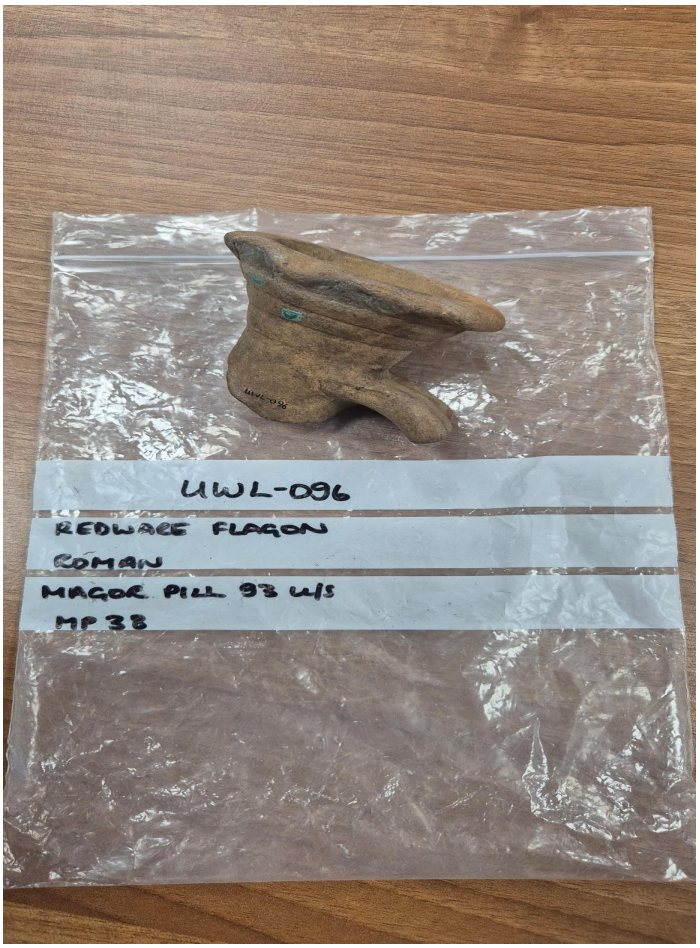
Object Biography Report (HPAR4011)



UWL/UWTSD- 096
Redware Flagon
Roman
Magor Pill 93’ U/S
MP38

By Sam Bennett

Index

1. *Location*
   - *1.1. UWTSD/UWL*
   - *1.2. Magor Pill*

2. *Background detail*
   - *2.1. Establishing the links to excavation*
   - *2.2. 1993 Barlands Farm excavation*

3. *Form*
   - *3.1. Flagon Type (tableware)*
   - *3.2. Roman redware types and fabrics*

4. *Condition*
   - *4.1. Underwater damage and weathering*

1. Location

1.1.-UWTSD/UWL Collection

The object covered in this report was part of the collection of the University of Wales Lampeter (UWL) but is now a part of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) teaching collection. *(image above right is of the University building in Lampeter source: (Aled Scourfield,BBC, 2025))*

The Teaching collection is used in practical lectures and sessions within the Carmarthen Campus of UWTSD. The object is listed by the number of 096 in the collection as signified by the UWL-096 being the record number in the collection. This therefore pinpoints the current location and ownership of the object to Carmarthen through the ownership of UWTSD. UWTSD/UWL did not originally own the artefact either as per the secondary record list that lists as MP 38.

1.2.-Magor Pill

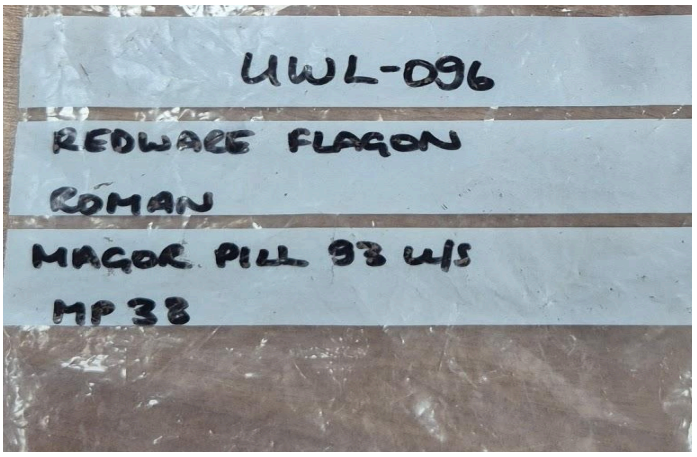
Magor Pill is one isle part of an ancient tidal creek located on the gwent levels on the severn estuary in southern wales. The area that encompasses the gwent levels can be pictured above right (Credit to Living Levels). The MP 38 on the bag indicates that this artefact was

