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The Roman combination knife and spoon

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There is a small group of Roman spoons with purse-shaped bowls and short moulded handles that is usually noted more for the highly decorated interior of their bowls than for the fact that their handles have flat terminals, unlike other Roman spoon handles which are generally longer with points or finials. A stray find made at Helpston (Cambs.) in 1980, the most elaborate example in the group, was later acquired by the British Museum and published by C. Johns. She noted that into the terminal of the handle "is set an iron tang which has broken away flush with the silver. The spoon is thus evidently incomplete"; she further suggested that the handle probably ended in a knife-blade, like that of the Lyon spoon (cat. no. A1, below). In fact, a few complete examples of this type of spoon do survive, with a knife-blade attached to the flat terminal, so it seems worth presenting the complete and incomplete examples of these 'knife-spoons' that are known to me (see catalogue below).

The bowls and handles are of silver, bronze or bone, while the few surviving blades are of iron, as one would expect, except for two (A3 and A4). The shapes of the bowls and handles were assigned a date of the 2nd- or 3rd c. by D. E. Strong on stylistic grounds.² The spoon bowls of all but four examples (A3, A4, B7, B8) are purse-shaped, and nearly all the silver examples have attractive floral decoration in niello. In addition, the spoon bowl from Helpston has the figure of a boar outlined in niello and filled with gilding. The spoon from Worms (B15) is also gilded. Two of the spoon bowls from Cologne have inscriptions — VTEREFELIX on the oval bowl which derived from a burial with pottery and latest coins of c.270, and ADELFI on another which came from a small hoard with latest coins of c.280. The single example in bronze (B2) is without provenance but was purchased in Germany.

The handle of the spoon from Helpston is by far the most elaborate, having a lively representation of a cupid cast in the round: he is seated, resting one foot on a crouching hare. Another handle from Cologne (B10) is also conceived in the round, being cast in the form of a typical Roman table leg with lion's head and clawed foot at either end. Other handles are in the shape of faceted balusters or columns, one decorated with a string of ivy leaves in niello. The bone handle has a criss-cross pattern which would have aided as a grip. The handles are all (except for B2 which is plain, and B5 which has a hawk's head) joined to the bowls in the form of a lion's head, which is stylised to a greater or lesser extent.

The iron blades survive in only three examples; by their nature they are the least well preserved part of the implement. They were fixed to the handles by means of an iron tang inserted into a hole in the terminal of the handle, where it remained in position presumably because it fitted tightly (in the case of the bone handle possibly it was glued, for otherwise it might have split the bone). There is a bronze disk on the bone terminal. The two surviving blades are hump-backed like other Roman domestic knives, both of the fixed and folding kind. The blade in Saint-Germain-en-Laye has a circular bronze stud on one side of it; the purpose of this stud, if not merely decoration, is unknown, but it may be compared with two small bronze rings inlaid onto the blade of the clasp-knife from Piddington (Northants).³

CATALOGUE

The following list includes all the examples (both complete and fragmentary) of which I am aware. All are unprovenanced and unpublished except as stated otherwise.

- 1 C. Johns, "A Roman silver spoon from Helpston, Cambridgeshire," *Britannia* 13 (1982) 309-10.
- 2 D. E. Strong, *Greek and Roman gold and silver plate* (London 1966), still the standard work on the development of Roman spoons.
- 3 R. Friendship-Taylor and R. Jackson, "A new Roman gladiator find from Piddington, Northants," *Antiquity* 75 (2001) 27-28, fig. 1.