

Cataloging and Interpreting Bone Artifacts from the Roman Bathhouse at Cosa

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Background of the Site

The ancient city of Cosa, residing in current day Ansedonia, Italy, was a significant Roman settlement, founded as a colony in 273 BCE, with continuous occupation even up to the Middle Ages. From the excavations of this site, first occurring in the 1940s, the archaeological world has gained an important insight into the culture and daily practice of the ancient Roman people. Recent explorations by Cosa Excavations focus on the baths, an iconic facet of Roman life.

Currently, the excavation team is preparing an exhibition of artifacts from the bathhouse for display at Cosa's on site museum to inform audiences on the intricacies of life at a Roman colony. My participation in this endeavor is through researching the artifacts, such as finding comparable objects found at other ancient sites, in order to create detailed catalog entries explaining both their original use and why they were found in the context of a bathhouse at Cosa.

Research Methodology

This project involved cataloging and analyzing a selection of worked bone artifacts found by Cosa Excavations including needles, hairpins, dice, and other such types of utilitarian objects. I used their extensive digital online database, which provided basic descriptions with photos and measurements, as well as contextual information for each object found during the excavation of Cosa's bathhouse. From this database, I selected specific artifacts for closer examination, then consulted excavation reports from Cosa alongside academic publications on Roman bone tools to compare form, function, and manufacturing techniques.

I also categorized these objects based on established classifications and examined parallels from other Roman sites to refine my interpretations. Digital tools, including high resolution imagery and measurement software, aided in assessing wear patterns and production methods. This comparative approach helped create detailed artifact descriptions for museum display, ensuring accuracy while making the objects accessible to a general audience.



A die found and cataloged from Cosa

Roman period dice displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Sample Museum Object Description

"This is a stylus found in the Roman bathhouse of Cosa. Made of bone, it was found heavily weathered, but still intact. Styli were used to write on wooden tablets coated in wax. Interestingly, these tablets were erasable, as the wax was easily able to be smoothed over or melted down. The stylus tapers on both ends, one side with a sharper edge to carve into the wax, and the other slightly wider, presumably to smooth over the wax surface."



Excerpt from Cosa Excavations digital catalog

1	Number	SU	Trench	Material	Type	Form/ware	Fabric/Class	Brief Identification	Weight (original)	Dimensions	Detailed Description	Catalogue Description
2	TE_C17.017	TE 21088	Terme 21	bone/shell	bone	worked	pin	bone pin	0.7 g	5.3x0.4cm	partially preserved bone hair pin, finial intact	Fragment of bone pin with intact rounded finial. Possibly used as a hair pin.
3	TE_C17.038	TE 21090	Terme 21	bone/shell	bone	worked	spoon	bone spoon	0.4 g	2.5x0.7cm	fragment of bone cosmetic spoon	Fragment of a spoon made of worked animal bone. Part of the head of the spoon is preserved. Possibly used in cosmetics.
4	TE_C17.012	TE 21088	Terme 21	bone/shell	bone	worked	pin	bone pin	0.9 g	9.5cm	intact bone hair pin in two fragments; finial intact	Two joining fragments of bone pin with rounded finial, preserving original length. Possibly used as a hair pin.
5	TE_C17.048	TE 21090	Terme 21	bone/shell	bone	worked	pin	bone pin	1.0 g	7.7cm	2 joining fragments of bone hair pin	Two joining fragments of bone pin, possibly used as a hair pin.
6	TE_C17.011	TE 21088	Terme 21	bone/shell	bone	worked	pin	bone pin	0.9 g	7.9x0.35cm	partially preserved bone hair pin with intact finial	Fragment of bone pin with intact rounded finial. Possibly used as a hair pin.

