

English Candlesticks

before

1600

By

W. G. MACKAY THOMAS

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Abbreviations: H.W.C. H. Willis Collection.
V. & A.M. Victoria & Albert Museum.
B.M. British Museum.
A.C. Author's Collection.

Foreword

AS early base-metal candlesticks are the rarest of antiques in this country and no book in the English language has been written dealing with this subject, and the objects are unmarked and there are no records concerning them, sufficient reason has been adduced to explain the appearance of this volume. Added to this has been the natural desire to traverse a path as yet untrodden, and although at times it has been the case of making bricks without straw, and often with too little clay, I shall be content if I may be able to throw some light, if only candle-light on a subject so long neglected.

With the exception of the chapter on *The Story of Brass in England* which perforce must depend on the written records of other writers, this work is the outcome of original research.

As the earliest silver candlestick known is dated 1637, and as pewter collectors recognise no candlestick made prior to the year 1600, no aid can be expected from either silver or pewter and so rare are these base-metal candlesticks that even our museums can be of little help.

Therefore some other source of inquiry must be found in order to determine provenance and period of early candlesticks.

In studying Flemish candlesticks much knowledge may be gained by an examination of Dutch and Flemish interiors by some of the Old Masters but the aid thus sought will be very limited.

On the other hand Venetian paintings particularly those of Ghirlandaio, Catena and Crivelli indicate the changes in design of Venetian candlesticks and as we in this country were in close and constant intercourse with Venice whose merchants supplied the beeswax for our candles, and kept pace as it were with those changes in the most critical period, the fourteenth and fifteenth century, we are thus able to determine with some exactitude the period of their adoption in this country.

It was mainly due to my recognition of Venetian influence which had hitherto passed unnoticed, that I was able to set out on this "voyage of discovery."

One other avenue of research was open: the examination of excavated relics from a known strata, often by a study of the pottery unearthed and from that to the candlestick remains found with them. Where pottery candlesticks were found of a recognised period any metal prototypes known to exist would belong to a slightly earlier time.

Foreword

Finally by gathering together a great number of English candlesticks, restricting them to the end of the reign of George II, they could be graded to some extent by the changes in design and from Charles II period by their counterparts in silver, but these naturally required no research.

I was fortunate not only in the formation of an extensive collection but in having ready access to another collection of equal merit belonging to H. Willis, Esq., of Hendon and it was surprising how the gaps in one collection could so often be filled from the other.

With very few exceptions the examples have been gleaned from these two private collections for they are not to be found in our museums.

The lack of interest shewn in the study of English candlesticks has been due mainly to the extreme rarity of the objects and to the lack of guidance available. Their rarity is due to their destruction in times of religious upheaval, and in the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and during the Puritan regime and also to the need for munitions in time of war.

During the Napoleonic War, Pitt initiated a salvage campaign but unlike those of more recent date his demands were confined to copper and brass and so imminent was the danger from invasion, homes were scoured to meet the demand and comparatively few brass or bell-metal candlesticks were un-offered. Church candlesticks which were more valuable had long since disappeared in the name of religion.

For information concerning "The Story of Brass" I tender grateful acknowledgments to the following authors.

J. T. Perry in "Dinanderie."

E. Suffield in "Church Brasses."

H. Hamilton in "Copper and Brass in England before 1800."

I am also particularly grateful to the following: The Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum for permission to publish the excellent photographs supplied by them; The Keeper of the Guildhall Museum for the three fine photographs mentioned in the text.

I am also indebted to the Editors of the following Journals for articles of mine which have formed a basis for some of the chapters in this book.

Burlington Magazine, "English Candlesticks and their Venetian Prototypes."

Apollo Magazine, "Some Anomalies in English Candlestick Design."

Country Life, "Early English Candlesticks."

Antique Dealer & Collectors' Guide, "The Earliest Pewter Candlestick."

And finally to H. Willis, Esq., of Hendon, for generous help in allowing me to photograph any specimens I found necessary.

W. G. MACKAY THOMAS.

CHAPTER I.

