

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN SOCIAL LIFE

AH16/B

Tweezers and Shears

The public baths were one of the most important buildings in any Roman town - a social centre as much as a place to wash and make oneself beautiful. Archaeologists often find objects like these when excavating such buildings. 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.'



Comb

Most combs were made from wood or bone. Ivory combs would have been more expensive. This example is made from bone and has a very simple design.



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. This example is rather thick and heavy - most styli were thinner and lighter.



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 coast seem to have had a regular supply. A single deposit at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester, in 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.



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Samian Pot

Samian pottery, with its characteristic shiny red surface, was made in Gaul. Many Samian pots were decorated with embossed patterns, but this one is fairly simple. Sadly, it has lost most of its surface. It might have been used to serve drink, or even items such as olives or nuts.



Modern 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 and other exotic foods were brought to Britain in such containers. There are several different kinds of amphora - this modern model looks similar to a kind known as a Gauloise amphora.



Horse Jawbone

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, examples of which are also included in this box.



Replica 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.



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Playing Counter

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 has been cut from a pot, made of coarse, black pottery. The grooves would have been decorative bands that ran around the side of the pot.



Replica Phaelera

Phaelerae were small discs awarded as military decorations, usually worn by the centurion of the honoured unit and attached to a leather chest harness. This example is a modern copy.



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. Most lamps were larger than this example, which would not have burned for very long before running out of fuel. Lamps are often found in Roman graves.



Spearhead

This example is rather small. Spear and arrow-heads 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 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.

The coins in this box are:

Top Left: Emperor Maximianus, who ruled AD 286-310. The reverse has a winged figure of Victory, who was very popular on Roman coins, and represented the triumph of Rome over its enemies. This coin was minted in Alexandria, Egypt.

Bottom Left: Emperor Severus Alexander, who ruled AD 222-235. Again, there is a figure of Victory on the reverse.

Top Right: Emperor Magnus Maximus, who ruled AD 383-388. The reverse shows Roma - a personification of Rome - seated between standards and holding a globe and a spear. Magnus Maximus seized power by leading troops from Britain to oppose the Emperor Gratian. This coin was minted in Trier, Germany, and is made of pure silver.

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.

