

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN SOCIAL LIFE

AH 16

Strigil

The Romans did not use soap to clean themselves. Like the Greeks they rubbed oil over their bodies and used a strigil to scrape it off. This process was much more efficient if the skin was sweating. Strigils come in all shapes and sizes. This one has lost a portion of its blade, it may have been twice as long originally. The handle is often bent round on itself like this example, although the pointy end is unusual.



Tweezers

Romans had bronze and iron razors to shave with. Most Roman men would either have been shaved by a slave or would go to a barber's shop, which were common throughout the Empire.

Tweezers were also used by both men and women to remove unwanted hair. The first-century philosopher Seneca lived near to some public baths and complained about the noise that was made there - yells, splashing, slaps, the cries of sausage sellers and so on - and also the shrieks of those who were having their hair tweaked out.



'The hair plucker keeps up a constant chatter in his thin and strident voice, to attract more attention, and is never silent except when he is plucking armpits and making the customer yell instead of yelling himself.'

This example is quite finely made, with an attractive finial joining the two blades; quite often they were made simply by folding a length of metal in half.

Ear Scoop

Many ear scoops have been found and like tweezers they were obviously widely used at the public baths. They may have been used as an ear scoop or for picking up small quantities of ointment (medical or cosmetic) from jars.

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Playing Counters

Gaming boards are found scratched onto tiles all across the Roman Empire. They were used to play games similar to draughts or noughts-and-crosses. Counters, too, were sometimes used to help people do complicated sums. One of these examples has been cut from a piece of Samian pottery, the other has been cut from a piece of bone, probably a flat shoulder bone.



Horse Teeth

Animal bones can tell archaeologists a lot about the diet of people living in past times, but horse meat does not seem to have been a regular food item in Roman Britain. However, when a horse died, its carcass would probably have been used. Horse hair, for example, was used to decorate the helmets of centurions and bone could be used to make things like combs and gaming counters, an example of which is also included in this box.



Stylus

The stylus was used upon the tabula - a tablet of wood covered with wax. The pointed end was used to scratch the letters onto the wax. The blunt end was used to rub out mistakes.



Lamp

Lamps of this form were used by both the Romans and the Greeks, and by many other ancient peoples. They were filled with oil. A wick protruded from the spout. Most, like this one, were made of pottery, though sometimes metal was used. This lamp belongs to the Picture Lamp category. Lamps of this kind were made using an upper and a lower mould. The mould for the upper surface often had a picture on it - in this case two gladiators fighting. A thin layer of clay was pressed into both halves, which could then be joined. Once dried sufficiently, the lamp was removed and it could then be smoothed and finished off. In this example, though, both the handle and the nozzle seem to have been made separately from the main body. If you look carefully you can also see traces of the potter's finger print on one of the volutes (the decorative curved sides on the nozzle).



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Oyster Shell

A taste for oysters seems to have been introduced into Britain by the Romans. They were eaten raw or cooked and covered with a sauce. They had to be transported quickly to prevent them going bad, but even towns far from the sea coast seem to have had a regular supply. A single deposit at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester, Hampshire) contained over 1 million shells like this one. It has been suggested that such a large dump was collected together so that the shells could be ground up and used to make mortar.



Samian Sherd

Samian pottery, with its characteristic shiny red surface, was made in Gaul.



Model Amphora

Amphoras are pottery containers which were used for storage and transport in the Greek and Roman world. In real life they were much bigger than this - on average they were about 1 metre tall and could contain about 28 litres of liquid. Olives, olive oil, wine, lentils and other exotic foods were brought to Britain in such containers. They came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some amphorae were tall and thin, and most had a pointed base that would have made it difficult for them to stand upright. It seems that when in use the end could be sunk into the ground, or the amphora would be leaned against a wall. They were sealed using clay, cork or wooden stoppers and wax or pitch.



Spearhead

Spear and arrow- heads like this were made by taking a long triangular piece of iron and then hammering the end opposite the point into a socket that could be fitted onto the shaft of the spear.



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Coins

Without coinage it would be hard to live in towns. How would you obtain food if you did not have your own land?

Coins began to appear in Britain slightly before the Romans arrived here.



Roman coins often show the head of the emperor on one side and a symbolic figure on the other. The head of the emperor reminded everyone who was in charge. Quite a few coins were also issued which showed the emperor's wife.

These coins show:

Top Left: This is badly worn, but it appears to show Faustina Junior, daughter of Emperor Antoninus Pius and wife of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. She married in AD 145 and died in AD 175. The figure on the reverse is too badly worn to be identifiable.

Bottom Left: Galerius Maximianus, who was Caesar (which at this time meant deputy emperor), AD 293-305. The reverse shows the Genius (Guardian Spirit) of the Roman people, holding a sacrificial dish and a cornucopia. This coin is made of brass and was called a follis.

Top Right: Emperor Vespasian AD 69-79. The reverse shows Victory on the prow of a ship and the word 'Navalis' - a celebration/invocation of naval victory.

Bottom Right: Emperor Licinius I, who ruled AD 308-324 (from 313-324 Constantine also claimed to be emperor - he had Licinius murdered in 324). The reverse shows the god Jupiter, with an eagle at his feet and a statue of Victory held in his left hand.

The three tiny coins are minims or minimissimi. They date from the fourth century.