

## A Handbag???

### **Some ideas for manly manbags for Roman men. And Ladies.**

by Stephen Kenwright

"Let vs make an honorable retreat, though not with bagge and baggage, yet with scrip and scrippage." Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Evidence for the form of Late Roman military luggage is limited, but there are some sources to draw upon for inspiration.

### **Of Bagge and Baggage**

Vegetius refers to sacks (yep, *saccus!*) used as sandbags and moneybags large enough for the deposited valuables of a cohort. With so many surviving items made of (then relatively cheap) leather, it is worth noting that, if not all, enough of these were of cloth to allow Tertullian, for example, to use the word *sacco* to mean 'in sackcloth' (Apology 40.15).

In the Vindolanda tablets, *impedimenta* or *inpedimenta*, appears to mean baggage or kit just as Vegetius and Ammianus generally refer to baggage trains, who add *sarcina* used specifically for packs. That these are worn personally is clear in Vegetius XXIII, where he stresses the need to train soldiers to run armed and with their packs. The basic form of such a sack or pack might be shown as an icon of soldiery in the C3rd mosaic of Felicissimus in Ostia, suggesting a round-bottomed duffel tied at the neck.



Joseph's departure, Vienna Genesis (early C6th)

In the early C6th *Vienna Genesis* we see Joseph in Late Roman dress being sent to check on his brothers by Israel from Genesis 37:13 - taking his leave, led by an angel and getting directions before crossing from Hebron to Shechem, where he is attacked. His sack-like pack is formed from pink material, probably a cloak, wrapped round and, I think, ligatured with string at either end of the load to keep it in place, then slung across the body and knotted at the front to fasten. This method is familiar from the American Civil War, nicknamed a 'mule collar', although bulkier than the neat blanket roll often seen. It has been tested on marches by members of Comitatus and found to be stable and comfortable once packed correctly, although obviously warmer and less ergonomic than a modern strapped rucksack and with the potential to weigh on the chest. One tip is not to include your only rain-cover!

Subdivision of the load is suggested by the C4th Deurne helmet was apparently supplied with a drawstring bag 35.5cm X 38cm made from two pieces of calfskin for protection, presumably inside the larger bundle made by a goatskin sheet that can be interpreted as a one-man tent panel.

### ***Of Scrip and Scrippage***

*sed nunc qui habet sacculum tollat similiter et peram*  
"But now they who have a purse, let them take it, and likewise a satchel"  
Luke 22:36 (Jerome's Vulgate)

The 4th century Vulgate's '*pera*' continues directly from the Greek πῆρα, with connotations of 'provisions bag', 'bread bag' and perhaps sometimes a 'begging bag': in Martial's epigram (XIV:81) a *pera* pleads 'that it may not be obliged to carry the beggarly food of a long-bearded, half-clad philosopher (who does that remind me of?), or serve as pillow to his mangy dog'. In 1 Samuel 17:40 David puts his selected sling-stones *in peram pastoralem quam habebat secum* 'into a shepherd's bag that he had with him'. This is presumably similar to the bags often seen when Christ is depicted as 'the Good Shepherd' in Late Roman iconography, and this I have chosen to use as a model for my own 'manbag' which Helena constructed for me from linen, in a rectangular box shape. The *pera* pictured seems to have a removable strap, perhaps to allow the bag to be washed without damaging the leather.

Women might carry a smaller *perula* with them (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book VIII.3:54), but Judith's maid (13:11) happens to have a *pera* with her, handily large enough to conceal Holofernes' severed head. These modern girls!



Marble statue of the Good Shepherd (Vatican Museum, C3rd, legs restored).



Bath procession (Piazza Armerina C4th)



Qasr Ibrim textile bag (C1st)

A first-century find from Qasr Ibrim, Egypt, looks reminiscent of a red servant's bag shown worn relatively high under the arm in a Piazza Armerina mosaic. Once on a cliff-top overlooking the Nile in Lower Nubia, now the far south of Egypt, the fort was left on an island in Lake Nasser by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. The site dump contained a mass of what was identified as Roman type refuse from the Roman occupation in the Augustan period, including many textiles.

The bag is made from five pieces of undyed flax, like 2 triangles sewn together part of the way up, with a wide base supported by the pointed top ends, which were tied in a square knot. One side is a single piece woven selvedge to selvedge, with the opposite side made of the other four pieces. The base is 33cm wide, which has narrowed to 20cm wide by the opening, the 'pouch' being 50cm high on one side and 43cm on the other, with the 'straps' continuing 40 and 30cm farther above the opening (Adams and Crowfoot 2001). The construction resembles modern versions of the Thai *yâam* shoulder bag and the authors identified it as a shoulder bag, but if tied off to be carried over the shoulder or thrown on a wagon I think the shape when full would be more like the Ostia mosaic bag.

In the above passage from Luke *sacculus* or 'little bag' apparently translates the Greek word βαλλάντιον (*ballantion*) suggesting a container one throws things into, associated with coins, hence I like 'purse'. It is also used for a bag holding weights for trading (Deuteronomy 25:13). Jerome also includes the term *marsupium* in the sense of a purse (from *marsippion*, diminutive of *marsippos* 'pouch' whence the infraclass of mammals, Proverbs 1:14).

