

Legion

life in the Roman army

1 February – 23 June 2024
Exhibition activity cards

The British
Museum



Ages
14–16

KS4

Bronze cavalry helmet, England, 1st century AD.

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Section 1

Enlisting in the army

Bronze boat prow, Greece, 1 BC – AD 1

Following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, the generals Octavian and Marcus Antonius split Rome's provinces between them (the Second Triumvirate). Octavian ruled the West and Antonius the East (and another general Lepidus ruled Africa). Their relationship became increasingly hostile and culminated in the Battle of Actium on the western coast of Greece in 31 BC. Octavian fought and defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra VII (reigned 51–30 BC), the last pharaoh of an independent Egypt. At this time Egypt was a 'client-state' of Rome, producing much of the grain needed to feed the empire. Antony and Cleopatra chose to commit suicide rather than be captured. Rome took control of Egypt and it became Octavian's personal province. Octavian then became the first Roman Emperor, 'Augustus'.

Mastery of the Mediterranean Sea was vital for the control and economic success of the Roman empire. Marines were usually non-Roman citizens and often recruited from seafaring nations like Greece, Phoenicia and Egypt. They faced hazardous sea travel and extra chores on land, for the lowliest wages of a basic auxiliary soldier. Shore labouring included roadbuilding and guarding Rome's grain fleet. More dramatic duties involved policing cities, firefighting and disaster search and rescue.

This prow fitting is believed to come from a scrapped ship that participated in the battle of Actium. Its size suggests that it probably belonged to a ship like a trireme (an oar-powered wooden ship). The figure is wearing a Hellenistic Phrygian (a region in present-day Turkey) helmet and an *aegis* (poncho or breastplate) of the type worn by the ancient Greek goddess Athena. The figure is believed to represent Athena's Roman counterpart, Minerva, goddess of wisdom and war.



Discuss

- Why might one of Octavian or Antony's warships have this particular goddess on the prow?
- Why do you think Octavian and Anthony were unable to continue sharing power?
- Do you think Antony and Cleopatra could have beaten Octavian?



Find

- Objects which incorporate images of gods or goddesses and discuss why you think a particular deity was chosen for that specific object.

Section 2

Ranks and roles

Colosseum coin, Rome

The Colosseum, opened in AD 80, was the largest amphitheatre ever built by the Romans and seated more than 60,000 people. It was built by three Flavian emperors, from a new dynasty which had come to power after several years of civil unrest. Construction began in AD 72 under Vespasian (ruled AD 69–79) and was completed in AD 80 by his son Titus (ruled AD 79–81). The games were very closely associated with the power of the emperor – their success was a way of winning the support of the Roman people. Running the games was hugely expensive. Politicians might offer to pay for the games to gain people's votes or favour with the emperor. Games could last for more than 100 days with the bloody 'entertainments' including gladiatorial contests, wild beast hunts and executions. Gladiators could be prisoners of war, enslaved people or convicted criminals, though around half were freemen who had chosen this profession. There were numerous amphitheatres in cities all around the Roman empire.

The Colosseum was built on the site of Emperor Nero's unpopular Domus Aurea or Golden Palace which had taken huge amounts of land away from the people of Rome. It was a remarkable feat of engineering and included underground cages from which animals could be released and water systems for flooding the arena for *naumachia* (mock sea battles). Awnings to protect people from the weather could be pulled over the seating area (by marines). The seating was arranged according to status with the poor, women and enslaved people sitting at the very top.



Discuss

- Why was it in the interests of the rulers to keep the population entertained by staging (often free) events like those which took place at the Colosseum?
- Why did the Flavians choose to build the Colosseum on this site?
- Why would a freeman choose to become a gladiator?
- This coin was minted in Rome. Why would images of buildings like this appear on coins?



Find

- What other kinds of public buildings or infrastructure did emperors commission to demonstrate their power and increase their popularity with the people? Can you find evidence to support these ideas in the exhibition?



