

A ROMAN PIPE FROM LONDON

GRAEME LAWSON AND ANGELA WARDLE

An unusual musical discovery has recently been made in London where a piece of bone and copper alloy tubing has been identified as the remains of a Roman pipe, one of a pair of *tibiae*, of the kind so often seen in classical paintings, sculpture and mosaics, but so rarely found (Pl. 1).¹

The pipe was recovered from spoil removed from the River Thames waterfront site at Thames Exchange, Lower

Thames Street, EC4, where excavations by the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London, had uncovered waterlogged deposits that included Roman material.² The object was at first thought to be post-Roman as nearby finds were of medieval date. However, parallels from several continental sites suggested an earlier Roman date and this has now been confirmed by

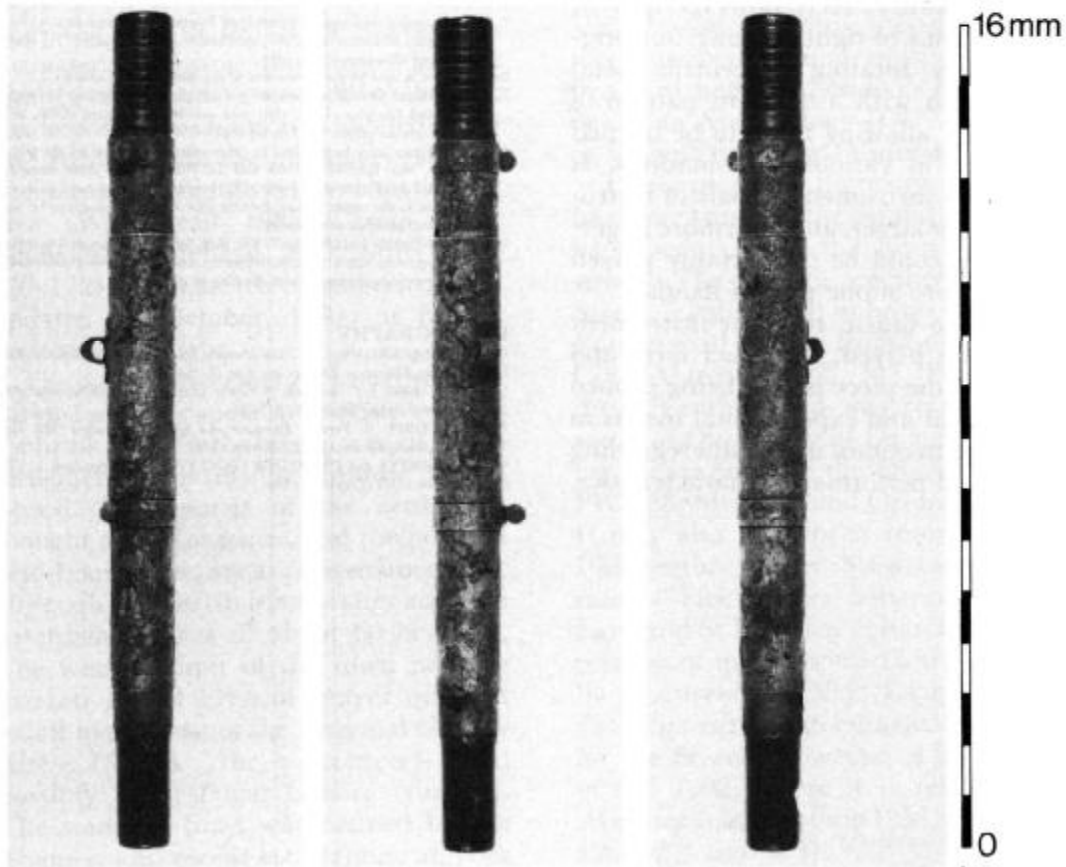


Plate 1. A Roman Pipe from London. Three views showing the copper alloy sleeves and fingerholes. The bone tube can be seen projecting at the upper and lower ends. Scale 1/1. (Scale on photograph in mm)

fibre-optic endoscopy.³ The surrounding metal sheathing conceals details of the instrument's construction even on stereo-radiographs but endoscopic survey has revealed that the internal bone structure is in sections. One of these, at the end of the pipe, is identical with a type of small bone cylinder of confirmed Roman date, already suspected to be of such musical use.⁴

The surviving length of the pipe is astonishingly well preserved, showing a complex sophisticated structure machined to impressively fine tolerances. The cylindrical bone internal sections have finger-holes to allow the production of different musical pitches rather like the modern recorder. Here however they fit inside a series of tightly fitting but originally freely rotating concentric metal sleeves, each with a different pattern of finger-holes allowing them to be opened and closed in various combinations. It suggests an instrument or pair of instruments rather larger, and with more finger-holes than could be comfortably played by the fingers of one pair of hands.

As to the music such an instrument would have played, the exact form and function of the piece is now being probed by analytical and experimental means in an attempt to obtain more data regarding its tone and performance characteristics.

Comparison with previous studies suggests that such narrow, cylindrically bored instruments which would have been blown using a reed like a modern oboe or bagpipe chanter (and quite unlike a flute), would have had a variety of tonal qualities, from low and soft to a loud and raucous skirling, according to need. In contemporary illustrations they are frequently shown in dance and processional contexts.⁵

The new pipe is a remarkable find of international importance and is a major contribution to the complex puzzle of reconstructing the form and place of music in Roman life.

NOTES

1. For an example on a mosaic panel from Pompeii showing rehearsal for a play (Naples Museum inv. 9986) see Pernice (1938, 99 and 171); Ward-Perkins and Claridge (1976, 314).
2. The object is now in the possession of the Museum of London.
3. One of several *tibiae* from Pompeii is conveniently illustrated by Ward-Perkins and Claridge (1976, 199) with references. Landels (1968, 231–38) discusses an earlier but related type.
4. Two examples have been found in excavations conducted by the DUA; Accession Nos RAG82-1420-89 and LCT84-3570-213 from Rangoon Street, EC3 and Leadenhall Court, EC3 respectively. They are similar to the section at the upper end of the new pipe and are thought to be part of the mouthpiece or reed holder.
5. See Ward-Perkins and Claridge (1976, 262), for a Pompeian wall-painting of a banqueting scene (Naples Museum inv. 9016) and Fleischhauer (1964 *passim*) for illustrations of the *tibia* in daily life.

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