found in the area surrounding magor pill which is located along the gwent levels area. The number 38 attached to the artefact is also indicative of not only its place in a record prior to being a part of the UWTSD teaching collection, but also that it was part of an excavation as the object has this MP 38 marking inscribed on it in marker, a clear sign of the original location that it has arrived from (Magor Pill) and its place in this original excavations collections.

2. Background Detail:

2.1.- Establishing the links to excavation

Since we can deduce that the object of our report was originally discovered in Magor Pill and has an original catalogue number, being MP 38, we can narrow the search for an excavation in this region of the gwent levels. However, there comes a difficulty with this region of the gwent levels as it is a hotbed for archaeological finds as a lot of the lowland tidal inlet areas such as Magor Pill tend to preserve items of archaeological importance very well and in this specific instance were also areas that were historically active in trading routes both in the middle ages and Roman times earlier.
Therefore the date of the excavation that uncovered the Roman Flagon piece has to be determined so a probable theory for the provenance of the object can be created. Fortunately this is included on the details written onto the bag, seen in the cover page and to the right of the page, under the line that indicates: *'Magor Pill 93 U/S'*.



2.2- 1993 Barlands Farm Excavation

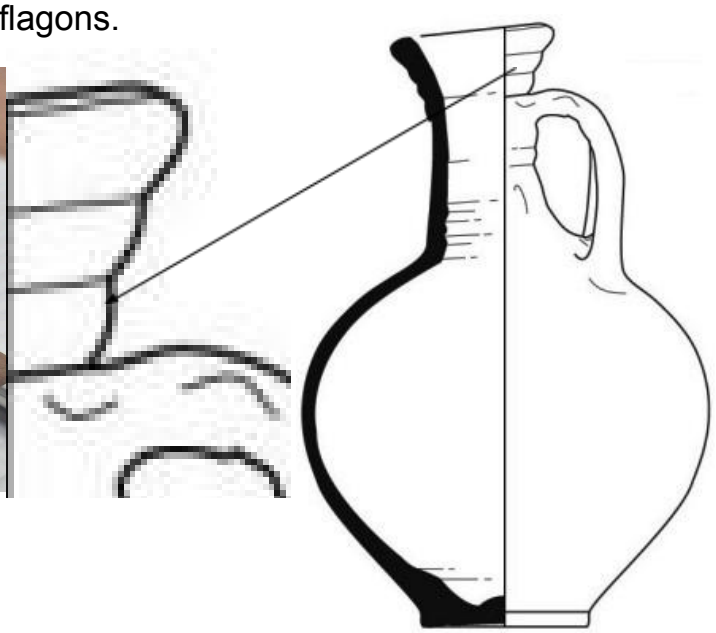
This then allows us to try and find out where this object may have been found. 93 indicates that the object was discovered in an excavation in 1993 around the Magor Pill area. Of notable excavations this year around Magor pill there is the 1993 Barland's Farm excavation covered in the report published in *Nayling, Maynard and McGrail, 1994.* The 1993 Barland's Farm excavation uncovered a romano-celtic boat dated to around the 4th/3rd century AD alongside artefacts that included coins, leather shoes and pottery which were all dated to around the same period as the boat (Harris, 2020). This is most evident in the coin recovered from the site which depicts emperor Diocletian who ruled the empire between the late 3rd to early 4th century (AD 284-305). Additionally, dendrochronology samples of the boat's timbers have been taken since and show the construction of the boat would have taken place between AD 283 and 326. This then clearly outlines the timeline for this wreck being around the late 3rd to early 4th century. This is important as it possibly links the object to this same timeframe and wreck based on the form of the object itself and its specific redware type. The boat has been stored at the Newport Medieval ship centre since the excavation as it is still awaiting a permanent home. This interesting to our report as the wreck itself is rare and not a commonality in the region as they rarely are found in such conditions as this one was. Furthermore the type of vessel is also interesting as it was identified immediately by excavators on the 1993 project as being of romano celtic origin due to its flat-bottomed style of hull (Nayling, Maynard and McGrail, 1994). Most likely this vessel was of similar type to the 'Blackfriars' class of romano celtic boats and was most likely locally built in south wales or england (Goodburn, 1998). The purpose of the vessel was almost certainly trade too which would have given it the reason for carrying possible tableware that the flagon fragment, the subject of this report, possibly could have been. Based on the year 1993 given and the location of Magor Pill also provided prior to this report it is sensible to not only link a roman redware flagon piece to possibly this wreck and excavation but to in general the period of time late 3rd to early 4th century. This will become clearer once discussing the form of the object.

