

# Selected Roman Small Finds from the Cemetery at nos. 3 and 6 Driffield Terrace, York

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## Abstract

This report deals with a selection of Roman small finds found during excavations conducted by the York Archaeological Trust at nos. 3 and 6, Driffield Terrace, York in 2004 and 2005 (Grid References SE59324510 and SE59285095. Site Codes YORYM:2004.354 and YORM:2005.513). The excavations revealed an unusual inhumation cemetery where the people being buried were overwhelmingly young males, and where decapitation was normal. The cemetery appears to have been used as a cemetery in the third and fourth centuries but dating evidence is sparse.

The finds include an unusual pair of iron rings around the ankles of one young male. The implications of these are considered, and it is argued that they cannot be regarded as fetters in any normal sense. There was also a small group of material including a set of miniature silver smiths' tongs which may have been offerings on a grave marker.

The report was originally written in November 2006 and has been up-dated in December 2015 for inclusion amongst the project documents at <http://www.yorkarchaeology.co.uk/resources/finding-the-future/gladiators-2/>

The site information is derived from the original assessment reports written by Patrick Ottaway and Kurt Hunter-Mann in 2005. Information about the pottery is based on Ruth Leary's 2006 report. The human bone information is derived from Caffell and Holst 2012.

## The leg irons

The outstanding finds from the cemetery were the leg irons found around the ankles of a young male aged between 26 and 35 years (skeleton 3DT37/4344, grave 4352). His decapitated body formed part of a double burial. His bones told the story of an injury-prone life, as well as one that might have been painful due to an abnormality of growth in his right scapula. His injuries included skull fractures, soft tissue damage to his right hand, and a broken left leg. At the time of his death he had an active chest infection.

The leg irons are both round-sectioned iron bars, with one end beaten flat, and bent into a circle (see fig. 1). Sf 331 which was found around the left ankle had the flattened end

overlapping the blunt end on the exterior. Sf 321 from the right ankle had the flattened end on the interior and the end overlapping this and bent out at 90°. The rings appear simply to have been forged to shape and the ends overlap rather than being welded closed. The bars were substantial. Measured from the X-radiograph, that around the left ankle (Sf331) has section diameter of between 17.5 and 25mm, whilst that around the right ankle had one of 15 – 23mm. The internal diameters (again measured from the X-radiograph) were 90 - 97mm and 82 - 89.5mm respectively. They weigh 1.871kg and 1.440 kg (with corrosion products).

