

# Seal Boxes from Roman London

Simon Holmes

## A new study

DURING THE last fifty years, increasing resources have been expended on the archaeological investigation of Roman London's topography which has resulted in the vast increase in information shown by recent publications<sup>1</sup>. However, there are few analogous artefact studies for the Roman period to compare with the major HMSO *Medieval Finds from Excavations* series. This article is concerned with one such neglected aspect of the archaeology of *Londinium*, the Museum of London's collection of Roman seal boxes. This is the second largest assemblage in the country but it has not been studied previously and the majority of examples are unpublished. The report presented below is based upon a recent study in which some 410 seal boxes from all over Britain were assessed<sup>2</sup>.

The typological examination of seal boxes found in Britain began with the work of Crummy<sup>3</sup> and Bateson<sup>4</sup> who recognised similarities of design between enamelled plate brooches and seal box lids. Consequently, both produced typological and chronological sequences according to shapes and contextual evidence based on local studies. However, by approaching the material on a wider provincial scale, it has proved possible to study seal boxes in greater depth and thus expand and develop those earlier classifications, producing a clarified terminology with a numbered series of types. Working from this wider perspective, the London evidence was then examined and found to com-

prise a series of five well-defined classes identified by shape and ornamentation. This is summarised here in a report which includes many previously unpublished examples. The illustrations are a combination of the author's own work, examples drawn from reports cited in the footnotes, or supplied by the Museum.

## Sealing the post (Fig. 1)

The state ensured the regularity of a postal service, the *Cursus Publicus*, by establishing a series of postal stations at fixed intervals along the most important roads, usually the military highways. Letters were passed as quickly as possible from station to station. This service ensured that the state authorities in the provincial capital were kept in constant touch with their civil agents and the military. Only rarely were private citizens allowed to use this service, as Trajan pointed out to Pliny: "permits to use the post must not be used once the date has expired . . . permits are sent out to every province before the date they are needed"<sup>5</sup>. Normally they had to arrange for the delivery of their correspondence at their own expense by using their servants, as Cicero mentions: "I am giving this letter to someone else's messenger since they are

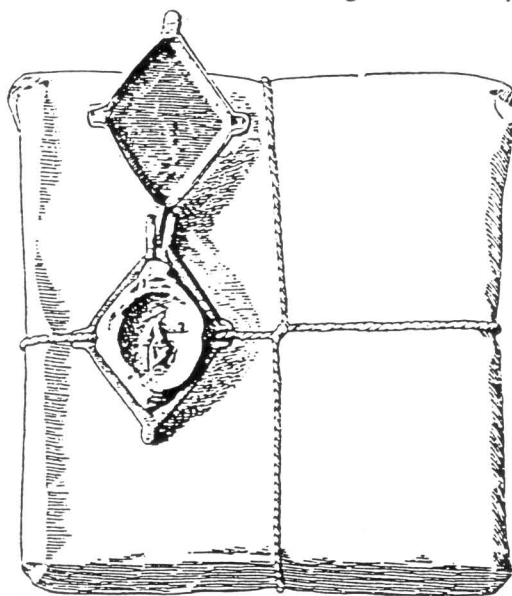


Fig. 1: illustration showing a seal box attached to a document package (after Atkinson 1942: see footnote 6).

1. See, for example, the CBA *Archaeology of Roman London* series, Research Reports nos 69, 70 and 88; London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper nos 3, 4, 8 and 13.
2. S. Holmes *Roman Seal Boxes: a classification of the British material* (1995): this dissertation was written by the author while studying at the Institute of Archaeology, and was prepared in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the BA degree in Archaeology awarded by University College London.
3. N. Crummy *The Roman small finds from excavations in Colchester 1971-9* Colchester Archaeol Rep no 2 (1983).
4. J. D. Bateson *Enamel-working in Iron Age, Roman and sub-Roman Britain: the products and techniques* British Archaeol Reps no 93 (1981) 48-50, fig 7.
5. Pliny X, 46.
6. D. Atkinson *Reports on the excavations at Wroxeter 1912-14* (1942) OUP.

leaving urgently . . . I am about to send messengers of my own<sup>7</sup>. If circumstances permitted, letters might also be entrusted to friends or guests on their travels. Consequently, a mutual assistance society was created for the regular delivery of private letters.

