

Many archaeological objects that come to the museum's attention are common types of find, of known typologies and designs. Other objects raise rather more of an eyebrow in terms of their rarity and imagery. This late Roman knife handle is one such object says **Antony Lee**, Collections Access Officer (Archaeology)



Syston knife handle

The handle was discovered by a metal detector user at Syston, near Grantham, in March 2007 and recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme. The museum subsequently purchased the handle from the finder.

The handle is copper alloy and 64mm long. Two rivet holes at the base of the handle illustrate that the blade was fixed, unlike many other decorative Roman knives which had folding blades. It is the imagery on this knife, however, that sets it apart from the majority of other examples.

The openwork design shows three figures – a larger male, a smaller male and a female, all interacting in an erotic scene. The larger, possibly older, male stands on the right of the scene, his feet resting on a small ledge. The woman sits astride the older male, with her legs raised around his waist. The smaller or younger male is on the left, back to

back to the female, being held by her arms and with his legs crouched. In his hands the smaller male holds a human head, identifiable through a carved hairline similar in style to that of the main figures, though it is impossible to tell if the head is male or female. The larger male faces in one direction, the female and smaller male in the other. To compound the complication of the scene, it appears that the female sits on top of the larger male's penis, which is actually directed towards the smaller male.

Only a small number of similar erotic knife handles are known, and all come from Britain. The only example to come from a datable archaeological context is from St Albans, which was discovered in 4th century layers, and the other examples are assumed to be contemporary. All but one of the other examples are folding knives.

All of the known examples share a similar theme in that they feature three figures, though none are identical. Other examples have the smaller male holding either nothing or an oversized penis. The Syston handle is the first to feature a severed head. Although the other examples all feature the smaller male supporting the female, the sexual interaction in the other examples is clearly between the larger male and the female.

So the specific imagery on this knife handle, particularly the gruesome addition of the severed head and the interaction between the males, mark it out as different from its contemporaries. But at present the exact meaning of the imagery, whether ceremonial or perverted, remains a mystery.