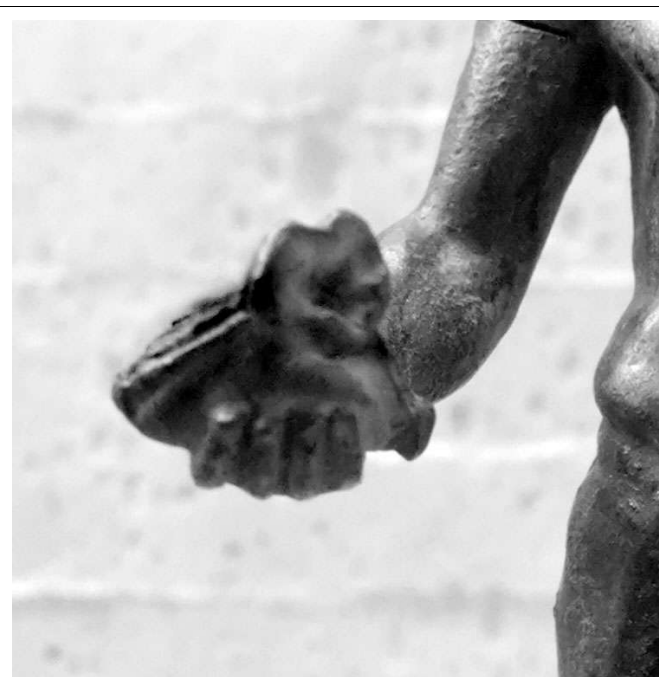
Statues of Mercury, copied from Greek originals of Hermes in his guise as the patron of commerce, often carried a distinctive purse bearing three tassels. The figurine pictured shows clearly a 'drawstring' opening. These can be made very simply from a circle of thin leather (nearly three times the desired height!), with holes punched for a drawstring in from the edge to give a generous closure.

Such a drawstring purse containing a large amount of money from the late C2nd was found at Barger-Compascuum in the Netherlands province of Drenthe. It was about 22cm X 26cm, with a divider inside and a leather toggle to close the drawstring, which may have been used to suspend it from a belt, although it is big.

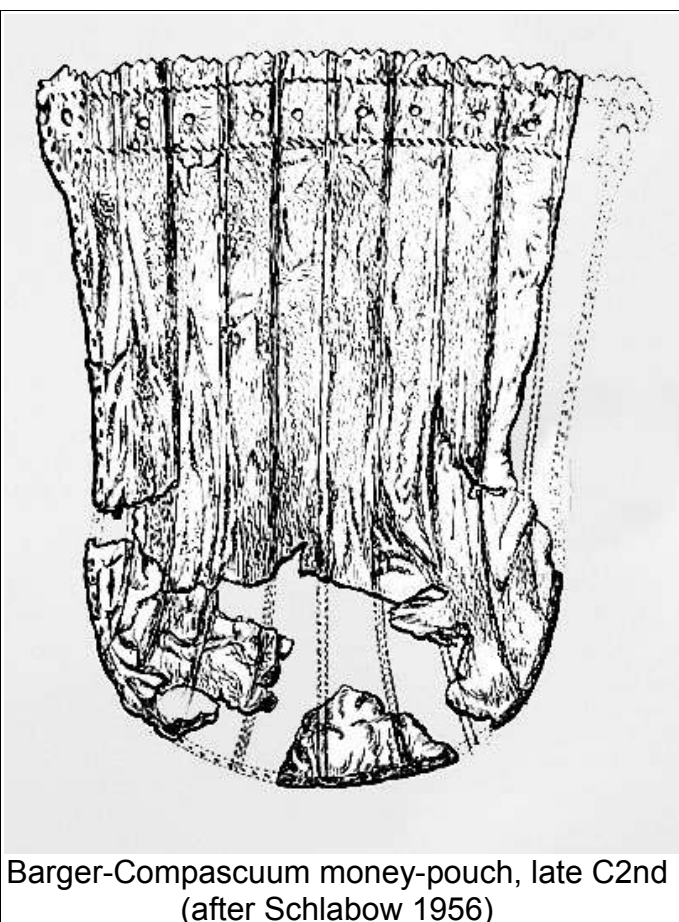
A leather wallet of a woman's legal papers spare thread and a mirror from the mid 130s was found in the 'Cave of Letters', Israel, resembling a classic rectangular tobacco pouch about 23cm X 12cm with a semicircular flap and I use something similar for concealing my modern items within my *pera*.

It does seem reasonable that the suspension rings on military belts might have held pouches and a small rectangular one can be discerned on the Dura Europos wall painting of the Cohors XX *Palmyrenorum* sacrificing. These

might have held the sort of items found with soldiers Paul Browne mentioned in his article in the last newsletter, such as combs, spoons, whetstones, tweezers and possibly tinder pouches with a fire steel on the front, like those found in Anglo-Saxon graves. I suspect coin-purses would be tucked away for safekeeping, possibly in



Bronze figurine of Mercury holding a moneypurse (Louvre C1st–2nd A.D.)



Barger-Compascuum money-pouch, late C2nd (after Schlabow 1956)

something akin to the small rectangular neck pouches such as appear on early imperial memorial monuments. I keep a lead tag with my name and unit on it in mine.

In Matthew 10:9 we find the *zona*, or girdle used for carrying money, and thus perhaps 'money-belt', just as in the (probably 4th century) *Historia Augusta*, Pescennius is described wishing to avoid the *sarcinae milites* 'baggage of the soldiers', or other booty falling into enemy hands:

*idem iussit, ne zona milites ad bellum ituri aureos vel argenteos nummos portarent, sed publice commandarent*

He gave orders, likewise, that the soldiers should not carry gold or silver coin in their money-belts when about to go into action, but should deposit them with a designated official.

I'll happily volunteer (see you in the *caupona!*).

### **Select Bibliography**

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