3. Form

3.1. Flagon Type (tableware)

The flagon, which has been identified by researchers/ archaeologists post excavation, has been uncovered in a state that although barely a portion of the full object can still inform us about its full form/function. The flagon can be identified as being possibly a type of tableware instead of a general use storage container. The spout of the flagon sports a handle that is singular. This hints at the flagon possibly being tableware and not the alternative because tableware would traditionally only sport a single handle as it would be used to hold moderate amounts of liquid or oils for use in a domestic setting rather than for simply transporting a large amount of something for sale or wide scale use. Traditionally those kinds of flagons would utilise two handles instead of a single handle which was much more common in homes as a piece of tableware. This exact section of the object is so key to determining its function due to the appearance of the handle and the section opposite it sporting no handle at all, making it clear that the flagon most likely had but a single handle and can therefore be attributed closer to tableware rather than industrial purposes etc. This can be seen more clearly with the image on the left, where the thumb is on the artifact; a handle should at least begin to spout away from the flagon's head if the flagon was two handed instead of a singular handle being present.

Single handed flagons utilised as tableware often were containers for water, olive oil and wine(peterbrough arch) although two-handled versions were in service too, the object that is the focus of the biography is clearly a one-handled flagon which were clearly utilised as tableware rather than the alternative. This possibly indicates that this flagon would have been of value in trading circles around the 3rd to 4th century AD as tableware would have certainly been a sought after luxury to Roman officials during that time, it was certainly in fashion as well which may become more evident when looking to the type of redware that the object may belong too.
Additionally, the flagon follows the design of a ring neck flagon though the grooves that pronounce the levels of rings down the neck are less pronounced than other examples, most likely due to this design being further away from its initial beginnings in the mid 1st century. Though it does have the thickened top lip that protrudes out more than the rest of the neck. In fact it was more common for this design to appear post 2nd century, with the simple grooving of the neck that has been identified on this flagon neck being a characteristic of ring necks post mid 1st to 2nd century AD (Leahy and Geake, Peterborough Archaeology). The photograph below (credited to Peterborough Archaeology) compares the side view of this flagon neck to an example of a traditional earlier design of ring neck flagons.



3.2. Roman Redware types and fabrics

The flagon is clearly some form of roman redware not only by its designation as such on the bag that was included with it in the UWTSD teaching collection but also because of its clear orange/red colouring. The flagon is most likely a

red slipped ware but of which origin it would seem difficult to narrow down, though using some previous provenance of the object maybe being linked to the romano celtic boat may prove useful. The object has links to North African Red Slipware through its colouring being a clear orange-red mixture and its smoother texturing, which are characteristics of North African slipware, in particular the 3rd century thinner fabric type (Tyers, 2025, North African red -slipped ware). To add to this notion, between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD in the roman empire North African slipwares were coming into fashion and were widely imported across the empire to phase out samian wares, which were becoming outdated. It is likely however that this piece is not actually a Tunisian sample (Tunisia being a key area of production for these types of redware) but rather a more local type of redware that was simply inspired by the design of North African wares. A possible example may be Severn Valley wares, which more closely follow the colouring of the flagon than the traditional appearance of North African slipwares, a comparison can be seen below:

