

Lindsay Allason-Jones, ed., *Artefacts in Roman Britain. Their Purpose and Use.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xviii + 356. 25 B&W figures; 3 tables. ISBN 978 0 521 86012 3 (Hb); 978 0 521 67752 3 (Pb). US \$82/ £50 Hb; US \$31.99/ £ 18.99 Pb.

Having been approached with the suggestion that she edit a volume ‘to assist students of archaeology to identify the smaller objects found on excavations’, after discussion with colleagues Lindsay Allason-Jones choose to produce a very different book, one ‘that helped students to understand the significance of finds and how they fit into our understanding of Roman Britain’. In achieving her aim Allason-Jones has assembled a list of thirteen authors who are all recognised leaders in the subjects they contribute on. In assembling that list, and by her chosen approach Allason-Jones has ensured that not only students, but also all Roman-period archaeologists who are not finds specialists, owe her a debt of gratitude as the resulting volume is far more valuable than any identification manual produced at a similar length could have been. As Allason-Jones states, successful identification of archaeological finds is best learnt through museum visits and the handling of objects with support of well-researched and illustrated excavation reports and catalogues, along with authoritative specialist volumes. Those seeking such publications need only turn to the extensive supporting bibliography which provides an extremely useful introduction to the literature where most of the key volumes are listed.

The volume starts with an introductory chapter that poses questions which finds researchers must seek to answer both to identify material but also, in Allason-Jones’ words, ‘to use the resulting information constructively’. That chapter alone should make the volume required reading for anyone seeking to develop as a finds researcher. The last statement should not be seen as questioning the value of the thematic chapters that make up the bulk of the volume; they too are immensely valuable, being written by authors for whom using their information constructively is second nature. There is no claim that the volume is comprehensive—‘pottery vessels, glass vessels and coins’ are not discussed in detail, but are subsumed into those thematic chapters where they serve to inform understanding of the subject under consideration.

Brickstock’s consideration of ‘Commerce’ understandably focuses on coinage, bringing in the only other significant material culture available to him, weights and measures. In a succinct discussion he manages to apprise the reader of the difficulties and potentials of the material and demonstrates that coins can tell us far more than simple dates.

Crummy acknowledges the difficulty of her subject matter, not least the general lack of intact objects associated with ‘Travel and Transport’, but nonetheless she succeeds in presenting a thorough consideration that ranges from ‘walking’ through wheeled transport and riding to sailing, but one that concludes that most aspects of the subject are understudied.

Manning’s contribution on ‘Industry’ reprises the subject by activity, carpentry, leatherworking, etc., and points to our reliance on metal artefacts for the bulk of our evidence, albeit supplemented by bone and in exceptional circumstances other

materials. He also points out that some industries leave few diagnostic objects, although other types of evidence may be available, for example, the remains of pottery kilns.

Rees discusses crop husbandry by following the agricultural cycle from cultivation through care of the crop to harvesting, with further sections on animal husbandry and food processing. Her concluding remarks emphasise a theme that all contributors address to a greater or lesser extent, that surviving objects are only part of the picture that need combining with other data.

Bishop's treatment of 'Military Equipment' notes that 'military artefacts' can be 'truly military', non-military (for example, for hunting), or possibly military 'depending on context'. In the light of that he discusses the use, deposition and survival of artefacts and finishes by emphasising that each artefact 'has a story to tell' and, particularly in the case of metalwork, military or otherwise, its simple survival makes it special, given that the bulk of the material will have been lost to decay or subjected to recycling.

In 'Writing and Communication' Tomlin provides an introduction to the subject that ranges from stone inscriptions, through writing tablets to graffiti, curse tablets and ownership marks and manufacturing stamps. He examines the role each played and the evidence they provide for literacy.

Mould has perhaps the most difficult task with 'Domestic Life', given the range of evidence she has to cover. She succeeds admirably, providing not only an interpretative overview of her subject, but also demonstrating the value to understanding of those objects that might be considered 'ordinary' or 'mundane'.

Eckardt's appropriately brief treatment of 'Heating and Lighting' reflects the fact that much of the evidence for heating is structural, although that structural material can appear in the artefact record, and also the limited penetration of artificial lighting as evidenced by lamps away from major towns and early garrisons.

Swift's consideration of objects of 'Personal Adornment', having introduced the main types, concentrates on what they can tell us. She examines 'reconstructing dress assemblages', 'why & how objects were used' and broader issues of the identities that might be being proclaimed by the wearers of the objects, or that those studying them might be able to discern, along with magical, ritual and religious uses. Her brief conclusion rightly emphasises the importance of context to understanding 'the possible meanings that ... an artefact may have had in the past'.

Allason-Jones herself deals with 'Recreation'. Her wide-ranging discussion covers the material we have associated with the amphitheatre through that for hunting to board games. In it she acknowledges both the limited evidence for some activities and the ambiguity of, or our limited understanding of, some of the material.

Jackson's treatment of 'Medicine and Hygiene' while covering those, mostly scattered, finds of medical equipment that we have and the objects associated with both bathing and personal hygiene, concludes by emphasising the paucity of our knowledge and importance of the few references in the Vindolanda tablets that hint at what might have been the norm elsewhere.

In dealing with 'Religion' Bird is perhaps at an advantage over some other contributors as at least some specifically religious objects can be readily identified. However, as she states, 'any object or deposit may have had a religious significance', a challenge to understanding compounded by our limited understanding of Roman-period structured deposition.

Cool's contribution on 'Funerary Contexts' brings the volume to a fitting end. Her discussion covers a range of issues, including the problems and potentials of cremation burials, the necessity of providing robust data that will be of value to future researchers posing new questions, and the purpose and meaning of grave goods. In identifying those and other issues, Cool and the other contributors seek to raise the bar for those seeking to study Romano-British finds; as Allason-Jones set in her introduction the objective of their efforts should be to 'understand the significance of finds and how they fit into our understanding of Roman Britain'. Anyone who chooses to be guided by this excellent volume should find achieving that objective that much easier.

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