

## Introduction

The foot is not a very ornamental body part, associated as it is with dirt, sweat and odour, so it might seem an odd choice for decorative objects. However, many Roman artefacts were produced in the shape of feet wearing shoes. This work investigates why this apparently unprepossessing body-part was chosen as the iconography for some ornaments, what we might learn from Roman footwear and shoe-shaped artefacts about the people who owned and used them, and the ideological significance of feet in the Roman world, particularly in the north-western provinces.

As part of this process further, related questions need to be considered. The ideological significance of feet and footwear in the Roman world must be established. The ancient evidence in texts and art for how feet and footwear were regarded has to be taken into account, and the extent to which this Rome-centric, adult, male, elite evidence applied to the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire considered. It is also necessary to examine what we might learn from Roman foot- and shoe-shaped artefacts about the identity and beliefs of the people who owned them.

While there are many studies, for example, of Roman lamps and brooches, specific studies of foot- or shoe-shaped artefacts are very rare, as Eckardt points out (2013: 229). This book aims to rectify this matter by studying such objects in depth. It builds on, and extends, previous research by synthesising, and adding to, earlier findings, filling a substantial gap in our knowledge.

### 1.1 Theoretical Pathways

From a pragmatic stand-point, this work regards research approaches as a toolkit, applying them where appropriate. Its attitude to archaeological theories is similar: theoretical ‘bricolage’, rather than purism. Preucel (2006: 257) concludes that ‘there can be no single, self-contained theory of material culture’ and Hodder (2005: 68) suggests that a general unified theory of material culture should be regarded with some scepticism. The test for this theoretical bricolage approach is whether it works consistently in relation to the research objectives; that is, it enables a better understanding of things that are too complex for any single philosophy or social theory (Olsen 2010: 14). To cover all the archaeological theories that informed this study would require several volumes, so this section discusses those which are most relevant to the social significance of Roman foot-shaped artefacts and which helped to shape the methodology used.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Further approaches, such as fragmentation theory, are discussed in the germane chapters.

#### 1.1.1 Object biography

Hoskins (2006: 77) affirms that ‘asking questions about the agency of objects has led to the development of a more biographical approach’, pointing out that Gell’s work suggests a more active model of an object’s biography, in which the object may not only assume a number of different identities, but may also ‘interact’ with those who look at it, use it, and try to possess it (Hoskins 2006: 76). The theory has influenced many scholars dealing with the life history of archaeological objects and sites (for example: Holtorf 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Fontijn 2002; Meskell 2004; Joy 2009; van Haasteren and Groot 2013). The object biography approach has been useful for this study, particularly in researching the significance of footwear deposited in Roman wells, but also for interpreting the symbolism of some foot-shaped artefacts, since it provides a method to reveal the relationships between people and objects (Joy 2009: 540).

The idea of object biographies is generally attributed to the work of anthropologists Appadurai and Kopytoff (Harris and Cipolla 2017: 80). However, Tassinari (1973: 132) developed somewhat earlier the idea of a ‘*curriculum vitae*’ for artefacts, by which she means the steps for reconstructing the life of an object: finding its place of origin, its date of manufacture, and establishing its movements around the Roman Empire. Kopytoff himself (1986: 66) cites the work of Rivers’s 1910 paper, ‘The genealogical method of anthropological inquiry’, as an influence.

Appadurai (1986: 5) posits that the meanings of objects are inscribed in their forms, uses, and trajectories and that it is these trajectories that illuminate their social and human context. Kopytoff (1986: 66) discusses the idea that the biographies of objects could be treated like those of people, pointing out that ‘Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure’ (Kopytoff 1986: 67), and suggesting the questions to ask of an object in order to establish its biography: its dates; where it is from and where it was found; what are the cultural markers for the stages in a thing’s ‘life’; what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness (Kopytoff 1986: 66–67).

