

## Lead cremation vessels and coffins

Cremations in Roman London are usually found contained within ceramic pots, often reused storage or cooking vessels. However, there were also containers that were made specifically for use in cremations.

This plain lead cylindrical canister and lid was purpose-made as a cremation vessel. It was found at Mansell Street, just east of the Tower of London, in an area that we know was part of a Roman cemetery. It was discovered during building work and was acquired by the Museum in 1919. The canister is not decorated. It has a flat lid with a very faint letter 'V' cut into it, possibly representing 'vale' the Latin for farewell or goodbye. It dates to the late 1<sup>st</sup> to early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD.

Other canisters and lead cremation vessels have been found in London but they are relatively rare with only about nine known. In 1881, four were found at Warwick Square, near Old Bailey in the west of the City, along with a rare imported stone vessel. All had been used for cremations. Two were decorated, one with the figure of Sol, the sun god.

In the Roman Dead exhibition you can also see a more elaborate lead cremation container. This is a lead casket from a Roman cemetery in Keston in Bromley and is later in date, probably dating to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. It's about 30 centimetres by 20 centimetres by 20 centimetres and contained the cremated remains of an adult, probably male. Both the casket and its lid are decorated with a beaded cable decoration. The form of this casket is very similar to Roman lead coffins and it may have been made at the same workshops, although whether these were in London or not we don't know. Also in the exhibition is the lid of a lead coffin found in 1999 at the site of Spitalfields Market in London. This coffin had been placed within a stone sarcophagus and contained the remains of a young woman. The lid is decorated with scallop shells and a beaded cable. The shells symbolise the soul's journey to the afterlife and are a common decoration on Roman lead coffins.

So how were these lead containers made? Most of the lead was probably sourced from the Mendip Hills in Somerset. Lead ingots, called lead pigs, have been found in London, which came from this area. Lead is quite a soft metal, which is relatively easy to manipulate. The

containers – either the cylindrical canisters or the box like caskets and coffins – are all made from flat sheets of lead, formed in a sand tray. If decorated, the design was impressed first into the sand and then the molten lead poured in. To achieve the scallop shell decoration, real shells were impressed into the sand. With the box-type containers, including the coffins, the box is made from a single sheet, with the sides folded up to form the box and the joins soldered. The lid is also made from a single piece.

These would have been special and expensive items in Roman London and their use in a burial, whether a cremation or an inhumation, indicates a degree of wealth or importance.