Primitive Lighting.

SCIENTISTS believe the great inventions of early times were evolved from a common culture centre and perhaps the greatest of these were the discovery of how to create a flame for kindling a fire, and the alloying of copper and tin to form bronze.

While the former takes pride of place as being of the greatest service to mankind it was perhaps simpler to discover and did not require such genius as the formation of bronze.

The phenomenon of a forest fire kindled by lightning, resulting in the stampede of demented creatures including man, must have drawn attention to what afterwards became of great import to mankind: the creation of warmth; the roasting of flesh making it more palatable; the fear created in the most dangerous denizens of the forest; and the illumination enabling objects to be clearly perceived in even the darkest night.

These advantages would be realised long before man had mastered the art of striking a light to kindle a flame for fire-making.

Man in the knapping of flint implements was continually making sparks and it only needed the presence of inflammable material in the immediate vicinity for a flame to be kindled.

This would at first create fear and the fire would be immediately smothered but once he realised it could be controlled the art of making a fire would soon follow, the act of smothering the accidental creation of a flame would serve to shew such control was possible.

Thus man secured not only artificial warmth for his comfort, the benefit he most appreciated, but means for cooking his food, and a protection from the wild beasts of the forest.

And it would become the first luminant, lighting up the faces of the members of the tribe as they sat round the camp fire enjoying its warmth.

Primitive Lighting

The brand plucked from the burning to frighten away some over-bold intruder from the forest would soon suggest the use of a torch. And so another advantage would be impressed upon the savage mind, enabling the tribe on occasion to travel by night through the forest, either to make a foray against a neighbouring enemy or to inspect their traps before their catch had been devoured by some prowler in search of a meal.

Certain resinous woods would require little preparation for this purpose. Small strips of bark or laths of wood might be dipped in some oily or resinous liquid and bound together to form a torch.

The great advantage of this means of illumination for out-of-doors was apparent, for the wind would serve to enhance its brilliance and so this form of illumination, probably the first ever used, retained its place as the ideal luminant for the open air down to modern times, and a walk down some of our London streets, such as Charles Street, will still shew over the iron gates of private residences the torch extinguishers, a cone-shaped receptacle used by the link boys of a former time.

In later times the chamber candlestick was often fitted with a replica in brass to serve the same purpose of dousing a light.

Excavations carried out on the sites of some of the earliest civilisations reveal the extensive use of lamps but candles were certainly used in some countries. Evans in his book entitled "The Palace of Minos" gives sketches of two earthenware candlesticks bearing a striking resemblance to the modern chamber stick, one Egyptian of the Fourth Dynasty and the other of practically the same design from the early Minoan Period.

So far as this country is concerned rushlights appear to have predominated in the more primitive districts. The rushes when gathered were cut into convenient lengths and a bundle of them would be laid in a trough of melted fat. Before this process however each rush after being steeped would be stripped of its outer covering with the exception of one narrow strip necessary to hold the pith together. Watchmen who required a rushlight to last a longer time used one where two strips of the outer covering were retained causing it to burn more slowly.

The few early socket candlesticks in iron which remain are usually associated with a rushlight holder.

Candles used in these would have a rush for the wick. Continued dippings of a rush would form a candle but the fat was more expensive as the rushes could be had for the gathering. Mutton fat was used chiefly as it set harder. Sometimes rushes over two feet in length were used and these necessitated much longer holders some being over a yard high.

Primitive Lighting

While the presence of candlesticks augurs the use of candles their absence does not prove their non-existence.

In various parts of South America the candle-fish whose body is impregnated with oil is used by the natives who place it within a cleft stick and sometimes a wick of bark is inserted forming a primitive type of candle, while in the Orkney Islands the body of the stormy petrel once answered the same purpose.

Hence the absence of early candlesticks in these regions would bear no special significance.

Although we are not cognisant of the materials used by the ancient Egyptians, the writings of Pliny contain detailed information of the candles used by the Romans which were of beeswax.

Dipping was not practised but sheets of the wax were rolled round a wick.

