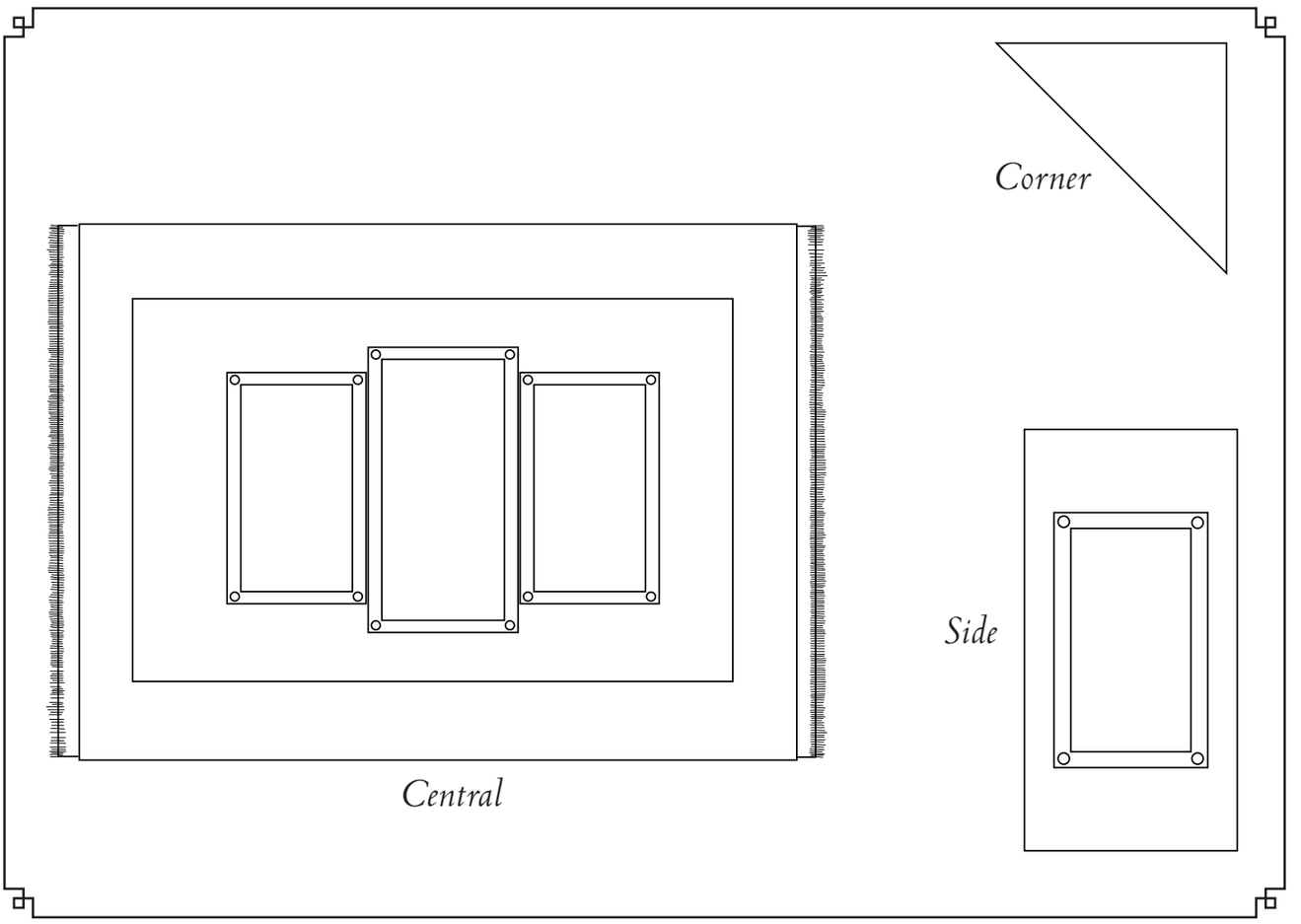
RITUALISTIC POTTERY OF BRITANNIA

Curated by R. R. M. V. Camara

CHIPSTONE

THE CASES


Corner
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Side

Dear Reader,

To begin, let it be known that I am a most unexpected Collector. I was born of non-Western immigrants and my name is an amalgamation of the names of my ancestors. From this perspective, I perhaps see things differently than most of my fellow Collectors in America.