Seal boxes are bronze containers which have either enamelled or non-enamelled decoration on the lids, and occur in a variety of sizes and shapes. They protected the impression of an intaglio enclosed within it and were attached to sealed documents. The impressions would have been readily identifiable by their owners and associates and would have served as personal signatures, guaranteeing the authenticity of the contents. Opening the documents was not possible without breaking the seal or cutting the cord. The delivery of both official and private correspondence was clearly a delicate business which tested the loyalty and intelligence of those to whom it was entrusted.

The basic method of securing a parcel with a seal box was to tie the package with cord and to encase the knot with bees wax inside the lower half of the seal box (Fig. 1). That the knot lay within the base is shown by the survival of cord and the impressions of it left in mineralised wax deposits: study of a circular example from Wroxeter suggests that the middle of the cord was threaded through the central hole in the base from the underside leaving a small loop in the interior. The two ends of the cord were then passed round the parcel, back through two other holes in the base of the seal box from the underside, and then through the loop in the cord. Both loose ends were then passed through a notch on either side of the base, after which they were pulled tight. The wax would then be added to hold the cord in place. With the lid of the seal box closed, the impression of the intaglio was protected from damage during transit.

### Classification (Fig. 2; Table 1)

This article catalogues the 44 London seal boxes already recorded by the Museum (all but two of which it still retains), but reluctantly excludes the 17 examples currently being processed. They have been classified on the basis of their shape and decoration into one of a series of types which have been further sub-divided. Each type has been given a number and is based on an idealised 'complete' seal box comprising base, lid and hinge, against which fragments can be matched and thus identified. Of the 61 examples from London, 65% are enamelled and these are all of the 'Champlevé' variety (in which the enamel cells are recessed) formed as part of the casting process. Where the enamel survives it has been shown that most seal boxes are decorated in just two or three colours, although a small number exhibit the more complex *millefiori* enamels.

### Relative Chronology (Table 2)

The dating evidence used here is restricted to that obtained from associated contextual material, which is itself often

dated relative to other contexts. Using such evidence to date the seal boxes calls for a degree of latitude, since it can only provide a *terminus post quem* for their deposition, which could be some fifty years after their manufacture. Some seal boxes are also aestheti-

Type	Catalogue number	Acc no/ref
OVATE:		
1.2A	1	3673.241
1.3	2	(See Footnote II)
1.3	3	264.10
1.3	4	88.3/9
1.3	5	59.88
1.4A	6	87.155
1.4B	7	2653.787
1.6	8	2813.1221
1.7A	9	17787
1.7B	10	100.7
1.7B	11	18119
1.7BSE	12	20646
LOZENGE:		
2.2A	13	84.453/1
2.2C	14	18243
2.3B	15	A11089
SQUARE:		
3.1	16	15808
3.1	17	19356
3.2A	18	*
3.4A	19	152 (Hattatt 1989)
LEAF:		
4.1A	20	10736
4.1BSE	21	1146/24527
4.1B	22	2641.802
CIRCULAR:		
5.1A	23	85.585
5.1A	24	9512.1280
5.1A	25	19308
5.1B	26	2721
5.1D	27	20081
5.1D	28	4263.1224
5.1D	29	19605
5.1BSE	30	19833
5.1BSE	31	57.172
5.2A	32	A2407
5.2B	33	A17724
5.2B	34	3498
5.2C	35	4083.220
5.2C	36	20394
5.2E	37	2423.173
5.2BSE	38	3766.451
5.2BSE	39	1310
5.2BSE	40	220.122
5.2BSE	41	811.49
5.2BSE	42	A19688
5.3	43	1131.302
*	44	658.51

