

A ROMAN SIEVE-SPOON FROM LONDON

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SUMMARY

A sieve-spoon¹ of copper alloy, a form of utensil previously unrecorded from Londinium, was recovered from the Thames foreshore, City of London. Comparison with similar spoons and strainers recorded from Britain and elsewhere in the Roman Empire shows this to belong to a group of utensils that occurs in both secular and religious contexts and which continued in use through to the early medieval period.²

The 1982–1983 excavations carried out by the Department of Urban Archaeology of the Museum of London on the north shore of the River Thames at Billingsgate Lorry Park, Upper Thames Street, uncovered waterlogged deposits of Roman and later date. Following completion of the limited archaeological investigations, commercial contractors cleared the site in preparation for redevelopment. From the resulting spoil tips artefacts dating from all periods were found, of which some Roman material has already been published (Henig & Chapman 1985; Jones 1984; Henig & Jones 1986).

Among the items recovered from these unstratified dumps was a sieve-spoon or strainer that was brought into the Museum of London for identification (Fig. 1a). It has since been acquired for the collections (Museum of London accession number 84.157).

Made of copper alloy, the sieve-spoon has a shallow hemispherical bowl perforated by small, irregularly spaced holes. The handle is a twisted wire of square section, a technique possibly employed to give it extra strength. This can be found, for example, on the silver sieve-spoon from Richborough (Fig. 1b: Bushe-Fox 1949, 130, no. 126) and on one of the silver strainers from Thetford (Fig. 1c: Johns and Potter 1983; No. 48). The handle of the London implement terminates with a simple unclosed loop. A shiny white substance is discernible in very small patches on the bowl (for analysis see below). The overall

length is 175mm, of which the handle is 135mm; the bowl 30mm in diameter.

The sieve-spoon was submitted for X-ray fluorescence analysis.³ Although this was only a qualitative analysis of the surface composition, it showed the alloy comprised copper and zinc (*ie* brass), with traces of lead and tin. The latter metal is consistent with the surface of the sieve-spoon being tinned. Writing in the 1st century AD Pliny (Natural History ix. 5) referred to objects made in alloys of copper, such as cooking vessels, being tinned. This coating prevented the dissolution of the copper and thus the tainting of foodstuffs. It also prolonged the life of the utensils. Smaller items were also tinned and the resultant surface made them (when new) visually indistinguishable from objects made of silver. Corfield (1985, 42) notes that in the anaerobic conditions of a waterlogged site tinning on iron survives quite well. It is possible that such conditions at Billingsgate may have helped the tinning survive in parts on this copper alloy sieve-spoon.

From classical to medieval times, metal strainers in many forms are known. They range from small perforated spoons, to ladles and to saucepan (skillet or *patera*) forms. Bronze saucepan-type strainers are known from Romano-British sites, including Great Chesters, Northumberland; Chesterford, Essex; Aldborough/Knaresborough Yorks; Great Wackering, Essex; Glenshee, Scotland (Eggers 1966); Kyngadle, Dyfed, and Abergele, near Bangor (Richardson 1980).

