

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN SOCIAL LIFE

AH 16/A

Strigil

The Romans did not use soap to clean themselves. Like the Greeks they rubbed oil over their body 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 example is a fragment of a strigil blade. The part that is missing is the handle, which was usually positioned at right-angles to the blade.



Circus Ticket

Stamped terracotta tokens like this were produced as entrance tickets for amphitheatres and circuses. Several have survived from the Coliseum in Rome. The image of a chariot on this reproduction token suggests it was intended for entrance to a circus - the long race tracks that derived their name from their semi-circular ends, which proved so tricky for the chariots to get round safely. In Britain horse and chariot races were probably run around a temporary track, however in 2005 a stone-walled circus was uncovered at Camoludunum (Colchester) which, at a length of 350 metres, is possibly the largest in north-west Europe.



Ear Scoop

Many ear scoops have been found 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.



Sheep's Shoulder Blade

This fragment of a sheep's shoulder blade shows the way in which every part of an animal's carcass could be exploited. The circular holes along the broken edge were created when the bone was drilled to make counters or buttons.



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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. This example was probably cut from a pot.



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. If you look carefully at this example you can see where the decorated upper section has been joined to the lower, plain bowl. Traces of the potter's finger-prints are visible on the upper surface. Before firing they were often dipped in a slip (a thin slurry of clay) that gave both the inner and outer surface a glaze and stopped the lamp from absorbing the oil. This lamp is rather worn and the image on its upper surface has become blurred. It appears to show a cupid figure running to the right. This lamp has two holes through which to pour oil into the reservoir.



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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 Flagon

Flagons like this were used to serve drinks.



Blade

A small fragment of a knife blade and tang - the projection by which a tool, is attached to its handle or stock. The original size and function of this knife are unclear.



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Coins

These coins, which were minted in places as far apart as Palestine and Britain, nicely illustrate the vast geographical range of the Roman empire. Some of them also hint at the violence upon which the empire's greatness was based.



1. This coin has a text in Greek script which seems to indicate that it was minted in Amphipolis, in Macedon. After the Roman conquest of Macedonia (168 BC) Amphipolis was made the capital of Macedonia Prima, one of the four divisions into which Macedonia was divided. This coin probably dates from the first century BC.

2. This coin was minted in Palestine in the years AD 133-134. It has a palm tree on one side and a palm leaf on the other. In AD 132 the Emperor Hadrian attempted to demolish the temple in Jerusalem. In response, Simon bar Kokhba led a revolt of Jewish people against their Roman rulers. At first the rebels were successful. The turning point of the war came when Hadrian sent one of his best generals from Britain, Julius Severus. 12 army legions from Egypt, Britain, Syria and other areas poured into Palestine and the rebel army was crushed. During the period of the revolt Simon issued his own coinage, using symbols used during an earlier revolt (AD 66-70) - the amphora, vine leaf, and palm tree. This is one of these coins. The inscription around the vine leaf is in Hebrew and reads 'Deliverance of Israel'.

3. This is a coin of Herod Agrippa I, who was a grandson of Herod the Great, the client-king of Palestine in whose reign Jesus was born. Herod Agrippa spent his early life deeply in debt and a prisoner in Rome until, in AD 37 the Romans decided that he might prove a useful client-king, like his grandfather. This coin has three ears of barley on one side and a fringed umbrella - a sign of kingship - on the other. After his death in AD 44 his kingdom came under the control of the prefect of Syria, and Palestine was now fully incorporated into the Roman empire.

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4. This is a silver plated copper coin. It may be from Carthage. One side shows a chariot pulled by several horses. Carthage was an ancient north African state centred on the country now known as Tunisia. It was one of the great Mediterranean powers from about the ninth century BC to 146 BC. For much of this period it fought with Greece and then Rome for dominance. The wars against Rome are called the Punic wars and involved three periods of fighting, from 264 to 146 BC. Every one of these three ended with defeats for the Carthaginians. After the last one Rome annexed Carthage and it never regained independence.

5. This coin shows Victory on one side, but the head of the emperor is too worn to make out. It is probably that of a member of the house of Constantine. This dynasty began with Constantine the Great, the man who founded what became a new Empire and made Christianity the official Roman religion. He was followed by his three sons Constantine II, Constans I, and Constantius II; their cousin Julian the Apostate; and Julian's short-lived successor Jovian. This coin was probably minted in Britain.

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