively soft rock, which cannot be explained by any natural process, would not be difficult.

Determining the age of the item is problematic and can be addressed in two ways. The bed of the brook has yielded a range of archaeological items many of which, like this lamp, are in good condition. Some were rapidly entrained in soft sediment and include Bronze Age discoidal scrapers and barbed and tanged arrowheads. This evidence provides a possibility that the artefact is Bronze Age or perhaps older. Dr Neil Wilkin of the British Museum pointed out (*in litt.*, 8 May 2021) that a fundamentally similar stone object bearing BM accession number 2010,8032.319 was recovered from a Bronze Age shipwreck at Salcombe, Devon. Secondly, although there are no known examples of Oolitic Limestone oil lamps in Britain, the use of stone oil lamps in prehistory, including some fashioned from Carboniferous Limestone, is well validated (Wilke, Quintero & Gebel, 2014). Some of the oldest examples occur unsurprisingly in the European cave record (Beaune & White, 1993) where they were evidently valued and decorated (Sieveking, 1979). The Little Comberton oil lamp does therefore have accepted prehistoric precedents.



01. Prehistoric stone oil lamp, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, 18 June 2020. Lateral aspect.



02. Prehistoric stone oil lamp, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, 18 June 2020. Lateral aspect opposed to that shown in 01.

Soapstone amulet

This item was found on the modern land surface on 7 May 2021. The site is recognised as forming a part of lands that once accommodated a Roman farmstead with contemporaneous site evidence for domestic and vernacular architecture, coinage and numerous ceramic vessel sherds. There is no difficulty ascribing this item to that time period, perhaps later in the occupation of the site which appeared to burgeon after AD300. Although I have a high degree of confidence in this association it is inevitably unproven especially in the absence of comparative pieces. However it is unlikely that medieval occupants of the area could have financed such a piece. The symbolism fits perfectly with Roman attitudes.

The item is a hand-cut obovoid flat-faced tablet of mottled soapstone measuring 47×31×18 mm. thick found on the modern land surface on 7 May 2021. The rear face has been damaged by mechanical impact but it is otherwise perfect. The tablet surfaces (not the etchings) appear to have been cut mechanically, not manually; the faces and facets all show parallel close set microstriae some of which swirl slightly indicating that the piece was applied to a finishing device and not the other way round. Each side of the piece has small transverse linear incisions (side notches visible in 03, 04) opposed to each other suggesting that it may originally have been framed and possibly suspended by a pendant chain. One face is engraved with symbols that can be read in two ways depending on the vertical disposition of the piece. In one disposition (03) the engravings represent human eyes, a nose and mouth. Rotated through 180° (04) the engravings then depict male and female genitalia, the workmanship seemingly at once naïve but also compelling and evidently instructively didactic depending on the orientation.

The interest that Imperial Rome had in the symbolism of gender and related matters is well-known and demonstrated in a wide range of artefacts and wall-paintings. The Little Comberton amulet is distinctive for its intense personalisation which, if Roman to which view I incline, implies that for a time the occupants of the farmstead were comparatively sophisticated and financially stable.



03. Soapstone amulet, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, 7 May 2021. Paul Whitehead



04. Soapstone amulet, Little Comberton. Worcestershire, 7 May 2021. Paul Whitehead

For the moment no parallels for this item have been located and neither Jane Evans nor Robert Hedge (*in litt.*, July 2021) of the Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service were aware of any.

Acknowledgements

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