



Military type buckles from Yorkshire. £50 to £70 each.



Matching pair of cheek pieces from a horse harness. c.2nd century AD. £195.



Bronze eagle decoration found in East Anglia. c.2nd century AD. 60mm wing span. £150.



Bronze bucket handle mount with horse head terminals. c.3rd century AD from Northumberland. £95



Decorative horse pendant with oak leaves motif. From Yorkshire. Late 1st century AD. £85



Bronze buckle with impressed profiles of male and female deities. Found in Norfolk. Late Roman. £95.



Decorative belt plate from a legionary, with She Wolf and Twins motif. c.1st/2nd century AD. £125.



Bronze handle from a pan or skillet with bear's head terminal. Found in North Yorkshire. 1st/2nd century AD. £125.

Collecting Roman Britain, Part II

by Vincent McCarthy

Military artefacts

At the end of the first century AD most of lowland Britain was settled in a Roman peace, aided no doubt by the presence of at least 50,000 troops and thousands more auxiliary workers. The major legionary bases were at Caerleon, Chester and York, with other smaller forts dotted around the country at places such as Lincoln, Gloucester and Wroxeter. A network of straight roads had been hastily constructed joining these centres thus speeding up the movement of troops and materials.

Roman material around these sites includes a large number of military items. However Roman soldiers took very special care of their equipment as any losses had to be made good from their own wages. Consequently better pieces of kit are not easy to find. Buckles were introduced into this country by the Roman army and they had a multiplicity of uses in fastening belts, armour and horse harness. The style of buckle changed over the years providing a simple and inexpensive field of collecting today. Early buckles and belt plates are often engraved with intricate designs of gods and animals. Sometimes they are silvered with black niello. Later buckles could be of zoomorphic type with dolphins and horses heads. The cavalry were even more flamboyant and used a wide range of pendants and 'horse brasses' to dress up their mounts. Prices will range from £45 to £100, perhaps a little more for something special.

Actual body armour, lorica segmentata, was made up of iron strips fastened with bronze buckles and hinges. Towards the end of the second century a type of scale armour, lorica squamata, and chain mail began to be used and as this was made of bronze, fragments have survived. Fragments can be anything from £50 to £150 depending on how much has survived. Helmets, swords, daggers and spear heads were also made of iron so suffer badly in the ground. Bronze fittings such as guards and bosses sometimes appear. Shields were mostly made from perishable materials with a bronze edge binding which is all that survives today.

Some common finds are literally 'throw away' items such as iron catapult bolts and egg shaped lead sling shot often with a thunderbolt motif on one side, reminders of the fierce battles which took place around the hill forts in the south of the country.

Phallic amulets of various types were popular with the military and were worn to bring good luck and offer protection against the 'evil eye'. They can usually be bought for between £45 and £95 depending on style and size. Other decorative bronze items from chariots and carts and even from the barrack room are found near to military sites. These often take the form of proud and fierce creatures such as lions and eagles. Pan and skillet handles often have the head of a boar at the terminal. These are often found broken from the bowl of the vessel having probably been discarded. Collectors might also wish to include some brooches or fibulae in their collections as some types such as the 'trumpet' and 'crossbow' were popular with the soldiers often being found near the forts. Prices for all of these bronze items need not break the bank. Most would be less than £150.

Inscriptions carved on stone tablets can be found although the major ones will be in museums. These may record the erection of a building or other structure, naming the units responsible for the work. Other inscriptions may come from the graves of soldiers telling us about their unit and length of service, possibly also their commander and even the provincial governor. Such information is useful to historians.

Red pottery tiles were used for roofs or hypocausts and fragments used to be very common finds when fieldwalking. They are harder to find these days especially pieces with a legionary stamp. Most were made at the camp workshops and some were impressed with the number of the legion such as LEG II, LEGVI, LEG XX, sometimes also with the legion's mascot such as a capricorn or ram. These are keenly sought by collectors so prices range from around £45 for a small fragment to £150 or so for a complete tile.

Pottery

The Celtic people of southern Britain had been making pottery since the first century BC, mostly storage pots, bowls and drinking mugs. They also imported some Gallo-Belgic wares mostly in red or black fabric. However with the arrival of the Roman legions there was a desperate need for a vast increase in production. There was also a preference for certain vessels which the soldiers had become accustomed to use back home. The wine flagon was introduced along with drinking cups and a new utensil, the mortarium, a shallow dish with grit roughened inner surfaces for grinding food prior to cooking. Much of this early pottery was made in the legionary workshops until the local potters were trained.

