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978-0-521-86012-3 - Artefacts in Roman Britain: Their Purpose and Use

Edited by Lindsay Allason-Jones

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Artefacts in Roman Britain

Their Purpose and Use

Roman Britain has given us an enormous number of artefacts, yet few books available today deal with the province's whole material culture as represented by these artefacts. This introduction, aimed primarily at students and general readers, begins by explaining the process of identifying objects of any period or material. Themed chapters, written by experts in their particular area of interest, then discuss artefacts from the point of view of their use. The contributors' premise is that every object was designed for a particular purpose, which may have been to satisfy a general need or the specific need of an individual. If the latter, the maker, the owner and the end user may have been one and the same person; if the former, the manufacturer had to provide objects that others would wish to purchase or exchange. Understanding this reveals a fascinating picture of life in Roman Britain.

LINDSAY ALLASON-JONES is Director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Artefact Studies and Reader in Roman Material Culture at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and has published eight books and over a hundred academic papers on themes related to the archaeology of the Roman Empire. She is the author of two previous textbooks, *Women in Roman Britain* (1989; 2nd edn 2005) and *Daily Life in Roman Britain* (2008).

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Preface

In 2001 I was approached by Cambridge University Press with the proposal that I should edit a volume on the ‘small finds’ from Roman Britain. The suggestion was that there was a need for a volume to assist students of archaeology to identify the smaller objects found in excavations. However, mature consideration and discussion with a number of colleagues indicated that such a book would not fill an identifiable gap; what was required was a book that helped students to understand the significance of finds and how they fit into our understanding of Roman Britain. Such a volume, it was hoped, would still help students to learn how to identify objects but in a more meaningful way.

The thinking behind this decision was based on a number of considerations. Firstly, vast numbers of artefacts have been discovered on Roman sites in Britain. Any volume detailed enough, and well enough illustrated, to be useful would have to be very large and unwieldy and thus too costly for the proposed purchasers. Furthermore, for those students wishing to learn how to identify small finds there are a number of books on specific types of finds, e.g. Martin Henig on intaglios (1978), Bill Manning on ironwork (1976; 1985), Glenys Lloyd-Morgan on mirrors (1981), which provide the details necessary to make an accurate identification of an individual artefact. It was also the opinion of finds specialists that anyone wishing to get a general idea of the range of objects to be found in Roman Britain would learn more by looking through several of the larger excavation reports and catalogues, e.g. Nina Crummy on Colchester (1983) or Allason-Jones and Milet on South Shields (1984) than by using a single general volume, however comprehensive.

Artefacts are three-dimensional, have weight and are in colour. Successful identification of objects depends on building up a body of knowledge, which can best be done through museum visits and by handling as many artefacts as possible. Learning to recognise artefacts through books alone tends to lead to fundamental mistakes. There is also the problem that Britain was part of a large and very cosmopolitan Empire in which goods were traded or transferred from province to province. One could not hope to produce a volume which dealt adequately with the full range of artefacts to be found across the whole Roman Empire and, indeed, it would be difficult to commission specialists who

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would feel comfortable with such a task. Finds from excavations often vary greatly between the different Roman provinces but there is a core of objects which can be found anywhere; for the latter group there are basic principles which can aid identification, whilst for the more unusual artefacts familiarity with the publications of colleagues throughout the Empire is necessary (see, for example, Cool 2004a).

Colleagues are in agreement that what has proved to be particularly difficult for the average student to understand is how the objects found in excavations fitted into the everyday lives of the cultures we study. Instead, there is often a tendency to regard artefacts as merely *objets d'art*. Recent work on finds, however, has progressed beyond merely identifying the objects and preparing detailed catalogues to using the objects to illuminate our understanding of Roman Britain by studying the objects and their contexts together. Examples of this approach can be found in Peter Wilson's recent publication of the excavations at Catterick (2002a; 2002b) and Hilary Cool's appraisal of the excavations at Brougham (2004a).

It was, therefore, decided that a volume that looked at finds from the point of view of their possible use was required. In this volume a series of themed chapters will be found, such as Funerary contexts, Commerce, etc., each chapter written by an expert in the artefacts that relate to that specific theme. The principle behind this method is the premise that throughout history every object found by archaeologists was originally designed for a particular purpose. This purpose may have been to satisfy a general need of a mass of people or the specific need of an individual. If the latter, the maker, the owner and the end user may have been one and the same person; if the former, the manufacturer had to provide objects which were well designed for their purpose so that others would wish to purchase them or exchange other items for them. Being aware of this not only makes the identification of objects easier for archaeologists and museum curators but also puts those objects into their social and economic contexts.