Hoskins (2006: 78) identifies two dominant forms of object biography: those which begin with ethnographic research, attempting to give a narrative of how certain objects are perceived by the people to whom they are linked, and those which begin with historical or archaeological research, and try to ‘interrogate objects themselves by placing them in a historical context’. This second form is particularly useful for archaeologists interested in the dynamic nature of

artefacts (Harris and Cipolla 2017: 80), whose meanings and functions can change in different contexts (Holtorf 1998: 23).

### **1.1.2 Contextual Archaeology**

The contextual analysis of symbolic meanings is a theoretical approach first discussed by Hodder (1987). While there is widespread recognition that the significance, or meaning, of artefacts changes over time and space, the way in which this understanding is applied to artefact studies can be uneven. Thomas (1991: 18–19) points out that the meaning given to artefacts is not intrinsic, but is attributed through practice and changes according to context. Tilley (2001: 260) states that an object's meaning comes from situated, contextualized social action which is in continuous dialectical relationship with procreative rule-based structures thus forming a medium for and an outcome of action. In other words, an artefact is given significance when it is used by a group for a particular purpose. Eckardt (2002: 26) opines that the social significance of material culture is not monolithic; it could have changed with time and according to social context. Since the symbolic and social meaning of Roman artefacts is 'not inherent and immutable, but rather determined by past actions and contexts' (Eckardt 2002: 27), a 'contextual archaeology' approach seems appropriate for studying the significance of Roman representations of feet.

When explaining the 'contextual archaeology' approach, Hodder (1987: 1) defines three types of contextual meaning: function (how the object functions in its social and physical environment), structure (its place within a code or set), and content (historical, situated within the changing ideas and associations of the object itself). The first stage of his analytical procedure is to identify the network of patterned similarities and differences in relation to the object being examined and the questions being asked. This is done by taking the four variable dimensions available to archaeologists: the temporal, spatial, depositional and typological (Hodder 1987: 6). Hodder (1987: 6) goes on to define meaningful pattern as showing statistically significant similarities and differences. He defines context as the whole of the relevant environment and all those associations relevant to its meaning (Hodder 1992: 13). The relationship between an object and its context is both complex and dialectic, as the context gives meaning to and gains meaning from the object (Hodder 1992: 13). Contextual archaeology has proved a useful approach for this study.

### **1.2 Steps taken in this research**

Understanding foot-shaped artefacts as part of a social code, and their historically specific significance, calls for a detailed examination of the cultural context of their usage (Eckardt 2002: 28). In order to explore the meanings of artefacts in depth, Eckardt (2014: 2) explains the necessity of first selecting artefacts that may be of social or cultural significance, then compiling a corpus, mapping their

distribution, and examining their contexts. In her 1973 study of Roman jugs with a handle ending in feet, Tassinari (128–130) outlines an artefact study method that produces an 'identity card', which includes, as far as possible, the date and place of discovery, context, dimensions, state of preservation, a detailed description, photographs and drawings. This, coupled with the theoretical approaches discussed above, provided a model for database entries.

This study assembled a corpus of 1,492 Roman representations of feet and footwear across 12 categories of artefacts, gathering a range of different types of data, for example, find locations, geographical and chronological deposition, and the types of site where the artefacts were found. Evidence for the deposition of actual footwear in 18,465 Roman graves and 1,311 Roman wells was also examined to explore their meanings, and the significance of Roman hobnailing patterns and how this was extended to depictions of hobnailing considered.

The data were collected from published sources and museum collections. Details of the published foot-shaped artefacts were obtained through a systematic literature review, which included artefact studies, museum catalogues, site reports and specialist Roman articles. Data for some artefacts were obtained through social media, for example, details of a foot-shaped lamp from Corsham originated on X (formerly Twitter) (Roman Britain News 2020), and were followed up with Chippenham Museum. Those for the foot-shaped lamp found at Rue de Koenigshoffen, Strasbourg, in 2019, were published on Facebook (Archéologie Alsace 2019) and researched further online (Crouvezier 2019). These data from modern media should help to counterbalance antiquarian reports. Unpublished foot-shaped artefacts were identified by contacting museums with Roman collections and through internet searches.

