

Rusty Nail Tells a Tale 2000 Years Old

By Darlene F. Lizarraga

ASM object A-33244 is a rusty old nail. What a story this little object represents!

Hold that thought. First, a little background...

Arizona State Museum (ASM) is renowned for several reasons, one being its unparalleled collections related to the peoples and cultures of the US Southwest and northern Mexico.



Those familiar with ASM and its focus on the Southwest may be surprised to learn that it has a rich collection of ancient Near Eastern, Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman material. The vast majority of this collection was acquired in the early days of the museum's history from the 1890s to the 1930s through exchange, donation, and, less commonly, by purchase.

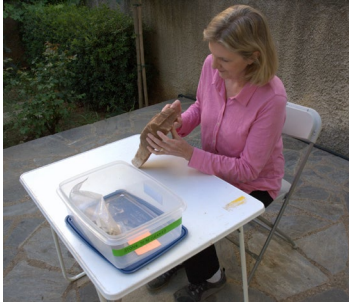
Moreover, few may realize that ASM also holds impressive collections from all over the world, not just the Mediterranean, collected and held for comparative and teaching purposes, key components of the museum's multi-faceted mission, given its relationship to the University of Arizona.

This fall, ASM Deputy Director Dr. Irene Bald Romano and four UA graduate students—Christopher C. Baker (classics), Chantel N. Osborne (classics), Emilio Rodriguez-Alvarez (anthropology), and Jessica Sue Wiles (classics)—have been “digging in storage” at the museum, focusing their research attention on the Mediterranean collections—some 520 individually catalogued items, plus a large collection of type sherds.

“We find sometimes that the stories that are most compelling are not about the objects themselves, but about the people who collected them,” said Romano. “Sometimes what might be most compelling is the technology of the piece's manufacture, and other times, perhaps, the history of a single, simple object can be *very* revealing.”

We return now to the aforementioned iron nail (ASM A-33244).

Romano explains:



ASM Deputy Director Dr. Irene Romano is a classical archaeologist and specialist in Greek cult practices, Greek and Roman sculpture, terracotta figurines, and Hellenistic pottery, and the author/co-author of five books and numerous articles on those topics. Romano also has conducted fieldwork in Spain, Italy, Greece, and Turkey. She currently serves as a senior archaeologist with the Mt. Lykaion Excavation and Survey Project in Greece.

Our nail is from a fortress at Inchtuthil built around 82-83 CE by the Roman army in Scotland (near Perth) to keep in check the Caledonian tribes who were resisting the Roman invaders. When fortunes turned for the Romans only a few years later (86-87 CE) and troops were needed elsewhere (to fight the Dacians probably), the fortress was closed down. The Roman troops did not want to leave behind anything of use to the dreaded Caledonians, so they dismantled the fort, building by building, nail by nail, removing whatever they could of the ashlar masonry blocks, burning the wooden structures, and depositing all of the iron in a huge 12 foot pit, concealing it carefully so this valuable weapon-making material would never be discovered by the local tribes. The pit was discovered, however, in 1959 by Oxford archaeologist Sir Ian Richmond. He uncovered some 850,000 iron nails, spikes, and other iron objects—some 10 tons in all, handmade in a local forge, and representing a massive number of man hours. Richmond gave several thousand of these nails to donors who contributed funds for the excavation of the site and some to museums around the world. Ours was a 1969 donation from a Wesley E. Jenkins, a physicist from Miami, FL whose son (Edgar W. Jenkins, UA professor of physics from 1964-1995) was at Cambridge and knew Ian Richmond's collaborator. The mass of the fused iron was sent to the Dalzell

Steel Works in Motherwell, Scotland where it was recycled.

And so our fragile little nail survives here at ASM, a snapshot of the history of Roman Britain.

Romano is quick to point out that existing museum collections are treasure troves for new discoveries and therefore new scholarship. "Once objects go into a research museum," she explained, "they are not just put on a shelf never to be seen again. Rather, collections that are held by a research museum, especially one with such vibrant teaching and research programs as ASM's, are accessed regularly by researchers, teachers, and students for a host of reasons." In this case—a graduate independent study course directed by Romano and Mike Jacobs, ASM curator of archaeological collections.

Indeed, fresh eyes, high technologies, advanced research techniques, and innovative questions can combine to look at existing museum collections in new ways, yielding interesting stories, revealing new insights, and discovering new details.

This is the first in a developing 4-part series on the results of Dr. Romano's independent study course and what she and her students have found "digging in storage."

Photos courtesy Irene Bald Romano and Emilio Rodriguez-Alvarez.