Table 1: catalogue of Roman Seal Boxes from London

7. Cicero *Atticus* XI, 17.

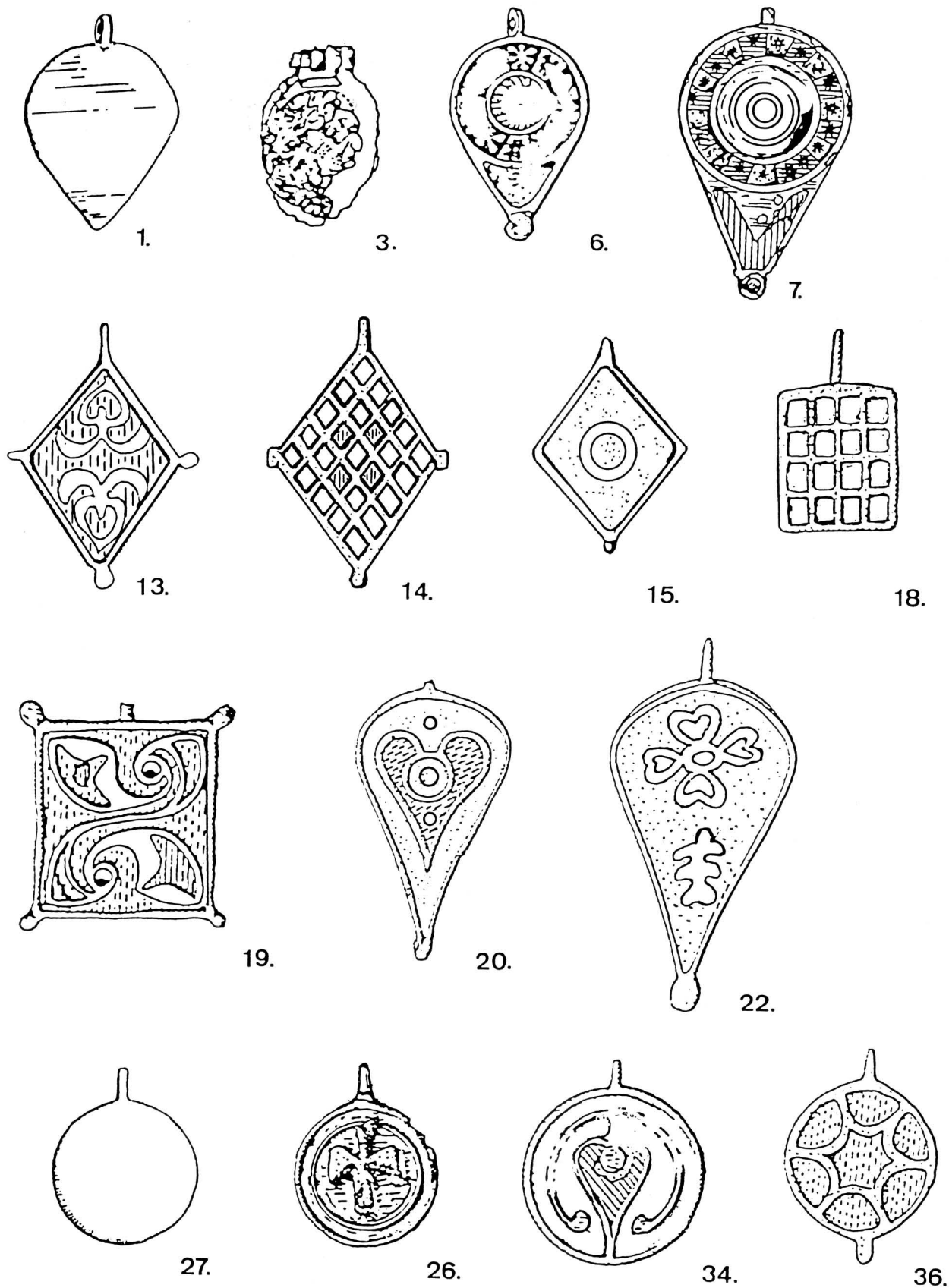


Fig. 2: selection of Roman Seal Box types represented in London.

cally pleasing and are thus quite likely to have been retained for long periods: a seal box lid found within a purse from a burial in Winchester may have been re-used as an item of jewellery, for example<sup>8</sup>. Taking all such matters into consideration, the dating of the various classes of seal boxes can rarely be refined to a range of less than 20 to 25 years. The results of the study are summarised in Table 2, where the *description* refers to the shape of each class while the number refers to the particular type within each broad class. The *catalogue number* refers to this new seal box catalogue (not to the corpus numbers in the original dissertation). The *suggested date range* represents that provided by associated material evidence. Where seal boxes of a similar design were associated with contexts of differing dates, as with nos 23 to 25 for example, then both the earliest and the latest dates for the whole group are shown. Those marked *undated* were unstratified.