Although every effort has been made to ensure that this research is as thorough as possible, no survey of this kind of material can ever hope to be, or remain, complete. However, the combination of a systematic literature survey, where references were carefully followed up, and an examination of unpublished examples should ensure that the samples are as representative as possible (Eckardt 2002: 29). Details of each corpus were entered into a Microsoft Access database, since this permits the inclusion of illustrations, and allows the material to be sorted according to a variety of criteria such as findspot, map coordinates (where available), material, size, chirality, date, and type. The greatest benefit of this method was that it facilitated the observation of chronological, spatial, and depositional distribution patterns. It also enabled the use of some quantitative data, which were entered into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, so that graphs and charts could be produced to illustrate the data analysis. Distribution maps were created using QGIS software.

The most crucial field in the database for this study, the context, was difficult to name. Various terms were

experimented with. ‘Social distribution’ is inexact, because it assumes that we are seeing different blocks of society at different locations, when, in reality, people moved between them, and they changed over time. ‘Context’ is an ambiguous term in Roman archaeology, signifying both the common usage meaning, and the specific circumstances (the more precisely definable, discrete, observable ‘event’) in which an artefact was found. Contextual information also has two levels: the type of site where an artefact was found, which it was decided to call ‘site type’; and the nature of the context, which was eventually labelled ‘find setting’ in order to obviate the terminological problems.

There are inherent problems in classifying both ‘site types’ and ‘find settings’, since the categories are very broad and tend to lump sites together. Millett’s suggestion (2001: 64) that forts should be considered as small towns does not help the situation. This problem is also evident in dividing up site types for archaeological numismatics (Reece 1995: 182; Lockyear 2000: 399). The implications for military assemblages are made clear by Allason-Jones’s work (1988) comparing small finds assemblages from Hadrian’s Wall forts with those from turrets, which elicited that these differ markedly from each other. It may, however, be necessary to generalise categories of site to create sufficiently large numbers of artefacts (Eckardt 2005: 144) in order to gain a representative sample.

There is a danger that the categories are used for convenience, or historically derived (Eckardt 2002: 29), although it is possible to modify these so as to incorporate material culture patterns and possible regional or status differences (Eckardt 2002: 30). Some sites call for more than one label, for example, Uley could be defined as ‘rural’ and ‘religious’. Other sites, such as Corbridge Roman town, changed status over time, but maintained a military presence. Eckardt (2002: 30) suggests that a pragmatic approach should be adopted. The category labels used for this study, therefore, vary a little, depending on the types of site and find setting encountered: the case study of shoe brooches also includes a ‘small town’ category for the sake of better accuracy; for obvious reasons, the category ‘tile works’ was added to the study of footprints in Roman ceramic building materials; the category labels for footprints carved in stone relate to the type of building in which they were found, since there is little variety of general find setting. However, most of the case studies adopt the following categories:

### Site types

- Military: legionary fortresses, forts, marching camps or mile castles;
- Urban: cities, *coloniae*, large towns, civitas capitals and small towns;
- Villa/rural: this category is biased towards villas, which have received more attention than rural settlements;
- Other: anything not covered by the above, and;
- Unknown: due to the lack of adequate recording and reporting, this tends to be the largest category.

### Find settings

- Domestic: from an area or building of habitation;
- Funerary: burials, whether cremation or inhumation, and cemeteries;
- Industrial: for example tile works, potteries, ports;
- Religious: temples, sanctuaries, shrines and *lararia*;
- Water: wells, rivers, and bogs;
- Other, and;
- Unknown.

This contextual approach helps to facilitate a focus on patterns of usage and deposition, and thus to interpret the social significance of Roman representations of feet and footwear.

