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Book Reviews



COSMETIC SETS OF LATE IRON AGE AND ROMAN BRITAIN. By Ralph Jackson. Pp. v and 224, Illus 51. British Museum Research Publications (Number **181**), 2010. Price 30.00. ISBN 978 0 861591 81 7.

This publication marks the culmination of over twenty years of comprehensive research into cosmetic sets, firmly establishing these two-piece sets as an artefact type which originated in the British Iron Age and became widely used in Roman Britain. Ralph Jackson's provisional but seminal work on these small bronzes, published in 1985 (*Britannia* **16**, 165–92), helped engender the vibrant and ongoing interest in links between material culture and identity. The fruition of his work in this new account adds significantly to our understanding of the function and possible meaning behind the use of these personal objects and the social role they may have played in society.

These objects were originally interpreted in the early twentieth century as 'pendant charms' (p. 1), but since 1985 the wider recognition that these objects were toilet implements, comprising two distinct components of a pestle and mortar, has paid dividends and led to a dramatic increase in reported finds. In light of, and drawing on this large and growing body of evidence, this study now takes stock: Jackson reassesses his provisional conclusions and sets the recent findings within the context of current scholarly debate, exploring how various identities might have been expressed in post-conquest Britain.

The meticulous, statistical analysis carried out in this study has enabled the classification of cosmetic sets into a number of distinct sub-types. Detailed discussions on the function, forms, manufacture, decoration and the meaning of these objects demonstrate a familiarity with the dataset and an expert eye. It is shown that a number of styles and decoration, such as bovid mortar terminals or enamel work, emphasize their indigenous roots; others demonstrate a fusion of Roman and Celtic ideas or themes from the Roman world (pp. 21–6). Distribution shows a number of interesting patterns which appear to reflect chronological and regional variations. The largest concentration of finds comes from the south-east of Britain with relatively high levels of distribution from urban areas in the regions of the Iceni and Trinovantes — leading to speculation that we may be seeing specific post-conquest identities asserted in areas where folk gathered, such as markets (p. 52). If the archaeological record is truly representative of distribution patterns, and problems with this are noted (p. 55), interesting lacunae have also been highlighted, notably in much of the west and north of Britain.

Contextualization is a strong theme running through this work, and whilst casual finds form the majority of the dataset, contextual information exists for 104 finds, allowing

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comment on social environment (p. 49). Selection for funerary and religious use has also been determined.

As to what was ground in the mortars, rigorous scientific analysis by Keith Mathews and Michael Cowell (Chapter 4) provides much useful information on their elemental composition, and while they are unable to determine what they held, Jackson (pp. 12–14) explores the possibility of a number of different substances and the suggestions are supported with literary evidence drawn from classical sources. It is not entirely clear, however, why woad is not considered to be a suitable candidate (p. 12), particularly as Gillian Carr has made such a strong argument in its favour (G. Carr: Woad, Tattooing and Identity in Later Iron Age and Early Roman Britain, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* **24** (3), 273–92, 2005).

This book is well written and the text is complemented by excellent colour plates, clear graphics and an easy to navigate, illustrated catalogue of 625 components. It makes a very valuable contribution to Iron Age and Roman scholarship and it should be on the bookshelves of all those studying these periods, especially those interested in the continuity of practice and tradition.

KAREN POLLOCK