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## **A STRIGIL FROM ROMAN JORDAN: EVIDENCE FOR PERSONAL CARE (CASE STUDY)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A totally preserved bronze strigil (cleaning blade) from the collection of the Ahli Bank Numismatic Museum in Amman is critically discussed and compared to similar ones typologically and microscopically. In the Graeco-Roman world, strigils were objects associated with personal hygiene that are frequently found in baths, gymnasia, healing sanctuaries, and tombs. This implement is rare among archaeological finds in Jordan and therefore its presence in the collections of the country's museums is meager and thus worth of investigation.

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**KEYWORDS:** strigils, toilet instruments, hygiene, athletes.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Practical use and symbolic significance

Strigils were used by diverse groups of people in the ancient world. These scrapers were used by both men and women in a variety of contexts. The strigil (flesh scraper) or cleaning blade was an essential tool of Greek, Etruscan and Roman athletes (Fig. 1). This instrument was part of the athlete's portable kit, together with an *aryballos* (oil-flask) and a sponge. Before exercising or competing, athletes applied oil to their bodies to keep the dirt out of the pores of the skin and perhaps also to avoid sunburn. A strigil was used to scrape off accumulated oil, perspiration, and sand or pumice, thus exfoliating the skin after exercising and before bathing. The athlete would then finish cleaning himself with water and a sponge <sup>1</sup> (Guhl and Koner 1989: 105-110).

The strigil thus became a symbol of the world of the ideal Athenian male citizen, an athlete, who used strigils in gymnastic activities and for bodily hygiene. This symbolic significance was adopted by the Etruscans and the Italic populations through the influence of the Greeks of southern Italy. The use and symbolic significance of strigils did not spread to central Europe <sup>2</sup> (Knobloch 2007: 337-352; Kratzmueller 2012: 212).

Literary sources attest that strigils were owned and used beyond the world of the *palaestra*. It was a common household item used by educated and prosperous men. In Greece, the earliest references to strigils date to the second half of the fifth century B.C. In a dialogue between Socrates and Ischomachus, the latter describes how he spends his days; after finishing work he arrives home, and cleans his body with a strigil <sup>3</sup> (Xenophon 1979: chap. 11 ; Plato 2014: sec. 368c; Hippocrates 1868: sec.18).

Strigils were not just a tool of men, women are also shown using them in Greek and Etruscan art (De Puma 2008: 433-434). Greek vases show women using strigils, which is evidence that wealthy Athenian women of the sixth to the fourth

centuries B.C., valued bodily hygiene<sup>4</sup> (Kratzmueller 2012: 212; Ignatiadou 2013:37; Prag and Quinn 2013:61).

Strigils were also used in the production of substances used for health benefits. Pliny recommends the bath indirectly when he notes that the by-products of the bathing routine, in particular the scrapings of oil and sweat, generated by strigiling (*strigmenta*), are useful for treating joint or sinew pain and in ointments for suppuration (Fagan 2006: 201). At Nîmes in France two glass strigils were discovered among other objects in a tomb of a healer, probably used to smooth medicinal preparations on injured parts of the body. Also metal strigils were among the instruments of doctors during the Hellenistic and Roman periods as evidenced by those found in Rimini (Italy) and Varna (Bulgaria) (Manniez 2011: 19-21).

Ancient art made in a variety of mediums including statues, architectural reliefs, and vase painting illustrate how strigils were used by athletes or bathers. Representations of strigils on vases appear no earlier than the second half of the 6th century B.C. Statues also portray athletes scraping parts of their bodies. The subject of the *Apoxyomenos* was popular among classical sculptors. The first to use it seems to have been Polykleitos, his example was followed by his pupil Daidalos, who made two scrapers. Lysippos, perhaps also influenced by the Polykleitan prototype, executed the most famous version in antiquity (Lattimore 1972: 13-15; Boardman 1971: 136-137).