Roman, Redware Flagon

North African red slipped ware

Severn Valley ware

To add to the idea that this fragment of a flagon is a more local piece we may tie it to the Barland's Farm boat from the previous section. It is more likely that the boat ,of romano celtic origin, would have been more likely to carry imports than a locally made and operated vessel rather than an international trading vessel. This makes the likelihood that if this piece of flagon was on the Barlands farm boat or traded in that area, it would have been very unlikely that it would have been of North African slipware origin and is more likely to have been of the type of Severn Valley ware. Severn Valley ware is even more likely for its location around Magor/Magor Pill as that area around that time period late 3rd to early 4th was ripe with local redwares such as the specific example of Severn Valley ware (Tyers, 2026, Severn Valley Wares).

4. Condition

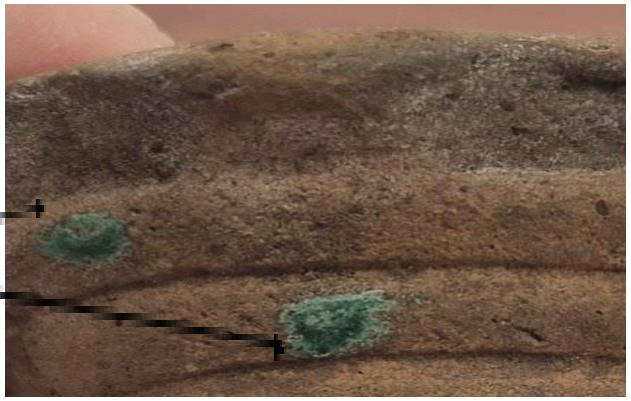
4.1. Underwater damage and weathering

The Roman redware flagon at the focus of the object biography shows various signs of wear that may have been caused by exposure to underwater erosive forces. As an example, the object has a really smooth texture where the breaks in the object would have occurred originally to separate it from the lower half of the flagon. The colour of the flagon is also weathered and grimy compared to other samples in the UWTSD teaching collection. Usually with pottery shards the areas where they fracture from other fragments are sharp to touch and rough as the inner parts of the pottery are not slipped or finished to make them smoother for human use. This is clearly not present in the fragment of the flagon as it is almost universally smoothened over across every surface which clearly suggests it has been immersed in water for a long period of time. This is interesting with the provenance of the object we've already theorised about in the previous sections and it seemingly fulfils the categories for being linked to a shipwreck in its uniquely smooth and grimy condition.

Below is a view of the object that shows the smoothened inside of the object's spout (*right*) and also the smoothened section of the handle that remains attached to the flagon spout (*left*).

Additionally there seems to be the unique addition of green splotches to a section of the flagon spout, this is another unknown with the object but could possibly be caused by damp and things such as algae or ‘river slime’ being a possible cause for these green splotches. Included below are close ups of the green patches on the object.

Green Splotches (Algae?)



Bibliography

- *Aled Scourfield (2025). Lampeter campus plan at University of Wales Trinity St David site. BBC News. [online] 12 Jun. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8xgzjvye5vo.*
- *Goodburn, D.M. (1998). Romano-Celtic boatbuilding and the romanisation of landscape and boatbuilding practice. Archaeonautica, 14(1), pp.171–176. doi:https://doi.org/10.3406/nauti.1998.1201.*
- *Harris, C. (2020). Living Levels. [online] Living Levels. Available at: https://www.livinglevels.org.uk/stories/2020/4/28/the-barlands-farm-boat*
- *Leahy, K. and Geake, H. (n.d.). Peterborough Archaeology. [online] Peterborough Archaeology. Available at: https://peterborougharchaeology.org/archaeology-skills-techniques/pottery-identification/.*
- *Nayling, N., Maynard, D. and McGrail, S. (1994). Barland's Farm, Magor, Gwent: a Romano-Celtic boat. Antiquity, 68(260), pp.596–603. doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003598x00047098.*
- *Tyers, P.A. (2025). North African red-slipped ware. [online] Potsherd.net. Available at: https://potsherd.net/atlas/Ware/NARS.*
- *Tyers, P.A. (2026). Severn Valley wares. [online] Potsherd.net. Available at: https://potsherd.net/atlas/Ware/SVW.*