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A Touch of Roman Reality Through Ancient Palettes and Keys



Through the study of ancient artifacts, art, and literature, one develops a deeper understanding of those who walked on our lands thousands of years before us. Beneath the buildings of our modern society lie the remains of our ancestors, imprinted with thousands of stories. Pieces of their existence are buried underground, waiting to speak of the world centuries ago. It is through these discoveries that we are able to illuminate the curious lifestyles of some of the most ancient people. We learn of their cultures, ideas, and politics, and, more importantly, discover how their lasting influences shape our own societies and ways of life today. For the scope of this essay, we will focus on a specific period in the land of the Middle East during the time in which one of the greatest political forces of history, the Romans, came to be. By analyzing artifacts discovered in the depths of ancient ruins, we learn the important features of the Roman Empire and the details of everyday life of its people. From opposite corners of the Mediterranean, two artifacts were once uncovered by archeologists: a cosmetic palette and a set of locks and keys. While starkly different at first glance, both objects served a common utilitarian purpose and they both offer insight on the advancements and prosperity of the ancient Roman society that they represent.

Nearly two thousand years ago, the Romans left their mark on our world. Conquering vast lands from Spain on the Western shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the arid deserts of Africa and Syria, the Roman Empire was arguably one of the largest this world has ever seen. This force of political power came to be near 63 BCE, the year that marks the beginning of the Early Roman Period. And the Roman Empire remained at the height of power until 324 CE, when it came to a harsh decline in a time of revolt and political chaos (Eliav, 2014). Yet after nearly 400 years of rule, the Romans left in their history a story of political success and societal advancement matched by no civilization

from before their time or by those that came after. As a result of the vastness of the lands the Romans had conquered, the society was characterized as remarkably multicultural; the empire encompassed diverse groups of people from every corner of the Mediterranean who brought with them the influences of their ethnic cultures, ways of life, and religions. The Roman Empire is not only known for its conquests, it is still thought today to be one of the most powerful entities culturally, militarily and economically, in history (Eliav, 2014). Historians distinguish the Roman period as one of great accomplishment; the architectural, social, and technological advancements made during this relatively short era changed the lifestyles of those that came after them (Mark, *Roman Empire*). The longevity of the empire as well as its vastness ensured the lasting cultural influences of Greek and Latin language, developments in ideas of philosophy, politics, and law, and the social and technological advancements of everyday life. The Romans rendered certain creations of their predecessors into ones that are quite surprisingly similar to those of the modern day, and they established social lives that are reflective of our current day society and lifestyles. Through analyzing art, literature, and ancient objects, we learn of the existence of those who lived centuries before us, discovering details of their cultures, beliefs, and events of their everyday lives.

In order to better understand the success of the Roman world and its resulting widespread influence, we must take a moment to understand the history before and after the Roman Empire. The Early Roman Period began with the fall of the Maccabeans, a group of Jewish rebels that dominated after a long period of Hellenistic influence (Eliav, 2014). These years and the preceding few centuries were characterized by a series of civil wars and conflict. As the Romans slowly grew in power, they defeated any remotely powerful

forces and conquered neighboring peoples. The first two centuries under Roman rule were defined by stability and prosperity known as the *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace (Mark, *Roman Empire*). It was especially during this time that the prosperity of the empire was at its greatest, and allowed for the luxurious lifestyles characteristic of its people. No empire can grow too large, however, without consequences. By 285 CE, the empire had grown so vast that a series of civil wars led to its division into the Eastern and Western Empires (Mark, *Roman Empire*). During this time, much of the economic focus was put towards the expense of war, and the two empires began to decline. As the Romans weakened, barbarian tribes grew in number and power and eventually defeated the Romans in the 5th century CE (Eliav, 2014). The legacy of the Romans world survived for centuries after, as the objects of their world, encased with stories, were buried.

