



# Drinking from a Kylix... and Other Ways of Bringing the Past Alive.

by Caroline Lawrence

Whenever I visit schools to talk about my books set in Ancient Rome, I often bring along some of my Roman artefacts. These are almost all replicas of the real thing, but convincing enough to be effective. They give children a visible, tangible idea of how first century Rome differed from 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. I often get ideas for plot elements in my books playing with these objects, and sometimes the pupils themselves give me ideas.

I recently attended a workshop for inner-city primary school-aged students with virtually no exposure to the ancient world. For a hands-on exercise, the students made amphorae out of balloons, plastic cups and masking tape. How utterly ridiculous! Not only are all these modern materials, but a balloon-and-plastic-cup amphora gives no sense of the original material or function of the artefact. The finished results didn't even look like amphorae. Much better to let students look at real objects and handle replicas. There are many re-enactment groups that come to schools, but for a small investment you can build up your own collection of real and replica artefacts.

I own a few real artefacts. One is a real as of Domitian bought at the antique coin shop opposite the British Museum. It cost about £60. Yes, it's expensive. But it's a real, indestructible artefact: an object once held by Roman hands. I also was given a Coptic oil-lamp, like many others sold at *Coincraft*. A little further

down Great Russell Street another shop sells high quality reproductions of Greek artefacts. It was a visit to *It's All Greek* which inspired this article.

Most of my artefacts are replicas and most of my experience has been with students in primary school, the target age range for my books. But I think students at secondary and university level will get just as much out of playing with artefacts as their younger counterparts.

And teachers at the secondary and university levels can go a bit further, trying real red wine instead of grape juice and maybe even playing with fire! Here are half a dozen of my favourites with advice and tips on how to use them in class, including contributions from some of my teacher and re-enactor friends, and one Classicist-turned-shopkeeper.

## 1. Kylix

I was taking some sixth form fans around the British Museum in the post-Christmas lull when one of them asked if you could really drink from a kylix. Such a question had never occurred to me before. But looking at the extra big one we were admiring, I could see her point. 'I've never tried,' I said. 'But I know a place that sells replicas. Shall we ask?' It was time for a break, so I led the way out of Room 69, down the south stairs, out through the main entrance, across the forecourt and the zebra crossing. A sharp

left at Starbucks took us to the corner of Great Russell Street and Bury Place, the site of a shop called *It's All Greek*. They sell replica kylikes there; I thought they might let us try one out. The smell of mulled wine boded well, but alas, the owner would only let us drink it from plastic cups, not her precious replicas.

Later, I remembered I had a replica kylix bought for me by my brother-in-law at the Vatican gift shop on a trip to Rome in 2000. I had never tried drinking from it. That night I gently washed it with Fairy liquid, dried it with kitchen roll, opened a bottle of dark red Primitivo and poured a little in. Even though the kylix wasn't very big, I found it felt safer to hold it with both hands. That big, wide, flat bowl does make for possible drips. How much trickier with a cup the size of a Frisbee, and possibly while tipsy! Another thing I realised was that dark red wine obscures the picture at the bottom. Like a child's cereal bowl, it's only when you finish the contents that you get the reward. In some cases it would have been Medusa's ugly mug staring back at you. In others a love scene begging the question: What does your host have in mind? Mine had the tragic scene of Ajax carrying the body of Achilles. We know that Achilles will soon burn on the pyre, his half divinity no help at all, and that Ajax for all his strength will soon be dead, too. So this image is a kind of *memento mori*. 'Let us eat and drink,' you say, 'for tomorrow we die!'

The Medusa medallion found in the middle of many drinking cups reminds me of the apotropaic in Ancient Rome. The more I delve into it, the more I think almost everything is apotropaic. But especially a cup with eyes like this kylix sold by Sotheby's a few years ago. When you tip it back it gives your face a new *persona*. It would make your fellow diners laugh and keep away the evil eye, both useful for when you are drunk and vulnerable.

I emailed the owner of *It's All Greek* and asked if *she* had ever tried sipping from a kylix and she gave the following reply.

