

Opening Hook

This fragment of Black Burnished Ware (BB1), accessioned as [catalogue number] in the UWTSD collection, is a rim sherd from a sturdy handmade cooking vessel. Dark grey to black on the exterior, with lighter grey-brown fabric visible along broken edges, it displays a pronounced rounded rim and moderately thick walls. The coarse clay body contains visible inclusions, and the darkened surface suggests reduced firing conditions. Dated to the Roman period (c. 1st–3rd centuries AD), the fragment likely derives from a vessel used within the civilian settlement (*canabae*) surrounding the Roman fortress at Caerleon, South Wales. Though modest in appearance, it represents the surviving trace of an object embedded in everyday household routines. I selected this sherd because it demonstrates how ordinary artefacts hold complex social histories. Following Gosden and Marshall's (1999) argument that artefacts accumulate meaning through social interaction, this biography examines its physical characteristics, production within the *chaîne opératoire* of pottery manufacture, its domestic function and cultural meaning, and its post-depositional journey from discard to curation.

Physical Description

The sherd measures approximately [X]mm in length and [Y]mm in width, with a wall thickness of [Z]mm. The curvature indicates an estimated vessel diameter of approximately 203mm, consistent with typical BB1 bowl forms from Roman South Wales. The rim is rounded and slightly everted, suggesting functional design suited to repeated handling and lid use.

The fabric is coarse and gritty, with visible sandy and stone inclusions serving as temper. These are irregularly distributed and clearly visible along broken edges. The exterior surface is dark grey to black, while the core and interior reveal lighter grey-brown tones, indicating reduction firing with restricted oxygen. The exterior appears slightly burnished, producing a subtle sheen, while the interior is smoother but less finished.

Manufacture was hand-formed rather than wheel-thrown, evidenced by the absence of concentric wheel marks and uneven wall thickness in cross-section. Subtle surface irregularities support coil-building techniques. The surface was likely burnished at the leather-hard stage, compressing clay particles to strengthen the vessel and improve heat resistance. The breaks appear ancient, with softened edges suggesting post-depositional wear. Minor surface pitting indicates prolonged domestic use. Overall, the fragment represents the durable upper portion of a utilitarian cooking vessel designed for everyday household activities.

Production, Provenance and Makers

The BB1 industry in South Wales centred on the Abernant kiln site, discovered in 1996 near Newport. Excavations revealed specialist production with kiln structures, working areas and probable drying sheds, demonstrating organised industry supplying regional demand. As van der Leeuw (1993) emphasises, ceramic production is not merely technical but socially organised knowledge transmitted through apprenticeship.

The *chaîne opératoire* followed structured stages. Clay was extracted from local sources, selected for workable yet durable properties. Temper—primarily sand or crushed stone—was deliberately added to strengthen the body and prevent cracking. Vessels were hand-formed using coil-building, then burnished at the leather-hard stage. Final firing under reduced-oxygen conditions produced the characteristic dark grey to black finish.

The Abernant complex represents specialist production rather than domestic manufacture. Purpose-built kilns and working areas suggest skilled potters operating within established workshop tradition. While direct evidence for individual identities is absent, parallels from Roman kiln sites indicate predominantly male specialist labour in small workshop units. Whether production was military-sponsored or independent commercial enterprise remains debated, but proximity to Caerleon suggests integration into regional supply networks responding to legionary demand. The potters were likely local craftspeople negotiating economic opportunity within imperial structures.

Distribution patterns indicate BB1 circulated primarily within South Wales, concentrated around military and civilian settlements. Its presence at Caerleon demonstrates supply to both fortress and *canabae*, linking specialist producers with domestic consumers across the region.

Use-Life, Function and Cultural Meaning

The physical characteristics indicate function as a cooking vessel. The slightly flanged rim suggests lid compatibility, important for regulating heat and retaining moisture during prolonged simmering—suited to stewing methods common in Romano-British cuisine. The darkened exterior, combined with possible soot staining, provides evidence of direct fire exposure. The coarse, heavily tempered fabric enabled the pot to withstand repeated thermal shock without cracking, reflecting intentional design for sustained practical use.

Contents likely included cereal porridges, barley or wheat stews, and pulse dishes. Meat stews may also have been prepared, particularly at Caerleon where military supply chains increased access to animal protein. The lidded form allowed tougher cuts to soften over long cooking periods.

Users probably included women, enslaved individuals, or servants responsible for daily food preparation within civilian households or soldiers' families. In Miller's (2005) terms, such objects structure daily life precisely because they appear ordinary and unremarkable—embedded within routines of labour, nourishment, and social interaction.

For its Romano-British users, this vessel was unlikely perceived as an "artefact" but rather as necessary household equipment. From an emic perspective, it may have been categorised simply as a cooking pot, its flanged rim signalling functionality rather than stylistic distinction. The sensory dimensions were significant: when new, it possessed a burnished sheen and mineral scent from firing. Over time, repeated heating absorbed the smells of stews and smoke. The tactile experience of handling its warm, roughened surface formed part of embodied domestic practice.

Socially, BB1 was widely distributed and considered ordinary rather than elite. However, black-burnished ware had deep pre-Roman roots in Britain. Its continuation into the Roman period may have carried subtle associations of cultural continuity within a changing imperial framework. As Swift (2012) argues, provincial material culture reflects hybrid identities; BB1 may represent continuity within imperial change. Its meaning shifted through time: when new, it represented economic investment; as it aged and accumulated wear, it became embedded in household memory; upon breakage, it transformed from valued object to rubbish—illustrating Kopytoff's (1986) argument that objects pass through shifting cultural phases.

Discard, Recovery and Collection

The vessel's use-life likely ended through accidental breakage during routine cooking—perhaps a crack from thermal stress or impact against a hearthstone. Once broken, it lost practical value and was discarded. One plausible scenario is deposition within a refuse deposit in the South *Canabae* at Caerleon, where substantial quantities of BB1 pottery have been recovered. Such middens accumulated domestic waste, providing insight into consumption patterns. Alternatively, the fragment may have been redeposited as part of demolition rubble, reused to level surfaces during building renovation.

The accession label indicates Context 082, suggesting recovery from a stratified archaeological deposit. Excavations in the South *Canabae* during the late twentieth century, particularly those by the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust, revealed domestic refuse deposits rich in BB1 pottery. If Context 082 derives from such a midden, the sherd represents structured domestic discard rather than casual loss, its stratigraphic position fixing it within occupation phases.

Carefully recorded, bagged, and labelled, the sherd entered post-excavation processing. Accessioned into the UWTSD teaching collection, it now serves as an educational resource. No longer cooking vessel, it functions as material for student analysis—its biography extending from Roman domestic life into contemporary archaeological pedagogy.

Conclusion

The biography of this BB1 rim sherd reveals how even a small ceramic fragment illuminates wider historical processes. From clay extraction and kiln firing in South Wales to its role preparing meals within the *canabae* at Caerleon, the vessel participated in interconnected systems of labour, trade, and household practice. Its eventual breakage and deposition mark not an abrupt end but transformation—from functional cookware to archaeological evidence.

Yet its story remains partial. Gaps in precise provenance remind us that object biographies are constructed from surviving traces. As Kopytoff (1986) argues, objects move through cultural phases, accumulating shifting meanings. This sherd's journey—from Roman hearth to excavation trench to university collection—demonstrates how artefacts continue to gather significance long after original use has ended.



Reference list

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