

Curse like a Roman!

In 2006, during the excavation of a large Roman town house at Vine Street in Leicester (today beneath the John Lewis car park), archaeologists made a rare discovery. At first, the find of two thin sheets of lead seemed unremarkable, until it was noticed that both were inscribed with line of Latin script. This made them extremely important as the first written texts from Roman Leicester (apart from a few instances of graffiti). They were deciphered by a specialist and identified as ‘curse tablets’ – typically small sheets of lead inscribed with a message to a god or spirit asking them to take action on the writer’s behalf.

Roman Leicester

Roman occupation of *Ratae* (the name for Iron Age Leicester) appears to have begun immediately following the Roman conquest of Britain in AD 43. By the early 2nd century AD, the Iron Age town had been reorganised and a new rectangular street grid with gravelled roads was laid out. This coincided with *Ratae*’s appointment as the *Civitas* capital for the British people known to the Romans as the *Corieltauvi*.

From this moment onwards new and increasingly sophisticated buildings began to line the streets and from the middle of the 2nd century major programmes of public and private building were undertaken across the town, included construction of the *forum* and *basilica* **(1)**, the Jewry Wall public baths **(2)** and at least one temple, identified as a *Mithraeum* (dedicated to the Persian god Mithras); as well as numerous private buildings including a variety of domestic, commercial and industrial premises, such as those found at Vine Street **(3)**.

In the late 2nd or early 3rd century, the town was provided with defences. At first these were simple ditches and earth ramparts but a substantial stone wall was added in the late 3rd century. The wall was three metres wide with towers **(4)** and may have been about four metres high, and would have been as much a symbol of civic pride as a discouragement to would-be-invaders.

By the late 3rd century, commerce was booming and the town had established trading links across Britain and Western Europe and as far as North Africa. New buildings, such as the *macellum* or market-hall **(5)** were built, although other parts of the town remained open space **(6)**, probably serving as storage yards, market spaces and kitchen gardens.

What happened to Leicester in the 4th century is less certain but the town may have entered a prolonged period of decline from the mid-4th century onwards.

The Vine Street Excavation

Between 2004 and 2006, archaeologists from ULAS began a large excavation at Vine Street in Leicester. It would prove to be the single largest archaeological project ever undertaken in the city. In total, more than a hundred archaeologists took the better part of three years to excavate the site.

Initial hints at the area’s importance emerged in the 19th century, when part of an elaborate Roman mosaic floor was unearthed by workmen digging a cellar next to Vine Street. Eventually, excavations revealed a complicated sequence of occupation of a single *insula* (city block) in the Roman town’s north-eastern quarter, dating from the 2nd century through to the 4th century.

PHASE 1: The excavation revealed a complex sequence of Roman buildings constructed between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD on the junction of two streets. Occupation initially began as a scattered development of timber buildings amongst fenced paddocks and yards.

PHASE 2: These survived for about fifty years before being replaced by a mixture of more sophisticated stone houses and commercial buildings. One of these houses possibly contained a bath suite incorporating a room and sunken pool heated through a small hypocaust system (underfloor heating).

PHASE 3: In the early 3rd century AD three of the stone buildings underwent a massive transformation into a spacious townhouse. This measured 40m by 40m and, with four ranges of rooms linked by corridors surrounding a central courtyard, it is the largest Roman house ever excavated in Leicester.

PHASE 4: By the mid-4th century AD the courtyard house was in poor condition. Parts of it had been knocked down whilst other rooms were being converted to commercial use, as a smithy and as workshops making bone pins. A hoard of 500 Roman coins was found buried under the floor of another room.

The Curse Tablets

A 'curse' tablet is typically a small sheet of lead inscribed with a message to a god or spirit asking them to take action on the writer's behalf. Such action usually included harming named individuals who had caused offence to the writer. The tablets were often thrown into a sacred pool, interred with the dead or else hidden in the fabric of a building. The Vine Street curse tablets were found in rubble from the demolition of the courtyard house and one still had mortar adhering to it, suggesting that it had originally been placed in a wall. Both tablets bear a style of script which was commonly used for everyday documents and letters, and the style of the language suggests that they were written between AD 150 and AD 250, at least 1,750 years ago.