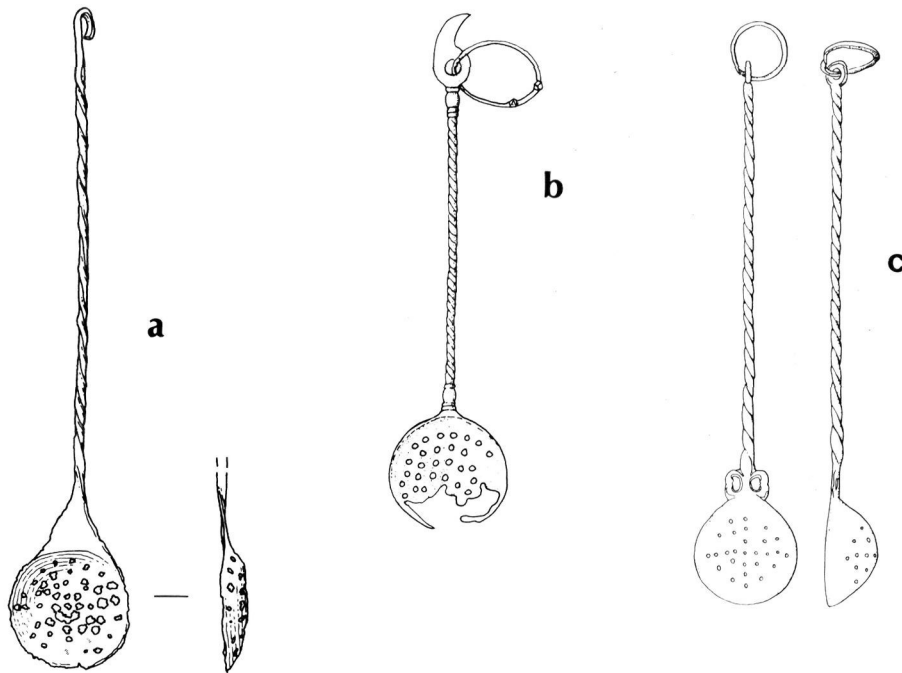


FIG 1 Roman sieve-spoons. a) the London sieve-spoon (A Sutton); b) sieve-spoon from Richborough (after Bushe-Fox); c) sieve-spoon from Thetford (after Johns and Potter; no. 48). *Not to scale.*

In these examples the perforations are arranged in geometric patterns such as rosettes, Greek key and wavy lines. Den Boesterd (1956, 17, No 47) refers to a 1st-century AD example with letters worked in perforations around the rim that record the maker L. Cassius Ambrosius and the neighbourhood of Rome in which it was manufactured, the Circus Flaminius. However, the strainer was recovered from a hoard deposited during the 3rd century at Mauer a.d.Url, Austria. Other strainers now in the Nijmegen Museum, with similar geometric patterning, are also described by Den Boesterd (1956, 21–3). They are given 1st to 3rd-century dates, with a possible use into the 4th century, and are mostly considered to have been made in Gaul or the Rhineland (see Fig. 2c for an example from Nijmegen, near de Winseling).

Such strainers were important for filtering and straining sediments from wine, and no doubt were used to remove dregs and impurities from other foods (Johns & Potter 1983, 53). It is likely that the silver-gilt

strainer found secreted in the stonework of London's Mithraeum was so used. Toynebee (1964, 317) suggested that this strainer, which was recovered with an ornate circular casket (Fig. 2a, Museum of London accession number 21579), was used in the filtering of honey, a food known to have been taken during the initiation rites of the Mithraic cult.⁴ Thus a specialised function may be attributed to this particular strainer. Similarly, the strainers from Thetford may be linked to pagan ritual activities, for the whole hoard appears to be closely associated with the deity Faunus (Johns and Potter 1983, 54), although as Watts comments (1988, 61–62), there are also strong Christian connotations.

Originally items of domestic use in Roman society, strainers were later used in Christian services. Richardson (1980) adequately covers those strainers associated with early medieval church practices when referring to the 8th or 9th-century(?) gilt-bronze strainer from Derrynavlan, County Tipperary, Ireland.

