

Are Roman seal-boxes evidence for literacy?

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Increasingly, individual classes of artefacts are being studied less in their own right and more to garner support for broader theories and arguments. Roman seal-boxes, for example, are now routinely used as proxy evidence for literacy because it is generally accepted that they were designed to protect wax seals attached to personal letters written on wooden *stylus* tablets. The most unequivocal expression of this position is found in the work of T. Derks and N. Roymans, who argue that the presence of seal-boxes, even in rural areas, is evidence for the penetration of Latin literacy.¹ Their work has proved influential; it was used, for example, by R. Hingley to argue that

The seal boxes on non-villa settlements may indicate that the population of the Lower Rhine were drawing upon aspects of Roman culture — Latin language and the technology of writing — through a creative engagement with the imperial system.²

Yet there had been very little prior research into seal-boxes themselves to support these ambitious theories (a point noted by Hingley himself³).

Seal-boxes are small, hinged, copper-alloy boxes with two main parts, a base and a lid. Both parts are usually cast and connected by an iron hinge-pin. They range in size from 2 to 5 cm. The basic shapes are circular, leaf or piriform, square and lozenge, although there are many significant variations within these basic shapes and some rare shapes fit none of the basic categories. One silver example was recorded in Britain; in other parts of the empire bone and ivory seal-boxes are known.⁴

All seal-boxes, whatever their shape or design, share some basic features (fig. 1): there is always a group of small circular holes (either 3 or 4) in the base, arranged in a square or triangular pattern; and there are also 2 small opposed slots or notches one on each side of the seal-box, formed as part of the base or lid. That these features are ubiquitous must mean that they were each crucial to how seal-boxes functioned.

A distinctive feature of seal-boxes (and one of the reasons why they have attracted attention) is that the lids are often highly decorated. In Britain, coloured enamel was commonly applied in geometric or curvilinear patterns to the exterior surface of the lid. Other boxes have separately-cast zoomorphic

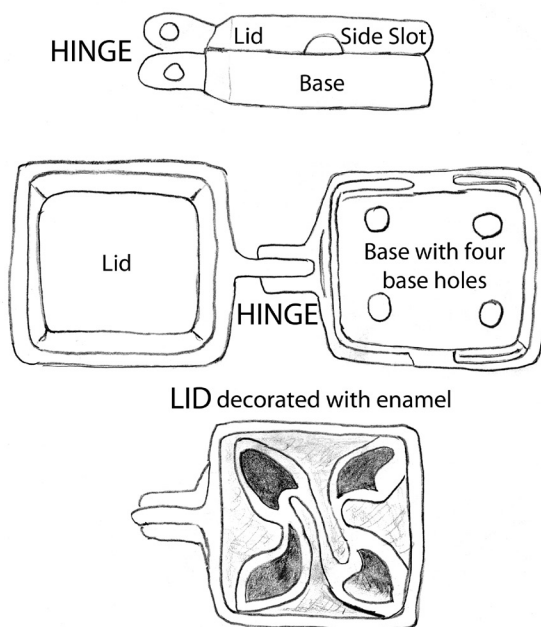


Fig. 1. Diagram of a complete seal-box.

1 Derks and Roymans 2002, 91 and 100-1.
2 Hingley 2005, 98.
3 Ibid. 153, n.50.
4 Derks and Roymans 2002, 91 n.23.