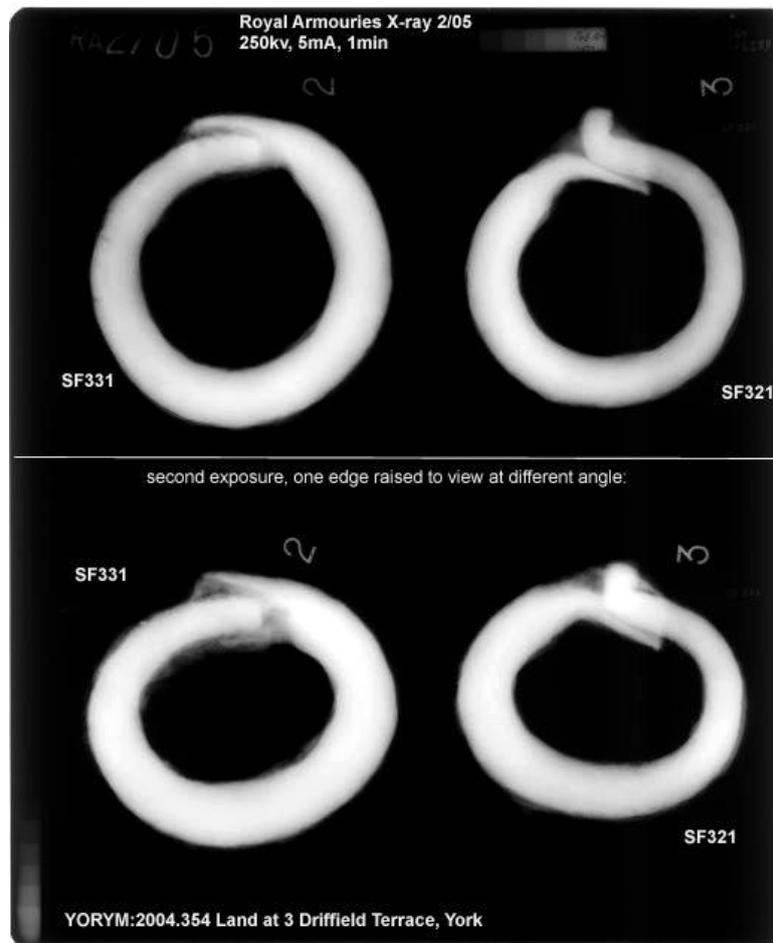


Fig. 1: X-radiographs of the leg irons Not to scale. (Source. YAT)

At the outset it should be noted that these are not shackles in the strict sense. A large number of slave / prisoner shackles have been recovered from late Iron Age and Roman contexts across Europe, sufficient numbers indeed for typologies of them to have been developed.<sup>1</sup> Chains and shackles for the neck, wrists and ankles are known. In all cases the shackle part consists of either two hinged segments that can be placed around the appropriate limb and locked into place, or a semi-circular element where the closing element is formed by the chain. In no case is the shackle simply a ring of iron that cannot be opened which was the case here.

Very occasionally burials have been found where the deceased was shackled. A skeleton found at Remedello di Sopra near Brescia (Italy) had fetters of the Bavay type around the ankles. This is a common form which may be taken as typical of the way fetters generally worked. In these one part of each fetter was fitted with a ring that passes through a loop on the other part before being attached to the bar of a barrel padlock.<sup>2</sup> They illustrate the basic requirement of fetters very well, i.e. to make it very difficult for a slave or prisoner to escape. At most the individual found near Brescia in these fetters would only have been able to shuffle along as the maximum distance between the feet was restricted to c. 20cms. The internal diameter of the closed fetter was c. 82 by 92mm which would have been too small for the individual to have slipped their feet out of it when closed. A cemetery outside of Saintes in the south-west of France produced the remains of four individuals with what appear to be shackles around their ankles. Although the site is still in the post-excavation phase having only been excavated late in 2014, published photographs indicate that these shackles too are ones that are

1 Thompson 1994

2 Thompson 1994, 121, Illus. 85, 159 no. 93.

designed to have been opened<sup>3</sup>.

An intriguing instance of someone who may have been shackled comes from Pompeii. There the body of a young man of 20-25 years was found outside of the Porta Capua. He had been fleeing at the time of the eruption in AD 79 when he was overcome by one of the hot gas surges.<sup>4</sup> He had an iron ring around each ankle. The inner diameter of these as drawn is now c. 100mm but may have originally been larger as they appear to have a thick corrosion crust. These unfortunately do not appear to have been X-radiographed and so there is no way of telling whether they are formal shackles or rings. Both have a pronounced thickening at one point, possibly suggesting the former.



Fig. 2: The leg irons *in situ* (Source YAT)

The iron rings around the ankles of the Driffield Terrace body (see Fig. 2) correspond to such fetters in only one respect, the internal diameter. It would not have been possible for feet to have been slipped through these rings. They would not have been effective as fetters because each foot was left free-moving. They are not joined together and show no traces of any attachments for chains. If they were to have been joined, a loose chain would have had to have been threaded through both rings and fastened in some way. Without such a chain it

3 See for example <http://www.pasthorizonspr.com/index.php/archives/12/2014/shackled-individuals-found-in-gallo-roman-cemetery-in-southwest-france> (checked 7th December 2015).

4 Etani *et al* 2004, 128, Foto 5-8; Etani 2010 Fig. 58 no. 1 Kazumichi 2010.

is difficult to see how escape could have been avoided. The rings are indeed heavy, but they are not so heavy as to immobilise an adult. The individual from Pompeii shows how it was possible to run with such heavy rings around the ankles.