Curse tablets were usually thin sheets of lead cut out and hammered flat to produce a small rectangular tablet. The curse was then scratched into the surface of the soft lead with a stylus. The Vine Street tablets

The Servandus Tablet

Measures 201mm by 78mm by 1mm

The Servandus Tablet (named after its writer) refers to a Celtic god, Maglus, and lists the names of nineteen suspects of a theft, thought to be the household slaves from the courtyard house.

'I give to the god Maglus him who did wrong from the slave-quarters; I give him who did theft the cloak from the slave-quarters; who stole the cloak of Servandus; Silvester, Rigomandus, Senilis, Venustinus, Vorvena, Calaminus, Felicianus, Rufaedo, Vendicina, Ingenuinus, Iuventius, Alocus, Cennosus, Germanus, Senedo, Cunovendus, Regalis, Nigella, ~~Senicianus~~. I give that the god Maglus before the ninth day take away him who stole the cloak of Servandus.'

The tablet contains a number of significant pieces of information, including the first known reference to a god called Maglus, possibly a corruption of the celtic *maglos*, meaning prince. The twenty named people on the tablet are the single largest group of people known to have once lived in Roman Leicester. As the cloak was stolen from a slave-quarters, the list is probably a unique roll-call of household slaves. Amongst them are people with a mixture of Latin (e.g. Silvester), Greek (Alocus) and Celtic (Cunovendus) names, as well as seventeen men and three women, Vorvena, Vendicina and Nigella. The cloak itself was a *sagum*, a square cloak often worn by soldiers and their servants.

Curiously, Servandus, or the scribe writing the curse on Servandus's behalf, crosses out the last name on the list, Senicianus. Was this the thief, identified after the curse was written? Or did Senicianus manage to prove his innocence? Sadly, we will never know.

The Sabinianus Tablet

Measures 123mm by 69mm by 1mm

The Sabinianus Tablet mentions the theft of coins; and a *septisonium*, which is believed to be a temple or monument depicting the seven gods after which the Roman days of the week were named (the Sun and Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn).

‘Those who have stolen the silver coins of Sabinianus, that is Similis, Cupitus, Lochita, a god will strike down in this septisonium, and I ask that they lose their life before seven days.’

Of the four named people, the Latin names, Sabinianus, Similis and Cupitus are typical of Lower Germany and Britain. The name Similis, especially, is from the vicinity of Cologne in Germany. Lochita, a woman, has a Greek name which means ‘born of a slave and a freeman’.

Mention of a *septisonium* in Leicester is very significant. It is only the fourth known reference to such a structure in the Roman Empire, with other examples being located on the Palatine in Rome itself, in Sicily and in North Africa. The *septisonium* on the Palatine was commissioned by the emperor Septimius Severus in AD 203, it appears to have been a monumental façade with fountains. The example in Leicester may also have been attached to a public fountain, and the curse may have been written to be thrown in water (although this may never have happened).

Today, such curses are important because they reveal something of the voices of ordinary people which would otherwise be totally lost. Around 500 tablets have been discovered across the Roman Empire of which over half come from Britain, mostly from the sacred springs at Bath in Somerset and at a shrine at Uley in Gloucestershire. To come across them elsewhere is unusual and the two from Vine Street are the first to be found in Leicester.

Morris, M, Buckley, R & Codd, M (2011) Visions of Ancient Leicester: Reconstructing life in the Roman and medieval town from the archaeology of the Highcross Leicester excavations. Leicester: ULAS

Tomlin, R.S.O. 2008. ‘Paedagogium and Septizonium: Two Roman Lead Tablets from Leicester’, *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 167, 207-24