Section 2

Ranks and roles

Bronze cavalry mask in form of an Amazon, Italy, AD 100–200

Like all soldiers in the Roman army, cavalry men had to buy their own equipment, but were paid extra to keep a horse. Owning a horse was prestigious – infantry centurions and all officers of noble birth had a 'mount'. There were also specialist auxiliary cavalry units, such as one from North Africa which was based at Hadrian's Wall in Britain.

Spectacular, colourful displays of military horsemanship, weapon drills and sometimes even mock battles were carried out by these elite riders. On these prestigious occasions, which acted as both training session and entertainment, both men and horses were dressed in flamboyant finery. This cavalry parade helmet, representing a woman's face, might have been worn at such an event. The wearer of this mask is re-gendered like a masked classical actor, probably to represent an Amazon, one of the race of legendary female warriors. Along with the Trojans, the Amazons were used to represent the 'barbarian other' in Greek art such as the Parthenon sculptures. The Romans saw themselves as the successors to the 'civilised' ancient Greeks, adopting many ideas from ancient Greek art, architecture and culture. Battles between the ancient Greeks and Amazons were a common motif in classical art and cavalry sports teams appear to have re-enacted them on the parade ground.



Discuss

- Why was being in the cavalry seen to be more prestigious than being in either the infantry or the marines? What documentary evidence can you find in the exhibition to support this?
- Why do you think it was important for the Romans to re-enact historical and mythical battles?
- How would it feel to wear this mask? How do you think wearing it would help a cavalryman prepare for an actual battle?



Find

- Other helmets in the exhibition. Look closely at the designs and evidence of combat to decide which were likely to be for battle and which for cavalry sports or military parades.
- The Draco standard, which was also used for cavalry parades. What do you think the importance of military standards was?

Section 3

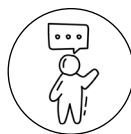
Dressing for battle

Iron sword of Tiberius, Germany

The Roman empire was vast and there was always the potential for rebellion. The army was vital for retaining control and quelling any uprisings. At the beginning of the Imperial period, under the emperor Augustus, the army became fully professional and there were around 30 legions posted all over the empire. A typical legion had around 5,000 ordinary legionary soldiers. Legionary soldiers had to be Roman citizens and they were supported by a roughly equal number of non-citizen auxiliary soldiers. Auxiliary soldiers might have specialist skills such as being skilled horsemen or archers. They were often posted far away from their home countries.

This iron sword and its ornate bronze scabbard was almost certainly commissioned for a senior officer to commemorate a victory in the lengthy and bloody military campaigns in Germany, where the sword was found. It may have been an official gift or reward. Victory in these campaigns was essential for the extension and protection of Rome's empire.

The images decorating the scabbard show the emperor Tiberius posed as the god Jupiter, flanked by the gods Victory and Mars Ultor ('the Avenger'). The general Germanicus credits his military victory to the emperor, according to strict imperial protocol, as he gives a statuette of victory to Tiberius (who was also his uncle). The first emperor Augustus is depicted in the roundel below.



Discuss

- Consider the materials the sword and scabbard are made from and how they have changed or survived over time. What materials are more likely to survive? What other factors might affect how likely an object is to survive?
- Why was it important for the generals to credit the absent emperor with a victory in battle? What was this intended to avoid happening between the generals?
- Why was the scabbard decorated with these deities and an image of Augustus?



Find

- Other objects within the exhibition which show how emperors used visual imagery as propaganda to help build on and extend their power.

Section 4

Camps and campaigns

Terracotta panel, AD 1–100



The Roman writer Tacitus stated: 'The booty of a city... always falls to the soldiers if it is captured, to the officers if it surrenders.' The spoils of war, which included people, were commonly featured in Roman triumphalist art.

