

Legion

life in the Roman army

1 February – 23 June 2024
Exhibition activity cards

The British
Museum



Ages
11–14

KS3

Bronze cavalry helmet, England, 1st century AD.

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Section 1

Enlisting in the army

Lamp of soldiers on a boat, Egypt, 10–50 BC



The letters from an Egyptian marine, Apion, who lived during the AD 100s have survived for nearly 2,000 years. His letters home recount his distant posting to the Bay of Naples in Italy via a turbulent sea crossing. This lamp fragment shows Roman marines aboard a warship, ready to fight at sea.



Discuss

- Who do you think might have owned this object?
- How do you think these soldiers felt to be travelling away from their homes to an unknown land or battle, not knowing if they would return?
- Why do you think there is an image of a centaur (mythical being that is half-man, half-horse) at the front of the boat?



Find

- A centaur figurehead about to throw a rock
- A triple battering ram on the front of the boat
- Soldiers carrying their helmets, oval shields and spears
- Rows of oars along the side of the boat
- A military standard (a long pole/staff carrying the symbol of different groups within the army, sometimes a flag/banner)

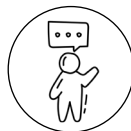
Section 1

Enlisting in the army

Ankle sock, Egypt, AD 200–400



Soldiers in the Roman army had to provide their own clothes and equipment – a soldier called Terentianus saved money by sending home to ask for his. He recounts receiving a tunic and felt socks. He wore socks with his sandals and needed to replace his footwear twice a month because of all the marching soldiers had to do. This sock was knitted from red wool and was made in Egypt. It divides between the big toe and the rest of the toes so the sock can be worn with flip-flop style sandals.



Discuss

- Do you think it would be comfortable to march long distances in Roman footwear (probably carrying a heavy load of equipment)?
- Do you think it was fair for soldiers to have to pay for their equipment?
- Why do you think clothes and shoes rarely survive through the centuries?



Find

- Leather sandals and hobnailed marching boots. Which would you prefer to march in?
- Letters, such as those included in the Vindolanda tablets, in which soldiers ask their families to send them clothes and equipment.

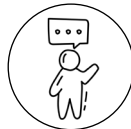
Section 2

Ranks and roles

The Ribchester hoard, England, AD 43–200



A hoard is a group of objects buried together on purpose. Hoards often contain valuable objects. Some hoards contain seemingly precious objects buried to keep them safe, some contain objects seemingly used for trading or working and others contain objects that may have been buried as a gift for the gods. The Ribchester hoard (named after the Lancashire village it was found in) contains cavalry equipment. The cavalry, who fought on horseback, were the elite soldiers of the Roman army. The hoard was hidden in Britain during the late AD 200s or early AD 300s.



Discuss

- Why do you think this hoard was hidden?
- How would wearing the helmet feel? Do you think wearing it would help you prepare for battle?



Find

- Objects that prove the hoard belonged to a soldier in the cavalry ranks.

Section 3

Dressing for battle

Fulham gladius (sword), Thames River, England, AD 1–75



This is the Fulham sword, found in the River Thames, in London. Watery places and places beneath the ground were probably thought of as interfaces where the worlds of humans and the gods met. Valuable objects might have been thrown into water as votive offerings to help keep the gods happy and the world in balance.

Short swords like this were specialised stabbing tools and standard issue for Roman foot soldiers.

The sword is made from iron and the decorative scabbard from bronze. The handle, which no longer exists, was probably made from wood.



Discuss

- Consider the different materials used to make this sword. It is displayed with a recreation handle – what do you think happened to the original handle? Do you think the iron sword and bronze scabbard looked like this when they were new?
- Why do you think these particular images were used to decorate the scabbard?



Find

- A stag, hounds and hares, a bird, butterflies
- The twin demi-gods Romulus and Remus who, in some mythical stories, founded the city of Rome
- The wolf who brought the twins up when they were abandoned

Section 4

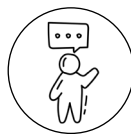
Camps and campaigns

Selection of medical instruments, Turkey, AD 1–200



The Roman army had permanent medics who treated soldiers who got ill at their forts or camps and set up field hospitals on campaign to treat battlefield injuries. There was no antiseptic to help fight infection and soldiers had to endure terribly painful treatment with only a basic opium-based anaesthetic (if they were lucky). Doctors had limited success in curing patients and had to be careful not to be blamed for worsening a patient's condition.

Records from Vindolanda fort on Hadrian's Wall suggest that contagious eye ailments were a common problem. Lice combs suggest nits were also an issue for many soldiers. More serious diseases, including plague, spread easily in the cramped living conditions.



Discuss

- Which job would you have preferred to do in the Roman army? Would you have chosen to be a doctor?
- What did soldiers do to try and keep fit and healthy?



Find

- A bone saw
- A folding knife
- A pair of forceps

Section 4

Camps and campaigns

Bust of Septimius Severus



Septimius Severus was a Roman governor from North Africa, who was proclaimed emperor by his troops. He ruled from AD 193–211, fighting and travelling widely alongside his armies. Severus increased soldiers' pay, raised their social status, allowed them to wear the fine clothing and jewellery of Roman gentlemen and get married. This marble bust shows him in the imperial travelling outfit of a tunic and military officer's cloak. He died from an illness while in Britain.



Discuss

- Why do you think Severus made these changes to improve life for the soldiers?
- Why do you think it was important for an emperor to fight and travel with his soldiers? Can you think of any challenges this might have led to back home in Rome?



Find

- The marble bust of Julia Domna, Severus's wife. Her hairstyle (it's a wig!) resembles a military helmet. Imperial doctors suggested everyone on campaign crop their hair for hygiene so perhaps wearing a wig was a deliberate attempt to show her commitment to the army.
- The terracotta pot which historians also think is based on Julia.