'A potter I met in Olympia some years back was a maker of functional vases, including a kylix. It was shiny black, with a band of decoration around the rim and a small circle in the tondo, within which was a Gorgoneion with protruding tongue! Within moments, the open bottle of Santorini Assyrtiko was being gently poured into the kylix (enough to obscure the Gorgoneion) and proffered. I closed my eyes and took a sip; just a little one, as I was concentrating intently on balancing the kylix correctly so as not to tip and dribble. I opened my eyes to a grin of delight from my observer. Dignity had been maintained but, what's more, during that split second, I had been there amidst the chatter and the hilarity and the imminent kottabos...'

*Kottabos* is a game from Ancient Greece where the last dregs of wine are flung from the bottom a kylix at an object. Several vases show the game being played. The guest has to hook his forefinger into one of the little handles and flip the cup in that way. Imagine how many valuable cups might have got broken that way! It's shown on the famous funerary frescoes from Paestum.

## 2. Clay oil-lamp

Always start by asking students what they think the object was used for. When I first showed my late antique oil lamp to a bunch of Year 5 students, guesses were creative and imaginative: 'Please, Miss, is it a musical instrument? A keyhole? A place to hide things in?' Because the big hole was slightly larger than my replica gold *aureus* bought in a Roman coins

pack, this last suggestion gave me the idea for a short story, *The Case of the Missing Coin*. Classics teacher Stephen Jenkin likes to fill a replica lamp with oil, pop in a wick, light it and then read a Roman ghost story to its spookily flickering glow. (Try *fabula mirabilis* in Stage 7, from Book One of the *Cambridge Latin Course*.)

I was playing around with a replica oil lamp one evening, pretending to be Flavia Gemina (the young detectrix in my *Roman Mysteries* books). I realised my hand was getting oily from the fact that porous clay 'sweats' oil. This gave me the good idea that Flavia finds a greasy handprint on the wall at the scene of the crime. This might indicate that the culprit committed the crime at night (or he wouldn't need a lamp) and that he was poor (or he would use a bronze oil lamp). I worked this theory into another of my mini-mysteries, *The Case of the Citrus Wood Table*.

You can ask pupils what other ways the Romans might have used to light their houses. And brainstorm what the dangers might have been!

## 3. A bronze tripod

Imagine a big bronze tripod full of glowing coals with a little frankincense or saffron sprinkled on top. It would be deeply evocative of ancient Greece or Rome. Here's what the owner of *It's All Greek* told me about her experience with a tripod:

'Some twenty years ago now, I wandered into a shop in Delphi, where I saw a glorious bronze tripod. At that stage I was teaching about Delphi, Apollo, the Pythia, the oracle, the tripod and the laurel. My modern Greek was rudimentary at best, but the shop owner and I struck up a conversation and together we carried the tripod outside into his little courtyard. The coals were lit, the bay leaves snipped and the ouzo was poured. I remembered then that in the *Odyssey*, royal storerooms were full of tripods which were exchanged as a token of hospitality between guest and host and here was I, in the centre of the world, watching the scented fumes rise towards Parnassus. Twenty years on, by design and coincidence, we stock that tripod at *It's All Greek*!

I've seen tripods filled with coals

and sending up plumes of smoke at re-enactment events such as Archeon or The British Museum's 'Rome Goes East' in 2002. If you can't afford a real tripod, get students to imagine what it would be like to have a tripod in the classroom or courtyard. As with the oil-lamp, you could use this as a platform to brainstorm other ways the Romans might have heated their rooms. What mishaps might occur?

## 4. Strigil

A replica strigil is great fun to pass around. We have no equivalent today so suggestions for its use can be very amusing.

Hands-on re-enactor Chris Carr writes: 'We have all sorts of lovely suggestions as to what a strigil is for when we do artefact handling sessions. These included: a shoe horn, a piece of armour, for cutting wheat, for operating on people, for catching naughty children and personal favourite: stabbing round corners. Oh, and one other suggestion: to put on your chariot wheels so you can cut up your enemies. This from an 8-year-old!'

Edward Zarrow (@drzarrow), a Latin teacher at Westwood High School in Boston, hilariously tweeted: 'I once tried metal edged rulers with olive oil, it was reminiscent of the 1980s 'Remington Epilady'! #classroomdisaster.'

