

Could this have been on what is now Grey Friars?



The Colchester Vase depicts a pair of gladiators named Memnon and Valentinus

March 2023 from BBC News by James FitzGerald

Gladiator fights were once staged in Roman-occupied Britain, new research suggests.

Tests have proven that the Colchester Vase - an ancient artefact which depicts a fight between combatants - was locally made and decorated. With no written information, this was the "only evidence" of such duels in Britain, says the head of Colchester and Ipswich Museums. The findings have led to "startling new conclusions", Frank Hargrave added.

The vase in question, which is nearly two millennia old, was used as a cremation vessel and discovered in a Roman grave in Colchester in the mid-1800s. The 23cm-high (9in) vessel, made around AD 160-200, is described as "one of the most important, and perhaps famous, pots from Roman Britain" by Colchester Museums. It depicts scenes which may have been witnessed in a Roman arena - namely animal hunts and a duel between a pair of gladiators.

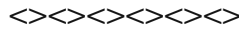
Mr Hargrave told *The Observer* that the vase was of "such high quality that there's been a bit of snobbery, an assumption that it couldn't possibly have come from Britain." But, he said, the fresh research had "put that to bed." As well as confirming that the artefact was made from local clay, the analysis crucially showed the names of gladiators Memnon and Valentinus were written into the clay while the pot was being made. It was previously believed that the inscriptions had been added after the vase had been fired - suggesting less of a link between the decoration and local events.

Analysis of the human remains inside the pot suggested the deceased person was aged over 40, and may have come from overseas. Glynn Davis, a senior curator of Colchester and Ipswich Museums, told *The Observer* that the vase may have belonged to a sponsor of the

gladiatorial fight depicted. The item is due to go on display at Colchester Castle from 15 July, along with other significant Roman finds.

Colchester is one of England's most historic cities, having become the capital of Roman Britain soon after the conquest of AD 43, and known as Camulodunum. Previous discoveries have indicated the presence of Roman-era gladiators in Britain, even if the evidence of arena combat here has been thinner.

Skeletons from an ancient "gladiator cemetery" went on display in York in 2011, although archaeologists said they could not be certain the men were fighters.



Some time earlier, in 2009, there was speculation as to where the amphitheatre may have been located. In January, Roddy Ashworth wrote in the East Anglian Daily Times ...

Expert homes in on Roman riddle

COLCHESTER'S leading archaeologist believes he may have come close to solving one of the town's longest-held secrets - the location of its Roman amphitheatre. Philip Crummy, director of Colchester Archaeological Trust, said that by a process of elimination it was now possible to identify the most likely spot where the huge arena would have stood. Mr Crummy, who was last year awarded an honorary degree at Essex University for his archaeological work in the town, said he believed the structure would probably have been located in the east of the town centre, near or on the current site of Roman Road and Castle Road.

The existence of an amphitheatre in ancient Colchester was all but confirmed with the 2004 discovery of the town's Roman Circus, which stood outside the settlement's walls on the edge of Abbey Field. In terms of public buildings, Mr Crummy said that the circus - a huge chariot racing track - would have been further down the Roman "shopping list" than an amphitheatre, where gladiators would have fought to the death in front of baying crowds and dignitaries.

He added that a wealth of remains found in the town depicting details of gladiatorial combat also suggested that people living in Camulodunum - the Roman name for Colchester - had seen the violent sport with their own eyes, rather than having heard about it from visitors. "The location of the amphitheatre is a big thing for us, and I personally would love to be able to find it before I give up the ghost," Mr Crummy said. "The chances of that, unfortunately, are fairly remote.

"However, many years of plotting within the town walls have shown it is almost entirely full of features such as small walls, mosaics and Roman foundations, except where Roman public buildings have already been found.

"So what we would need to do is identify a space big enough - probably about 100 metres by 100 metres - with none of these features, because they would not have been present on the site of an amphitheatre.

"There were eventually only two possible locations left, and we recently eliminated one of them when we were looking at trenches where gas mains were being put down Queen Street and along Culver Street.

“I think we are at a stage now where we can say that, if the amphitheatre was within the town walls, there is only one space big enough and empty enough where it could have been.” Mr Crummy said that this was to the east of the town's Norman castle - where the imposing Temple of Claudius once stood - on the outskirts of the Roman town. “That would also have been a good place for it. That area is quite flat - it is before East Hill starts to slope away - and if I had to put money on it that is where I think the amphitheatre would have been.”

Another possibility, Mr Crummy said, was that the combat arena was outside the town walls and part of a monumental complex including the Roman Circus, perhaps near to the St John's Abbey site. But he said that while digging near the circus no evidence of the large building had come to light. “That area is possible, but it is certainly candidate number two. Number one is definitely Roman Road and Castle Road.”

Mr Crummy added, however, that without excavation the location of the amphitheatre - in which hundreds of gladiators would have been brutally slain - would remain a mystery. “It is the favoured spot. But unless there's a big service trench dug like there was in Queen Street and Culver Street, we won't ever really have a chance to know,” he said. “What we really need is somebody who lives in the south end of Roman Road or Castle Road to say 'Please come and dig up my back garden' - but, quite understandably, I don't think that is going to happen,” he added.

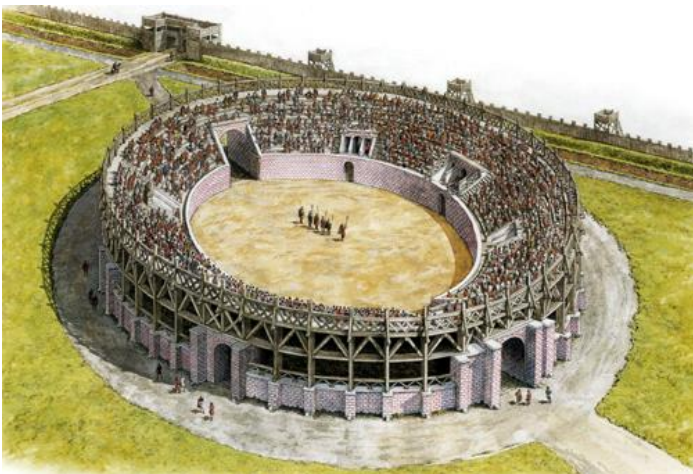


This painting by Peter Froste depicts the Roman town and the nearby circus. The yellow arrows show the extent of the Grey Friars rectangular site, within the north-east corner of the town wall. This would have presented a large extra space to the east of the Temple of Claudius when the walls were constructed on suitable ground following the sacking of the town by Boudicca.

Roman amphitheatres are large, circular or oval open-air venues with raised seating. They were used for events such as gladiator combats, *venationes* (animal slayings) and executions.



About 230 Roman amphitheatres have been found across the area of the Roman empire, however, in the UK only a handful of examples remain to this day at Caerleon (illustrated on a postage stamp), Silchester, Carmarthen, Chester, Maumbury, Cirencester, Richborough, Chichester, London and St Albans.



Interpretation of the Caerleon amphitheatre