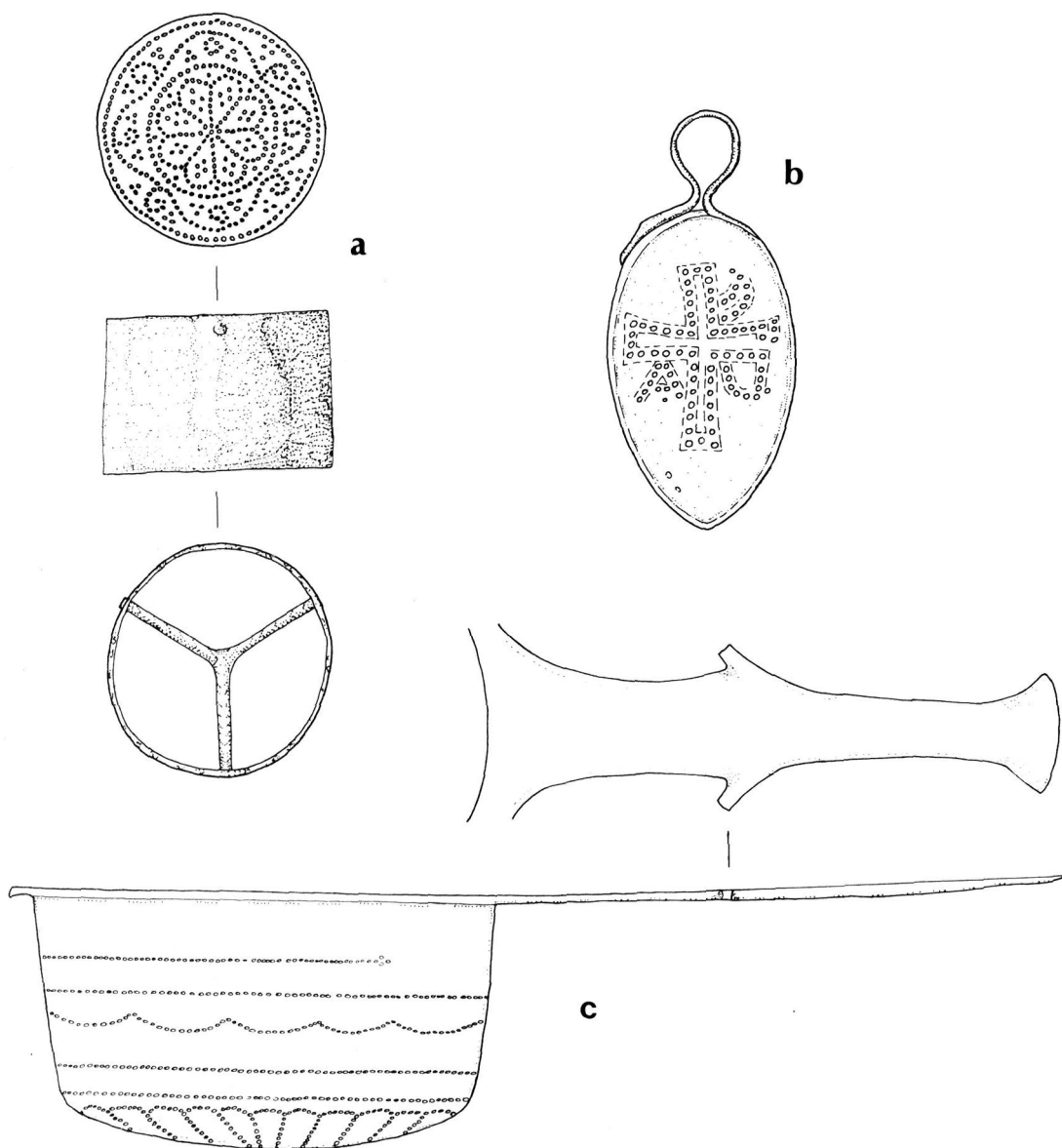


FIG 2 a) Circular casket and strainer from the Mithraeum, London (after Grimes); b) silver sieve-spoon with swan's neck handle from Canoscio, Italy (after Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann); c) strainer of copper alloy from Nijmegen (after den Boesterd) *Not to scale.*

Her article also reproduces the illustration that opens St Luke's Gospel in the Book of Kells (late 8th to early 9th century), showing a strainer from which wine is being poured into a chalice.

Theophilus writing *c.* AD 1100, in his work,

On Divers Arts, has a section devoted to 'The Strainer'. Not only does he describe how it should be made but goes on to say:

Now the round part of the little basin at the end [of the handle] should be pierced with tiny holes to cover a circle two fingers

in diameter in the middle of the bottom. Through these holes should be strained the wine and water that are to be put in the Chalice for the celebration of the sacrament of our Lord's blood (iii. 57; trans Hawthorne & Smith 1979, 129).

The London sieve-spoon has no self-evident details that could describe its functions as either religious (pagan or Christian) or secular. It is of a very simple form with decoration confined to tinning, though this may have been applied either to suggest an implement of superior quality or to prevent the tainting of food substances—or perhaps a combination of both. The terminal is a plain loop, probably indicative of a humble function and perhaps suggesting a domestic, even kitchen use, rather than a ceremonial one.