In the mountainous region of the Central Hills in the heart of the Mediterranean lies a site of great discovery, the excavation of Samaria-Sebaste. This archaeological spot has been the center of much historical evidence and many findings, but for our purpose we will focus on one in particular. The small artifact is about 90 mm in diameter and 25.5 mm in width, the perfect fit for the average human palm, and it offers more truth about past reality than it would seem at first glance. The object is heavy for its size, evidently made out of a smooth, beige, dense stone, likely limestone. Imagine a perfectly round peach, cut in half and its core removed, leaving half a sphere with a flat surface and a smaller circular depression in the middle. This is the shape of the object in study. Along the edges of the flat face and around the depression are bands of carved patterns, likely serving a decorative purpose. The band around the outer edge of is a series of squares, each alternating square with a cross-hatched pattern of smaller squares, and the inner band along the rim of the

smaller circular depression with short lines perpendicular to the rim. The backside, similar to the round part of a peach, is smooth except for a single rim that runs along the circle. Darker brown speckles paint the object's flat face surface spontaneously, most likely a product of aging. With a closer look, we see a couple small speckles of an unexpected color in the depression, turquoise. With the realization that this is not a byproduct of aging, and through further analysis we discover the source of this color: makeup. Serving as a cosmetic palette, this object was considered a necessity in the everyday lives of the women of the Roman Empire.

Having discovered three styles of palettes with notable differences in the excavation site of Samaria-Sebaste, archeologists created an archaeological report to document particular items to serve as a comparison. When newer items are discovered elsewhere, they are compared to the items in the report in order to be dated and to discover their uses (Crofoot 1). In the report of palettes from Samaria-Sebaste, a type of cosmetic palette with incised decorations in concentric bands in a pattern is very similar to our palette, both visually and descriptively, leading us to believe the palette from the Kelsey may be the same one from the report. Though unconfirmed, the object is believed to have been created during the 7th century, a few centuries after the height of the Roman rule. We note that this palette may not have been created during the Roman Period, however, we are still able to see the influence of Roman culture in the palette and it serves as a representative item of the time period. Stone is one of the oldest mediums that was used by not only Romans but many ancient societies before and after them to create anything from everyday tools to sculptures and architecture. Even the first cosmetic palettes are believed to be dated back to 700 - 500 BCE, though they were less common at the time (Crofoot 1). Many techniques

were used with stone, one of the most common being carving, a process in which natural stone is shaped through a process of chipping and removal (Eliav, 2014, Object 02). It is through techniques of stone carving that objects such as the cosmetic palette were created. Carving tools such as chisels were used by hand for both creating the center depression, where stone was chipped away, as well as the finer decorative bands around the edge of the flat surface (Cartwright, *Roman Sculpture*).

And now, we turn to the population that found the greatest use of cosmetic palettes: women. Freeborn Roman women held citizenship under the Roman Empire, though they were unable to vote, hold a seat in political office, or serve in the military. Once married, a Roman woman kept her family name and the status of the male with whom she was most closely associated. She was entitled to the properties she owned previous to her marriage, and unless otherwise stated by a will, had equal inheritance rights to those of her brothers. The daily life of a woman of this time period included the caretaking of the household, business, children, and overlooking the work of the slaves. She was in charge of running any family business while her husband was away, and depending on his social status, organized social parties at which women were guests equal to men (Conolly, Peter, and Dodge 158). As much of the work that had only centuries ago been performed primarily by women was now done by the family's slaves, the lives of Roman women were much more independent, social, and less demanding than those of their ancient Athenian counterparts (Conolly, Peter and Dodge 159). As a result, we conclude that classical Roman women had the luxury of time in caring for their physical experiences, introducing an emphasis on day-to-day outward beauty and health of women that had not yet been seen before in the social world. Both ideas and products of beauty spread across the land and came to be more

popular with increased communication and trade with neighboring regions, further boosting the flourishing cosmetics trade (Stewart 11). And with this flourish came the improvement of already existing merchandise as well as the creation of new makeup products and cosmetic tools, such as makeup palettes.

Literature of this era that corresponds to the cosmetic palette in our focus provides evidence of the significant role of cosmetics in Roman times. In her book "Cosmetics and Perfumes in the Roman World," author Susan Stewart writes, "contemporary writers and artists exploited cosmetics and perfumes, including them in their work in order to express ideas not only about beauty, but also health, gender, social role and status, luxury and wealth" (9). It can be noted that in literature depicting Roman society, the purpose of cosmetics went far beyond the outer layer of the skin. Cosmetics were a means of women to express themselves and their identities but they also represented a means for writers to express their views on women and society. For example, a few contemporary Roman writers wrote about the use of cosmetics by men, which wasn't as common as the use of cosmetics by women. Stewart describes how these texts were a way for writers to express their belief that men who used such products were effeminate and unfit for society. By writing about various Roman emperors using cosmetics "Suetonius and others shed doubt on the suitability of these men to rule" (Stewart 20).