Whereas in England the rushlight preceded the candle, in Southern Europe the taper was first used and consisted of a coil of twisted threads impregnated with wax or fat, and placed in a container with one end protruding.

In England candle-making was at first one of the duties of the house-wife but in the Middle Ages the chandler supplied the needs of the neighbourhood.

By the thirteenth century when England was famous for its sheep and wool, tallow was plentiful and the wick became the problem, as rushes would tend to become scarce where the land was more settled and the marshes drained.

Just as to-day we have certain trades segregating in one street or neighbourhood so it was in the Middle Ages. Cannon Street was a street where chandlers flourished and the name is a corruption of Candlewick Street.

That its significance should not be lost one of the imposing blocks of offices recently erected in that thoroughfare has been named Candlewick House.

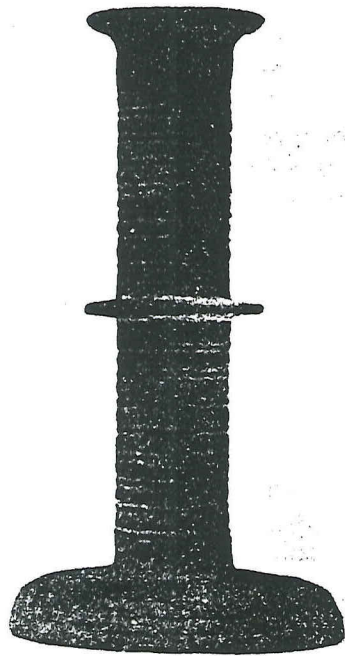


Plate I.

Roman Bronze Candlestick. 1st Century. B.M.

CHAPTER II.

Roman Britain.

THE Romans when they came to Britain found very different conditions regarding night and day as existed in the countries bordering on the Mediterranean, for in those latitudes artificial light was seldom used, as day and night were more evenly distributed than in northern climes.

De Quincey in his essay on "The Casuistry of Roman Meals" says, "None but rich and luxurious men, nay, even among these, none but the idlers did live or could live by candlelight. An immense majority of men in Rome never lighted a candle except at early dawn. And this custom of Rome was the custom of all the nations round the great lake of the Mediterranean. In Athens, Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor, everywhere the ancients went to bed from seven to nine o'clock."

Hence those Romans forced to live in England found candlelight was essential in the long dark winters and so the earliest examples of candlesticks in this country date from Roman times and appear to be always of the socket variety, yet some of the finest pricket candlesticks are of Roman origin and a number of these in the British Museum date from the sixth century and in excellence of design out-rival any made in later times.

Pliny is a mine of information on the subject of candles and candlesticks and from him we learn the Romans made pricket candles. Whereas tallow candles may be easily fixed on the spikes of iron candlestands used in certain churches without injury, the same would not apply to candles of wax which would be fractured.

Hence the Romans placed a spigot of wood, corresponding in size and shape to the spike of the pricket, at the lower end of the wick and after rolling a sheet of wax round the two, would then remove the spigot and so an aperture would be formed which would exactly fit the pricket.

Roman Britain

As brass was not made in this country until the closing years of Elizabeth I's reign, and for over a century afterwards was of very poor quality, the examples treated in this work will consist of an alloy of copper and tin, either fine pewter, hard bronze or bell-metal, dependent of course on the proportions used of each metal.

A few isolated examples of brass candlesticks were made in this country in the sixteenth century but from looted brass from the Monasteries at the time of the Dissolution; but they would be of foreign brass. A great quantity of this alloy came on the market for Henry VIII passed a law forbidding its export.

Unlike other discoveries until the seventeenth century the manufacture of brass was confined within comparatively narrow limits. The Romans obtained the secret of its manufacture from the Persians who in turn gained their knowledge from India and it is supposed to have originated in a district to the north-east of that country.

