

ART ANCIENT



GALLO-ROMAN QUERNSTONE

Fécamp, Seine-Maritime, France
Circa 2nd century BC - mid-4th century AD
Carved puddingstone
Diameter: 43 cm

PROVENANCE

French private collection

Subsequently French art market, April 2023

Exported from France with cultural property passport 243418

The lower grinding stone from a late Iron Age, early Gallo-Roman quern - an aesthetic and powerful symbol of life two millennia ago.

Carved from puddingstone, an extremely beautiful and hard sedimentary rock named after its appearance of a fruit-filled cake. Formed of rounded flint pebbles embedded in a fine grained sandy matrix - the pebbles with a variety of beautiful hues ranging from pinks, reds, oranges and soft greys.





Daily Life in Roman Gaul

While known to the Romans as fearsome warriors, the Gauls, in the centuries leading up to the birth of Christ, were bearers of the La Tène culture. As the height of Celtic civilisation, this was a defining period of early European history, marked by its artistic sophistication, and cultural connections with the Mediterranean world. Day-to-day, however, the Gauls lived in an agricultural society. Indeed, shortly before the Roman conquest by Julius Caesar, about 60 tribes shared the territory comprising modern-day France. Their names came from their geographical location, such as Nantuates, 'people of the Valley'; the Morini, 'people of the sea'; and the Sequani, 'people of the Seine River'. Many lived in fortified, hilltop settlements known as *oppida*, which also functioned as centres of trade, political control and defence. But right at the heart of the Gallic society, were the smaller villages and farmsteads, where men and women worked the land, producing crops like wheat, barley and oats, raising livestock and trading with local neighbours.

Following the Roman conquest of Gaul under Julius Caesar in 50 B.C., Roman influence began to reshape Gallic society. Urban centres connected by roads began to emerge, and throughout these new cities - complete with public bathhouses, forums and theatres - Roman clothing, language and artistic styles were adopted. While cities flourished in this new cosmopolitan atmosphere, agricultural settlements remained a crucial backbone to society, and the introduction of Roman agricultural techniques and tools enhanced productivity. As output increased, Gaul became a significant source of food, with the men and women who worked the land becoming the foundation of the Empire.



1 A horse-powered millstone depicted on a panel of a Roman sarcophagus, 3rd century BC.

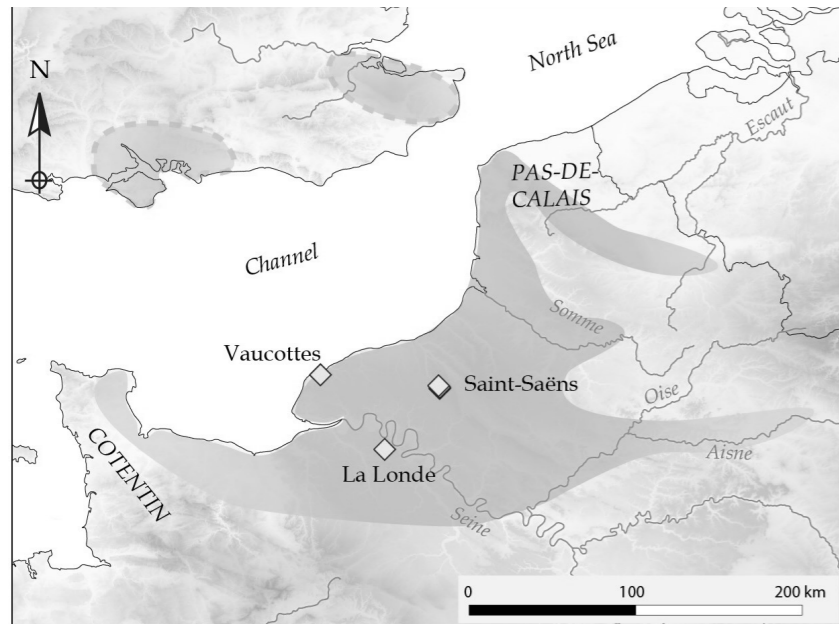


2 The Sale of Bread, Fresco, in the House of the Baker, c.1st century AD, Pompeii.



The Roman Millstone

In the Late Iron Age and throughout the Roman period, every Gallic household was equipped with a hand-driven quern that would likely have been worked by the women of the family. The present puddingstone quern is the stationary, lower part of a manual millstone, known as the *meta*. The hole in the centre would have received a vertical spindle, which would also have held the upper quern, the *catillus*, in place. Rotating around this axis, it would have been used to grind cereals and grain such as hulled barley and emmer wheat in day-to-day food production. During the Late Iron Age, this would have been used primarily to make porridge, before the Roman introduction of bread-making wheats.



Puddingstone

The formation of puddingstone - named as such for its visual similarities to a fruit-filled cake - began in the early Eocene (55 million years ago). During this period, many small, mainly flint, pebbles, deposited in sea or river beds by shifting coastlines, became cemented together by silica-rich sand. Compressed and bonded together during the intense conditions of the Ice Age, the resulting stone was a particularly hard and durable material, prized throughout later millennia for its unique qualities.

Recognising the usefulness of such a rock, the Romans quarried puddingstone for building work, and the creation of a crucial household item - the quernstone. A number of ancient quarries intended to extract puddingstone from its rare outcrops are scattered across Northern France, such as in Normandy and Seine-Maritime, as well as on the other side of the Channel, in the south of Great Britain, and particularly Hertfordshire. The present puddingstone hails from the Seine-Maritime region, and in particular, the quarry of Vaucottes (Saint-Léonard) near Fécamps.

Despite the introduction of watermills and animal-powered mills following the Roman conquest, the agricultural classes continued to grind their own corn and prepare their own food, resulting in continued demand for durable hand-driven querns. As such, the trade of puddingstone querns lasted for around six centuries. Beyond its practical function, the puddingstone quern also played a key role in shaping the economy, social and technological landscapes of the societies that used it. Providing food for farm labourers and warriors, it is also a powerful signifier of the foundations of Celtic culture and indeed the Roman Empire.

3 Distribution of puddingstone across the north of France and south of England, detailing the three ancient quarries of Seine-Maritime: Vaucottes, La Londe and Saint-Saëns.



Everlasting Stone

Owing to its remarkable durability, puddingstone became known as 'everlasting stone,' and was used in the foundations of houses and churches from the Roman times, right up until the 16th century. Boulders of this enigmatic rock were even referred to as 'woe stones', or 'witch' stones, on account of their supposed power to ward off evil or act as a good luck token. In 1662, in the Village of Aldenham, Hertfordshire, a woman suspected of having been a witch was buried with a piece of puddingstone atop her coffin, to keep her from rising after death. Beyond its protective use, puddingstone was also known as 'Growing' or 'Breeding-stone'. Folklore held that there were male and female stones, and as they slowly emerged from the ground, people believed they were multiplying, further adding to their mystical reputation.

Over 55 million years since its formation, and over two millennia since its adoption for daily use, this puddingstone quern is an aesthetic and powerful symbol of the incredible forces of nature, and a powerful signifier of the foundations of Celtic culture and indeed the Roman Empire.