References to beauty were also found in pieces of Roman art such as paintings, mosaics, and sculptures, which often depicted objects involved in the act of beautifying, such as combs, mirrors, and bottles of perfume or makeup. These ancient works of art also teach us what sort of materials and techniques were used in cosmetic production without the technology and conveniences we have to make the same things today. We've learned

that cosmetics were mostly created from natural substances such as animal products or botanicals. For example, facial makeup was mixed in small plates made from the lanolin of sheep's wool and eyeliner was made from antimony powder (Conolly, Peter and Dodge 157). Our artifact, the cosmetic palette, comes into play as an object to hold such cosmetics. The speckles of blue found in the depression of the palette are most likely remnants of colored makeup similar to eyeliner or shadow.

The use of cosmetics and perfume during the Roman period tell us about Roman social and cultural life at the time, and is representative of the identities of Roman people. Citizens, especially women, put great emphasis and care into their physical and outward appearance in their daily lives. They used these items to beautify themselves and look more presentable to society. Cosmetics and perfumes, however, went farther than just the idea of beauty; they functioned to create Roman ideals of health and societal status. Women believed a way to depict their status and well-kept health was through their outward appearance (Stewart 22). A woman with a nice appearance gave the impression that she was of a select social status and also that she was in good health. Through historical artifacts such as the cosmetic palette, we learn more and more about what life was like during the Roman Ages. With this palette, possibly thousands of other ancient artifacts, it has been realized that the Romans lived lives of luxury and wealth that had not been experienced by most before them. It was in this period that women did not need wealth to afford makeup; a significant proportion of society began to use beauty products as they spread across the Roman world (Conolly, Peter and Dodge 157).

The palette also offers insight on the sophistication of the Roman trade economy. With expansion and innovation, communication and trade between the Roman Empire and

neighboring regions flourished. As Stewart states, “cosmetics and perfumes were a familiar feature of everyday life...” and “sold across the Roman world” (9). With the advent of trade routes between the Mediterranean and neighboring regions of Asia and Europe, cosmetics became popularized both within and outside of the empire (“Ancient Roman Trade”). We may consider that cosmetics, perfumes, and related merchandise contributed to the flourishing economy. The growing influence on appearance from neighboring lands carried over to Rome, resulting in the increased emphasis on appearance seen in Rome at the time. The use of cosmetics was becoming prevalent everywhere, and as the Roman society grew to be more sophisticated than its neighbors it may have seen an even greater prominence in the Roman World.

As we’ve seen, an object as small as a cosmetic palette sheds a considerable amount of light on ancient Roman history and culture. Looking beyond the simplicity of the stone object, we’ve learned about the women of the era, their roles and identities in society, and the luxurious lifestyles of the general Roman society. Turning our attention to more artifacts created a few centuries later, we discover more characteristics of the Roman Period.

The second set of objects in our focus consists of a collection of locks, keys and related hardware, discovered in a small villa in the 1st century CE. Located near Pompeii, Italy and neighboring Mount Vesuvius, the Villa Nona was known to be a farming center as well as an elegant retreat for its owners and for invited guests. When those amongst the prosperous people of Rome desired a break from the bustling city life, these luxurious villas provided to be the perfect escape (Roman Hardware). They included all the necessities of leisure, including the popular private bathing houses, woods for peaceful walks or

recreational hunting, and decorative gardens for more calming activities. The lifestyles of wealth and luxury are once again depicted, through the remains of the villa.

The process through which the hardware pieces were created denotes the technological advancements of the Roman society. As the items in the hardware set were made primarily out of bronze and iron, we can infer that metalworking was the common means of producing these objects. The earliest evidence of metalwork was found thousands of years before the Roman Period, when ancient copper mines were discovered in Iraq (Olson 295). During the Bronze and Iron Ages, both bronze and iron were discovered, and they were found to be more suitable than copper for purposes that required harder metals. The metal was heated until it was malleable and capable of being molded, and then with tools similar to hammers, it was bent into the shape (Eliav, 2014, Object 02). At the time, the skills were perfected and executed by those individuals who had mastered the techniques and made a living out of metalworking, such as professionals like artisans, blacksmiths, and alchemists.

Identifying the small details of the hardware items from the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor is again crucial in learning about the era. The collection consists of door hinges, lock plates, keys, furniture castings, and angular braces. Each item is composed of heavy bronze metal while the door hinges and hinge pins are also made of iron. The thousands of years of aging and rusting have left behind different shades of blues and greens painted randomly upon the objects, though we may be able to speculate that they were once their natural colors due to the bronzes and metallic shades that are also present. The pieces are all a bit larger than those found in modern day, signifying that doors and locks had been larger and thicker at the time and much less intricate than those of today. The objects also

have sharp square edges, possibly because it was more difficult to work with hard metals and create rounder edges in ancient times since modern technology didn't yet exist. Some pieces of the set also have rust-colored pumice fragments attached to them, a result of the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius that destroyed and buried the villa in 79 AD (Roman Hardware). The pieces, especially the keys and door hinges, show how the influence of Roman advancements remained for the centuries that came after the fall of the empire and can even be seen in our times today.

