Roman basket found at Marcham/Frilford site, Oxfordshire – notes by Felicity Wood

This Romano-British site has been an Oxford University training dig for the past 11 years.
Digging activities now brought to a halt while work continues on all the finds on this site.

Basket found in a pit, together with pot and shoe [dated to 4th century AD].

A site of a temple. Not a residential site.

On Wednesday 16 November, at the invitation of Sheila Raven [Marcham Finds Manager], Felicity Wood, Joanna Gilmour and Linda Mowat went to look at a basket that had been discovered at this dig site. Just back from conservation at York Archaeology Centre and now held at Institute of Archaeology, Beaumont Street, Oxford.

First impression: Looked quite squashed, rope border clearly visible and main wall of the basket constructed in fairly fine pairing, with a row of waling approx mid way up as decoration. Upright stakes thicker than the horizontal weaving material

Material[s]: The stakes seemed to be of stripped willow. Ends of some of the stakes showed a central hole [pithy cavity]. In some places could see spots on the rods = position of leaves. Weavers much finer. Could be willow but no sign of any tapering [ie reduction in diameter over the length] or overlap for joining. Rather than willow, could weavers be a reed or a long vine-type of plant…eg honey suckle? Bobart quotes Pliny as saying that the Romans used very fine willow…..much finer than is found today and Elizabeth Allnutt [ref BA newsletter No. 58] who made a reproduction of a basket found in Carlisle used No.3 centre cane for this reason. Some variation in colour of weavers…but it felt as if that was by chance ie natural variation rather than dyed material.

Origin: Was this a basket brought from the Mediterranean or one made locally – maybe mimicking the original style but perhaps using a different locally available material? If brought from Mediterranean ..would most likely have been part of the effects of someone in the army…but there was an army camp within a reasonable distance of this site so this is a feasible possibility.

Shape and use: As there was no photograph of the base, SR lifted the basket off the mount. One could see that there were just cut off stakes…no basket base. So the question is: was it a flat rectangular bag about A4-sized or was it a round basket ie with a base [now lost] and upright side and maybe even a lid?

Certainly the fine weave and the line of decoration would indicate that it was for personal use …a sewing basket perhaps [a 'designer handbag' has also been suggested!]

Ritual killing of offerings: It was common practice to 'kill' an object – ie damage in some way before giving it as an offering. An earthenware pot found in the same pit has a round hole in the side which could only have been made intentionally. This would perhaps explain why no base to the basket and also a cut in the side of the basket.

Other fragments: In association with this find were some fragments that may have been a handle.
Also found: some thicker wood pieces, one with cut marks, which might also have been a handle.

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Agreed that FW would send some small samples to Mary Butcher to see whether she would be willing to comment on the possible material of the weaver. Or knew someone that could.

FW would formulate a request for funding from the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers to create a replica.
This idea was inspired by the work done by Sue Stanton [now textile conservator at the Ashmolean] who, as part of her course at the Textile Conservation Centre, made a replica 16th C doublet when studying one that had been discovered in the wall of a house,. Also basketmaker, Kazue Honma, made replica of basket c 2000 years old which was found preserved in the anaerobic conditions of the muddy shore at Tottori in Honshu. There could be a lot to be learned by making a replica. Mary Butcher [President] and Bunty Ball [Chair] of the Basketmakers' Association would support this request

FW 19.11.2011

Note:

In The Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock

Roman Gallery

Lowbury near Goring

Offerings of deliberately blunted swords - thus not suitable for actual use