British sieve-spoons most closely resembling the London find include the silver spoon from Richborough (Fig. 1b; Bushe-Fox 1949, 137, no. 126). This has a more elaborately formed handle with comma-shaped terminal⁵ perforated to take a wire hoop. This came from a late Roman or post-Roman context.

A further silver spoon comes from Catterick (Fig. 3a; Yorkshire Museum ref. no.: 593719.K.XIX-1; pers comm A. Thompson, D. Sherlock). The bowl, damaged and incomplete, is some 42mm in diameter. It has a small flange with short incised lines of decoration. There is no readily discernible pattern to the perforations in the bowl. The handle is attached to the bowl by a rectangular-shaped shoulder with semi-circular bevelled edges, with a pair of grooves at each end; it is round in section and terminates in a small loop, now broken. Like the London spoon, this has a shallow hemispherical bowl. The Catterick spoon is also an unstratified find. However, it comes from the site of a large courtyard building occupied after *c.* AD 375 (pers comm. A. Thompson), which, by association, would suggest a late 4th-century date for this sieve-spoon.

Two of the strainers with slightly deeper bowls are from the Thetford Treasure, deposited in the late 4th century (Figs 3c and 1c; Nos 47 and 48 in Johns and Potter 1983).

The third (Fig 3b) and smallest Thetford strainer (No. 49) has a comma-shaped terminal similar to the Richborough find. The small bowl (15mm diameter) has a central perforation surrounded by a band of eight holes (two of which are damaged). A feature of strainer No. 48 is that the perforations are placed to form a distinct geometric pattern within the bowl. The holes form a cross-pattern, each quadrant of which contains three additional holes. In common with the London sieve-spoon the handle is fully twisted, but the terminal loop has been created by hammering the rod flat and then perforating this flattened area; also the shoulders of the spoon are ornately worked. This similarly applies to Thetford strainer No. 47, the largest of the group. The decorative shoulder is pierced and the handle is twisted for only half its length, but like the London find the perforations in the bowl have no clear pattern. Johns and Potter (1983, 107) comment that on such items a haphazard distribution of the holes is less common than the working of a perceptible pattern.

Clearly the long-handled silver strainer recovered among the late Roman plate from Water Newton (Painter 1977, 30 no. 7) featured in Christian practices. Engraved within a circle of punched dots on the handle terminal is a Chi-Rho with an alpha and omega. Similar associations can be assumed for the silver plate concealed *c.* AD 400 at Traprain Law. Among the items is the bowl of a strainer, the base of the handle formed by two engraved dolphins. The Chi-Rho in the centre of the bowl is formed by the arrangement of the perforations and the words IESVS CHRISTVS are worked in small holes below the rim. Similarly, one of two silver sieve-spoons found within a 4th-century hoard from Canoscio, Italy (Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984, Fig 55 no. 2), has a Chi-Rho worked into the bowl (Fig 2b).⁶ However, the bowl is oval-shaped with a swan's neck handle that rejoins the rim of the bowl.

Other Continental examples include two silver sieve-spoons found in the hoard of late Roman silver tableware at Kaiseraugst (Figs