Lifelong exposure to diverse cultures, languages, traditions, religions, and geographies has inspired my deep intellectual curiosity, as well as an insatiable desire to form a most interesting "Collection." You see, ancient objects are not simply material things to be coldly categorized. Instead, they carry on as living testaments to shared human experiences. Such artifacts convey the beauty and the terror of human history, ever-present reminders of how we lived in the past and how we might move into the future. As with material from every culture, objects hold forgotten or hidden stories that survive as a kind of essential knowledge that must be preserved and shared.

One particular part of my ever-expanding Collection centers on a few ancient Celtic ceramics from the southeastern coast in an area known as Upchurch, Kent, England. These bowls, plates, jugs, beakers, ollae, and jars tell a story that has perhaps been largely lost to time. Antiquarians of the 17th through 19th centuries, such as John Battley, C. R. Smith, and Thomas Wright, surmised that these delicate vessels, found in such great quantity, are proof of a major Roman ceramics manufacturing site, though no evidence of a kiln has been found. Additionally, Smith regarded rituals of the Celtic past as "irrational" and the discussion of ritual has been notably acknowledged as taboo in archaeological scholarship. With this in

mind, if these vessels did hold sacred, funerary, or ceremonial significance, it would come as no surprise that this aspect would be overlooked.

Objects make ritual tangible, and we Human Beings are creatures of ritual and habit. For millennia, throughout history and mythology, there have been rituals and offerings to supernatural powers, practices of divination and magic, incantations, dancing, music, all manner of ancestral worship, and, of course, a most profound reverence for nature. My research is devoted to this array of belief systems across time and space. Rather than proving how different we are from one another, these cross-cultural rituals unite us as a species. Whether divine correspondence is expressed through, for example, Native American ceremonial costume, West African ritualistic sculpture, Siberian shamanic drums, or ancient Celtic funerary vessels, a common thread centered on larger belief systems—past and present—is clearly discernible.

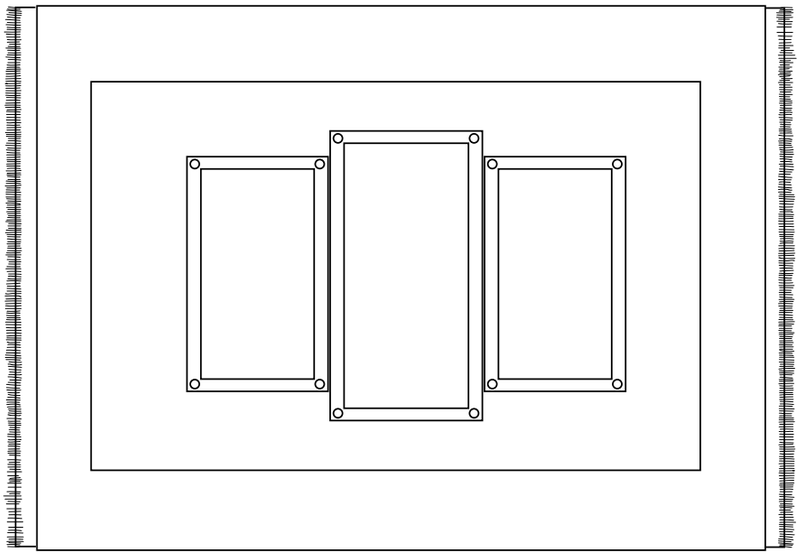
Thus, when viewing my Collection of Romano-British pottery, please pause to consider what you or your ancestors may have had in common with the ancient peoples of Britannia or Rome. What does the current moment share with the ancient past? What can we learn from those who came before us? What of your own beliefs are seen in these unearthed things? In our steady march into the future, it is fair to ask whether we have indeed progressed. Maybe we all are not that distant from these objects but, instead, live on as a part of their ongoing story. May you find yourself endlessly curious and conscious of the stories we all share.

Sincerely and respectfully yours,

INTRODUCTION

In 43 CE, the Roman emperor Claudius launched an invasion of Britannia, which encompassed the majority of modern-day England and Wales. For four centuries, native Celtic tribes became subjects of the occupying authorities, and their traditions gradually mingled with those of their invaders. These 2,000-year-old ceramics are remnants of this time, and they tell us much about the hybridized Romano-British pagan practices surrounding death and devotion.

