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A Knife Handle from Caerwent (*Venta Silurum*) Depicting Gladiators. Dávid Bartus and Jessica M. Grimm write: An excavation by Channel 4's *Time Team* in the Roman town of Caerwent (*Venta Silurum*) in 2008 produced a highly decorated ivory handle of a clasp-knife. The object was found in Insula XIV in redeposited demolition layers and cannot, therefore, be closely dated. The handle depicts two fighting gladiators, a rare form in Britain and, indeed, in the rest of the Roman world, and merits publication in its own right.

Insula XIV lies in the centre of the Roman town. Previous excavations have revealed the baths in Insula XIII to the west and a temple and shops in Insula IX to the north. The demolished buildings in Insula XIV were probably also shops.

The scene on the handle depicts two types of gladiators fighting. The object is probably made of ivory since no bone or antler cancellous structures could be detected on the surface, as would have been the case if bone or antler had been used for such intricate carving. The ivory may have come from an Asiatic or African elephant, and would have been available through the Roman Empire trading network. The object measures 48 by 28 mm and has a maximum thickness of 14 mm.



FIG. 4. Caerwent knife handle: (a) showing groove for the knife blade; (b) front depicting *secutor* on the left and *retiarius* on the right; (c) reverse. Scale 1:1. (*Photos: Elaine Wakefield, Wessex Archaeology*)

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A vertical groove on the back of the helmeted figure indicates that the object was originally part of a clasp-knife (FIG. 4a). The old breaks (and one fresh) at the bottom of the piece (across the legs of the figures) indicate that the carved scene was no longer functional as a knife when buried. It is possible that this skilfully crafted piece of art had some value in its own right.

The figure on the left side (FIG. 4b) depicts a heavily armed *secutor*. He wears a helmet with a dorsal ridge said to resemble a fish.[29] The helmet has a flared neck-guard and round eyeholes. His right sword arm is thickly padded (*manica*), as indicated by two sets of double horizontal lines. A loin cloth (*subligaculum*) with broad armoured belt (*balteus*) is also detailed. The chest and stomach area also seem to have been protected by some sort of rectangular shielding with two shallow holes, one in the right upper corner and one in the left lower corner. These holes were either purely decorative or it is possible that they were used to secure a thin layer of metal to the object. The gladiator's back is probably bare. His right hand is protected by a glove which is held in place by leather straps, as indicated by carved crossed lines. This simplified representation of leather straps can be seen on other similar knife handles.[30] The hand holds a short straight-bladed sword, a *gladius* (tip broken off, fresh). The left arm is protected (not visible) by the curved rectangular shield, decorated at the top with two horizontal lines. The surviving part of the right leg (to the knee) seems to have been bare.

The other figure is the adversary of the *secutor*, the much lighter armed *retiarius* or net fighter.[31] This type of gladiator wears no helmet and the carving suggests shoulder-length hair held in place by a hairband. The eyes, nose and a grim-looking mouth are detailed. The left side of the neck and shoulder are protected by a rectangular, curved-upward shield (*galerus*; displaying new damage). The left arm is padded in similar fashion to that of his adversary (new damage). The gloved hand grips the right hand of the *secutor* around the wrist in order to fend off a thrust with the *gladius*. The bare right arm is extended and grips the back of the helmet of his adversary. Although a small part of the hand is missing (thumb indicated), it is unlikely that the *retiarius* held one of his traditional weapons in it: the trident, the net or a small dagger. Apart from the thick belt and the loincloth, the *retiarius* fights naked. A small rectangular pouch dangles from his waist on the right buttock (FIG. 4c). The right upper thigh is bare and the left leg is missing. The fighting scene seems to depict a winning *secutor* and a desperate *retiarius* who has lost his weapons and has to resort to fighting with his bare hands. Alternatively, the scene could depict a drawn competition. Such an outcome is identifiable on a second-to-third-century terracotta medallion from Cavillargues, France,[32] which depicts a *secutor* and a *retiarius* having fought to a draw, with the inscribed phrase '*stantes missi*'.[33]

The fighting scene depicted on the Caerwent knife handle can be found on other objects. A second-to-third-century tin-coated bronze fibula from Germany (find spot unknown) depicts a *murmillo* (the *secutores* developed out of this older class of gladiators) against a *retiarius.* The *retiarius* lies on the ground with his unprotected arm raised against the shield of the *murmillo*, who is standing with his *gladius* in hand, ready for the final blow.[34] The famous 'Colchester vase' depicts a fight between a *secutor* and a *retiarius* who raises his right hand as a sign of surrender.[35] A mosaic from Nennig, Germany, shows a fighting scene between a *secutor* and a *retiarius*,[36] the postures of the two gladiators being identical to those on the Cavillargues medallion.[37] A similar scene is also found on a mosaic in the archaeological museum of Tripoli, Libya.[38] Depictions of single gladiators are more common. For instance, terracotta figurines of gladiators, which were probably presented as small gifts on the New Year feast of the Saturnalia, have been found in Pompeii. They represent gladiators of the *thraex* and *hoplomachus* type.[39]

[29] Köhne and Ewigleben 2000, 61–3.
[30] Bartus 2007, figs 90c, 94a, 97e, 98a.
[31] Köhne and Ewigleben 2000, 59–61.
[32] Gleason 2004, 52–60.
[33] *CIL* 12, 2747.
[34] Wamser 2000, 286, 427.
[35] Toynbee 1962, no. 158.
[36] Cüppers 1983, 287, 292, 297.
[37] Gleason 2004, 53, fig. 2.
[38] Köhne and Ewigleben 2000, 73, fig. 83.
[39] Ward-Perkins and Claridge 1976, figs 299–302.

