

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN RELIGION

AH 31

Altar

This is part of a small, crudely carved altar. Its size suggests it may have been for use in a house, rather than a temple. The Romans believed that each household was looked after by a god called the *Lars familiaris*. Houses often had a small wall-shrine dedicated to this god, among others, including the ancestors of the family. Prayers and gifts were offered to these gods in order to gain their favour. Offerings of food and wine would be placed on top of the altar. Temple altars, which generally stood outside in front of the temple building, sometimes had a small fire lit on the top to consume these offerings. This altar would have been too small for such a procedure - a small piece of food, or a cup of wine, would have been placed on its upper surface.



Head of Sol

The spikes which radiate from the figure's head represent rays of light and help us identify who it represents - the god Sol (the Sun). The stub at the base suggests it may have been mounted on a ritual staff. The God Sol Invictus was worshipped by the Emperor Constantine. When Constantine became the first Christian emperor, he continued to venerate this God. It was Constantine who determined when the festival of Christmas should be observed - on the same day when the birthday of Sol was celebrated, in the heart of winter.



Lettering

This is a modern reproduction of part of an inscription found in a temple in Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester). Archaeologists often find fragments like this and they have to work out what the missing letters would have been. The three Latin words shown here probably read '[c]ollati[onibus]' '[commi]ssum' and '[peregrine]orum'. Three almost identical inscriptions have been found in this temple - all of them seem to commemorate the giving of three gifts (possibly statues) to the temple by a group of 'foreigners' (peregrinum). The difficulty of reading such broken inscriptions is made even more difficult by the fact that the Romans often abbreviated entire words with a single letter.



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Bronze Cauldron

This small, finely made bronze cauldron may have been used for ritual purposes, perhaps to hold a small libation of wine. The word libation is derived from a Latin word - *libare* - which means 'to pour out as an offering'. The shape of this vessel suggests it was made outside Britain.



Ladle

Ladles similar to this bronze example, which has an elegant curved swan's head at the end of the handle, were used in kitchens. The bowl is rather small and shallow, so it could possibly have been used for ritual purposes. *Paterae* (libation pourers) are generally more like shallow pans with a horizontal handles, but occasionally ladles like this are carved on to altars. *Paterae* were used to pour an offering of wine onto an altar - probably a cheaper option, for most people, than to buy and sacrifice an animal.



Glass Lid

This is the lid of a glass jar. Glassware was highly valued in Roman Britain. Vessels of this size and quality often found a secondary use as a cinerary urn - that is, a container for the ashes of someone who has died and whose body has been cremated. Funeral practices varied across the Roman Empire and over time. In Britain, in the early Roman period (mid first to second century AD), cremation was widespread, but by the late third century AD burial seems to have been more popular.



Lamp

Lamps like this were used by the Romans, the Greeks and by many other ancient peoples. They were filled with oil, though animal fat could be used if there was nothing else. A wick protruded from the spout. Lights were lit in temples and before shrines, but this fine lamp has a very non-religious image - it shows two gladiators fighting. This particular lamp was found in the city of Carthage (now called Tunis, on the north-African coast).



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Coins

Coins began to appear in Britain slightly before the Romans arrived here, although these pre-Roman coins do not seem to have been widely used to buy things.



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: Emperor Caligula, who ruled AD 37-41. The reverse shows Vesta, the goddess of the home.

Bottom Left: Emperor Licinius I, who ruled AD 308-324. The reverse shows the god Jupiter, with an eagle at his feet and a statue of Victory held in his left hand. This coin was minted in Egypt. For much of his reign Licinius ruled the eastern half of the empire, while his rival Constantine ruled the western half.

Top Right: Silver coin of Emperor Tiberius, who ruled AD 14-37. The reverse shows Livia, the emperor's wife.

Bottom Right: This is a coin of Emperor Constantine, who ruled AD 307-337. The head, however, is not that of Constantine, but of *Roma* - the spirit of Rome. The reverse shows a wolf suckling Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of the city of Rome. From AD 313-324 Constantine fought with his brother-in-law Licinius I for the title of Emperor. He eventually defeated him and had him killed. Constantine is famous as the first emperor who officially tolerated Christianity (from AD 313). Constantine gradually moved from devotion to the God Sol to wholehearted Christianity, so that by the end of his reign Christianity was the main religion of the Roman Empire. After defeating Licinius, Constantine moved his capital from Rome in the west to the new city in the east which he had founded, called Constantinople.

The three tiny coins are minims or minimissimi. They date from the fourth century. Many emperors were tempted to reduce the amount of gold or silver in their coins. Also, forgers often made cheap copies of official coinage. By the fourth century the system for producing official coins was breaking down and the result was the minting of tiny coins like these, which had a very low value.