CENTRAL CASE

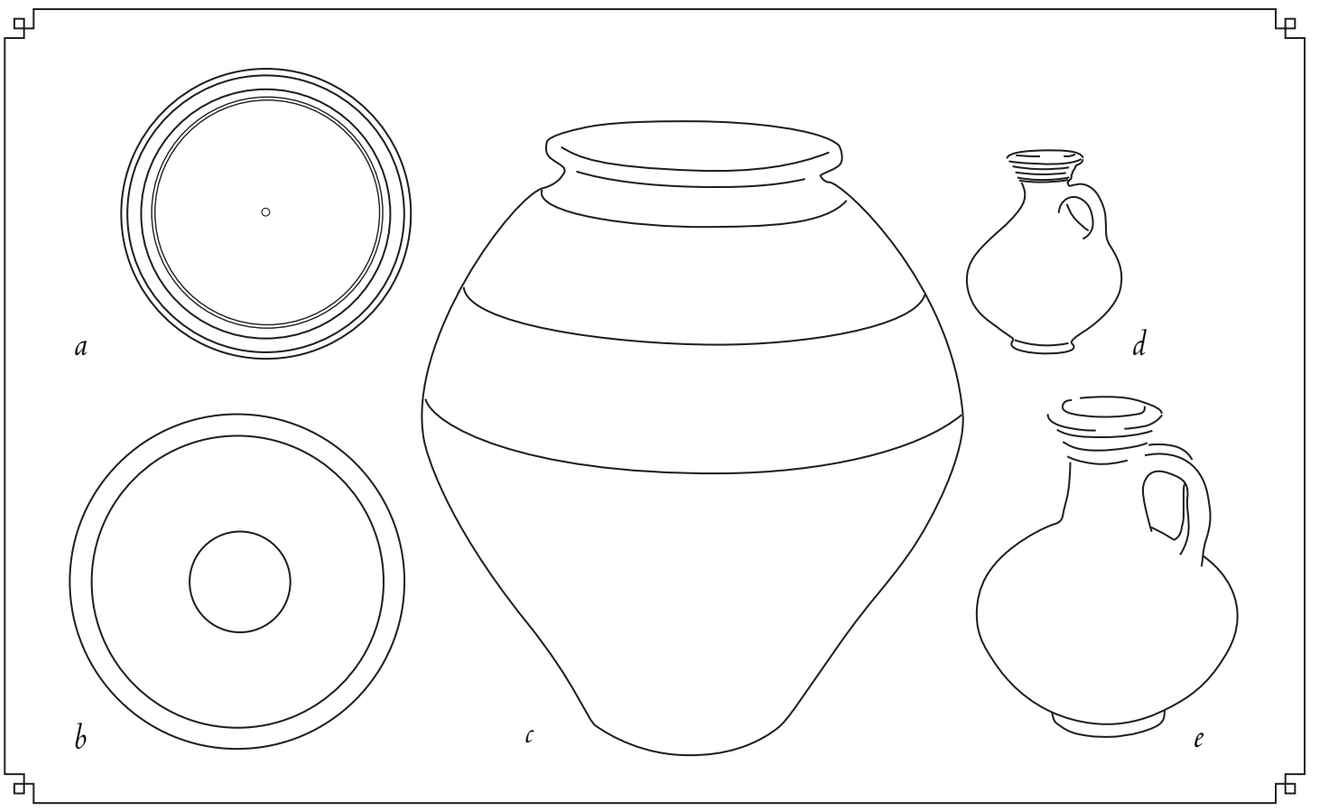


Funerary Rites

Bowls and other tableware made in Britannia were used during funerary rites to serve food and drink and in the ritual. Attendees processioned the body of the deceased to a burial site—according to Roman law, these sites needed to be outside settlements—where they feasted on sacrificed animals alongside the funeral pyre (fire). This act of eating symbolically linked participants to the flames that consumed the body.

Small pitchers, later called flagons, held water, wine, honey, and milk for consumption. They also were used performatively to douse the simmering ashes on the pyre or to clean the remaining bones before being placed in an urn.