There is no doubt the Romans introduced the manufacture of brass into the Low Countries as the exceptional difficulty of alloying copper and zinc precludes the discovery of the process by independent countries. All the great inventions of ancient times are supposed to have been confined to one culture centre and from there disseminated throughout the civilised world, and this must be particularly so of brass not only on account of the extreme difficulty experienced in alloying copper and zinc, but also in recognising that the white powder calamine was the compound of a metal. Furthermore, zinc is not found in nature as a metal and was not separated from its ore in the form of pure zinc until the eighteenth century.

The Romans did not introduce its manufacture into this country probably as they were unable to find any deposits of calamine or cadmium as they termed it.

On the other hand our rich supplies of tin encouraged the manufacture of bronze with which the Romans had long been familiar.

England had been famous for its tin mines even in pre-historic times and as the production of bronze seems to have been universally known it was natural for bronze in some form to have been the principal alloy used in this country and whereas in other countries tin was regarded on account of its rarity as a semi-precious metal, it was used sparingly resulting in the formation of hard bronze while the English on the other hand were able to use a greater proportion of tin—hence bell-metal was the main alloy.

Probably the earliest pair of metal candlesticks in existence are a pair of Roman origin made in the first century, A.D. and now in the British Museum. One of them is illustrated in Plate 1 and they bear a striking resemblance to

Roman Britain

a type made in this country in the seventeenth century. Additional stability is secured by the heavy base.

In the Worthing Museum are a number of earthenware candlesticks of Roman origin, and an exceptional feature is the saucer-shaped drip tray just below the socket, and they also shew the earliest example of a trumpet base.

The position of the drip tray was due possibly to the custom of the Romans of placing the drip tray immediately below the spike in their pricket candlesticks.

Another type of earthenware candlestick dug up at Cambridge was illustrated many years ago in "The Connoisseur."

It seems strange for the socket candlestick to be predominant in England and the Low Countries while in France the pricket was in favour.

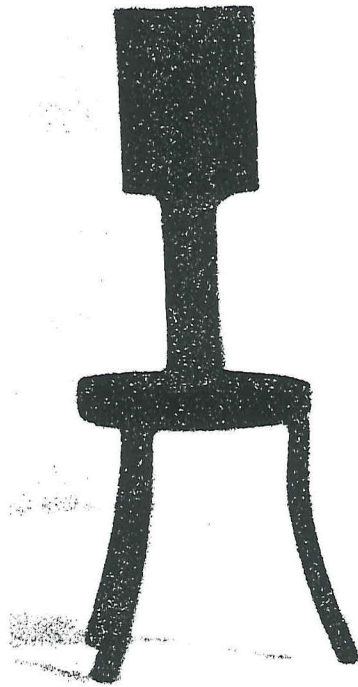


Plate 2.

Early Bronze Candlestick. Probably Early English. A.C.

CHAPTER III.

An Early English Candlestick.

BRONZE, unlike iron, suffers more from accretion than erosion and so is practically indestructible. On the other hand, bronze objects in any form were eminently desirable in ancient times for they could be re-moulded into any form more suitable to the finder. Hence early objects of bronze are comparatively rare. It is said for example the only bronze bridle of early times in existence is the one adorning one of the horses attached to the chariot of King Mausolus now in the British Museum.

So save in undisturbed tombs, it is extremely rare to find an early bronze object still retaining its original form. This applies not only to civilised races existing thousands of years before Christ but also to those which have appeared in the Christian era.

The small candlestick in bronze featured in Plate 2, is probably one made by the Jutes after they had settled in this country. It is the only example known to the writer of a hand-wrought candlestick in this alloy. Quite a number of bronze relics from Early English times are in our museums.

Whereas the majority of English candlesticks made in this country prior to the year 1600 are of bell-metal which of necessity must be moulded, this specimen in bronze shews clearly the marks of the chisel in the shaping of the socket.

The thirteenth century candlesticks of English origin generally shew a base obviously copied from earlier examples where the cross section of a sapling formed the base. Then in Norman times, the tripod base proving unstable, whereas stability was the first essential quality in a candlestick, they lowered the centre of gravity by using a circular base leaving only three diminutive legs to shew source of origin and this type was converted by the English into