In order to understand the advancements that were made during the Roman Empire, we begin by focusing on times prior to the Roman era. The history of the lock and key began in 2000 BCE, supposedly around Egypt or Nubia, long before the Romans (James, Peter, and Nick Thorpe 469). For centuries, locks and keys were much different contraptions, consisting of wooden bolts and ropes. Both visually and functionally, they were so different that it was after much debate and analysis that archaeologists finally discovered their purpose (James, Peter and Nick Thorpe 470). A lock known as a tumbler was introduced under the Assyrian kingdom in the 8th century BCE, and the use of this inventive device spread quickly through the Middle Eastern lands. An improvement on the earlier methods of security, it became known as the Egyptian lock. Over time, the lock went through subtle advancements, but it wasn't until the time of the Romans that more significant improvements were made (James, Peter and Nick Thorpe 471). It was the Romans, or possibly Greek locksmiths living under Roman rule, who developed locks and keys that looked and functioned similarly to those of modern times. Casting aside the commonly used wood and rope, they introduced the use of bronze and iron, which came to be popular mediums of creation. The Romans were first to introduce the rotary lock model

that is still seen today, and became best known for their padlocks, especially the barb-spring padlock. It is likely that these locks were discovered in Fishbourne, Sussex, shortly after the Roman conquest of Britain in 43 AD (James, Peter and Nick Thorpe 472). The lock cases were created with a rectangular hole into which a bolt was pushed, compressing the springs within the case. Once inside, the springs sprung outwards, or decompressed, locking the bolt into place. It could only be removed with an L-shaped key. With this contraption, we see the characteristics of sophistication of mechanics within the Roman society.

Just as with the cosmetic palettes, these pieces may also serve as evidence of the luxury and prosperity of the Romans. Metal was a much more expensive and more difficult to obtain material than wood. With a flourishing economy, Romans were able to incorporate greater quantities of metal into anything from tools to buildings. This may also be evidence of the increased trade and communication with neighboring partners such as Spain, France, and North Africa. Trade was vital to ancient Rome. Numerous roads were built by the Romans, criss-crossing the empire and opening trade on all sides surrounding the Mediterranean ("Ancient Rome and Trade"). As mentioned, the items are made out of the same materials and have a similar resemblance. We may also speculate that the consistent use of the same materials, especially if found within items within the same house, were an indication of prosperity. Even middle class Romans may have been wealthy enough to afford door hinges, keys, and other household items that were made out of the same expensive material, contrary to the past where cheaper crude materials that had been used in the building of household appliances.

As mentioned before, the Romans were driven to seek knowledge and effect

advancement. Their improvement in security systems represents only a single example of the impact they had on the technology of their time period. While materials such as bronze and iron had been introduced centuries before them, they learned to incorporate them into more and more objects, creating sturdier and more innovative devices. Made out of metal, these objects lasted longer than the wooden counterparts. These locks and keys are some of the first signs of objects that are similar to those of modern day, both visually and also in methods of function. Traces of similarity are easily seen in the hinges and rotary keys found in the Kelsey Museum of Archeology, and we realize that Roman influence lasted well into our era today.

Two starkly different objects, both the cosmetic palette and set of locks and keys serve as powerful rhetorical tools. At first glance, both are seemingly ordinary objects, as they are far less intricate versions of common items of our modern world. But with a deeper, more analytical eye, we see that both offer a powerful insight on both the history and lifestyles of the Roman Empire. The cosmetic palette tells us of the emphasis on health and beauty in the common Roman society as well as the significance of cosmetic use in an individual's identity. It plays a part in characterizing the Roman society of one of wealth and prosperity, as the ancient women of this time allowed cosmetics to become a part of their everyday use. The locks and keys also offer similar insights on the prosperous period, as well significant improvements seen in the Roman era. The modification of existing locks as well as the introduction of newer forms of locks and keys by the Romans is evidence for their pursuit of advancement. Through the analysis of these artifacts, from how they were created to the populations that they served, we have learned a great deal about the Ancient Roman Empire and its impacting influence on our world today.

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