There are two instances known to me of individuals wearing iron leg rings that were not formal shackles. These were on two bodies found close together in the Finsbury Circus cemetery in the upper Walbrook area of London<sup>5</sup>. In one case a young man aged 18-25 years had rings with internal diameters of c. 100mm on each ankle. The other body just consisted of the lower legs, one of which retained a ring with an internal diameter of c. 80mm. The individual was an adult, but it was not possible to age or sex them. In neither case could any indications of how the terminals were joined be seen on the X-radiographs due to the heavily corroded state of the rings. It was clear though, that they were solid rings and could not have been opened as in a proper shackle. The more complete of the bodies had the arms positioned behind the back below the pelvis, and so it is possible that he might have had his hands bound. Both graves were assigned to Period 3 of the site's use, indicating a mid to late second century date.

The leg rings at York and London pose considerable problems of interpretation. As they are not fetters in the normal sense of the word, it can be questioned whether they necessarily indicate that the men with them were slaves or prisoners; though the possible binding of the arms of one of the Walbrook bodies might suggest the latter status. Roman shackles are complex pieces of forging for a very good reason. The aim was to keep the individual secure but not to kill them. The shackles may have been uncomfortable to wear, but they would not have been harmful other than superficial sores and abrasions. The

<sup>5</sup> Harwood *et al* 2015, 95-6, 144 no. Bu30/1, 148 no. Bu73/1.

smaller rings at both London and York would have been too small to have been forced over a living adult foot and ankle, and it would have been difficult to have to have done that with the larger ones. The alternative would be to forge them in place. The injuries associated with putting these rings onto a living person would have been dreadful. Each substantial bar would have had to be heated to red heat and though it would have been possible to forge it to a U-shape away from the person, each end would have had to be hammered closed around the ankle. An eminent consultant physician has described such an activity as likely to cause 'the most horrific damage, including most likely fractures and severe burns' (T. Waldron *pers comm.*). It is unlikely that anyone would survive such an operation. When the bones of the York individual were studied initially, it was suggested that the areas of porous woven bone seen on the legs are the result of the individual having been shackled for some time. If this is correct it seems highly unlikely that it could have been as the result of these rings.

The various factors would seem to suggest that the rings were forged around the ankles of a dead body, and the question then arises - why? It could have been to suggest a servile condition, but in that case it seems a great deal of effort when it would have been easier to use a set of proper fetters. One possibility is that it was done to stop the deceased walking as a ghost amongst the living though, given that the York man was accompanied by hobnailed shoes, there must be assumption that he was free to continue his journey to the afterlife.

A third possibility, strange as it might seem, is that it might just have been a mark of distinction. As Leary has made clear, much of the pottery in the fills of these graves consists of small abraded sherds most probably derived from grave-side activities that ceased at the end of the third century. The fill of this individual's grave contained second century

material but that merely provides a *terminus post quem*. The only other dating evidence is provided by the hobnailed shoes, a Roman fashion that does not appear to have continued much into the sub-Roman world. There is no evidence that would prevent this burial being of very late Roman date. If it did belong to the later fourth century, then the use of such considerable quantities of iron could well be significant as there does appear to be a change in attitude to the material then. During much of the Roman period iron had been a common material, but in the fourth century iron artefacts start to be deposited again as hoards, just as

they had been in the late prehistoric period.<sup>6</sup> People were regarding iron differently, and any individual treated as this one has been could well have been regarded as special in some way.

We can only speculate why this man should have gone to his grave wearing these monstrous rings, but there are sufficient oddities about them that the assumption that they indicate he was a slave or a criminal should not be made unthinkingly.

6 Manning 1972.

## Finds associated with Graves 1150 and 1130

Four objects are associated with the complex which includes Graves 1150 and 1130. One of these – the iron goad (no. 1, fig. 3) – came from the upper fill of Grave 1150. It is of a style normally termed a Rees Type II.<sup>7</sup> It has occasionally been asserted that these were pen nibs but the case has not been made convincingly, and an agricultural use still seems the most likely. It would be an unusual item to be a grave good, though it can be noted that the upper fill had a considerable amount of horse bones. Possibly therefore it may have been involved in the funerary ritual, rather than being a residual find from earlier occupation.

