

ROMAN FOLDING SPOONS

by
David Sherlock

There is a small class of spoons from Roman Britain which may be called folding spoons, since they either folded in half or had attachments which unfolded from the ends of the handles. Only ten from Roman Britain, and an eleventh from France, are known to the writer. Less than half of these have been adequately published, and the group as a whole has not been discussed.

The spoons may be divided by their shapes into two basic types, here called A and B, and a third, a hybrid C. As far as is known from ordinary spoons with comparable shapes, this typological order seems to be roughly chronological, so it is convenient to consider the types in that order. The spoons will first be listed under types and then discussed.

Type A (Fig. 1)

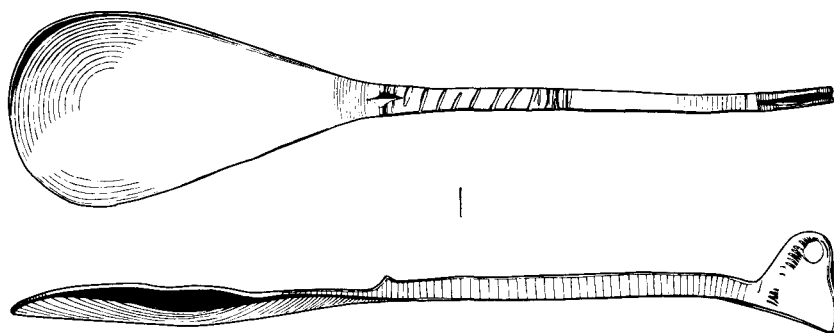
1. Bronze. Length 108mm. From the Walbrook stream-bed, Bucklersbury House site, London, 1956. Date range A.D. 50–150. (Museum of London Acc. No. 20086.) Unpublished.
2. Bronze with iron blade. Length 119mm. From silt fill of a Walbrook tributary, Angel Court, London, 1974. Not later than A.D. 180. (Museum of London ACW 74, Registration No. 61.) Excavation report in preparation.¹
3. Iron. Length 104mm. From Cow Roast Inn (Herts. SP/197103), Romano-British settlement. 1974 excavations. (Small find No. 294.) From a pit with coins of c. A.D. 222–273.² Almost identical to No. 2, but less complete.

In this type the handle is not hinged to the bowl, but has a hinge for a blade at the other end. The bowls are an elongated shape with a raised notch where they meet the handles. The three examples are not quite the same because the first has a hinge at right angles to the bowl, while on the other two it is on the same plane. On the recently discovered example from Angel Court (No. 2) a fragment of the iron blade survives, about 35mm long and 14mm wide. There is a bulge half way along the handle which X-ray photography has shown to be a repair where the handle broke in two.

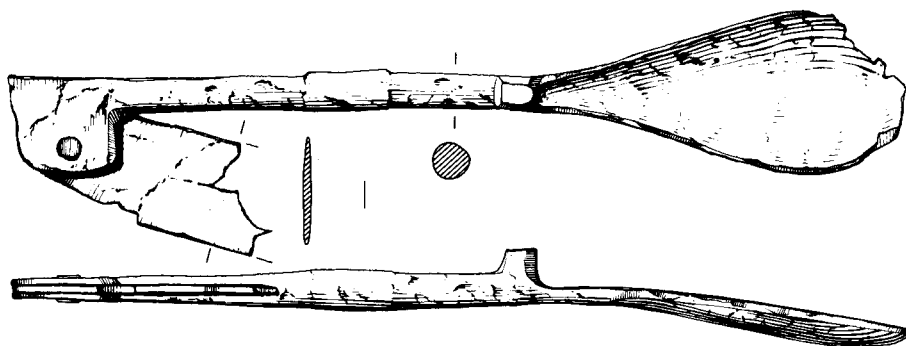
These spoons are plainer and more crude than those of Type B. The only decoration is on No. 1 which has small engravings running half the length of the top side of its handle.

Type B (Fig. 2)