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Knife handles in the shape of gladiators are also not uncommon. More than thirty pieces are known,[40] some of them from Britain. Excavations at the villa of Piddington, Northants., recovered a clasp-knife with a copper-alloy handle and a folding iron blade. The handle depicts a gladiator of the *secutor* type and dates to A.D. 200–250.[41] Another copper-alloy clasp knife depicting a *secutor* has been found at Corbridge, Northumberland, but it is not securely dated.[42] Two unprovenanced knife handles, one copper-alloy and the other bone, both depicting a *secutor*, are held by the British Museum.[43] A clasp-knife handle made of ivory from the Roman fort at South Shields depicts a gladiator standing behind his rectangular shield and is dated to the late second/third century A.D. [44] Another ivory handle has been found in Lexden, with a depiction of a *murmillo*, dating from the first to second century A.D. [45]

The only other known ivory knife handle that depicts two gladiators comes from Avenches (*Aventicum*), Switzerland. The scene is the same as on the knife handle from Caerwent with a *secutor* and *retiarius* in similar poses.[46] Three bronze knife handles from France also depict exactly the same fighting scene: one from Épône,[47] one from Moselle, [48] and another one with unknown provenance, from the department of Loir-et-Cher.[49]

The five analogous knife handles are of very different quality. The *Aventicum* knife is one of the finest Roman knife handles; even the small details are carefully elaborated. The example from Caerwent is also of high quality, but somewhat poorer in detail compared with that from *Aventicum*. The bronze pieces are generally less detailed and of lower quality than the ivory ones, owing to the fact that they are cast. However, the example from Moselle is relatively rich in detail, compared with the other two bronzes, which are of very low quality and show local influence, especially the face of the *retiarius* on the knife handle from Loir-et-Cher.[50]

This raises the question as to whether there is any connection between these five knife handles. The main aspects to consider are the possible centres of production and a common prototype. Although we lack any data on the production of the objects, differences in quality indicate that most of the recovered knife handles were produced in separate workshops. The exceptions to this are the knives from Moselle and Loir-et-Cher which are very similar in almost every detail. They are probably from the same workshop, though not from the same mould. The similar composition of the fighting scene and the identical posture of the gladiators indicate that the five knife handles could have had a common prototype, which may have been inspired by a drawing in a so-called 'pattern-book', rather than by a sculpture.[51]

On stylistic grounds, the attractively carved knife handle found at Caerwent suggests a third-century date. All the other datable knife handles depicting *secutores* are also from the second to third century. Fights between a *secutor* and a *retiarius* are a favourite theme in third-century Roman art; it is not known if the scene depicted on the Caerwent knife handle records a famous fight between two well-known gladiators or is just a general fighting scene.

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[40] Bartus 2007, 182–207, 360–2; Bartus 2009.
[41] Friendship-Taylor and Jackson 2001.
[42] http://www.findsdatabase.org.uk/hms/pas_obj.php?type=finds&id=60954.
[43] Mercklin 1940, Anm. 62; Friendship-Taylor and Jackson 2001, 28.
[44] Allason-Jones and Miket 1984, 300, 6.2, pl. IX.
[45] Köhne and Ewigleben 2000, 69, fig. 73
[46] Mayor 1904; Schenk 2008.
[47] Mayor 1904, 133–4, fig. 47.
[48] Feugère 2004, 34.
[49] Feugère 2004, 35.
[50] Feugère 2004, fig. 9.
[51] On the problem of Roman pattern-books, see Bartus 2007, 254–6.

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Platters in the Mildenhall Treasure. Richard Hobbs writes: This note concerns the two largest vessels in the Mildenhall treasure, one of the most spectacular survivals of the late Roman Empire and, to date, the largest set of Roman silver tableware discovered in the British Isles. The hoard's 27 pieces[52] of silver plate have received a great deal of discussion since it came to public attention in 1946, not least because of its fine classical decoration, largely Bacchic in tone,[53] and the complicated circumstances surrounding its discovery.[54] The treasure continues to delight and intrigue millions of visitors to the British Museum every year, where it has been on almost uninterrupted display except for occasional visits to other British and international museums.[55]

The two largest vessels, which are under discussion here, are 'the Great Dish' and the 'Niello Dish'. Since assuming responsibility for curating the Mildenhall treasure in 2002, it has been a puzzle as to why two further components of the hoard, a matching pair of vessels, are described as 'platters' (or 'the Bacchic

[52] The hoard is often described as having 34 pieces, because the whole assemblage is made up of 34 components, some of which had become detached when discovered. For example, the fluted bowl has three components, the vessel itself and the handles, reflected by its museum registration number (BM 1946,0407.15–17), but ought to be considered as a single item.
[53] e.g. Painter 1973; Toynbee and Painter 1986.
[54] Hobbs 1997; Ashbee 1997; Hobbs 2008. The discovery even led to the publication of a children's story by the celebrated author Roald Dahl (1977).
[55] e.g. the 'Buried Treasure' tour, Hobbs 2003.

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