### 1.3 Recurring strands of significance

During the analysis of this study’s corpus it became apparent that a number of strands, or themes, of social significance are common across the different categories of artefact. Feet, to the Romans, could signify a whole individual, whether human or divine, and could function as a signature, or as a symbol of power, authority, and status. Roman representations of feet and footwear could symbolize certain deities, and played a role in Roman ritual activities, particularly in burial rites. They may also have been regarded as having apotropaic properties to ward off the evil eye (Forrer 1942: 43-78; Riha 1979: 42; van Driel-Murray 1999a: 131; Galavaris 2006: 44; Eckardt 2013: 231). Chirality, whether feet were left or right, was significant to communities living within the Roman Empire, and the role it played relating to good or bad luck will be investigated. Roman hobnailing was another important part of the significances of feet and footwear, since the patterns of the nails bore symbols which could be religious or apotropaic. Roman hobnailing was also associated with ideas of authority, power and domination. How these themes relate to the different categories of objects studied is discussed in detail in the relevant chapters. This work argues that, far from being merely whimsical or fashionable, foot- and shoe-shaped artefacts could be polysemous, although they did not necessarily mean the same thing at the same time to everyone.

One should, of course, be aware that feet were not the only significant body part in Roman ideology. Heads could represent a whole person (Ferris 2003: 14) and were regarded as powerful (Eckardt 2014: 168). Hands could symbolise a being (Croxford 2003: 92) and had apotropaic properties (Eckardt 2014: 161). The human phallus is also a known apotropaic symbol (Collins 2020: 274).

### 1.4 Terms and limitations

‘Roman’ is a very slippery term, being used for a fairly long period of time and over a wide and changing geographical area in which not everyone was always considered Roman. ‘Roman’ in this study means within the bounds of the Roman Empire for a timeline that runs from the early first century BCE to the early fifth century CE. This

study defines the north-western provinces as comprising an area within the borders of these modern nation states: the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Germany. Selected data from other areas of the Roman Empire, especially Austria, Switzerland, and Hungary, are included for the purposes of comparison.

The scope of this project is, therefore, wide-ranging, so it might be useful at this point to explain what it does not entail. Many aspects of actual Roman footwear are not considered in detail, because they have been studied at length by Carol van Driel-Murray and many other scholars (see Chapter 2). Nor does it research in depth anatomical foot-shaped votives to do with healing, since this aspect has been covered by other researchers, such as Chiarini (2017). It will not investigate the significance of images of sandals on mosaics, especially those found in baths, which Dunbabin (1990) discusses in detail. Likewise, the prospect of concealed shoes is not considered here.

Although every effort has been made to ensure that this research is as thorough as possible, a few texts, such as von Mercklin's *Römische Klappmessergriffe* (1940), and Guarducci's *Le impronte del 'Quo vadis' e monumenti affini, figurati ed epigrafici* (1943), proved unobtainable. Publishing bias should also be taken into consideration, since small finds, especially metal ones, are much less well published in Spain, Italy and eastern Europe (Eckardt 2022: personal comment). It is therefore inevitable that some foot- and shoe-shaped artefacts have been overlooked.

### 1.5 The significance of feet in other cultures

Meanings of feet and footwear are not unique to the Romans. In order to begin to examine the special ideology of feet in the Roman world, this section summarizes some of these by dint of comparison. This will only be a brief overview, since this topic could form an entire book on its own.

Some cultural meanings of feet and footwear do coincide with Roman ideology. The funerary use of feet and shoes occurs in Ancient Egypt, where sandals were provided for the deceased (Achrati 2003: 486). Foot-shaped vessels were also used in some burials in Ancient Greece (Smith 2018: 203), and in other areas of Europe in the Iron Age (Forrer 1942: 50; Kohle 2013: 53). Shoes and foot-shaped artefacts are common in Roman burials.