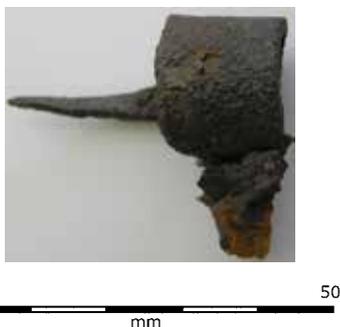


Fig. 3: Iron goad (no. 1) Scale 1:1. (Source author)

7 Rees 1970, 76.

Three items came from context 1095 which may have been a marker mound over graves 1150 and 1130. The context formed part of the deposits grouped together as possible upcast from grave-digging (Group 13), but was singled out as being a possible grave marker because of its compact nature and the convex upper surface. The items form a rather odd and disparate group consisting of a miniature set of silver tongs (no. 2), a glass disc (no. 3) and a bone hair-pin (no. 4).

The miniature pair of smith's tongs is a most unusual find (Fig. 4). Miniature artefacts are not infrequent finds in Romano-British contexts, but the most common items are wheels and axes.<sup>8</sup> Tools such as these tongs are much less common, though another miniature set of tongs in copper alloy is known from the fort at Great Chesters.<sup>9</sup> Kiernan<sup>10</sup> has made the interesting suggestion that miniature tools such as hammers and tongs may not have been votive items in the same way that many miniature items were, but rather small

8 Green 1981, 253.

9 *ibid* 268 no. 8

10 Kiernan 2009, 188

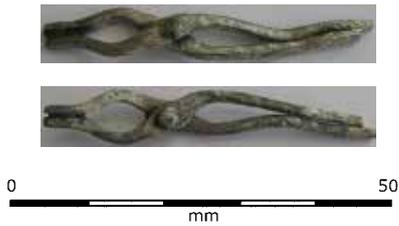


Fig. 4: Silver miniature smiths' tongs no. 2. Scale 1:1. (Source author)

practical tools for fine metalworking of the sort needed for jewellery. The material no. 2 is made from would seem to preclude a practical interpretation like that. Both the material and the subject matter seem to set no. 2 apart from the general run of miniature items, as does the context. Miniatures tend not to be found in funerary settings in the north, though some, mainly axes and spears, have been found in graves in the south.<sup>11</sup>

It is tempting to associate no. 2 with the type of miniatures generally termed Mithras symbols, though it has long been known that this is a misnomer as many of the models have no connection with the cult of Mithras. Groups of these small models have been found in a number of fourth century graves in the Rhineland. They generally consist of beam balances, tools (especially those to do with agriculture and carpentry), ladders, keys, frogs and lizards.<sup>12</sup> The only example of such a set from Britain is a find made prior to 1854, described as having been found in a tumulus in Sussex but with no further details. In publishing these items, Manning<sup>13</sup> drew attention to the fact that some, though not all, of the miniatures in these sets are items that also occur on the votive hands of the god Sabazius. He was an eastern, saviour god

11 Philpott 1991, 187

12 e.g. Behrens 1939; Haberey 1962, 401; La Baume 1971, 83; Abb 5. 8 -15.

13 Manning 1966.

commonly identified with Bacchus.<sup>14</sup> It is possible, though by no means certain, that the Mithras symbols may have been associated with his worship. Smiths' tools have not been identified amongst these sets of miniatures, and only one hand has a depiction of a set of tongs on it.<sup>15</sup> So, whilst it might be suspected that the symbolism that made Mithras symbols appropriate for funerary contexts might also be working here, this cannot be demonstrated with certainty.