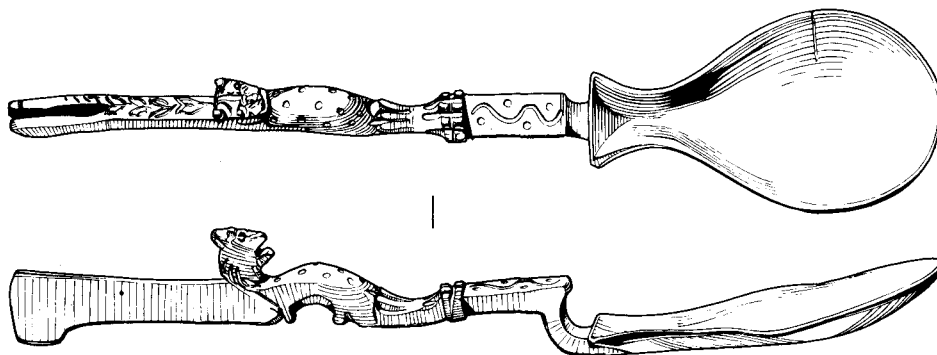
1. Bronze. Bowl only. Length 48mm. From Richborough. (Now Cambridge, Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Trinity College Loan Collection No. 1914.) Published.³
2. Bronze, tinned. Bowl only. Length 46mm. Unprovenanced but thought to come from a villa site near Chepstow (Monmouthshire). (Birmingham City Museum, Acc. No. 232.69.) Unpublished.
3. Bronze, silvered. Bowl only. Length 49mm. From Shakenoak (Oxon.) villa. Published.⁴ Excavated from a late third century, but unsealed, deposit.
4. Bronze. Length 106mm. From Traprain Law (E. Lothian). (Now Edinburgh, National Museum of Antiquities.) Published.⁵ From a third or fourth century A.D. context.
5. Bronze. Length 106mm approximately. From Hockwold-cum-Wilton (Norfolk). (Norwich



TYPE A.1



TYPE A.2



TYPE C.1

Fig. 1 Roman folding spoons: Type A, 1. Bucklersbury House, London. 2. Angel Court, London. Type C, 1. Northern France. (all $\frac{1}{i}$)