### 1.2 Typology

Despite a number of attempts since the 1990s to study and classify strigils, the lack of systematic investigation on the development of Greek strigils, makes it impossible to securely date them. The general shape of the strigil remained the same from the time of its introduction, probably in the sixth century B.C., through the Roman period. In its chronological evolution, slight changes occurred in the curvature and the broadness of the blade (*ligula*) and in the

shape of the handle (*capulus*). Older Greek and Etruscan strigils, dated to fifth or fourth century B.C., have broad and deeply hollowed spoons or blades, their handles form a rounded loop that is bent backward and fastened to the blade, from which they were attached to a chain or ring, which went round the wrist for convenience in carrying (Fig.6).

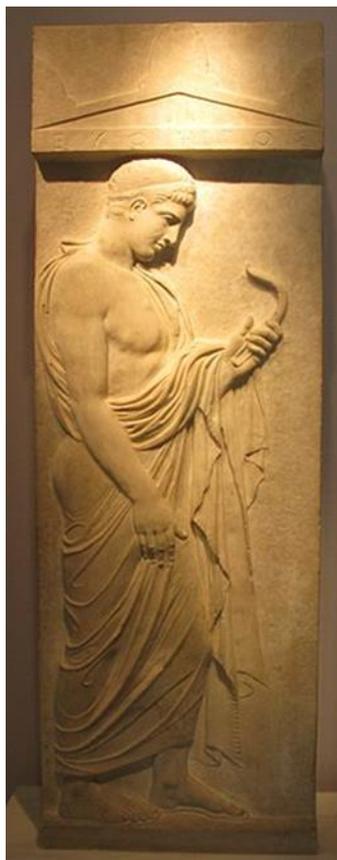


Figure 1. A Funerary stele of Eupheros holding a strigil (c. 420 BC.) Kerameikos Archaeological Museum-Athens (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>)

Strigils with narrow spoons or blades and handles folded into rectangular sockets, appeared in the third century B.C. and became increasingly popular between the second and first century B.C. Beginning in the first century A.D., strigils with a narrow blade are made with an unbent rectangular rod shaped handle (Fig. 7) (Richter 1915: 293; Bolla and Buonopane 2010: 415-430; Bol and Weber 1985: 108; Tabolli

2012; Eldridge 1918:278; Raubitschek 1998: 122).

## 2. THE STRIGIL

### 2.1 Description

The Ahli Bank Museum strigil is made of bronze <sup>5</sup>. It is completely preserved and in good condition. It is of good workmanship (Figs. 2-4). The strigil is cast in two pieces, that were hammered and welded together; a blade/spoon (*ligula*), and a handle (*capulus*). The long and shallow blade has a curved concave profile. The blade has a hollowed out interior channel between the two sharpened side edges. The width of the blade is widest at the curve and tapers, to 1cm. near the tip. The blade has a J-shaped appearance. The handle is a single solid rectangular rod made in a separate piece and bonded to the blade. The handle is not in continuous alignment with the blade, but rather, slightly off-set.

The strigil is decorated with six grooves (longitudinal ribs) molded into the back of the blade, a simple decoration in comparison with elaborate examples including scenes from the Roman Circus ( Köhne and Ewigleben, 2000 ).

The Ahli Bank Museum strigil is devoid of any inscription. Inscriptions usually appear on handles of strigils either imprinted with a stamp or engraved with a burin, with the name of the manufacturer or owner or phrases against thieves ( Buonopane 2012: 195-206).

### 2.2 Size Measurements

Length of strigil: 22.2 cm. (blade and handle)

Length of handle: 10.1 cm.

Maximum width of the blade: 1.5 cm.

Thickness of the blade: 0.1mm.

