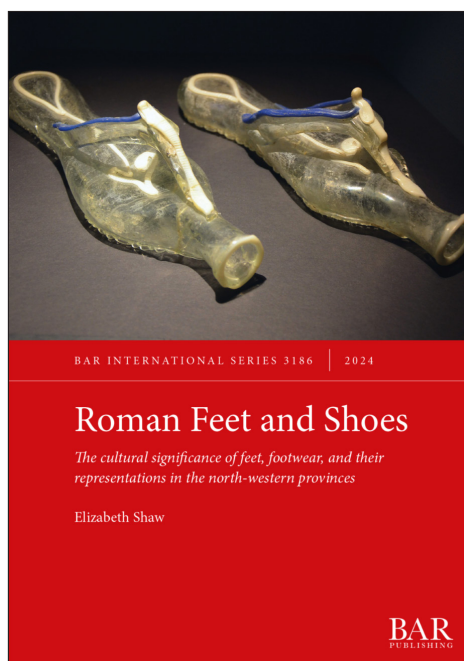


## Book Review

Shaw, Elizabeth. 2024. *Roman Feet and Shoes: the cultural significance of feet, footwear, and their representations in the north-western provinces*. BAR International Series 3186. Oxford: BAR Publishing; 978-1-4073-6154-3 paperback £55.

For the first time, the social significance of Roman foot- and shoe-shaped artefacts is explored as an independent theme in Elizabeth Shaw's *Roman Feet and Shoes*, bringing together diverse artefacts, sources and datasets. Usually, shoe-shaped objects are included in specific material culture studies, such as foot-shaped lamps or brooches being merely a sub-type of lamps or brooches. This work lifts twelve categories of shoe and foot shaped objects from the back pages of specialists' studies, antiquarian collections and archaeological reports and unifies them through the importance of their subject matter. Though many archaeological finds are shown, the monograph is not a catalogue of all possible examples but rather a theoretical approach aimed at understanding the social and cultural significance of why Romans employed foot- and shoe-shaped objects. Multiple types of sources are examined, from ancient texts to archaeological finds to temple architecture, trying to understand in which context and what was the importance of the use of shoe-shaped objects in Roman society. This leads to examining the artefacts through object biography, which given the twelve categories of shoe-shaped artefacts, also necessitates an overview of the



wide range of archaeological sites, deposition situations and ritual function of the objects. This information is presented along with background information about actual archaeological shoes, hob-nailing and the social significance of deposited Roman footwear in Chapters 2–4.

The twelve categories of foot- and shoe-shaped objects are presented in Chapters 5–9, with each category documented by charts and graphs showing chronological period, quantification and geographical distribution. Chapter 5 presents Roman small finds of foot- and shoe-shaped objects, starting with metal amulets and finger rings and emphasizing their apotropaic function. The purpose of the second category, bronze jugs with a foot-shaped terminal on the handle, is discussed in relation to the types of find contexts and deposition situations, suggesting ritual use. The third object category, Romano-British knife or razor handles in the shape of feet, is summarily presented, as more than 48% of the examples were detectorist finds thus making social interpretation by context or site difficult (p. 45–48). The chapter concludes with folding stools with human feet and foot-shaped flasks made from glass, pottery and copper alloy.

Roman foot-shaped lamps are presented as a case study in Chapter 6. The author presents a database of 245 artefacts, collected from diverse sources and including copper alloy as well as pottery examples. The social significance of foot-shaped lamps is examined through accompanying attributes linked to various gods, ritual practices and actual shoe fashions, as well as geographical and chronological distribution. A case study is also used for Roman sandal fibulae in Chapter 7. A typology is proposed, incorporating and improving on several previous typological studies. The total number for the dataset is 447 fibulae gathered from published sources for the north-western provinces as well as PAS and detectorist finds. A specific social significance for the use of the sole-shaped fibulae could not be determined since the object encompasses fashion, funerary and religious ritual practises.

Chapter 8 covers the categories of images of feet or footprints carved in stone, footprints in Ceramic Building Material, foot shaped stamps for CBM and seal stamps. These instances all relate to the use of the foot as a representative of the person or deity. Importantly, the author demonstrates the difference between the use of footprints and shoe sole imprints on CBM as an intentional marker and the occasional accidental imprint. These uses of footprint or shoe sole shapes suggest various social meanings relating to identity, authority, memorialization, etc.

The final category of foot-shaped objects is statuary foot fragments (Chapter 9). The author remarks that sculpted feet broken off from stone or copper alloy statues show an unusually high survival rate, suggesting that their social significance may be

the reason. Only examples from Britain were used for the dataset, which may be taken as representative of the general trend throughout the north-western provinces.

This volume is an ambitious project employing the theoretical approach of object biography to discover the social significance of Roman foot-shaped objects. In most cases, the conclusion is that foot-shaped objects are generally polysemous, and no single cultural usage is possible to apply to the twelve categories of foot- and shoe-shaped objects. Questions of chirality are addressed for many of the categories, and can be shown that in some, but not all instances, the right foot is preferred. The diverse nature of the shoe- or foot-shaped artefacts in the twelve categories does not lend itself to a simple interpretation of potential social significance, so for most of the categories multiple possibilities are mentioned. Although the work is highly theoretical, the information is readily accessible and supported by a good amount of statistical evidence. One drawback, although not the fault of the author, are the amateur drawings and photographs used to illustrate some of the artefacts; this is obviously the only solution in face of the exorbitant fees required for high quality images. The principal strength of the work is that the author has presented numerous aspects of social significance associated with foot-shaped objects in the Roman world, revealing that their use is not merely whim or coincidence. In this way, it is an invaluable resource and a starting point for identifying Roman mentalities regarding the significance of shoe- and foot-shaped artefacts.

Marquita Volken  
Gentle Craft Centre for Calceology / Shoe Museum Lausanne  
[gentle.craft@vtxnet.ch](mailto:gentle.craft@vtxnet.ch)

---

