Who’s Who in Aquae Sulis

Peregrinus, the Trader

Traders, travellers and pilgrims came to Aquae Sulis from all over the Roman Empire. They brought with them objects to sell, barter and exchange, and we can get a good idea of how people and items moved because of this.

The tombstones and altars in the museum’s collection often record where someone has come from. We know that visitors came from Germany, Southern France, Greece and Spain, and some of them made their homes in Aquae Sulis. A skeleton that was found in a Bath graveyard belonged to a man from Syria.

This Samian ware pottery was made in central France and is unique to that region. It was the highest quality tableware that you could get in Roman times. The clay was set in highly decorated moulds, then dipped in its distinctive red slip glaze.

Here is the altar that the trader Peregrinus set up on arrival in Aquae Sulis. The inscription reads “Peregrinus, the son of Secundus, who is a citizen of Trever, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow to the brilliant Mars and Nemetona.”

Many different gods and goddesses were honoured at Aquae Sulis, not just Sulis Minerva. Nemetona was the Celtic goddess of rivers and open spaces, and she was a popular goddess in Peregrinus’ hometown of Trier in eastern Germany.
Belator, the Bath-House Attendant

Many of the local people had to learn to adapt under Roman rule. Although some prospered, others became slaves and servants to Roman masters. The Roman bathhouse would have employed many locals and Romans alike to work all kinds of different jobs, from construction and engineering to providing massages and spa treatments.

There was plenty of opportunity for social mobility. The Celtic bathhouse attendant Belator, who is mentioned in one of the curse tablets as stealing items from the bathhouse, could have started working as a cleaner in the hot rooms, before being promoted to other roles.

Belator would have been very familiar with this room. It is called a tepidarium, a warm room in the bathhouse where visitors could have a massage. All the stacks of tiles held up a floor, which was laid on top. The hole at the end is where the hot air from the fire in the furnace flowed through and heated up the floor. This is known as a hypocaust. Small slaves and perhaps children would have been made to crawl between the tile stacks to sweep out soot and debris.

Oysters were a popular snack to eat around the bathhouse. They were very cheap, and poorer patrons could use the shells to scrape all the oil and sweat off from their skin after a massage. The oysters would have been harvested locally in the Bristol channel.
Flavia Tiberina, the Roman Lady

Some local people married the incoming Romans and led comfortable lives. They swapped their roundhouses for villas, learnt Latin, and adopted Roman styles of dress and customs.

We don’t have as much evidence for the lives of Roman women as we do about Roman men. Though women could be literate and educated, they were mainly in charge of running the household and raising children. Wealthy women would have spent a lot of time out and about in public, going to the baths and holding dinner parties. Women of lower social status may have helped their husbands run their businesses. Women of all social classes would have been assisted by their household slaves.

This stone carving shows a Roman lady with elaborately curled hair. The hair was probably a wig, made by entwining the lady’s real hair with hair purchased from women elsewhere in the Empire. It is possible to date this hairstyle, using portraits of the Emperor’s wives. These ladies where considered very fashionable, so their hairstyles were copied by wealthy women. This style was popular during the reign of Vespasian, in the early 2nd century AD.

Here is a selection of jewellery found around Bath. Some of the beads are made locally in Aquae Sulis, other have come from Greece, Egypt, and Asia. The earrings (top right) and rings are made from gold and may well have come from Roman gold mines in Spain.
Apulia, the Slave Girl

In contrast to Flavia not everyone profited from the Roman invasion. Many Celts became slaves. Slaves were an important part of the Roman Settlement at Aquae Sulis. As well as working in the bath house like Belator many would have been employed as domestic servants. There is little evidence for the lives of slaves like Apulia.

Sometimes we might find a tombstone set up by a Roman slave owner to their servants, but these are unusual. More commonly we find tombstones set up by ex-slaves and we can tell this because their master’s name becomes part of their identity as a freed-person. One example belongs to a slave called Mercatilla. Although it is not certain, it seems likely that she was the child of a slave owner and died at the age of 18 months.

These are replica sets of Roman spa and beauty products. The basket on the left contains perfumes, olive oil and towels. The other contains make-up, some of which is made from animal fat, crushed insects, lead and charcoal. Roman ladies would instruct their slaves to apply their make-up and style their hair.

Slaves would also accompany their masters to the Temple of Sulis Minerva. These coins were thrown into the Sacred Spring by people hoping that the goddess would answer their prayers. Other objects, such as curse tablets and plates, were also thrown in as offerings.

Mercatilla’s tombstone reads “To the Spirits of the Departed, Mercatilla, freedwoman and foster-daughter of Magnius, lived to be 1 year, 6 months and 12 days.” The tombstone is barely larger than an A3 sheet of paper but is extremely important as it is a rare example of a tombstone for a baby girl.
Gaius Tiberinus, the Roman Official

Some Romans who came to Britain had jobs in the local government. Gaius Tiberius was born in Greece but his job as a city official allowed him to travel the Empire, eventually settling in Aquae Sulis. We know he was in charge of the bathhouse so was responsible for overseeing all building works as well as the day-to-day administration. The large tombstone he set up to his benefactor and father-figure tells of his nomadic but wealthy life.