Width of handle: 1.5 cm

Weight: 130.5 gram

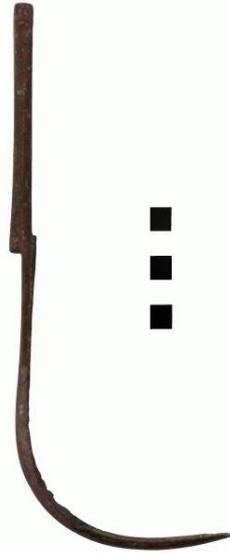


Figure 2. Bronze strigil (Ahli Bank Numismatic Museum)

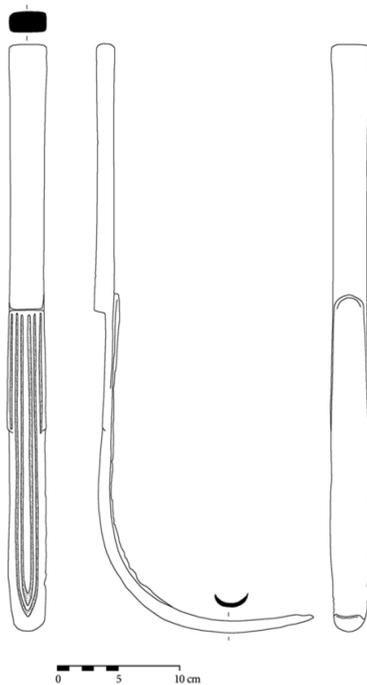


Figure 3. Drawing of the strigil

### 2.3 Dating of Strigil

Strigils are rare among archaeological finds in Jordan and their presence seems to be quite limited. An iron strigil (26 cm. in length) was discovered at Umm Qeis (Gadara of the Decapolis), during 1993 excavations conducted by S. Kerner, in the domestic quarters on the theatre slope

among other metal finds including: needles, spatulas and knives. No precise date within the Roman period was given by the excavator <sup>6</sup> (fig. 5) (Kerner 1997: 296).

The situation is the same in Palestine, only two strigils were reported. The first, an iron strigil, was discovered in the Mamilla neighborhood of Jerusalem. It was found in a poor state of preservation. The handle and part of the blade were missing. The strigil was dated to the second century B.C. based on pottery and coin analyses (Zissu and Ganor 2004: 111-115). The second was discovered in a burial cave, part of a Roman cemetery, east of Arsuf (Apollonia). Only part of the strigil survived due to the robbing of the tomb. Based on the ceramic evidence, the tomb was dated approximately to the fourth century A.D. (Sukenik 1942: 195-196; Tal 1995:112).

Because the Ahli Bank Museum strigil was purchased from a local antiquities dealer, no information concerning the context of its discovery is available and, therefore, it is not possible to assign a precise date to the scraper.

Based on the slender form of the strigil, its narrow blade/spoon, and the unbent solid rod-shaped handle, this author suggests that it belongs to the Roman period in Jordan with a date not earlier than the first century A.D. (Bolla and Buonopane 2010:425; Hayes 1984: 102, fig. 162).



Figure 4. Detail of the back of the blade

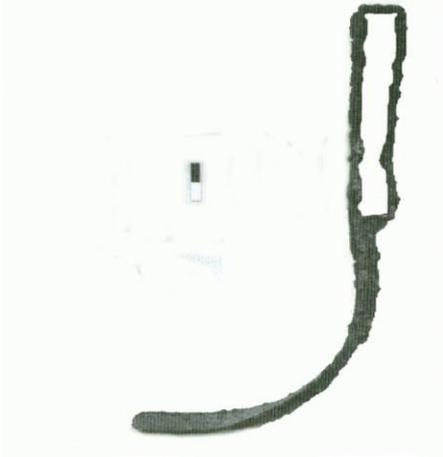


Figure 5. A strigil from Gadara of the Decapolis (Kerner 1997)



Figure 6. A Strigil in Museo delle Antichità Etrusche e Italiche - Rome, 5th-4th century B.C. (Tabolli 2012: 425)



Figure 7. A Strigil in Museo delle Antichità Etrusche e Italiche - Rome, 1st century A.D. (Tabolli 2012: 440)

### 3. EXPERIMENTAL

For the examination and metallurgical study, the optical microscopy (Nikon model H-III) located at the Department of Earth Sciences at The Jordan University was used. Furthermore, the optical assessment by the critical eye and a magnifying lens (10 x) was carried out to investigate the variegated color of the corrosion deposited on the strigil's surface. The whole strigil was examined under the microscope, since taking a small sample would be destructive and damaging to the object.