This terracotta panel shows prisoners being led through Rome as part of a triumphal parade. They may be prisoners captured when Romans, under the emperor Trajan, defeated the Dacians (in present-day Romania) in AD 107, but it is not certain which event this panel refers to. Trajan was born in Roman Spain and was the first non-Italian emperor. He was considered one of the most successful soldier emperors and under his rule the Roman empire grew and reached its greatest extent in AD 117.



Discuss

- Why did the 'booty' go to the soldiers if a city was captured but the officers if it surrendered?
- How were people captured by the Romans after a battle treated?
- What effect did parading prisoners of war through the streets have on the prisoners and on those who saw them?
- How do you think Roman citizens were meant to feel when viewing images like this on the public buildings and monuments that surrounded them in Rome (and cities across the empire)?



Find

- Further depictions of Roman victory in battle. Consider why it would be important for these images to appear both on large, monumental objects and small-scale objects like coins.

Section 5

Fort life

Medusa pendant, Germany, AD 200–300

Decorative personal adornments are common finds from Roman forts and can offer insights into the beliefs of their wearers. Roman religious beliefs followed those of the ancient Greeks: they were polytheistic, meaning they believed in many different gods and that the gods and spirits ruled every aspect of life – personal, environmental and cosmological. The Romans also believed in magic and the power of charms and amulets to protect them.

This pendant depicts Medusa, the most famous of the Gorgon 'monsters', with snakes for hair and eyes that could turn anyone looking at her to stone. She is shown in a round frame which may be an allusion to Athena's shield, which was decorated with the head of Medusa. Medusa's head was also shown on the breastplate worn by an enormous gold and ivory statue of the goddess Athena which stood in the ancient Greek Parthenon.

The material (jet) and craftwork are British – and the jet came from Whitby beach in Yorkshire. Jet can be easily carved and has a particularly unusual physical property: it is electrostatic. Handling jet produces a static charge, which may have attracted the hair or textile fibres of its owner, particularly when rubbed. The face of this pendant is worn smooth, probably from where it had been rubbed by ancient hands. This effect, combined with the mythological imagery, made for a powerful amulet – a magical object designed to protect its user from supernatural harm, offering luck or protection.



Discuss

- Why would Medusa feature on a protective amulet when she was seen as a mythical 'monster'?
- Why did Roman imagery often refer back to ancient Greek stories, art and architecture?
- What other magical/belief practices did the Romans use to try and protect themselves or their families and homes – or to gain power over or punish their enemies?



Find

- Other personal, non-military, items which have been found in a Roman fort. What do these help us understand about life for the people living there?

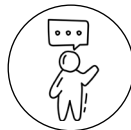
Section 5

Fort life

Rudge cup (replica)

This is a replica of a small bronze cup which has lost its handle, found in a well on the site of a Roman villa. In forts and camp soldiers cooked and ate meals communally in their section, of eight men. A *trulla* (handled drinking cup) like this was essential equipment and used like a ladle to dip into well buckets or streams. This cup is unusually ornate and was probably made as a souvenir. It shows a schematised drawing of Hadrian's Wall and is inscribed with names of the five forts lying along or associated with the Western part of Hadrian's Wall – MAIS (present-day Bowness-on-Solway), ABALLAVA (Burgh-by-Sands), VXELODUM (Stanwix), CAMBOGLANS (Castlesteads), BANNA (Birdoswald). Originally the design was picked out in coloured enamels, as can be seen on the handle displayed alongside it from another *trulla*, which is decorated with enamelled images of hares and hounds.

Hadrian's Wall, commissioned by Emperor Hadrian (ruled AD 117–138) after his visit to Britain in AD 122, was a continuous defensive barrier that guarded the north-western frontier of the province from 'barbarian' invaders. It extended from coast to coast, running for 118 kilometres (73 miles) from Segedunum (Wallsend) on the River Tyne in the east, to Bowness on the Solway Firth in the west. Many of the troops stationed in Britain were auxiliary soldiers who came from all over the empire. An altar inscription tells us that a North African cavalry unit, (the numerus Maurorum Aureliatorum), was based in Britain at Aballava, at the western end of Hadrian's Wall, between AD 200 and 400. The unit was probably brought over by the emperor Septimius Severus (reigned AD 193–211), himself a North African.