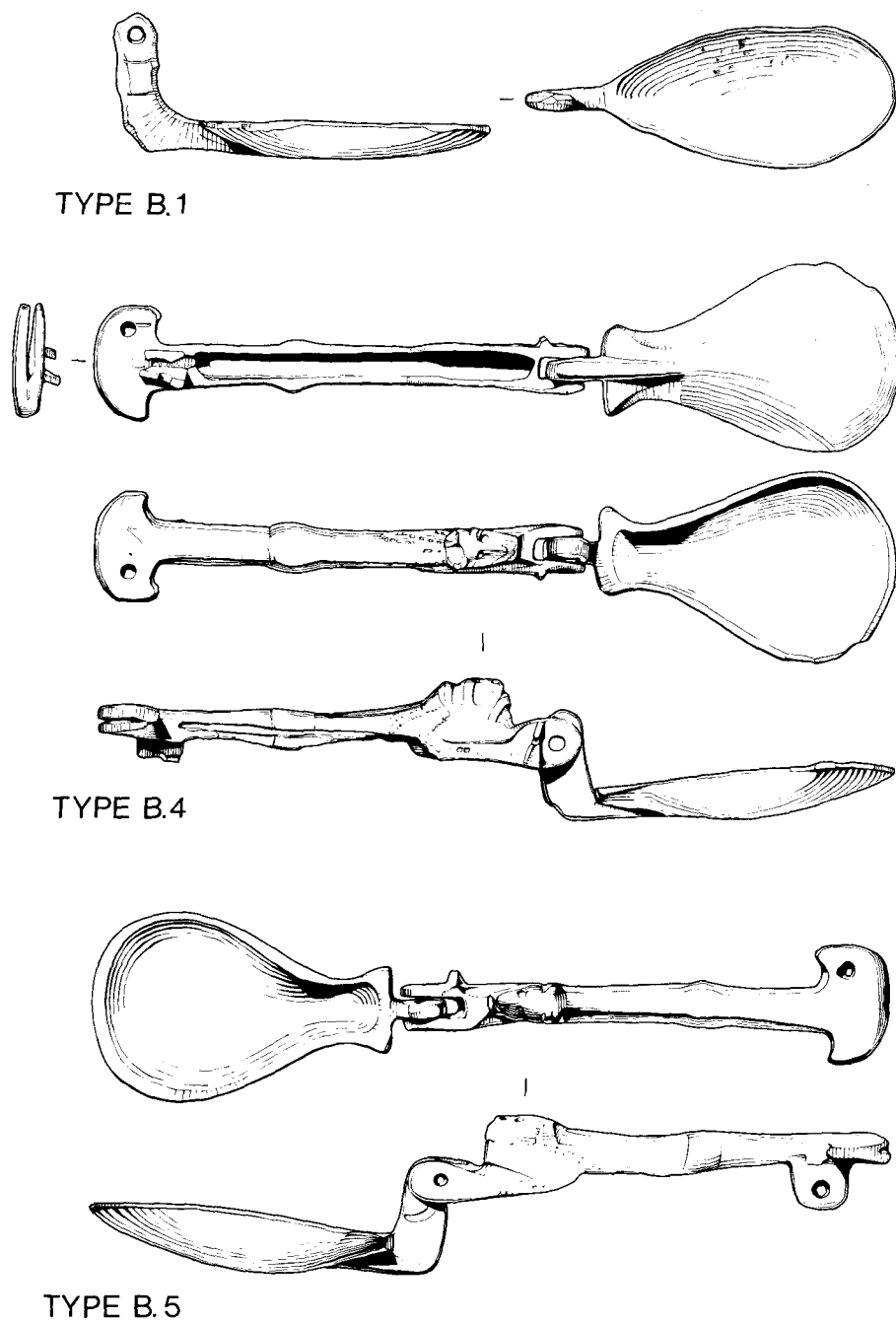


Fig. 2 Roman folding spoons: Type B, 1. Richborough. 4. Traprain Law. 5. Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Norfolk. (all 1/1)

Castle Museum, Acc. No. 396.962.71.) Unpublished.⁶ Almost identical to No. 4, but more worn.

6. Bronze. Handle incomplete; bowl half missing. Length 85mm. From London. (British Museum, Acc. No. 1856 7-1, 1152.) Published.⁷

7. Bronze. Handle only. Length 55mm. From Wroxeter, unstratified. Published.⁸

The bowls of the spoons in this group are all so-called fiddle-shaped, except for that of the first which is leaf-shaped. The end of each bowl has an L-shaped projection onto which the handle was hinged.

While the bowls are plain and like those of ordinary spoons, the handles are elaborate, both decoratively and technically. Their lower half is in the form of a lion's or leopard's head, and the bowl may be considered as being held between the animal's front legs. The underside of the head is hollow and the handle is U-shaped in section. Half-way along the handle is a bulge representing the animal's hind quarters and legs. The other end of the handle flattens into a curved piece like a double-headed axe. One half of this piece is sliced and pierced for a hinge for an implement which would have folded along the side of the handle and been fitted between two notches near the animal's front right paw. Underneath, and slightly to one side, is another smaller hinge—perhaps for another attachment which folded underneath the handle.

None of the implements that fitted onto the handles have survived. As the handles of ordinary spoons nearly always ended in a spike, which it has been suggested was used for extracting the flesh from snails and other small shell foods, it is a reasonable guess that one of the folding implements was a spike.⁹ This could have fitted conveniently along the side of the handle and been held in place by the notches. The implement underneath might have been a narrow-bladed knife for which the hollow handle would have formed a sheath, or a spatula for extracting bone marrow. The curved blade of such a spatula when folded out of use would have completed the round section of the handle.¹⁰ The end of the handle is not symmetrical and the half of the end which is not pierced has no obvious purpose.

The hinges have not survived, so one cannot be certain which way the handles were supposed to lie when the bowls were unfolded. It seems likely that the animal's head was intended to be seen when the spoon was in use, and would have folded more compactly into the bowl than if it had been facing the other way up.

Type C (Fig. 1)

1. Bronze, silvered. Length 122mm. From Northern France. (Now New York, Metropolitan Museum, Department of Medieval Art 17.192.254.) Published.¹¹

This is really a hybrid between types A and B. The bowl is the same shape as in B, 2-6, but there is a hinge, like Type A, on the other end for a blade to fold underneath. The middle of the handle is composed of a leopard's head with spotted chest and stylised feet. The flat part of the handle immediately above the bowl is decorated with a snake and four spots.

Although the component parts of this spoon are familiar on various other spoons, their combination is most unusual. Because of the vague provenance of the spoon its authenticity must be doubted until it has been analysed or other examples discovered.

Discussion.

The archaeological dates, where recorded, are vague. They relate to when particular examples of the types were lost or deposited, not to their date of manufacture, nor do they tell us the date-range of the type as a whole. With that caution, we might conclude that Type A is earlier than Type B. It has two bronze examples from first or second century contexts and a third, a crude one of iron, from the second or third quarters of the third century. On the other hand, of only two dated examples in Type B, No. 3 is also third century and No. 4 is from a late hoard of metalwork, and could be much earlier. They may all be approximately dated to the second or third centuries A.D.

No closer dates can be reached by comparing the shapes of the bowls with those of ordinary spoons. Several other spoons with leaf-shaped bowls come from Roman London, and some of these from early contexts. One from Verulamium came from a deposit of A.D. 135–145.¹² So-called fiddle-shaped bowls of silver spoons are dated to the second or third century A.D.¹³ The dating of similar bronze spoons does not seem to be different. Bronze spoons which have a coating of tin or silver (as here B 2 and 3; C 1) may have a date that is comparable with that of the debasement of Roman coinage in the later third century.