Pottery vessels, glass vessels and coins are mentioned in this volume but possibly not in the detail some colleagues would have preferred. There are many volumes which assist a student to study such artefacts so they have only been included when they are an essential ingredient to complete a scenario; for example, in a funerary context the offerings or equipment might include pots, glass vessels and coins, so merely to discuss the small finds in such a context would hamper understanding. They have also been discussed if they show images that throw light on different aspects of life in Roman Britain, such as the pottery and glass vessels decorated with scenes of gladiatorial combat.

The contributors have attempted to confine their discussions of the artefacts to within the themed topics rather than by the presumed contexts from which

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they are derived – it is too easy for objects from a fort to be considered as ‘military’ or those from a temple to be ‘sacred’ without thought being given to the actual use of the individual objects. Because of this, some artefacts, such as bells, may well be discussed by several of the authors rather than forced into one section. This is not a weakness but a strength as it is important that students understand that an object may have had several uses, depending on both context and user.

The authors hope that readers of this volume will find it a useful aid to learning more about the material culture of Roman Britain. We hope that it will provide an insight into the processes involved in identifying objects as well as introduce students and colleagues to the importance of artefacts in Romano-British studies. We also hope that the essays will offer an unusual view of everyday life in Roman Britain and encourage our readers to reassess what is known of the people of the province.

All the ancient sources cited in the text have used the translations in the Loeb Classical Library series, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, unless otherwise stated.

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Photographs

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Carlisle Museum and Arts Services (Pls. 3, 30, 53)
Portable Antiquities Scheme (Pls. 6, 7, 38)
The Vindolanda Trust (Pls. 9, 42)
Colchester Archaeological Trust (Pl. 10)
Museum of London (Pls. 11, 12)
National Museums of Scotland (Pls. 13, 15, 55)
Reading Museum Service (Reading Borough Council) (Pls. 14, 16, 44)
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Sussex Archaeological Society (Pl. 19)
Ralph Jackson (Pls. 39, 49)
Colchester Museums (Pl. 40)

Figures

All the figures, with the exception of Figure 22, which is reproduced courtesy of Surrey Archaeological Society, and Figure 24, which is reproduced courtesy of the Centre for Archaeology, English Heritage, were drawn by Mike Bishop.

Abbreviations

AE	<i>L'Année Épigraphique</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin and New York
DCMS	Department of Culture, Media and Sport
MoLAS	Museum of London Archaeological Service
RCHM York	<i>An Inventory of the Historical Monuments of the City of York</i> , vol. I: <i>Eburacum, Roman York</i> (1962) Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England. London
RIB	<i>The Roman Inscriptions of Britain I: Inscriptions on Stone</i> (1965) ed. R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright. Oxford
RIB II.3	<i>The Roman Inscriptions of Britain II.3: Instrumentum Domesticum</i> (1991) ed. S. S. Frere and R. S. O. Tomlin. Stroud
RIB II.4	<i>The Roman Inscriptions of Britain II.4: Instrumentum Domesticum</i> (1992) ed. S. S. Frere and R. S. O. Tomlin. Stroud
RIB II.5	<i>The Roman Inscriptions of Britain II.5: Instrumentum Domesticum</i> (1993) ed. S. S. Frere and R. S. O. Tomlin. Stroud
RIB II.8	<i>The Roman Inscriptions of Britain II.8: Instrumentum Domesticum</i> (1993) ed. S. S. Frere, R. S. O. Tomlin and R. P. Wright. Stroud
RIB III	<i>The Roman Inscriptions of Britain III: Inscriptions on Stone Found or Notified between 1 January 1955 and 31 December 2006</i> (2009) ed. R. S. O. Tomlin, R. P. Wright and M. W. C. Hassall. Oxford
Tab. Vindol. I	<i>Vindolanda: The Latin Writing Tablets</i> (1983) A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas. London
Tab. Vindol. II	<i>The Vindolanda Writing Tablets: Tabulae Vindolandenses II</i> (1994) A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas. London
Tab. Vindol. III	<i>The Vindolanda Writing Tablets: Tabulae Vindolandenses III</i> (2003) A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas. London
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>