The suggested chronology begins with the non-enamelled ovate types 1.2A and 1.3 (eg nos 1 and 3, from Leadenhall Court and Aldgate respectively) which occur in levels dated to between AD 50 and AD 120. In addition, non-enamelled circular types 5.1A, B and D, and the non-enamelled square type 3.1 have been found in contexts dated AD 45 to AD 150 (eg no 23 from Billingsgate, nos 25-6 from Bucklersbury House and no 16 from London Wall). These non-enamelled examples (and also possibly the enamelled square type 3.4 from Billingsgate) seem to be a feature of the military expansion and civilian developments in the period up to c AD 140.

From this point onwards the chronological framework relies heavily upon the study of the evolution of enamel working, as the percentage of unstratified enamelled seal boxes is greater than for the non-enamelled examples. The broad lines of the development from simple single colours to the complex *millefiori* varieties is certainly traceable. The earliest specimen of the enamelled lozenge

Description	Catalogue numbers	Suggested date range
<b>OVATE SEAL BOXES:</b>		
with tinning (1.2A)	1	c 60-90
with tinning & embossed portraits (1.3)	2-5	c 50-120
concentric & triangular enamel cells (1.4A)	6	c 100-300
concentric & v-shaped enamel cells (1.4B)	7	c 175+
enamelled with lobes at terminal (1.6)	8	c 175+
alternating coloured cells (1.7A)	9	undated
enamelled star or sun (1.7B)	10-11	undated
base (1.7)	12	undated
<b>LOZENGE SEAL BOXES:</b>		
opposed recurved motifs (2.2A)	13	undated
25 cells forming lattice (2.2C)	14	c 120-165
central cell surrounded by enamel (2.3B)	15	undated
<b>SQUARE SEAL BOXES:</b>		
with tinning (3.1)	16-17	c 130-200
enamelled lattice (3.2A)	18	undated
enamelled swash-n motif (3.4A)	19	undated
<b>LEAF-SHAPED SEAL BOXES:</b>		
heart-shaped motif (4.1A)	20	undated
base (4.1)	21	c 400
enamelled design within field (4.1B)	22	undated
<b>CIRCULAR SEAL BOXES:</b>		
tinned embossed rings (5.1A)	23-25	c 45-150
tinned with zoomorphic rivet (5.1B)	26-27	c 70-130
tinned flat surface (5.1D)	28-29	undated
base (5.1)	30-31	undated
concentric cells of enamel (5.2A)	32	undated
outer cell of millefiori (5.2B)	33-34	undated
heart-shaped motif (5.2C)	35-36	c 140-220
seven elliptical cells (5.2E)	37	undated
base (5.2)	38-42	c 125+
enamelled with four lobes (5.3)	43	undated
?	44	undated

Table 2: types of Roman Seal Boxes from London, with suggested date ranges: the Catalogue Nos refer to Table 1.

type 2.2C (no 14 from the Walbrook) can be dated c AD 120-165. These single coloured enamels on the circular examples of type 5.2A (eg no 31 from London Wall) continue up to c AD 256<sup>9</sup> which thus co-exist with the *millefiori* examples of type 5.2B which continue up to AD 300.

Seal boxes which occur in 4th-century contexts are presumably residual. Their discontinuation in this period was probably the result of the gradual adoption of lead as a cheaper but effective alternative method of sealing documents (lead seals are found in increasing quantities during the 3rd century), as well as the conversion of the postal stations into supply bases during the 4th century<sup>10</sup>.

### Distribution (Fig. 3)

In any attempt to show the distribution pattern of material there is always the concern that all that may be revealed will

8. M. Biddle 'Two Flavian burials from Grange Road Winchester' *Antiq J* 47, ii (1967) 232.

9. Given the paucity of dated examples from London, the date of AD 256 quoted here derives from the latest examples recorded at Dura Europas,

Syria: see N. P. Toll *Pierced bronzes, enamelled bronzes and fibula of Dura Europas*, Report 4 (1959).

