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AN INSCRIBED ROMAN SPOON FROM CANTERBURY

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A small bronze fragment found in 1976 during excavations on the Cakebread-Robey site in Stour Street, Canterbury, was described by M.W.C. Hassall as 'part of a needle-like implement or pin' and the inscription on the end of it he expanded to read [VTERE FE]LIX, meaning 'use with good fortune'.¹ Comparable objects from Colchester,² Malton³ and South Shields⁴ show that the fragment is part of the handle of a Roman spoon and that although Hassall's reading is correct only one word of the inscription occurs on each spoon. The four spoons which are shown in Fig. 1 are the only known examples of their type and have not hitherto been published.

The spoons are of bronze (that is, a copper alloy) with traces of tinning. Where dimensions are possible to take they are very similar: the bowls measure 38–39 mm. long and 25–27 mm. wide. The surviving piece of handle on the Canterbury spoon is 45 mm. long. Judging from other complete handles it would have originally been about 110 mm. long and would have tapered to a pointed end. The only complete flanged section of handle, which is on the Malton spoon, measures 16.5 mm. long. The bowls have a flat rim and a raised grooved bar near the handle. In view of their similarity it is

¹ M.W.C. Hassall, 'Roman Britain in 1981', *Britannia*, xiii (1982), 413. The object was in fact found in 1976 in a medieval robber trench on the Roman theatre. I am grateful to Mr. Tim Tatton-Brown, and Mrs. Pan Garrard of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust for allowing me to publish it.

² Castle Museum, no registration number. Provenance unknown. Examined by me in 1971 but subsequently lost. I am grateful to Mr. Mark Davies, for trying to find it.

³ Malton Museum R.30.340. Provenance unknown. I am grateful to Mrs. Elizabeth Hartley of the Yorkshire Museum for allowing me to examine it, and to Dr. Barry Knight for cleaning it.

⁴ Newcastle-upon-Tyne Museum of Antiquities accession no. 1956, 128.9.A. I am grateful to Miss Lindsay Allason-Jones for arranging for the spoon to be cleaned.