He married a local woman, Flavia Tiberina. Roman women took the feminine form of their husband’s name, hence Tiberina and Tiberinus. Although we have lots of women’s jewellery in the museum collection, Roman men wore jewellery as well. Signet rings were worn by men and used to seal important documents and letters. The gemstones had small pictures carved into them that became embossed in the hot wax. Unfortunately, men wore their rings when taking a bath, where the hot water caused many of the gemstones to fall out. A large collection of stones was found in the Roman drain when it was excavated in the 1970s.

This tombstone shows a wealthy man wearing a toga. Togas were worn by Roman men performing official business. The size of the toga i.e. the amount of fabric and amount of times it was wrapped around the body, denotes a man’s wealth and social status. The tunic worn underneath came in a variety of colours, but togas were always made from white fabric.

The inscription on this tombstone reads “Antigonus of Nicopolis, veteran of the 20th Legion, aged 45, lies here. His heir Gaius Tiberinus had this set up.” In Roman times you did not need to be a relative to inherit a person’s fortune. Friends or colleagues could inherit after a person’s death, but if no-one was nominated in the will the Roman state would receive all the person’s wealth and belongings.
Sulinus, the Stonemason

Some locals did not have to make huge changes to their lives when the Romans arrived. Sulinus, a stonemason from Corinium, continued to ply his trade in Aquae Sulis. The one small change he needed to make was to learn a bit of Latin.

Local merchants and handymen good with timber, stone, ceramics, and metals were employed by the Roman to help build Roman towns. Almost all of the building materials used to build the baths at Aquae Sulis came from within a 20 mile radius of the town, allowing the baths to be built quickly and cheaply. The naturally hot spring water enabled the Great Bath to be much bigger than its counterparts elsewhere in the Empire, as the water did not need to be heated externally.

This altar, made by Sulinus, reads “To the Sulvae, Sulinus the sculptor, the son of Brucetius, made this sacred offering willingly and deservedly.” The third line down however is mis-spelled. It should read “Sculptor” rather than “Scultor” perhaps revealing Sulinus’ unfamiliarity with Latin.

Mosaics, made from small pieces of tile, were a popular way to decorate the floors in many Roman buildings, including bathhouses. This example, showing dolphins and sea-beasts, came from a villa just outside the city walls.
Gaius Calpurnius Receptus, the Chief Priest

One of the major ways the Romans impacted Britain was the arrival of new religious practices. The previous Celtic religion focused on worshipping deities of nature and the elements, whilst the new Roman religion used the ancient Greek practice of worshipping specific human-like gods and goddesses.

The Roman family of gods was virtually the same as the Greek, though the names were changed. The Romans also practiced animal sacrifices, in return for favours from the gods. These sacrifices and ceremonies were presided over by priests, and each god or goddess had their own set of priests who looked after their temple. In Aquae Sulis, the chief priest was called Gaius Calpurnius Receptus. He would have been in charge of all religious worship at the temple, including conducting prayers at the edge of Sacred Spring.

These three steps are some of the remains of the Temple of Sulis Minerva. The original temple would have had thirteen steps, and overall would have been fifteen metres high. Only the priests of the goddess would have been allowed inside to worship the cult statue.

This is the tombstone of Gaius Calpurnius Recpetus, and is shaped like an altar. It reads “Here lies Gaius Calpurnius Receptus, chief priest of Sulis Minerva. He lived to be 75 years old. His wife and freedwoman Calpurnia Trifosa had this made.” Chief priests had a very comfortable life – Gaius would have had a good wage from the Roman government (alongside any tips), a share of the sacrificial meat, and all the best medical care.
Lucius Marcius Memor, the Omen-reading Priest

One of the other priests working alongside chief priest Gaius Calpurnius Receptus, was the soothsayer named Lucius Marcius Memor. He was a haruspex, a priest who used the entrails and organs of sacrificed animals to read the future.

Haruspices were a rarity across the Empire, as only 60 of them were allowed the practice at any one time. Memor is the only one recorded as working in Roman Britain, highlighting the importance of Aquae Sulis as a centre of Roman religion. It was likely he was from Italy, as all haruspices were trained in Rome.

Once an animal had been sacrificed, the haruspex would take the liver and cut it open. He would check it for dark marks and blemishes and use these to tell the future, such as if a certain day was good to get married, go travelling etc.

This altar is where Memor would have conduct all his readings. It says “To Sulis Minerva, Lucius Marcus Memor, the haruspex, made this for you”. The third line has hastily been added to, as few people in Roman Britain would have known the Latin abbreviation of haruspex. The altar is right next to the main sacrificial altar, in the centre of the temple courtyard.