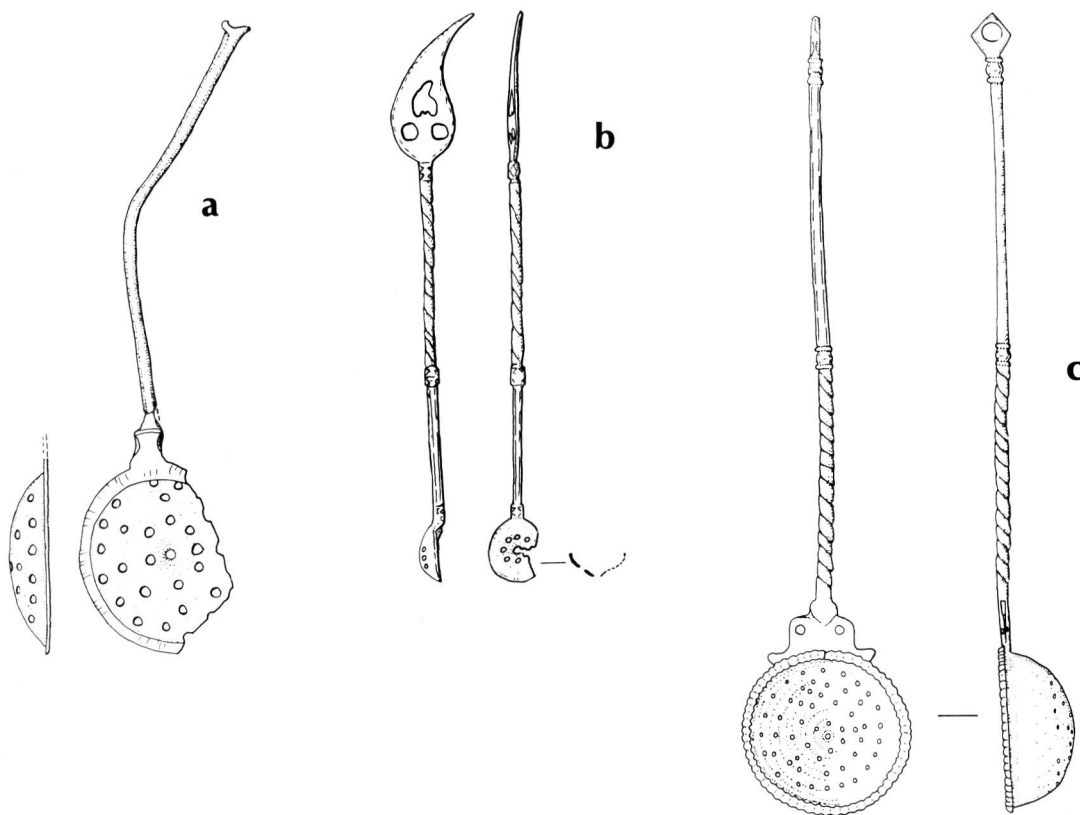


FIG 3 Silver sieve-spoons from a) Catterick, Yorks (after D S Neal); b) and c) Thetford (after Johns and Potter; nos 49 and 47). *Not to scale.*

4a-b; Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984 Nos. 36 and 37). Both are more elaborate than the London sieve-spoon, but they are similar to two of the Thetford spoons (Nos. 47 and 48; Johns and Potter 1983); One (No. 36) has a hemispherical bowl, the other (No. 37) a conical bowl. Both have decorated shoulders, probably stylised dolphins, although one (No. 37) is slightly different, comprising fine openwork. On both examples, the half of the handle nearest the bowl is twisted, with decorative transverse moulding. The handle of No. 37 is finished by a commat-terminal, similar to the Richborough example, whereas the other has a simple hook terminal, not dissimilar to the London spoon. Like the London sieve-spoon, the bowls of the Kaiseraugst silver spoons are randomly perforated.

In his list of ancient silver spoons, Sherlock

(1973) includes a sieve-spoon recovered with a hoard deposited in the 3rd century in La Alcudia bei Elche, Alicante, Spain (Fig 4c). This is illustrated in Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann, (1984 fig 54-1) with a similar spoon from Stráže in Czechoslovakia (*ibid* 54-2) (Fig 5b). As does the London example, these two silver sieve-spoons have randomly perforated bowls. Overall, however, they are more elaborate specimens, with flattened rims, an ornate junction of handle and bowl, and cylindrical handles with transverse mouldings. Through a loop worked in the end of each handle a suspension ring is attached. In common with one of the Kaiseraugst spoons (No. 37), the Czechoslovakian sieve-spoon also has a conical bowl.

