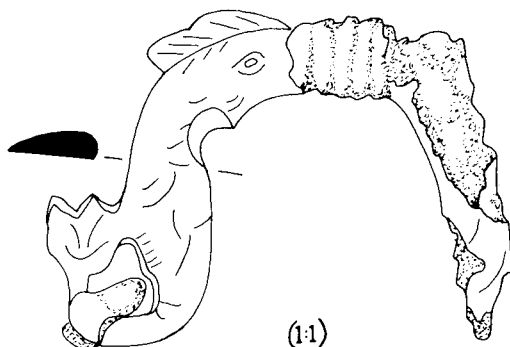


# A ROMAN DOLPHIN HANDLE FROM PHOENIX HOUSE, KING WILLIAM STREET, LONDON

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A recent acquisition for the Museum of London is a cast copper-alloy dolphin handle, found during excavations for the construction of Phoenix House, 4 King William Street in 1914-15<sup>1</sup>.

The handle is formed by two dolphins, one of which is complete, while the other only partially survives and is badly corroded. The dolphins are affrontée, their snouts joined by a ball decorated with three vertical concentric rings. Their bodies are s-shaped to form the handle and the three-pronged tail fin of the surviving dolphin curves around to fuse with the lower part of the body, thus forming a loop for attachment. The remnant of one split-pin is still attached to the loop. The eye and dorsal fin are deeply incised and other incised decorations are visible on the body. The dolphins are moulded on one side and the back is flat.



Such handles are thought to have been most commonly used on bronze bowls, wooden boxes and military helmets, though it is difficult to distinguish their exact function from the handle alone.

In some cases, it is possible to suggest whether they have a domestic or military purpose from the nature of the excavated site. Dolphin handles found in such settlements as Woodcuts<sup>2</sup>, Verulamium<sup>3</sup>, Fishbourne<sup>4</sup>, Gadebridge Park<sup>5</sup>, Wroxeter<sup>6</sup> and Alchester<sup>7</sup> were perhaps attached to bronze bowls or boxes. Alternatively, handles found in such military settlements as Corbridge<sup>8</sup>, South Shields<sup>9</sup>, Faurndau<sup>10</sup> and Niedermörmter<sup>11</sup> and perhaps Mucking<sup>12</sup> are more likely to be from helmets.

Dolphin handles on bronze bowls, though varying in size, are of a standard form. Those from Alchester and Verulamium are similar to examples attached to bronze bowls in the Rijksmuseum<sup>13</sup> and from Pompeii<sup>14</sup>. The tail does not fully curve to form the loop for the split-pin attachment. Such handles are firmly fixed in pairs by the tail on opposite sides of the bowl, and then rise outwards from the underside of the rim.

On the other hand, a movable handle attached by a split-pin would have been more practical for boxes and helmets. Examples of box-handles are rarely found with the wood of the box still surviving. Menzel<sup>15</sup> quotes three handles as being box-handles from Rheinzabern, Speyer and Altrip, but gives no suggestion of any surviving wood. Box-handles are usually flat-backed so that they can lie flat against the side of the box. The size of the handles vary with the size of the boxes.

In the late 2nd to early 3rd century AD certain legionary and cavalry helmets were made with both a suspension-ring (located underneath the neck-guard) and a carrying-handle (provided as a secondary means of suspension for transportation). This handle was attached by split-pins to the upper surface of the neck-guard. Examples of dolphin handles found still attached to helmets rather than boxes, are more common. A legionary bronze helmet from Niedermörmter and a similar fragmentary iron helmet with bronze attachments from Faurndau were found with the handles attached. Similarly, fragments of cavalry helmets have been found from Kastell Pfünz<sup>16</sup> and Heddernheim<sup>17</sup> that include dolphin handles.

The great similarity between the helmet and box-handles makes it difficult to assign a detached handle to one or other function, and Menzel<sup>18</sup> has even suggested that the armourers made the handles for both helmets and boxes, perhaps producing handles of a standard size and quality. However, one or two points can perhaps be noted to help distinguish the two types. The existence of split-pins, attached to the tail loops, can be a useful indicator of the thickness of the object to which it was attached. If the split-pin is intact, the distance to the bend in the pin shows whether the pin was inserted through a helmet neck-guard or through the side of a box, which would probably have been thicker. Secondly, helmet handles must be wide enough to take two fingers and were, by necessity, smooth and not angular for ease of carrying<sup>19</sup>. Box-handles vary according to the size of the box.

Unfortunately, since we have no record of stratification or evidence of closely associated finds, it is difficult to be certain about the use to which the Phoenix House handle was put, but it is perhaps more likely that it came from a small wooden box than a helmet.

## NOTES

1. MOL Accession No. 76.137.  
The handle was presented to the Museum together with other Roman and post-Roman material from the same site. We would like to convey our thanks to the Phoenix Assurance Company for the deposition of this material, and especially to Mr. G. M. Hayward who arranged the matter.
2. A. H. L. Pitt-Rivers *Excavations in Cranborne Chase I* (1887) 65 and Pl. 21, No. 5 and Figs. 1-5.
3. S. S. Frere *Verulamium Excavations I* (Rep. Res. Com. Soc. Antiq. No. 28) (London 1972) Fig. 41 Nos. 133-135.
4. B. Cunliffe *Excavations at Fishbourne 1961-69 II* (Rep. Res. Com. Soc. Antiq. No. 26) (London 1971) 117 and Fig. 48, No. 127.
5. D. S. Neal *The Excavation of the Roman Villa in Gadebridge Park, Hemel Hempstead 1963-68* (London 1974) 132 and Fig. 57, No. 72.
6. D. Atkinson *Report on Excavations at Wroxeter 1923-1927* (Oxford 1942) 212 and Pl. 49, No. A.260.
7. C. Hawkes 'Excavations at Alchester 1926' *Antiq. J.* 7 (1927) 181 and Fig. 11, No. 1.
8. H. Russell Robinson *The Armour of Imperial Rome* (London 1975) 92 and Fig. 117.
9. *ibid.* 92 and Fig. 118.
10. *ibid.* 74 and Pl. 192.
11. *ibid.* 92 and Fig. 119.
12. M. U. Jones 'The Mucking Excavations 1975' *Panorama Thurrock Local History Society* 19 (1975/6) 36 and Fig. 2.
13. M. H. P. Den Boesterd *Description of the Collections in the Rijksmuseum G. M. Kam at Nijmegen - The Bronze Vessels - V* (Nijmegen 1956) 55, No. 186 and Pl. 8, Nos. 186, 186A.
14. J. Ward-Perkins, A. Claridge *Pompeii Exhibition Catalogue* (London 1976) No. 263.
15. H. Menzel *Die Römischen Bronzen aus Deutschland I* (Mainz 1960) 51 and Pl. 55, Nos. 87-89.
16. H. Russell Robinson *op.cit.* 92 and Fig. 118.
17. *ibid.* 63.
18. H. Menzel *op.cit.* 51.
19. I must thank H. Russell Robinson for his advice on helmet carrying-handles.