The Domus 'del chirurgo' at Rimini:
an interim account of the medical assemblage

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Ancient surgical instruments are of great importance, for they are the most tangible part of early medicine. They are also the link between ancient medical texts and patients, because they confirm the reality of those texts. Furthermore, as part of the débris of daily life, medical instruments and equipment can shed light on the actuality of ancient medicine, on the practise of medicine at the level of the 'general public', in a way that other types of evidence cannot.

From earliest times people developed strategies to deal with disease and injury. However, much of this medicine is invisible because the theories of health and disease and many of the treatments have left no archaeological evidence. Surgery, on the other hand, is an essentially practical response to disease and trauma which requires tools. Those tools may be as basic as the operator's fingers and teeth. Often, too, surgery may have been performed using simple household objects, domestic implements or the tools of carpenters and other craftsmen. From the time of the early Roman Empire, however, a range of distinctive surgical instruments begins to appear in the archaeological record.[1] It would seem that, alongside the remedies dispensed by relatives and friends and the therapies administered by part-time healers, there was now a growing number of full-time practitioners of medicine and surgery, especially in the larger towns and cities of the empire, who required a supply of purpose-made surgical instruments and medical equipment.

The cumulative experience of surgical practitioners over the millennia had resulted in the development of operative instruments that were specifically designed for, or adapted to, surgical interventions on the human body. Not only were the instruments well designed, but many were exceptionally finely crafted and often exquisitely decorated.[2] Roman metal-workers manufactured sharp blades, fine-pointed needles, catheters with an immaculately smooth surface, and many other precision tools. Most were made of copper and its alloys, principally bronze and brass, which could be cast, forged or cold-worked. For bonding purposes tin-lead solder was commonly used. Iron, chosen especially for blades, was always forged, and Roman blacksmiths knew the technique of carburisation to produce steeled tools.

The technical virtuosity for the manufacture of surgical instruments lay in the hands of the Roman craftsmen who made them, but the stimulus for innovative design and the incorporation of ingenious features may have come from some of the healers themselves. However, although new instruments were invented and novel features introduced, many of the tools of surgery acquired a distinctive form that changed very little over the centuries. Examples have been found throughout the empire and their distribution implies widespread uniformity of surgical practise, even if the medical theories that lay behind the surgical interventions differed.

The discovery of individual instruments helps to build up a picture of Roman surgical practise, but much more informative are the sealed groups of medical instruments found in some graves.[3] The reason for this kind of burial rite is not known, but it is usually accepted, at least, that the deceased person had been a healer, and the instruments may be seen as his (or her)

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1   E. Künzl, "Forschungsbericht zu den antiken medizinischen Instrumenten," *ANRW* II 37.3 (1996).

2   See, e.g., L. J. Bliquez, *Roman surgical instruments and other minor objects in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, with a catalogue of the surgical instruments in the "Antiquarium" at Pompeii by Ralph Jackson* (Mainz 1994); R. Jackson, "Roman doctors and their instruments: recent research into ancient practice," *JRA* 3 (1990) 5-27; id., "Medical instruments in the Roman world," *Medicina nei Secoli* 9.2 (1997) 223-48.

3   E. Künzl with F. J. Hassel and S. Künzl, *Medizinische Instrumente aus Sepulkralfunden der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Bonn 1983).