Sieve-spoons were also made in gold. A surviving example has been recorded from

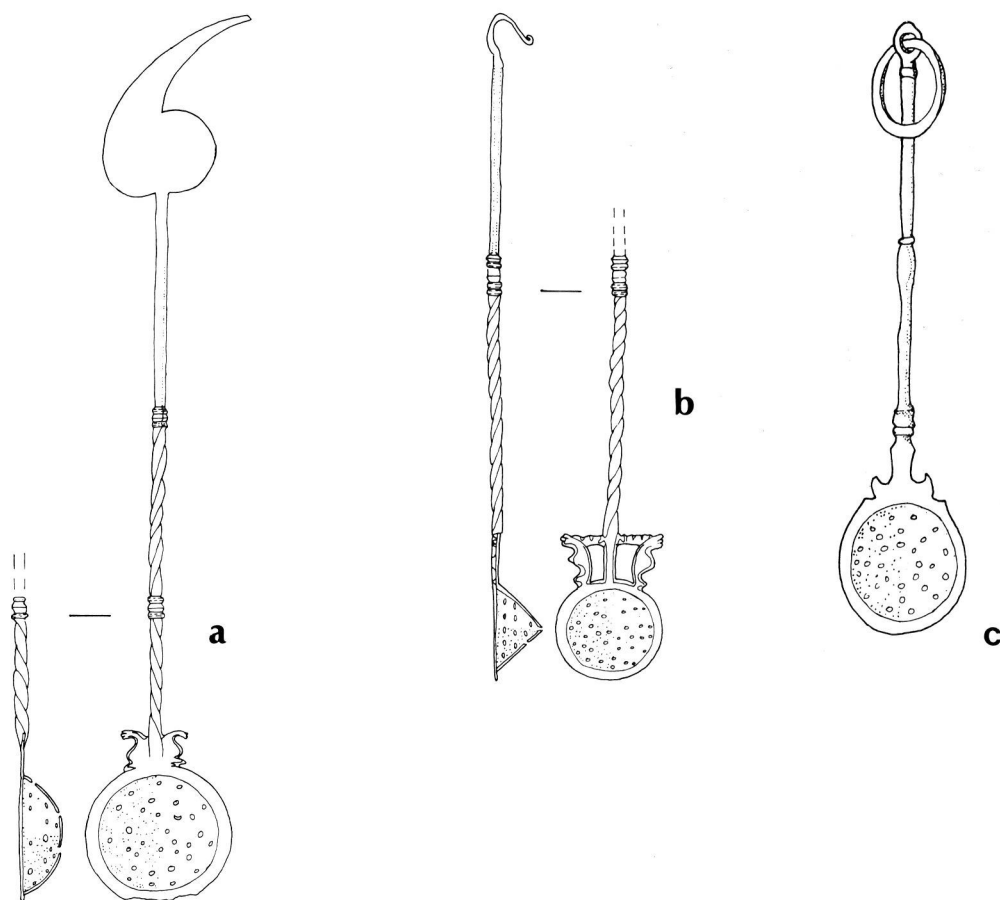


FIG 4 Silver sieve-spoons from a) and b) Kaiseragst (after Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann; nos 36 and 37); c) La Alcludia bei Elche, Spain (after Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann). *Not to scale.*

Heuneburg, Württemberg (Roes 1958, 95). Some 105mm long, the round bowl has a ridged rim and two rows of perforations arranged around a central perforation. The handle is twisted or coiled for its full length, terminating with a suspension loop.

A bronze example of a sieve-spoon comes from Schorndorf with a 2nd or 3rd-century date (Fig 5c; Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984, fig 54-4). It has a handle of cylindrical section that tapers away from the bowl to a fine point. The small bowl has eight radiating lines, each consisting of three perforations. A similar pattern of eight radiating lines, but this time each of four holes and with two separate perforations placed at 1 o'clock and 7 o'clock around a

central perforation, can be discerned on one of the silver sieve-spoons from Canoscio, Italy (Fig 5a). The handle has three equal zones of which the central one is twisted, the other two plain. This may be a 5th or 6th-century object (Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984 fig 55 no. 1).