The Roman idea of feet as *pars pro toto*, that is, representative of a whole being, can also be seen in other cultures. The footprints of the Buddha are venerated throughout the Buddhist world (Strong 2007: 86). Islam acknowledges the footprints of Adam on a mountain in Sri Lanka (Galavaris 2006: 43), the footprints of Abraham in the Kaaba, Mecca, and those of the Prophet in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Achrati 2003: 488). The idea of feet representing a whole being continues. A commemorative sculpture installed in 2005 on the banks of the Danube in Budapest (Yad Vashem 2021) depicts 60 pairs of iron shoes as a memorial to Hungarian Jews shot in 1944–1945.

Feet as symbols of power is another recurring motif. The sandals and footstools of Egyptian pharaohs were decorated with images of their bound and prone enemies so that they symbolically trampled the foes of Egypt (van Driel-Murray 1999a: 131). Carved footprints at Dunadd fort, Scotland, and the Broch of Clickimin, on Shetland, are associated with kingship and inauguration rites (Thomas 1879: 28; Historic Environment Scotland 2021a and 2021b).

There are, however, associations of the foot that are not seen in the Roman world. These brief examples show that feet have many different meanings across the world and across time, and how they fit with Roman ideology. In Asian and Islamic countries, showing the sole of your foot is considered impolite. The foot is the lowest part of the body, in contact with the ground, making it the epitome of dirty (Bishop 2012). Thus, in Iraq, shoes can be used to show extreme disrespect (Weeks 2003), for example, a shoe was thrown at US President Bush by an Iraqi journalist in 2008 (Asser 2008), and statues of Saddam Hussein were beaten with shoes after his fall (BBC News 2003).

Feet can also have erotic connotations. In Ancient Greece, the foot was considered a symbol of the penis (Levine 2005: 59; 68). Feet are also used as euphemisms for the genitals in the Bible (Gravett *et al.* 2008: 170), for example, Isaiah 6:2 and 7:20; Ezekiel 16:25. While it is possible that the foot symbolised the penis to the Romans (Goh 2017: 14), this study found no clear examples of this. This aspect would, however, add another layer to the evidence for feet having an apotropaic role in Roman times.

Freud took up the idea of the feet symbolising the penis in 1905 (Brill 1938: 375) and included it in his theory of foot fetishism (Brill 1938: 567). An example of supposed foot fetishism is Chinese foot-binding, which was imbued with erotic overtones (Foreman 2015). The painful process, which involved breaking a girl's feet and binding them with a silk strip, was widespread for a long time, lasting into the twentieth century (Bossen and Gates 2017: 2). Girls were commonly told that the resulting 'lotus' feet were a passport to a more prestigious marriage and a better way of life (Bossen and Gates 2017: 8). However, it has also been suggested that foot-binding was adopted as an expression of Han Chinese identity (Foreman 2015; Bossen and Gates 2017: 6). Recent research suggests that foot-binding, which limited mobility, ensured young girls sat still and worked at tasks like spinning (Bossen and Gates 2017: 10), that contributed to the household economy (Bossen and Gates 2017: 25). This is a non-Roman example of feet being polysemous.

### 1.6 Conclusions

Through its analysis of a wide-ranging corpus of 1,492 foot- and shoe-shaped artefacts, and its structure, this study aims to build up an evidentiary picture of the social significance of representations of feet and footwear in the

north-western provinces of the Roman Empire. It begins with some background information about actual Roman footwear and discusses ancient attitudes and more recent studies. The significance of Roman hobnailing is also considered. In order to establish some connotations of Roman shoes, their deposition in Roman era graves and wells is considered, before moving on to a series of case studies that looks at twelve different categories of foot- and shoe- shaped artefacts.

Overall, it argues that feet and footwear held a special place in the ideology of the Roman world, with meanings ranging from witty, novelty objects, through fashionable items, to artefacts appropriate for religious, funerary, and other ritual activities. Feet could stand in place of a person, act as a signature, and be symbols of power and status. They were also used apotropaically, especially on a journey, whether that be actual travel, the journey through life, or to the Underworld.