10. H. Chapman *The archaeology and other evidence for the operation and organisation of the Cursus Publicus*, Institute of Archaeology PhD thesis (1978) 171-366.

be the fruits of non-uniform excavation or collection policies. However, if the fundamental factors which affected the use and loss of seal boxes in London is to be understood, then a chronological distribution of their location within the archaeological record is essential. Such a detailed study has yet to be completed, but this final section discusses aspects of that research, summarises some of the problems as well as the potential of the subject.

The total volume of seal boxes used in London can be considered as a pool to which new forms were added to earlier ones over time until the wide range represented in Table 1 was attained. Thus the types of seal boxes circulating at any particular time would be biased towards those types most recently issued, as earlier types became rarer through loss or breakage. It is therefore difficult to determine the popularity of any one type at any one period. Difficulties in the interpretation of the material are further compounded by differing levels of accuracy in the recording of the contexts from which the seal boxes were derived over the last fifty years.

Once such problems have been overcome, or at least allowed for, some useful avenues of research

might be followed. Chronological distribution plans of the seal boxes would highlight the principal concentrations, probably representing the major centres of administration and redistribution, as at the Basilica (eg Leadenhall Court, nos 1, 24, 27, 33, 37, 38) and Forum (eg Fenchurch Street, no 36; Lime Street Passage, no 43), the Bucklersbury area (nos 2, 12, 17, 25, 26, 29, 35), a possible *mansio* (Southwark Street, no 44) and at military camps (eg Cripplegate no 11; Aldgate no 3<sup>1</sup>). The presence of particular types of seal boxes might also be indicative of the social class or status of the inhabitants of an associated building. It might even be possible to use seal boxes as an indicator of changing population levels over time. Thus such studies would show the importance of particular areas of the town and may say something about the function or status of certain types of site. Spatial analysis may also provide insights into the working of the postal system and the extent to which different social and economic groups within London had access to it. The changing role of *Londinium*, set at the heart of the communications network in *Britannia*, might also be studied through the provincial distribution of seal boxes.

## Conclusion

In sum, this report has presented the first illustrated corpus of the decorative forms of seal boxes found in London, and a dating framework has been proposed. The group has been discussed and the need for detailed chronological distribution plans related to the archaeological context of each seal box stressed. Clearly the study of seal boxes merits further intensive study: indeed, now that our understanding of the topography of Roman London has increased so notably, we can build on that knowledge and turn our attentions not just to seal boxes but to the many other classes of neglected artefacts from *Londinium*.

## Acknowledgements

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11. H. Chapman & T. Johnson 'Excavations at Aldgate and Bush Lane House in the City of London 1972' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 24 (1973) 48.

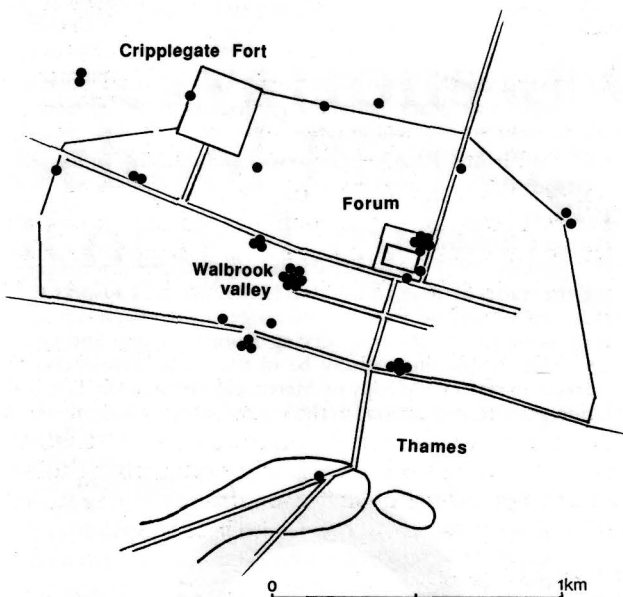


Fig. 3: schematic plan to show multi-period distribution of seal boxes in relation to main features of Roman town: note major concentrations around the Forum and Basilica, for example, and also from Bucklersbury House in the Walbrook valley.