Discuss

- Why did auxiliary units often serve away from their home territories?
- What does the decoration of this cup, and where it was found, suggest about its use and who it was made for/owned by?
- What were the similarities and differences between being a Roman legionary soldier and an auxiliary soldier? Find documentary evidence in the exhibition to support your ideas.



Find

- Objects in the exhibition which help us find out more about daily life in the Roman army.
- A similar cup being used on the imaginifer's daughter's tombstone.

Section 7

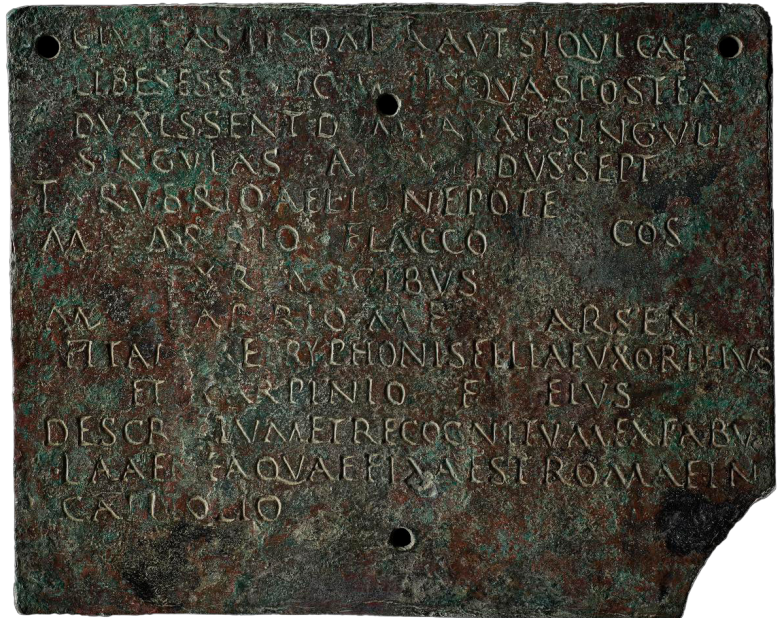
Leaving the army

Diploma of discharge, Egypt, 8 September AD 79

Regular pay and social status proved attractive incentives for potential new recruits to join the Roman army. Free (unenslaved) people from all over the empire enlisted. Serving alongside men from unfamiliar cultures, soldiers were often posted far from home to places unknown to them.

This bronze diploma confirms the formal discharge from the Egypt-based fleet of a rower, Marcus Papirius. The diploma had to be signed by seven witnesses and sealed. It was awarded on the 8 September AD 79 (incidentally the year Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried the city of Pompeii).

For the 50% of those fortunate enough to survive illness and injury after 25 years' service (26 for marines), the rewards of honourable discharge and social transformation awaited. Legionaries or citizen-soldiers received a lucrative bonus upon retirement – a pension worth a decade's pay. For auxiliaries, like Papirius, although they did not receive a similar financial reward, a fundamental change of status awaited as Roman citizenship gave them and their children rights and privileges in law, taxes and property. Once a father earned citizenship, his sons, armed with good references, could seek to join the elite legions of the army. The diploma also granted citizenship to Papirius's wife and their son, Carpinus.



Discuss

- Why was the diploma made from bronze?
- Why did a person have to serve the full number of years to get their diploma and citizenship?
- Why did only the citizen soldiers or legionaries receive a financial bonus on retiring?
- Why were soldiers encouraged to save money for their retirement? What happened to their savings if they left before completing their time in service?



Find

- Evidence for the benefits received by both legionary and auxiliary soldiers who made it to retirement.
- The remains of a less fortunate soldier who probably died at Herculaneum (also buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius) within weeks of the creation of this diploma?