

Writing in the Roman Empire

Writing tablets and metal **Styli** (singular: a stylus) were Roman writing tools. Each wooden tablet was normally inlaid with a wax surface on which the writer could scratch words with [the stylus](#), which also had a flat end for smoothing the wax over again.

The wax has worn away or been removed from [our tablet](#). Each side was then painted white, on which ancient Greek words were written. On one side the writing refers to a measure of wine, using a specific unit that helped us to determine that it was written in the 4th century ad. The other side documents the sale of grain and other foods. The holes along the edge may have been made to bind the tablet to a lid or another tablet with cord. The grooves may be where excess wax was scraped off the stylus.



These tools were everyday classroom objects, just like Victorian slates or pens and exercise books today. Language education was also necessary for adults throughout the vast Roman empire who wanted to take part in Roman society. Many Romans wanted to visit the new provinces and read the Greek literature that still fascinates us today. Styli and wax tablets have been discovered from the empire's northwestern boundaries, such as Vindolanda in Scotland, to the southeastern reaches of Egypt, from where our tablet comes, and where many languages, such as Greek, were spoken. Styli and wax tablets remained in use throughout the world for many centuries after the fall of Rome.

Ask the museum staff if you can have a go with our replica stylus and wax tablet. If you find the tablet difficult to read, try turning it sideways to the light. Roman education usually took place outdoors in the morning or afternoon, when the sun was lowest in the sky. The **raking** (low-angle) light creates shadows that make the letters thicker, darker and easier to read.

Samuel James