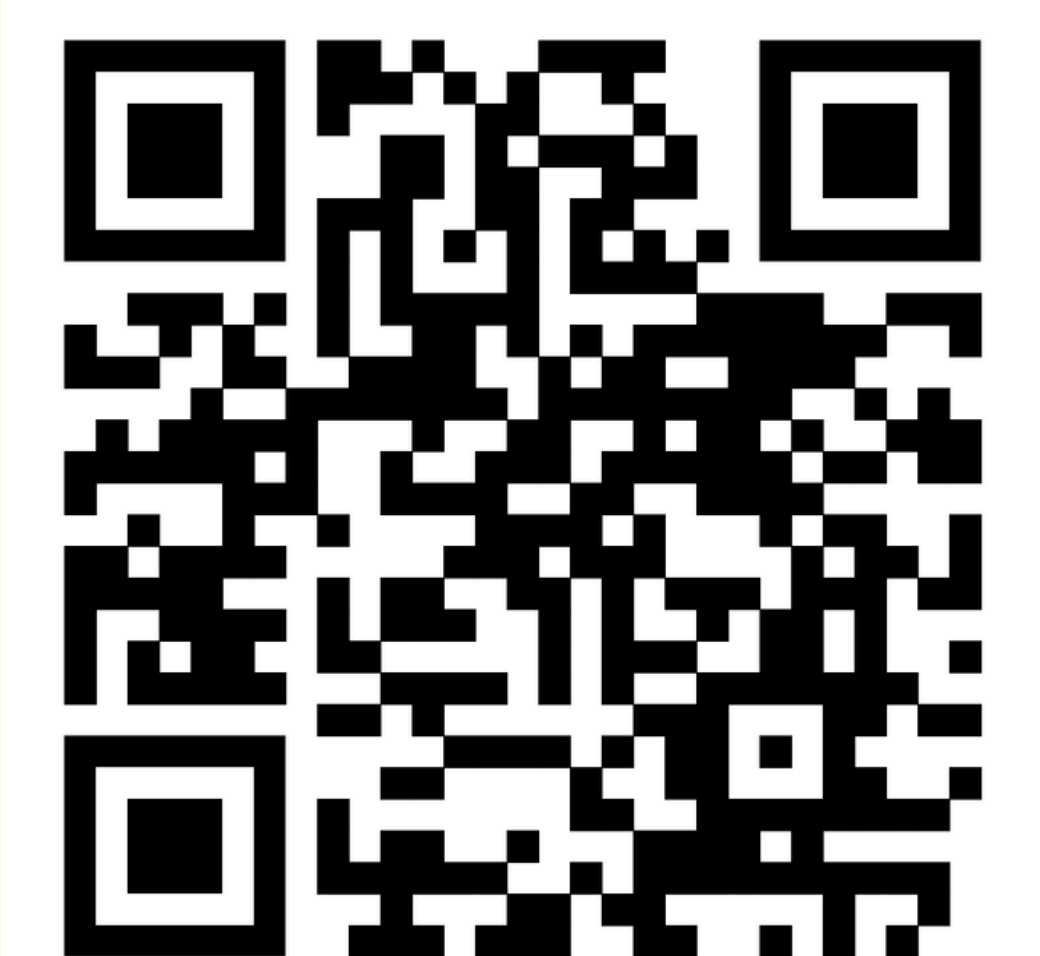
Findings

The cataloged artifacts from the excavations of Cosa's bathhouse highlight the prevalence of worked and carved bone, primarily used for decorative and personal objects.

- Many of these items were crafted through carving, while some were also burned.
- The dominance of hairpins suggests the bathhouse was a space where grooming and personal adornment were significant, reinforcing its role in Roman social life.
- A significant number of needles were found, indicating that more practical activities may have taken place at these structures.
- The presence of dice suggests that leisure and entertainment were also part of the communal experience.

The number and variety of worked bone objects underscores the bathhouse's importance as a social hub where individuals not only bathed, but also engaged in personal grooming, relaxation, and recreation, making it a key setting in daily Roman life.

References



Acknowledgements

Thank you to:

- My Research Mentors, Dr. Andrea De Giorgi and Dr. Christina Cha
- The excavation team at Cosa Excavations
- FSU's Center for Undergraduate Research and Academic Engagement
- The Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, including my UROP leader, Reagan Haddix