Beyond providing nourishment for the living, food and drink were believed to be essential for a safe transition to the afterlife and eternal well-being. In Roman Britain, the deceased often were buried with various objects, including food and tableware. After the burial, the living continued to pour liquid sacrifices onto graves to appease the dead.


a
b
c
d
e

a. *Bowl,* ca. 1st/2nd century
Upchurch, England
Burnished gray earthenware

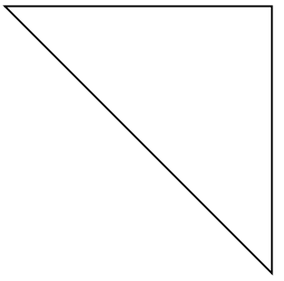
b. *Bowl,* ca. 90–140
Upchurch, England
Burnished gray earthenware

c. *Large Storage Jar,* ca. 120–160
Upchurch, England
Gray earthenware

d. *Small Flagon,* ca. 150–190
Upchurch, England
Orange-pink earthenware with mica, red ochre, and slip

e. *Large Flagon,* ca. 75–150
Upchurch, England
Earthenware

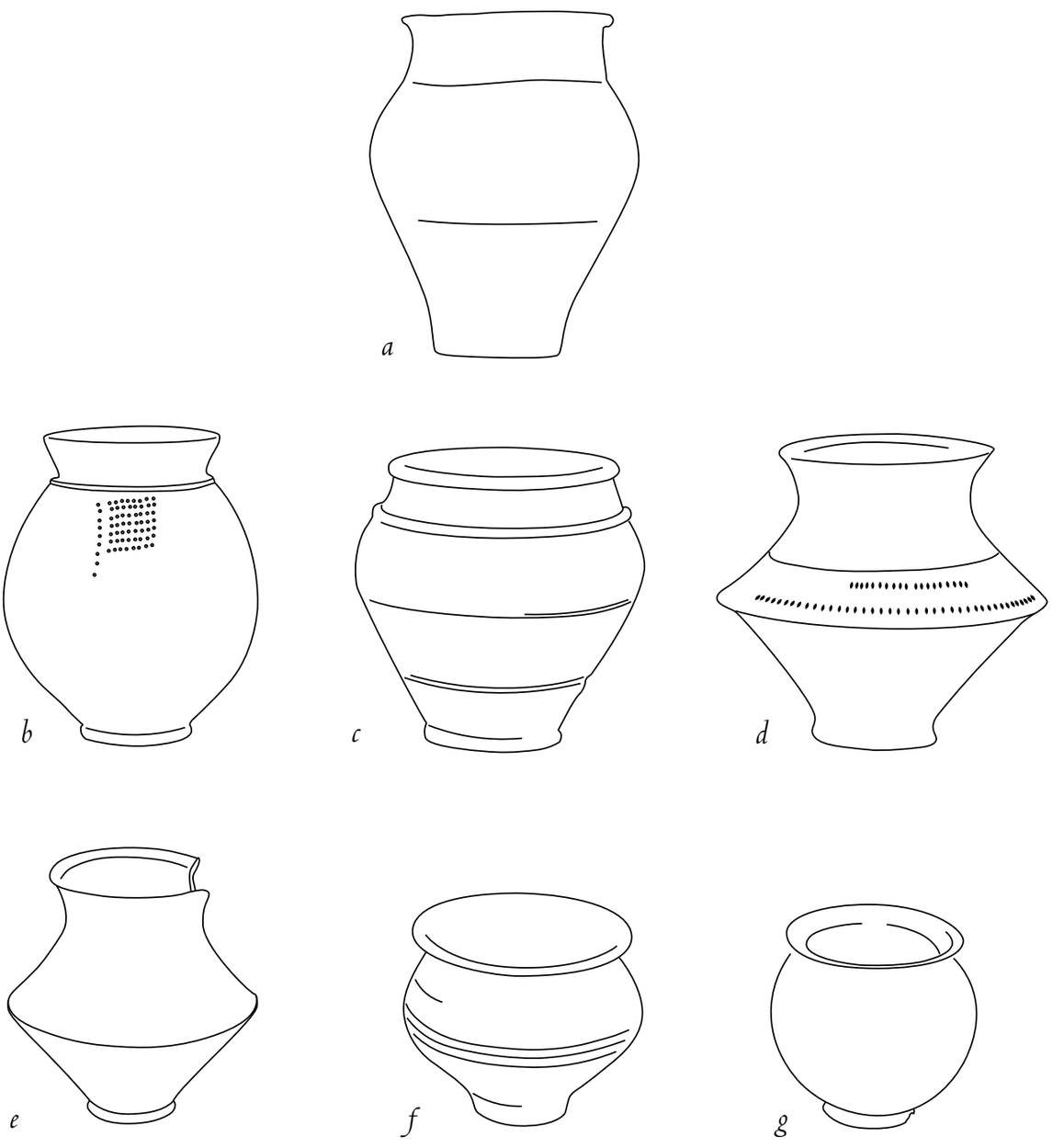
CORNER CASE



Burial Vessels

The assorted ceramic pots in this case were ritualistically buried in an area along the southeast coast of England during the era of Roman occupation. Their distinctive shapes and ornamental patterns suggest the influence of much earlier indigenous Celtic ceramics. The gleaming black of the surface, resulting from the firing process, was a color associated with mourning, death, and the gods of the Roman underworld.

When unearthed by British archeologists, these pots were found alongside a larger ceramic urn containing a cremated human and six smaller pots, each containing cremated puppies (now at the British Museum). The sacrificial offering of young dogs was part of worshipping the underworld deity Trivia, the Roman goddess of witchcraft, crossroads, magic, necromancy, ghosts, and the dark side of the moon. The vessels here likely housed the ashes of a person or sacrificial offerings now lost to the mud and sea of the coast.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g

a. *Olla,* ca. 40–75
Upchurch, England
Burnished gray earthenware with possible bitumen slip

b. *Poppyhead Beaker,* mid-2nd century
Upchurch, England