In Figures 8-11, microstructure examinations show that parts of the strigil are brown with yellow or bronze patches whereas other parts are dark red in color and fine in appearance. After fine crushing, fractured pieces of corrosion have bronze properties, which may indicate that both Copper (Cu) and Tin (Sn) are present as a bronze alloy which was preserved in a good condition and shows acceptable solidity (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). However figures 10 and 11 reveal that the strigil contains different forms of metal corrosion. An obvious heterogeneity of strigil texture is shown under microscopy, this might be due to the effect of environmental conditions or chemical reaction during the use of the strigil in the past. The copper corrosion of green color is Malachite ( $\text{Cu}_2\text{CO}_3(\text{OH})_2$ ) (fig. 10) whereas the red color reflects the presence of copper oxide called Cuprite ( $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$ ) (Fig. 11) (Scott 1991; Hauptmann 2007).



Figure 8. Microscopic image of strigil artifact shows the pure bronzy appearance

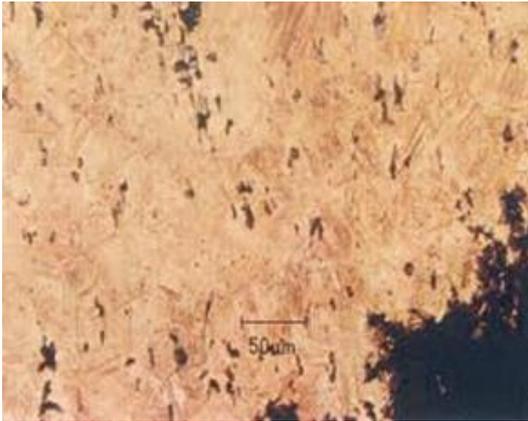


Figure 9. Microscopic image of strigil artifact shows the mixed or bronzy patches appearance



Figure 10. Microscopic image of strigil artifact shows the green color of malachite corrosion products.

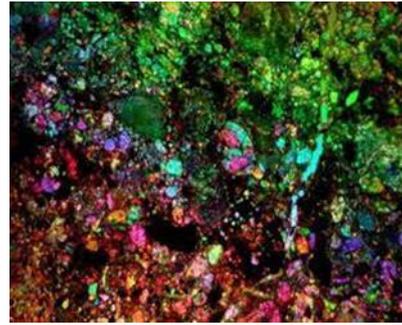


Figure 11. Microscopic image of strigil artifact shows the mixed green and red color of malachite and cuprite corrosion products.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Strigils were intimate personal belongings and articles of daily life, usually associated, in the Graeco-Roman world, with baths, gymnasia, healing sanctuaries and tombs. In spite of the popularity of public baths in the Decapolis cities in Jordan, the rarity of strigils from Jordan and Palestine would indicate that the use of such a utensil was not part of every day practices in the region. It might have been an object acquired by a Roman soldier, stationed in Jordan, and was part of his toilet set, or it might have been in the possession of a doctor, part of his medical instruments.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. In Roman baths, strigiling rooms (*dstrictaria*), were a secondary feature associated with Roman baths alongside exercise grounds (*palaestrae*) and sweat baths (*laconica*) (Fagan 2001: 403).
2. Archaeological excavations in Roman forts in Dacia recorded a number of strigils (Gui 2011: 121).
3. Strigils, oil-flasks and sandals are found depicted on a mosaic floor at Sabratha with an inscription "have a nice bath" (Habas 2007: 153-4).
4. Strigils were found in graves of females, as in Thessaloniki (Greece), originally placed around the feet with a *phiale* and a clay *pyxides*, dated to the 3rd century B.C. (Ignatiadou 2013:37). Also in Etruria and Latium strigils appear in female tombs e.g. at Fossa (Prag 2013: 61).
5. Strigils were usually made of metal, bronze or iron but were also made from silver, lead, bone, ivory and glass.
6. The strigil is now in poor condition at Umm Qeis Museum.

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