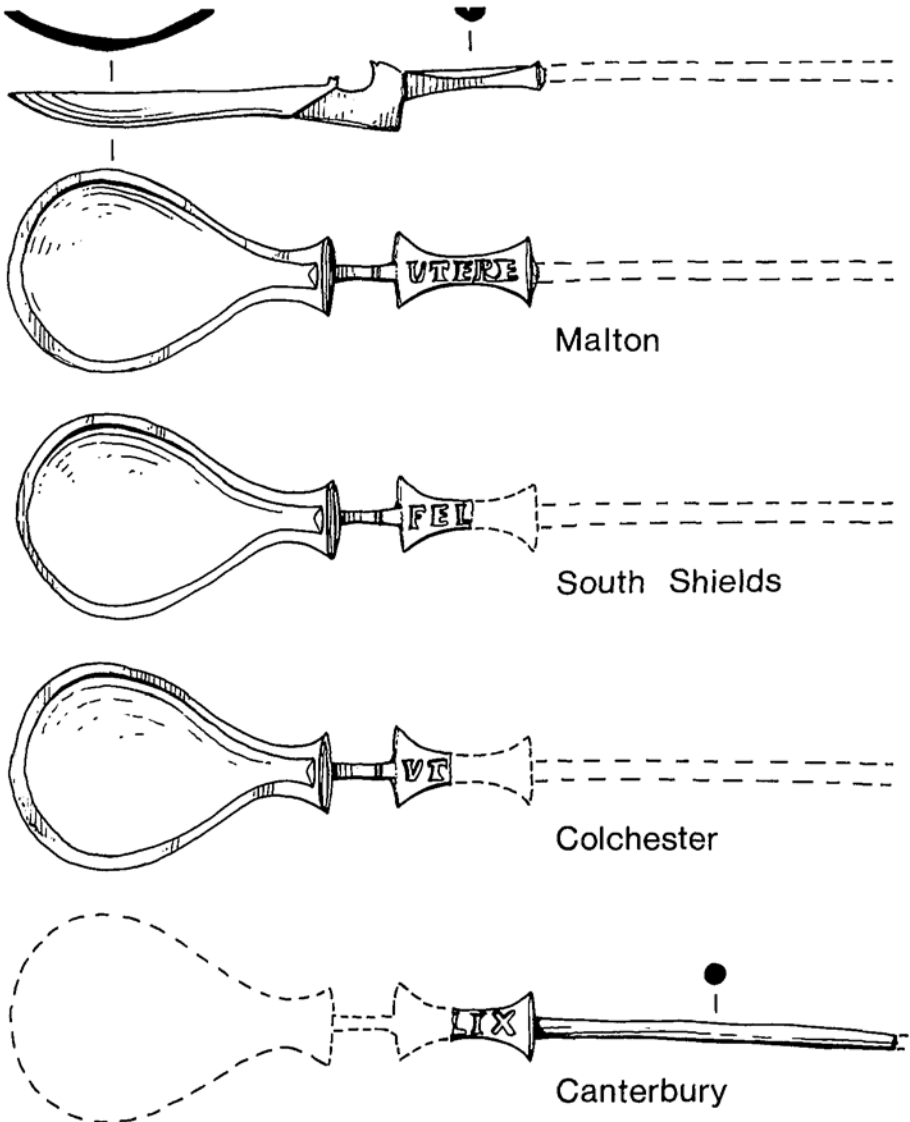


Fig. 1. Roman Spoons, inscribed *utere* and *felix* (Scale: c. †).

likely that the spoons were made in the same workshop (see below). None of them comes from a dated context but the purse-shaped bowl (also known as 'fiddle-' and 'lyre-shaped') is a familiar third-century shape.⁵

The inscriptions are the most interesting aspect of the spoons but, before their significance is discussed, it may be worth recording how they came to be studied, if only to show the dangers of interpolating from too little evidence. When R.P. Wright's attention was drawn to the Colchester spoon, he read the inscription as 'VI[. . . , presumably for *vivas*]',⁶ though judging from the size of the Malton spoon (then thought to be uninscribed) the present writer felt that the numbers VII, VIII or VIII were more likely. Moreover, the word *vivas*, 'may you live', almost never occurs alone. The possibility that VI was part of a number seemed to be increased when the Canterbury fragment was found, reading perhaps [X]LIX. Admittedly, the number 49 might more normally have been expressed as XXXXVIII, but if this number seemed improbably high it was pointed out that the Kerynia (Cyprus) and Kaiseraugst (Switzerland) treasures each contained thirty-six spoons while the tableware in the Boscoreale treasure totalled 109 pieces and that in the House of Menander at Pompeii, 118 pieces;⁷ also, three spoons from a hoard near Rome have the numbers II, III and VI on them.⁸ However, when the Malton and South Shields spoons came to be re-examined for this paper they were found to be inscribed VTERE and FEL[IX], making the Canterbury spoon read [FE]LIX, as Hassall had originally postulated. This left the Colchester spoon to be re-examined to see if VI was in fact VT[. . .] Regrettably, this spoon cannot now be found but judging from a photograph taken in 1972, the second letter can be read as a T with its cross-bar damaged before casting. Again, because of the Malton spoon it is now possible to restore VT[ERE]. We therefore now have two spoons that were once inscribed *utere* and two, *felix*.

These are the only known spoons from Roman Britain with *utere felix*, though a variant VTI FELIX occurs on the bowl of a spoon in the Thetford treasure⁹ and the phrase occurs on seven Roman silver spoons from abroad, in each case on the bowls. The earliest of these

⁵ See D.E. Strong, *Greek and Roman Gold and Silver Plate* (1966), 177-8 and Emilie Riha, *Die römischen Löffel aus Augst und Kaiseraugst* (1982), Taf. 33.

⁶ *Britannia*, iii (1972), 355-6.

⁷ Strong, *op. cit.*, 125.

⁸ *Bull. di Arch. Crist.*, vi (1868), 79.

⁹ *Britannia*, xii (1981), 393; Catherine Johns and Timothy Potter, *The Thetford Treasure* (1983), 113, no. 59.

has a second-century type of oval bowl with a stylised ivy-leaf between the two words.¹⁰ The most elaborate spoon has a lion's-head join between the bowl and handle and came from a grave of c. A.D. 270 at Cologne.¹¹ Three spoons from a fourth-century treasure from Isola Rizza near Verona have a cross between the words.¹² The other two spoons are from Augst (late fourth-century) and from Salles-d'Aude near Narbonne (date unknown).¹³

The phrase *utere felix* has been found on many other kinds of Roman objects, too numerous to list *in toto*. It mainly occurs on other utensils such as pots, metal skillets and dishes and glass drinking-cups;¹⁴ and on articles of dress such as rings, brooches and belt fittings, two of which have also come from Canterbury and South Shields.¹⁵ A first-century building-stone from Malton reads: *Feliciter sit genio loci. Servule, utere felix tabernam aureficinam*. 'Good luck to the genius of this place. Young slave, use with good fortune this goldsmith's shop'.¹⁶ On a fifth-century mosaic at Mièune-Marboné (France) the maker invites his customer to use it well: *Ex officina Ferroni. Felix uti, Steleco*.¹⁷ The Latin verb *utor* was clearly capable of a wide range of meanings including eat, drink and wear as well as generally make use of something. *Felix*, here a shortened form of the adverb *feliciter*, made with *utere* an easily recited dactyl and spondee, one of several such expressions of well-wishing, though curiously the phrase is not known in Latin literature.¹⁸ The datable objects suggest that the phrase came into fashion in the first or second century A.D. Initially, it had no deeper meaning but by the time Christianity was becoming widespread it could also have a religious significance. The

¹⁰ Sold at Sothebys, 6 May 1982, lot 259. Provenance unknown. On loan to Moyses's Hall Museum, Bury St. Edmund's.

