

Can You Solve a Ten Year Mystery by Naming this Surgical Implement?

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By Kate Schroder

Readers are invited to help solve a long – running mystery by replying with their thoughts about the likely surgical use for this piece of mid – Roman kit.

A surprisingly large amount of well - preserved surgical equipment has been uncovered across the world during archaeological excavation. Much of it looks and handles the same as more modern equipment, and it is likely, given written accounts of Roman procedures from the both practitioner and patient viewpoints, that some procedures have changed little during the last two thousand years or so, apart from pain relief, antiseptics and antibiotics.

One of my most self - indulgent birthday purchases, setting aside shoes too high to walk in safely, was a Romano- Germanic surgeons kit dated circa 150 AD. I fell in love with it at first sight despite or because of, the blue green patina and the way in which the implements sat in the palm of the hand. Weighty enough to be comforting and balanced perfectly for use.

When I got the chance to look at a quantity of Roman surgical implements kept behind the scenes at the British Museum earlier this year, in the company of a small number of similarly enthused medics and historians from diverse backgrounds including a chap who happily announced himself as a retired Bone Hacker, my weekend was completely mapped out.

We were drawn to a canvas roll containing items shown in the picture above. We called out the type of instruments – scalpels, forceps, probes, and so on, and the range of procedures they probably supported.

Opinion concurred until we reached the piece shown in the second photograph above. The likely use of this item is still unclear – we all agreed to undertake our own research despite the Museum’s senior Roman – artefact expert having declared several years of unsuccessful hunting through documentation and a dead – end of fruitless investigations across medical schools.

We discussed the range of equipment used in modern theatres and worked through the more common Roman instruments we had seen in other locations, eliminating as we talked.



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A variety of surgical instruments are known from archaeology and Roman medical literature, including for example scalpels which would have been made from either forged iron or bronze. Ancient scalpels had almost the same form and function as those of today. The most ordinary type of scalpels in antiquity were the longer scalpels. These long scalpels could be used to make a variety of incisions, but they seem to be particularly suited for deep or long cuts. Smaller, bronze scalpels, referred to as bellied scalpels, were also used frequently by surgeons in antiquity since the shape allowed for delicate and precise cuts to be made. The mystery piece is clearly not a scalpel.

Obstetrical Hooks were used regularly by Roman and Greek doctors. The ancient doctors used two basic types of hooks: sharp hooks and blunt hooks. Blunt hooks were used primarily as probes for dissection and for raising blood vessels. Sharp hooks, on the other hand, were used to hold and lift small pieces of tissue so that they could be extracted, and to retract the edges of wounds. The mystery item doesn't seem to fit into either category. The probe like heads are the wrong way round to be useful as a wound retractor.

Bone Drills Driven in their rotary motion by means of a thong in various configurations. Roman and Greek physicians used bone drills in order to remove diseased bone tissue from the skull and to remove foreign objects (such as a weapon) from a bone. Bone Forceps were used to extract small fragments of bone which could not be grasped by the fingers. Again, the un named item is not positioned to act as

pincer like fragment remover. The twin head is sharp and would damage tissue if placed into a wound as the points face outwards.

The mystery continues. Unless you know better?

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About the Author

Kate Schroder, MBE is an experienced CEO and Director with technical ability across Finance, Bidding, Contracting, Commissioning, Clinical Ops Mgmt, Campaigning, with national awards for Turnaround and organisational development in the Health sector (winner CIPFA and Cabinet Office Turnaround Manager award 2009, Kings Fund Innovation award 2009/10, health sector Campaigner award 2010, MBE for services to Ophthalmology 2009). Commissioning portfolio of responsibility up to £1.6billion, also devising , modelling and implementing QIPP and CIP in Trusts and community, many integrated forms of delivery with acclaimed - evidenced success of a steady £50k per day. Producing NHS Turnaround manual for use in CCGs during Dec 2016 - May 2017 on behalf of NHS England- manual and first volume of clinical cases launched in May 2017, second volume of clinical cases published in late 2017. Board Trustee of FirstLight, an organisation with charitable status supporting Veterans from emergency services and the armed forces NED, Concordia & National Outpatients, UK



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