

Legion: life in the Roman army

New exhibition from the British Museum tells the story of the life of a Roman legionary through their own eyes and those closest to them

1 February – 23 June 2024
Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery

Images available at: <https://bit.ly/45tRvBS>

LONDON, 17 October: A major new exhibition at the British Museum will look at what it was like to be in one of the most elite fighting forces of all time. *Legion: life in the Roman army* explores the reality of daily life for the men, women and children who were part of the machine which allowed Rome to master its vast empire.

Protecting a superpower for over half a millennium, the imperial Roman army acted as a military, naval and police force to around a quarter of the Earth's population. However, life for the majority of those serving was surprisingly domestic, with many living in settled military communities stretching from Scotland to the Red Sea.

Legion will share the stories of real legionaries and will challenge some of the perceptions about what it meant to be a Roman soldier by showing the army was as much an engine of social change as a formidable war machine. Recruits came from all walks of life and joined to advance themselves, acquire Roman citizenship, and support their families – despite a general ban on marriage.

Visitors will hear from a recruit from Egypt called Terentianus who related his experiences through surviving letters, as well as hearing about a Roman soldier on a humanitarian mission caught up in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, and – a century later – a pair seemingly murdered in Canterbury in the course of policework.

This blockbuster exhibition is made up of over 200 objects including loans from 28 lenders, from national and international institutions, and is supported by material from the collection. It features iconic Roman military objects alongside contemporary evidence of the real lives of men, women, and children – citizens and non-citizens, free or enslaved – in forts and frontiers across the empire.

Many of the items will be on display in the UK for the first time ever, including the world's only intact legionary shield - on its maiden transatlantic loan from Yale - and the oldest and most complete classic Roman segmental body armour, recently unearthed from the battlefield at Kalkriese (Germany) in 2018.

One standout exhibit includes the remains of a soldier found at Herculaneum, who will be reunited with his belt and equipment for the first time outside of Italy. He is believed to be one of the marines commanded by Pliny the Elder caught up in the eruption of Vesuvius while attempting to help citizens flee. The neighbouring site of Pompeii will also contribute military gear – including a trumpet, sword and standard – in remarkable states of preservation.

In addition, stunning objects will help to illustrate the magnificence of the Roman cavalry, including a rare public display of the Crosby Garrett mask helmet found in Cumbria in 2010, and a unique and fearsome dragon standard found in Germany, making its first visit to the UK from its usual lair in the castle of Koblenz.

Closer to home, remarkable material discovered at Newstead, Scotland and on loan from National Museums Scotland will be brought together to show how Roman military developments combined legionary body armour with arm protection more familiar on images of gladiators.

Richard Abdy, Curator of Roman and Iron Age coins comments: "This is a really exciting opportunity to present an epic subject on a human scale. Sword and sandals, helmet and shield are all on parade here as would be expected, but told through often ordinary individuals, unfamiliar stories can also help us to understand the deceptively familiar figure of the Roman legionary. Every soldier has a story: it's incredible that these tales are nearly 2000 years old."

Sir Mark Jones, Interim Director of the British Museum, said: "The story of the Roman army is more than just pitched battles and war. *Legion: life in the Roman army* is a chance to show different perspectives and showcase the lives of the men, women, and children who formed one of the most famous armed forces in the world."

Legion: life in the Roman army will run from the 1 February – 23 June 2024 in the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery at the British Museum. The exhibition is supported by Graham and Joanna Barker, Hugh and Catherine Stevenson and Christian Levett.

Notes to Editors:

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 70 mins before closing. Tickets from £17, under 16s free, 2-for-1 tickets for students on Fridays, and concessions and group rates available.

Publications

To coincide with the exhibition, a beautifully illustrated catalogue, *Legion: life in the Roman army*, written by Richard Abdy, will be published by the British Museum Press in February 2024. British Museum exclusive paperback, £30, ISBN 9780714122946. Hardback, £45, ISBN 9780714122939.

For young readers: Find out what life was like in the Roman army in this complete guide filled with fascinating facts and grisly detail. *Roman Soldiers*, written by Tegen Evans and illustrated by Tom Froese, will be published by Nosy Crow in collaboration with the British Museum in January 2024. Reading age 5+, Paperback, £8.99, 9781839948374. Hardback, £12.99, ISBN 9781839948367.

For more information on the books please contact: Toni Allum - tallum@britishmuseum.org



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For more content about *Legion: life in the Roman army*, follow the British Museum blog at blog.britishmuseum.org

Further information

Contact the Press Office:

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