Bronze sieve-spoons or strainers recorded from Romano-British contexts are less numerous than those in silver. This may well reflect the composition of bronze hoards as opposed to silver hoards; that silverware of a religious nature was treasured more than bronze and therefore more likely to be hidden away; or simply dictations caused either by recycling of materials in antiquity, or even by the lack of archaeological investigation in the appro-

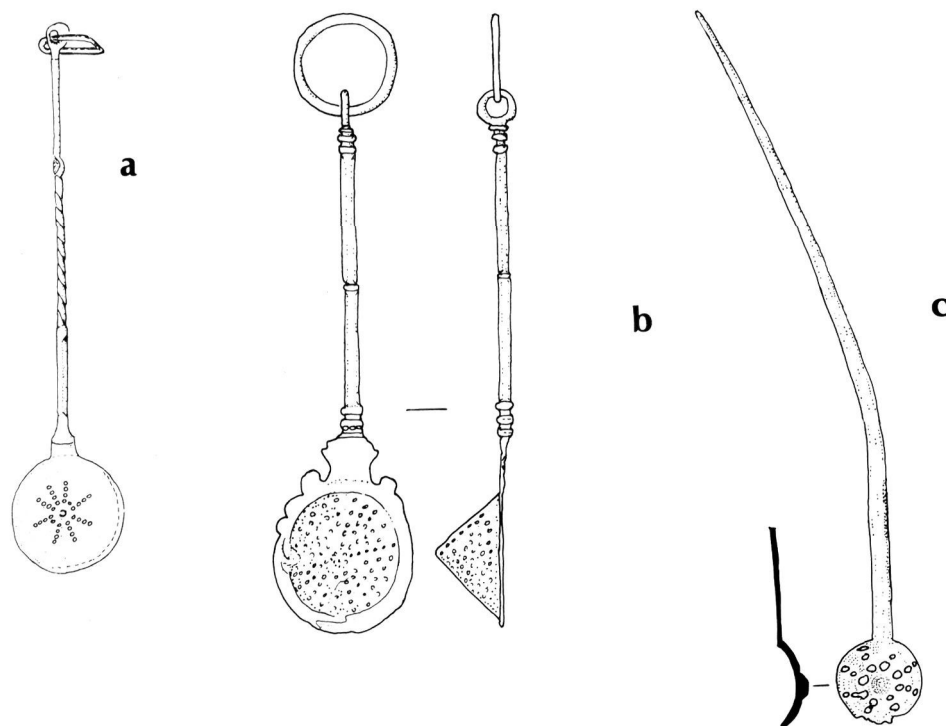


FIG 5 Silver sieve-spoons from a) Canoscio, Italy; b) Strazé, Czechoslovakia; c) a bronze sieve-spoon from Schorndorf, Germany (all after Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann). *Not to scale.*

priate areas. Those sieve-spoons that have contexts fall within the later period of Britain's occupation, and it is therefore likely that the London sieve-spoon is of a 3rd or 4th-century date.

Lack of context and intrinsic evidence prevents a clear assertion of what the London sieve-spoon was used for and whether it had any domestic or religious connections. Indeed evidence from throughout the Roman world suggests that such items had many uses, either in succession or concurrently. Nonetheless this is a unique find from *Londinium*, and one to be noted along with all the possible functions it may have served.

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NOTES

¹ Following the German terminology this utensil is referred to as a sieve-spoon (Sieblöffel). This term gives an immediate impression of the object's form and differentiates it from the general class of utensil known as strainer of which sieve-spoons are just one variety.

² For discussion of strainers forming part of toilet sets occurring in early medieval contexts throughout Europe, especially in grave groups, see the extensive list provided by Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann (1984, 119). Miložčić (1968) specifically cites examples from Saxon graves in England while Johns and Potter (1983, 54) comment on typological development and context.

³ By the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, English Heritage.

⁴But note also Toynbee 1986, 49, where the author does admit that 'An alternative possibility is that the strainer was used for infusing a concoction of herbs which served to induce a ritual hypnosis in Mithraic (or some other) mystical cult...'

⁵For discussion of the function of these pronged terminals, see Johns and Potter 1983, 54 and 107; Johns and Potter 1985, 333, Cahn *et al.* 1984, 102; Watts 1988, 62.

⁶Details of the Canoscio material can be found in Giovagnoli 1935.

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