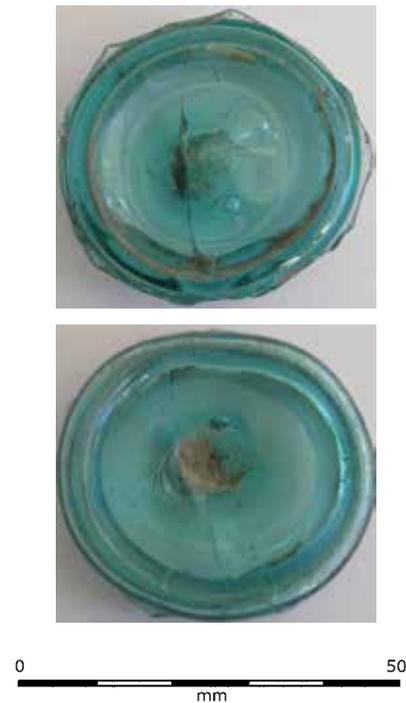


Fig. 5: Glass grozed base no. 3. Scale 1:1 (Source author).

The glass disc (no. 3 - fig. 5) has been deliberately fashioned from the base of a blue/green vessel. The combination of the colour and the pontil scar on the underside suggest that the vessel was manufactured in the later second or third centuries. The wear patterns seen on it suggest it may have been used as a disc for some time before deposition as they are not in places where wear might be expected when the base still formed part of a vessel. Discs such as this are not uncommon in

14 Turcan 1996, 315-25.

15 Vermaseren 1983, 1 no. 1.

Romano-British domestic glass assemblages though their purpose is unknown. Swift has drawn attention to the fact that this is a type of re-use that seems especially prevalent within northern military sites and small towns<sup>16</sup>, and it seems likely to be part of the re-use of material that becomes such a feature of late Roman assemblages. It is thus possible that no. 3 may have been deposited a century or more after the vessel itself was made. The third item from this context is a broken fragment of a hair-pin of Crummy<sup>17</sup> type 6 (no. 4), a type in use during the third and fourth centuries.



Fig. 6: Bone hair-pin no.4. Scale 1:1. (Source author).

This small assemblage of items would better fit an interpretation that the context was a deliberately constructed marker, rather than a chance accumulation of objects derived from other graves. In the first instance the presence of a hair-pin would argue against the material being derived from such a source. Hair-pins were an ornament type that females wore. Where they are found in graves with securely sexed adults it is nearly always with females; as is demonstrated by those from such cemeteries as Butt Road, Colchester,<sup>18</sup> the Lankhills cemetery at Winchester,<sup>19</sup> and

from the Eastern cemetery in London.<sup>20</sup> A preserved head of hair, still preserving the pins in situ, from an inhumation burial found at the Railway Station Booking Office site in York,<sup>21</sup> makes the connection between females and hair-pins most graphically. Pins have occasionally been found with sexed male burials as at Poundbury,<sup>22</sup> but this is exceptional. At Driffeld Terrace where only a single female was identified, it seems highly unlikely that a hair-pin would have been deemed a suitable grave good. Miniatures such as silver tongs have been found as grave goods, but again at this cemetery where grave and pyre goods of any type other than vessels seem to be absent, it would seem to be stretching the limits of credibility that this was the only such item and that it just happened to be disturbed.

If these items were deliberately included in a marker mound then it might fit the pattern of grave-side ceremonies suggested by the pottery assemblage. The pottery from the feature includes some of the latest Roman pottery recovered and this might suggest that the individuals buried in graves 1150 and 1130 were the focus of continuing attention which might have differed in nature from that demonstrated by the pottery. Certainly those graves stood apart from many in the cemetery because of the inclusion of parts of horses. Laying items on the mound or pressing them into it, might have been part of the rituals of remembrance. Why these items should have been chosen is impossible to say without knowing who these people were and what gods they and the bereaved looked to.

16 Swift 2014, 138-40.

17 Crummy 1979, 161.

18 Crummy *et al* 1993, 40, Table 2.51 no. G174.

19 Clarke 1979, Table 2 grave number

100.