¹¹ *Germania*, xxviii (1927), 39–40, Abb. 3.

¹² *Bull. di Arch. Crist.*, ser. 3; i (1873), 119.

¹³ Riha, *op. cit.*, Nr. 275; *C.I.L.* xii, 5697, 11.

¹⁴ Reference to a number of such objects can be found in S.S. Lewes, 'Description of an Inscribed Vase, lately found at Guilden Morden', *Camb. Ant. Soc. Comm.*, iv (1880), 337–40.

¹⁵ Canterbury brooch: *Britannia*, xi (1980), 413, no. 45. South Shields belt fastening: L. Allason-Jones and R. Miket, *Catalogue of small Finds from South Shields Roman Fort* (1984), 214, no. 3.726. See generally H. Bullinger, 'Utere Felix: A Propos de la Garniture de Ceinturon de Lyon', *Gallia*, xxx (1972), 276–83.

¹⁶ *RIB*, 712.

¹⁷ *Année épigraphique*, 1981 (1984), no. 648.

¹⁸ Greek versions of both *utere felix* and *vivas* (see below) are also known. See e.g. a Roman glass phial from High Down Anglo-Saxon cemetery inscribed +δγμένων χρῶ, *Archaeologia*, lv (1887), 206, and an unprovenanced spoon inscribed]να ζύθας, *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Lond.*, xv (1895), 274. The phrase *utere temporibus* occurs in Ovid, *Tristia*, iv, 3, 83 and *deorum muneribus sapienter uti* in Horace, *Odes*, iv, 9, 47.

Thetford spoon with *uti felix*¹⁹ was one of a hoard associated with the worship of the pagan god Faunus. On the other hand, a ring from Pannonia inscribed *Vintio utere felix in deo*²⁰ and the three spoons with *utere + felix* from Isola Rizza were almost certainly intended for a Christian owner. By the fourth century *utere felix* was overtaken in popularity on spoons and other small objects by the single word *vivas*, normally accompanied by a name in the vocative case and probably denoting a Christian owner, with the notable exception of the Thetford treasure spoons. A spoon from Caistor St. Edmund (Norfolk) has simply *vivas in deo* which like the ring just mentioned is probably Christian while one from Terrugem (Portugal) inscribed *Aelias vivas in Christo* with *alpha* and *omega* is certainly Christian.²¹

The four spoons which are the subject of this paper are of added interest because the phrase here requires a pair of spoons in order to be read. Pairs of Roman objects with inscriptions are familiar enough, for example the strigils from Caerleon (Gwent), one inscribed 'it washed you well' and its lost twin which will have read 'it will wash you well'.²² The two Mildenhall treasure spoons with their wish *vivas* to Papittedo and Pascentia,²³ although not quite identical in design, may be considered as a pair, possibly intended as a baptismal gift, or, like the *utere felix* pairs of spoons, intended as marriage or new year gifts to a couple. There is, however, only one other pair of Roman spoons, the inscriptions on which need to be read together to be understood. This is the famous pair from the Sutton Hoo ship-burial inscribed in Greek + *Saulos* and + *Paulos* with the implied reference to Christian conversion.²⁴

The Canterbury spoon and its three companions are so identical that they must have been made in the same workshop although they have been found at Roman towns many miles apart.²⁵ At which of the four places (if any) the spoons were made,²⁶ whether there were

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* in note 9 above.

²⁰ *Année épigraphique*, 1980 (1983), no. 11.

²¹ Caistor St. Edmund: *Norf. Arch.*, xxxvii (1980), 346; Terrugem: *Conimbriga*, x (1971), 93.

²² *Britannia*, xiii (1982), 420.

²³ Strong, *op. cit.* in note 5, 206.

²⁴ *Speculum*, xlii (1967), 670-2 and xlvii (1972), 91-5.

²⁵ Two identically decorated pewter spoons have been found as far apart as Vindolanda and London (Martin Henig, *Roman Life and Art in Britain*, ii, Pl. 15, BAR, 41, 1977).

²⁶ Clay moulds for the manufacture of a similar type of Roman spoon have recently been found at Castleford (Yorks.).

others, and whether the four were originally the actual pairs are of course mere speculations.²⁷

²⁷ The likelihood that these four spoons were actually pairs (i.e., either Malton + South Shields and Colchester + Canterbury, or Malton + Canterbury and Colchester + South Shields) is no less remote than that of the inscribed ring from Silchester (Hants.) being the stolen one referred to in the leaden curse from Lydney Park (Glos.) (*RIB* 306).