The finest pottery was imported from Gaul and is known as Samian ware. It is a very distinctive deep orange-red colour with highly polished or burnished surfaces. A range of forms were produced including cups, plates, deep bowls and shallow dishes in a variety of sizes, many with moulded decoration depicting scenes from mythology and everyday life. Samian became the preferred table ware for those who could not aspire to silver.

The most common of all pottery is the black and grey ware which was used for cooking pots and bowls. Some types are burnished over part of the surface with simple cross-hatched decoration. This black ware was produced for a long time over much of the country and was used by soldiers and civilians alike. Some local kilns produced distinctive forms and styles of decoration. New Forest ware had beakers with indented sides and sometimes incised linear decoration, whilst Nene Valley products used white painted motifs in Celtic style. Roman-British pottery is scarce in fine condition but more freely available in a damaged state. Good repairs are worthy of consideration at the right price. Intact pots can cost £400 or more, repaired pieces around one third of that.

Glassware

In the early days most glass vessels were imported from Gaul or the Rhinelands and were scarce and expensive. The range of products was extensive and included decorative flagons or bottles often in coloured glass, dishes and cups and dressing table objects like perfume or cosmetic pots and phials. Most glass found in Britain is not in the best condition so collectors may find it difficult to buy nice pieces without resorting to examples from elsewhere in the Empire. It is difficult to give a guide to prices as pieces can range from £60 or so to many hundreds.

Religion

The Romans practised religious tolerance, although the Druids who were held responsible for subversive activities were remorselessly hunted down. Most Celtic deities were revered alongside their Roman counterparts even sharing shrines and temples. To the Romans religion was part public ceremony and part private devotion, a strange mixture of faith, hope and superstition. There were temples to all the old pantheon and of course they still practised animal sacrifice to appease or propitiate the gods. Jupiter, the first and the best, was the patron of the army and Mars, being the god of war was understandably popular. Mercury was the protector of travellers and merchants, useful for the business-minded Romans. The shapely form of Venus and cheerful countenance of Bacchus the wine god found favour almost everywhere.

Legionaries who had seen service in the eastern provinces had developed a reverence for the god Mithras and several temples were dedicated to this deity. These have been identified in London and at sites on Hadrian's Wall where he is depicted wearing a soft and floppy cap and slaying a running bull. Unlike most of the traditional Roman gods, Mithraism attracted serious followers who progressed through a series of initiation ceremonies to reach higher levels of attainment in the cult.

Bronze and brass figurines of these deities are found. Most are only a few inches in height and designed for private devotion. Many homes had a shrine to accommodate them. Figurines are found in various states of preservation. Some were ritually broken for depositing in holy shrines or temples. Style, size and condition govern the price. You will need to pay anything from £150 to £1,000 or more.

In the fourth century the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Occasionally emblems such as the Cross and more frequently the Chi Rho monogram (the first two letters of Christ's name) begin to appear in decoration. A famous example is in the Water Newton treasure at the British Museum. Many of the older gods declined in popularity and there is some evidence of Mithraic sites suffering defacement, but the Roman period in Britain was drawing to its end and fresh ideas began to take over. The end came slowly with over a century of barbarian incursions, high taxes, corrupt and ineffective administration, freedom loving slaves and the breakdown of town life. By the end of the fifth century Britain was finding a new identity in the continental immigrants who had settled on these shores.



Chariot rein fitting with eagle head top found at a military site in Yorkshire. c.2nd century AD. £195.



A bronze oil lamp found in Essex. Late 1st century type. £295.



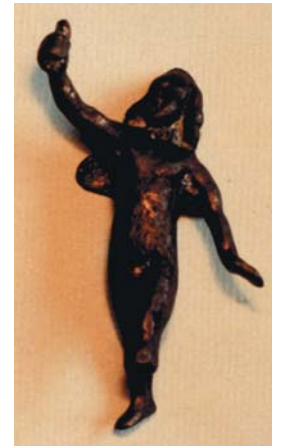
A shallow red Samian ware dish. 2nd century AD. 13cm diameter. £95



Small figurine of Mercury, ritually broken as a votive offering. Found in Sussex. c.2nd/3rd century AD. £150.



A deep glass bowl with soil encrustation inside. c.1st century AD. 10cm in diameter and intact. £295.



A small bronze figurine of Eros. Late Roman. £175.



Bronze figurine of Bacchus holding a bunch of grapes. 10cm tall 2nd century AD. £495

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