When I was in Rome last September, I met two scholars studying Roman baths. To my astonishment, neither of them had ever made time to visit a Turkish bath or hammam. You don't have to go to Istanbul or Fez to get this experience. There are Turkish baths in most major cities. So teachers, get your students to strip off... Just kidding! But if you want to loan it out or try it yourself it will be a revelation. Oil up your naked body, (carefully) do some exercises to build up a sweat, go into a steamy bathroom or - better yet - sauna, then try scraping off the oil and sweat and see what else comes with it. You should collect a fine greyish sludge of dead skin cells and dirt in the curve of the dull blade. Yum! Get a friend to help scrape your back (see why Romans took their slaves?). Finally, rinse off and then towel dry. Don't you feel great?

The strigil reminds us of many things, especially that Roman bathing habits were very different from ours.

## 5. Wax-tablet

One of the easiest and cheapest of all artefacts to get hold of, a wax tablet is marvellous for all the senses, especially smell. The best quality ones use beeswax so they smell gloriously of honey when you get your nose right up against them. Students will get lots of revelations as they use the sharp end of a stylus to write on the wax and the flat end to rub off. Re-enactor Nicky Browne told me she has warm skin and finds her thumb a more efficient eraser than the flat end of a stylus.

Re-enactor Zane Green attends lots of fairs and says: 'Regarding wax tablets, I always wince when the kids are gouging their names into the wax and then find it almost impossible to erase. The Romans would have used a stylus with an extremely sharp point so they could just scratch the surface of the wax thus making it easy to erase. There are cases of course of some text being scratched upon the wood under the wax, meaning the wax was either very thin or the writer had a heavy hand!'

Chris Carr agrees: 'I too have to restrain myself from asking children to be a little lighter handed when using wax tablets.'

Zane Green: 'I also love the idea of writing a secret message on the wood and then covering it over with dark wax. You would just need to remember which tablet had the secret message!'

I used the idea of a message being preserved because it was scratched into the wood for my fourth Roman Mystery, *The Assassins of Rome*. This was inspired by the fact that many tablets from Vindolanda had traces of writing in the wood.

If you let students play with your wax tablet, it will get chewed up. To refresh it, cut some chunks of beeswax, arrange them on the wooden leaf and pop it under the grill. Don't wander off! The wax turns into clear liquid very quickly, then goes opaque as it cools to a silky smooth surface. Black wax tablets are fun but messier than uncoloured beeswax.

## 6. Ink on papyrus

Papyrus and ink remind us that Romans didn't have any really cheap or easy

way of sending messages. Papyrus was expensive, parchment even more so. Scrolls could be cumbersome, too.

A few years ago Zane Green, aka Gaius the Scribe, made me a lovely scroll of ink on papyrus of Horace's famous ode. Last week I asked Zane if he makes his own ink. 'I sometimes make my own ink,' he replied. 'When I do make it, I use very finely ground soot, water and gum arabic. I have gum arabic crystals that also need to be ground to powder but I was warned to wear glasses as the fragments can be like tiny pieces of glass if they fly out when breaking down the crystals. Better still to wrap them in cotton and crush them with a pestle. The soot has to be finely ground otherwise the grit will stick to the nib of the pen. I use a special bronze pestle and mortar for this. You then need to sieve the powder through fine cloth to trap the impurities.'

Chris Carr also reported: 'I have used the powder in the past but find it very hard, particularly when getting children to mix ink to get the right amount. It often ends up like jelly. Roughly ground crystals seem better.'

Zane Green: 'I often use modern India Ink because it is waterproof and most shows we do are outside. It's very frustrating to get a few drops of rain on some carefully written text. When the kids get some on their fingers the parents often ask if it will wash off easily. 'Of course!' I say, hiding under the table.'

I've met too many scholars who have never held a wax-tablet or strigil. Let's not let our students graduate to be one of them!

**Caroline Lawrence is the author of The Roman Mysteries series of children's books and is President of JACT.**

## References

<sup>1</sup> You can easily buy replica oil lamps and sometimes even genuine antique ones. *Coincraft* sell real ones, *It's All Greek* have replicas in clay and bronze. <http://www.itsallgreek.co.uk/search/lamp/> The British Museum sells a replica oil-lamp with a quadriga on it for only £9.99.

<http://www.britishmuseumshoonline.org/roman-lamp/invt/cmcr91100>

