

These boots were made for Romans

 londonmuseum.org.uk/blog/these-boots-were-made-for-romans





Banner-roman-leather-shoes. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Examples of Roman leather shoes.

Waterlogged conditions on the Thames waterfront and in the Walbrook river valley have created the oxygen-free environment needed for the survival of ancient organic artefacts.

Around 3,500 objects have been found, many of them extremely well preserved. However, until recently very little of the Roman leatherwork from London had been studied or published. Recently, a project was undertaken to catalogue and reinterpret around 750 objects in the London Museum's collection of material, excavated from the 19th century to the 1970s.

“Leather footwear became a key part of the growing materialism of the Roman period”

Major technological innovations of the Roman period

Eighty-nine per cent of this material is footwear. This is typical of Roman sites, where tough vegetable-tanned shoe leather is better preserved than the more fragile leather used in furniture, tents or clothing. The introduction of vegetable-tanned leather and the expansion of ironworking were some of the major technological innovations of the Roman period; allowing the mass production of sturdy, hobnailed shoes. As a disposable form of fashion, leather

footwear soon became a key part of the growing materialism of the Roman period. London's Roman leather is therefore a vital resource for studying technological and social change in the period.



- 1st-century-caliga-london. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

A 1st-century caliga from London.



- Near-complete-carbatina-london. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

A near-complete carbatina from London, around 70–125 CE.

A shoe for every occasion

We tend to think of the Romans only wearing their iconic caliga sandals; the robust hobnailed marching shoe of the Roman military. But these shoes weren't in vogue for very long, going out of style less than half a century after the conquest of Britain and the foundation of Londinium. In their place came a vast array of fashionable footwear.

The simplest are carbatinae – a sort of moccasin-like sandal made from a single piece of cattle hide with a seam up the back, cut into loops and laced over the foot. Despite their simplicity, carbatinae were often decorated with openwork heels and elaborate arrangements of loops.

“For the fashion conscious, sandals were the thing to wear for most of the Roman period”

As they would have worn down quickly, carbatinae may have been used as indoor shoes, and are found mainly in women's and children's sizes. Several in the London Museum's collection have been repaired with extra circles of leather attached to the heel and toe with thonging (known as a clump repair). One of these shoes has had its sole cut apart to make clump patches for another.

Carbatinae-with-clump-repairs. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Carbatinae from London with clump repairs.

Footwear fashion trends across the Roman empire

One of the strange things about Roman footwear is how the same styles were worn across the empire, even when they didn't seem suitable for northern climates. For the fashion conscious, sandals were the thing to wear for most of the Roman period. Roman sandals were shaped to resemble feet and toes, and were secured to the foot with a thong between the toes in a similar way to a modern flip-flop. The insoles were often decorated with stamped designs, including occasional astrological symbols.

Sandal styles changed rapidly, indicating the spread of fashion trends across the empire, from Northern Britain to Egypt. Although initially only worn by women, they were adopted by men in later centuries. These men's sandals took fashion to the extreme, with toes so wide they would have changed the way you walked.

“Shoes like this were perfect for showing off colourful socks”

Roman--toe-sandals-1st-3rd-centuries-AD. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Roman toe sandals from London, 1st–3rd centuries CE.

Even enclosed shoes made little concession to the cold. Boots of this type were worn in Germany, and on Hadrian's Wall in the far north, but were decorated with elaborate punched designs. Shoes like this were not much good for keeping the cold out, but were perfect for showing off colourful socks.

If the shoe fits...

As archaeologists, we're interested in more than just cataloguing the material we find. We want to use it to explore past places and societies. One of the best things about Roman footwear is the intimate connection to people of the past.

Because of how closely shoes fit the foot, they provide a source of biometric data that is only rivalled by skeletal remains. Individual variation means that we can't always say with certainty whether an individual shoe was worn by a man, woman or child, but we can safely assume that men's shoes will be on average larger than those of women and children. By looking at the proportions of shoes of different sizes, we can therefore get a sense of the demographics of a whole site.



- Enclosed-boot-roman. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Enclosed boot from London, around 75–125 CE.



- Roman-shoe-insoles-different-size. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Roman shoe insoles of different sizes from London.

Studying London's shoes in this way reveals something surprising – women's and children's sizes outnumber men's. Adult men may represent only 22% of the surviving shoes. Other Roman sites (mostly military sites) have a distinct bias towards men. This may reveal differences in the populations of ancient forts and cities. Moreover, the fact that women and children were able to wear shoes may be an indication of their comparatively high social status. In early medieval settlements, or even early modern Scotland, women and children rarely wore shoes.

The many meanings of Roman footwear: Medicinal, political and social

Shoes have also been modified or manufactured to accommodate health problems that affect the feet. In London, several shoes have hobnails on the inside of the shoe. These may have been uncomfortable, but perhaps they were added because of the belief in the healing properties of metals in the Roman world. One particularly odd example has a copper alloy

stud in the heel bearing an Imperial image. As well as potentially being medicinal, this could be interpreted as an act of private political protest – literally trampling the Emperor underfoot.

This isn't the only instance of personal belief or identity being expressed through footwear. Astrological symbols can be found impressed into sandal insoles, or executed in arrangements of hobnails.



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- Roman-shoe-insole-copper-alloy-stud. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Shoe insole with copper-alloy stud from London.



- Roman-shoes-astrological-symbols. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Roman shoes with astrological symbols from London.



- Roman-fragment-gilded-sheet-leather. External Copyright. Photo by Dr Owen Humphreys, Kingston University London and AHRC

Fragment of gilded sheet leather from London.

In the early 3rd century, Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus*, Chapter 12) even decried this trend as going too far, lamenting the way young women wrote messages in the hobnails of their sandals, carving “amorous embraces” into the earth as they walked. The women of Roman London do not appear to have embraced this particular fashion, but the high rollers of the city certainly embraced the “gold-plated and jewelled mischievous devices of sandals” that Clement so disliked. While most of the leather we find is black from waterlogging, a few exceptional pieces sparkle with gold leaf.

This project on shoes has given us a unique glimpse into the society of Roman London, a place with a distinct urban character, drawing fashion inspiration from across Europe. We see evidence of soldiers, but learn much more about the lives of women and children in the city. Through these objects we can meet people from all walks of life; from those who cut up one pair of shoes to repair another, to those with gilded sandals and colourful socks.

Owen Humphreys is Senior Registered Finds Specialist at MOLA. Hear more from Owen Humphreys on the subject of [Roman shoes](#) on BBC.