20 Barber and Bowsher 2000, Table 115 nos. B238, B444, B839.

21 Hartley *et al* 2006, 157 no. 108.

22 Greep 1993, 108 nos. 2 and 7.



Fig. 7: Bone cheek-piece no. 5. Scale 1: 1 (Source: author)

### Other Finds

The presence of elements of horses in some graves makes the presence of no. 5 (fig. 7) an interesting feature. It came from one of the contexts interpreted as grave up-cast (Group 13). The function of these items, also known as toggles, has been much debated but an identification as a bridle cheek-piece is now preferred; and the wear seen on one side but not the other, seen on no. 2 would fit this identification. They appear commonest in the late Iron Age and early Roman period but have occasionally been found associated with late Roman pottery.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> see Greep 1995, 1127 no. 909 for discussion and references.

The final item from 6 Driffeld Terrace considered here is the highly abraded base fragment from a pipeclay figurine found in the medieval ploughsoil. Very little remains to provide any clue as to the figure type but the base appears to be angular which, of the commoner types, would suggest it was more likely to be from something like a Dea Nutrix than a Venus figurine. Pipeclay figurines do occur as part of grave furniture from time to time,<sup>24</sup> but here it might be questioned whether this fragment was associated with the cemetery. The shape of the blunt point would be an unusual one for the figure to break as, or become worn into, in the ploughsoil. The possibility exists that it may have been deliberately re-worked, and for it to have

<sup>24</sup> see discussion Cool 2004, 400-401.

arrived at the site at a much later date.

The excavations at 3 Driffield Terrace produced a copper alloy pelta mount (no. 7, fig. 8) of a type that was a common part of military uniform in the later second to third centuries.<sup>25</sup> At that period it was unusual for individuals to be buried wearing such items, though an inhumation at the Derby Racecourse cemetery is an exception to this.<sup>26</sup> There an unsexed individual had been wearing both a belt and a baldric, and two very similar pelta mounts (though with only a single rivet) had been used to fasten the baldric to the belt at the front and back.<sup>27</sup> The possibility that this was a disturbed grave good cannot, therefore, be ruled out; but it would be very unusual.



Fig. 8: Copper alloy pelta mount no. 7. Scale approximately 1:1. (Source author)

25 Oldenstein 1977, 178-84, Taf. 53.

26 Wheeler 1986, fig. 105 no. 220; fig. 121.

27 *ibid* fig. 120 no. 7.

## Catalogue

The numbers at the head of each entry are in the order Context : Small Find number.

1 1144: 318  
Goad. Iron. Rectangular strip bent into penannular ring with pointed spike projecting from one end. Diameter 18 x 15mm, total length 37mm, width of band 14mm.

2 1095: 236  
Miniature tongs. Silver. Two square sectioned bars expanding at point c. one-third way along where they are riveted together. Jaws now closed; handles bent out of shape. Length 42mm, maximum width 7mm, thickness 1.5mm, rivet diameter 2mm.

3 1095: 235  
Base fragment converted to disc. Blue/green glass. Tubular pushed-in base ring; base centrally domed with pontil scar and additional glass on underside. Side grozed. Grozed edges, side of base ring and some of the higher parts of the interior of the base show wear. Diameter 41 x 38mm, thickness c. 7mm.

4 1095: 268  
Hair-pin. Bone. Disc head with very shallowly conical upper face; circular-sectioned shank with central thickening; lower part of shank missing. One edge of head blackened. Present length 47mm, head diameter 4mm, maximum shank diameter 4mm.

- 5 1114:338  
Bridle cheek-piece. Bone. Fragment of long bone with cancellous tissue hollowed out. Sub-rectangular perforation through both faces. Band of diagonally cross-hatched grooves around each end with framing groove; groove framing each side of perforation with grooved decoration between them on both side faces – a diagonal cross with the two outer zones filled by vertical grooves. Most of one perforate face and parts of one grooved face missing. The best preserved grooved face has shallower grooving than the other side, probably due to wear. Length 101mm, maximum diameter 23mm, perforation dimensions 22 x 14.
- 6 1018: 357  
Figurine; base fragment. Pipeclay. End of rectangular (?) base retaining faceted edge of figurine now formed into a blunt point. Width of base 40mm.
- 7 4368: 335  
Pelta mount. Copper alloy. Openwork pelta mount with two integral rivets and washer on underside. One side missing and piece bent in two. Depth c. 20mm, original width c. 26mm, length of rivet 6.5mm.

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