

Small Finds and Social Practices in Roman Public Baths

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With the assistance of funding generously granted by the Hugh Last and Donald Atkinson funding committee, I conducted preliminary data collection for my post-doctoral research project on social life in Roman military and provincial bathhouses and presented a paper based on my dissertation research in a session which I co-organized at the 2014 Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference.

From 20 – 25 March 2014, with the assistance of Stephen Bull and the staff of the Lancashire County Museum, I conducted archival research on the Ribchester auxiliary military bathhouse, which was excavated in the late 1970s and remains unpublished. Prior to my archival research, I knew very little about this bathhouse artefact assemblage, save that a number of objects were recovered, including intaglios from the drainage system. During my research, I was able to determine the excavated extent of the drains, identify two major drainage contexts with artefact assemblages, and compile an inventory of the objects recovered in the drains.

In addition to three intaglios, these drains contained numerous items of jewelry (mostly small glass beads and melon beads, as well as two finger rings and a brooch), many bone gaming counters, a possible bone needle, two bronze tweezers, a Dupondius of Trajan, and glass and ceramic sherds, representing Samian cups and plates, and commonware bowls and beakers. The presence of construction / demolition debris (window glass sherds, nails, tile fragments) and industrial waste (glass slags and lead splashes) may suggest that rubbish (originating from the baths or elsewhere) entered the drains at least once. As a result, I have been cautious to base my interpretations of social life in these baths upon finds which were recovered in the lowest, continuous drain layers, as these are least likely to be the result of or affected by dumping.

The Ribchester finds parallel those from other public and military bathhouse drains. Gaming counters and ceramic cups and plates illustrate the significance of socialization in the baths, while small glass beads indicate the presence of women (though notably, bone and bronze hairpins, which are clear evidence of female bathers and are common in urban and military bathhouses, are absent from the Ribchester drains). The presence of gaming pieces, drinking vessels, and serving plates from urban public and legionary and auxiliary military bathhouses may indicate that the leisure activities depicted in the passages of Seneca and Martial took place in most, if not all, bathhouses, regardless of location or primary clientele. The presence of women in an auxiliary bathhouse is not particularly surprising, given their presence in other legionary (Caerleon) and vicus baths (Weißenburg, Vindolanda), as well as other Roman military contexts.

After further analysis of the Ribchester finds, I completed and sent a report on the Ribchester drains to the Lancashire County Museums in July 2014. I will present a paper on Romano-British military bathing culture at the 2015 Archaeological Institute of America's annual meeting, in

which the Ribchester baths will feature prominently. I plan to revise this paper and submit it as a journal article in Summer or Fall 2015.

In addition to conducting research at Ribchester, I was also able to visit Vindolanda and arrange with Dr. Andrew Birley and the museum staff to conduct similar research on the artefact assemblages of Vindolanda's two military baths at a future date.

Over 28 – 30 March 2014, I attended and presented a paper (*Not Just for Bathing: Shops and Commerce in and around Roman Public Baths*) at the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference in Reading. The session which I organized with Dr. Stefanie Hoss, *Small Finds and Ancient Social Practices*, was well attended and received, and we plan to publish an edited volume of small finds papers from our session and the conference in Spring or Summer 2015.