

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN COSTUME & JEWELLERY

AH 32/A

The upper layer of this box contains a variety of bracelets, brooches and other personal decorative items.

Bracelets

Numerous bracelets have survived from Roman Britain they were obviously very popular. Both of the examples have the simplest design - plain loops of metal, with unfastened ends. The larger of the two, though, has been finely shaped so that the body of the bracelet is slightly thicker than the more delicate ends. The smaller bracelet - a thin loop of metal which has been twisted to give some texture - is so small that it must have been intended for a child.

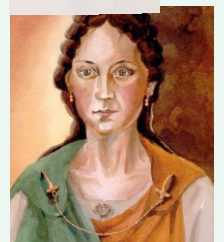


Fibulae

Fibulae - safety-pin-like brooches - were used by both men and women to hold clothing in place. There are four fibulae fragments in this box, one of them a fine almost-complete example, with blue enamelled decoration.



Fibulae were widely used in Britain before the Romans arrived, as well as afterwards, and there are many different styles, although all of them consist of a bowed back and a pin. While being primarily practical they also offered their wearers an opportunity for decoration and display.



Thousands of such fibulae like these have been found in Britain and they must have been an everyday sight. Most styles are 'T' shaped. We can tell from statues that such brooches were worn with the cross-bar of the T facing downwards. The drawing shows how such fibulae probably looked in use.

The brooch with the blue and green enamel roundel belongs to the loose category of Trumpet Headed brooches, so-called because the curved head is supposed to resemble a trumpet. This form seems to have been particularly popular in Roman Britain and was fashionable in the late first century and throughout the second. The rings at the head and foot of this brooch have been snapped off, but otherwise it is in good condition. There must have been a matching brooch to go with it, as the rings would have been used to attach a decorative chain(s), as in the picture. Several similar examples have been found at sites throughout Britain.

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Two Pins

Thousands of such pins have been found from Roman sites across Britain. Women often wore their hair in complicated styles that took a long time to do. These pins were probably used to keep plaits and loops of hair in place. The bronze example has lost its head - probably it had a simple roundish head, like the bone pin.



Faience Melon Bead

Evidence from Roman statues and paints suggests that women frequently wore more than one necklace at a time. A short choker-style necklace could be combined with one or several longer chains. Bead necklaces have seldom been found in a form which enables us to recreate their original appearance. As with this example, beads are frequently found as a single item - perhaps the one that rolled into a crack in the floor when a necklace string broke cascading beads in all directions. This type of bead is generally referred to as a 'Melon' bead. It is made of faience, a form of glass with light-blue or turquoise surface. Such beads are found all over the Roman empire and were obviously very popular. Faience is particularly associated with Egypt, but they were also produced elsewhere. They are known to have been made in London and were probably also manufactured in smaller towns.



Bronze Buckle

This design of this small buckle is still used today.



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Cloth Fragment

Roman Britain was famous for its cloth products, but no complete item of clothing has survived. The example in this box probably dates from the Roman period and was found in Egypt, where the dry conditions are more favourable than they are in Britain to the preservation of cloth.



Cloth was both exported from and imported into Britain. Archaeologists can use a variety of techniques to pinpoint the probable place where fragments of cloth were manufactured. For example, in the western half of the Roman Empire spinners twisted the fibres that made up their thread in a clockwise direction but in the east they preferred an anti-clockwise direction. However, only very careful examination under a microscope will reveal such clues. Several small fragments of cloth that have been found in Britain that are thought to have been made in Egypt.

This fragment is brightly coloured and made of fine thread. It gives some idea of the rich colours in which more privileged individuals from the Roman era would have dressed. No doubt, as in Egypt, much of the clothing that was used in Britain would have been woven from coarse thread. Most of the population probably couldn't afford fine work and the weather favours thick, warm clothing. However, the upper-classes would have been able to splash out on clothes made from the delicate and colourful threads, such as those on display here. There was probably a lot more colour and variety to fashion in Roman Britain than plain tunics and togas!

Shoe Fragment

This is probably the decorated upper surface of the sole of a sandal. The stitch holes running around the edge suggest there was a lower sole (or soles), which may have had studs in, as was common in Roman shoes of all kinds.