Burnished gray earthenware with black slip

c. *Olla,* ca. 50–85
Upchurch, England
Gray earthenware with slip

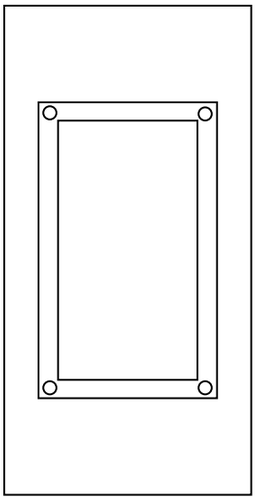
d. *Beaker,* ca. 60–80
Upchurch, England
Burnished gray earthenware with black slip

e. *Beaker,* ca. 60–80
Upchurch, England
Burnished gray earthenware with black slip

f. *Bowl,* ca. 50–80
Upchurch, England
Gray earthenware with slip

g. *Beaker,* ca. 100–140
Upchurch, England
Gray earthenware with slip

SIDE CHEST



Divine Water

Water was considered divine by the Celts and Romans alike. The miniature barrel here was located on the southeast coast of England. Its form mimics sturdy wooden barrels commonly used for storing food and liquid for travel and trade by river or sea. In ancient Celtic pagan traditions, small sculptural ceramics of this sort were offerings placed at shrines or sanctuaries to express a wish, desire, or gratitude toward a god or goddess. This diminutive icon may have been originally devoted to one of the many gods or goddesses linked to water.

The Romans relied on the favor of water gods for prosperity in trade and conquest, evidenced by the imported red cup and intricately decorated shards. Potters likely created these wares, known as terra sigilata, in Gaul (France), where they were exported to Britannia with the occupying army. The makers stamped their Latin names into their creations, as seen here.

Remnants of these ceramics indicate the influence of the Romans across their vast empire. The abundant archaeological evidence of terra sigillata, imported for everyday and ritual use, literally marks the path of Roman occupation throughout modern-day England and Wales.


a
b
c
d

a. *Saucer*, ca. 69–96
Upchurch, England
Earthenware

b. *Barrel*, 1st/2nd century
Upchurch, England
Earthenware

c. *Cup*, ca. 69–96
Upchurch, England
Red-gloss earthenware, terra sigillata (samian ware)

d. *Fragments (b-f)*, ca. 43–150
London, England
Red-gloss earthenware, terra sigillata (samian ware)