Stylistically, the lion's head at the junction of the handles and bowls in Type B is similar to others which are common on ordinary spoons.¹⁴ The leopard's head and feet on the example of Type C is a very familiar treatment in classical art.¹⁵ The flat-sided piece joining the bowl to the leopard's feet is also common on Roman spoons of the second and third centuries.

Nothing definite can be said about why the folding spoons were made. The fact that they folded and combined other implements obviously suggests that they were made for travelling as a kind of convenient picnic set, like a modern pocket knife or a soldier's knife fork and spoon that clip together.¹⁶ If they were indeed 'military issue', then we have no documentary or literary evidence to support this, and the provenance of the spoons such as they are known do not suggest that they were left behind by soldiers. Three are from London, and those from Richborough and Wroxeter *could* also be military; but the other four from known provenances are from rural sites with no obvious connection with the army. The spoons of Type B are so similar to one another as to suggest a single source of manufacture; the same might be said about those of Type A. Folding spoons represent about one per cent of the surviving spoons from Roman Britain. They were a small proportion and can never have been popular.

NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Michael Rhodes of the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London, for supplying me with details of this spoon and allowing me to include it prior to the publication of the site. I must also thank Hugh Chapman of the Department of Prehistoric and Roman Antiquities, Museum of London, for details of the Bucklersbury House spoon. For drawing the spoons I am grateful to Miss Judith Dobie.

² I am grateful to Mr. Eric Holland, Field Officer, Berkhamstead and District Archaeological Society, for supplying me with details of this spoon and allowing me to examine it. (Excavation report in preparation.)

³ John Battely, *Antiquitates Rutupiensis* (1745) 113, Fig. 2.

⁴ A. C. C. Brodrigg *et al.*, *Excavations at Shakenoak 2* (1971) 108 and Fig. 46, No. 62.

⁵ A. S. Robertson 'Roman Finds from Non-Roman Sites in Scotland', *Britannia* I (1970) 226 and Fig. 9, No. 4.

⁶ I am grateful to Mr. Tony Gregory, Assistant Keeper of Archaeology, Castle Museum, Norwich, for supplying photographs.

⁷ C. Roach Smith, *Illustrations of Roman London* (London 1859) Plate 37, No. 13.

- ⁸ J. P. Bushe-Fox, *Second Report on the Excavations . . . Wroxeter, Shropshire 1913* Rep. Res. Com. Soc. Antiq. No. 11 (London 1914) 14 and Fig. 5, No. 19. A similar handle (inscribed FECIT) in Shrewsbury Museum is also illustrated, Fig. 6.
- ⁹ There is also the superstition related by Pliny that the spike on the end of the spoon was used for piercing an empty egg-shell to prevent an evil spirit occupying it (*Nat. Hist.* 18.2).
- ¹⁰ My search in a number of museums with quantities of unsorted or miscellaneous Romano-British metalwork has not so far produced a piece that might have belonged to one of these handles, but one might easily be recognised, and if so I would be glad to be told of it.
- ¹¹ S. Foltiny in *Situla 14-15* (1974) Fig. 21, No. 4. I am grateful to Dr. Margaret Frazer, Associate Curator, Department of Medieval Art, Metropolitan Museum, New York, for supplying me with details and photographs of this spoon.
- ¹² E.g. British Museum (71.7-14.30) from the Thames at Southwark, 1865; Museum of London (19381) from the Walbrook stream-bed; *Ibid.* (59.94-2) from Cophthall Court, 1911 (this bowl is quite similar to those of Type A); Verulamium v. S. S. Frere *Verulamium Excavations I* Rep. Res. Com. Soc. Antiq. No. 28 (London 1972) 124 and Fig. 35, No. 14.
- ¹³ D. E. Strong, *Greek and Roman Gold and Silver Plate* (London 1955) 117.
- ¹⁴ There are several of these unpublished in Cologne Museum. Published examples from Cologne are in *Germania* 11 (1927) 39, Fig. 3; and from Preuseville in Seine-Inferior; *Comm. des Antiq. Bull.*, Vol. 7, 352.
- ¹⁵ Cf. the shale table-legs from Dorset or more closely the marble legs of a table from Pompeii, published in A. L. F. Rivet (ed.), *The Roman Villa in Britain* (London 1969) Plate 4, 24-26 and Fig. 4, 14.
- ¹⁶ Mr. G. Boon has suggested that guests may have been expected to bring their own knives and spoons to dinner, and that the folding types were for this purpose, v. G. C. Boon, *Silchester, The Roman Town of Calleva* (1974) 228. For an example of a folding knife see British Museum, *A guide to the exhibition illustrating Greek and Roman Life* (1920) 149 and Fig. 183d.