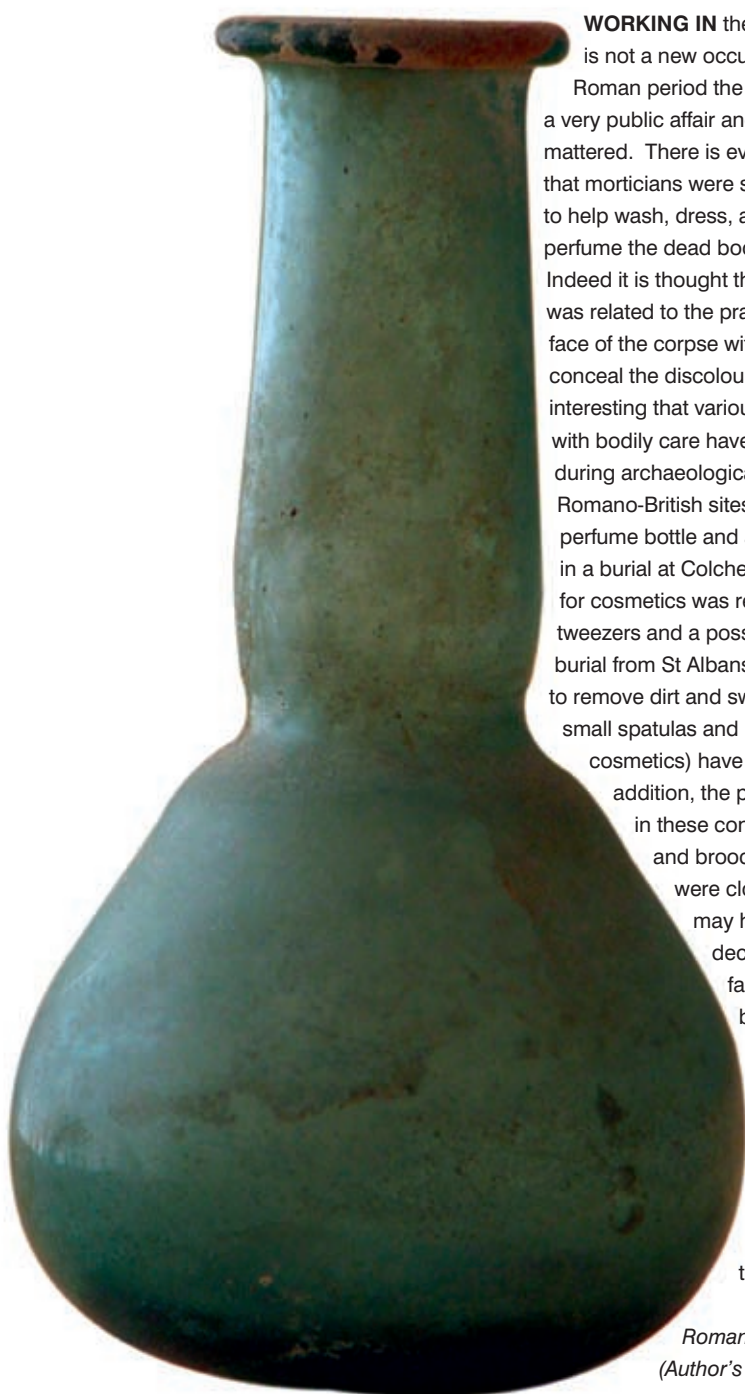


Romano-British Morticians

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WORKING IN the funeral industry is not a new occupation. During the Roman period the funeral was often a very public affair and the ceremony mattered. There is evidence in the literature that morticians were sometimes employed to help wash, dress, apply make-up and perfume the dead body before the event. Indeed it is thought their name *pollinctores* was related to the practice of covering the face of the corpse with powder, in order to conceal the discolouration of death. It is interesting that various things associated with bodily care have been found in graves during archaeological excavations of Romano-British sites. For example, a perfume bottle and a comb were found in a burial at Colchester, and a grinder for cosmetics was recovered with a set of tweezers and a possible nail cleaner in a burial from St Albans. Strigils (implements to remove dirt and sweat from bodies), small spatulas and pallets (for mixing cosmetics) have also been found. In addition, the presence of jewellery in these contexts, such as pins and brooches suggests corpses were clothed. All these items may have belonged to the deceased person or their family, and were used by the funeral team to prepare the body for public display. The ceremony involved taking the corpse, which was laid out on a funeral couch (*lectus funebris*), through the streets

*Roman perfume bottle, probably third century A.D.
(Author's own artefact and picture.)*



Modern copy of Roman personal items including a nail cleaner, an ear spoon and a set of tweezers. (Author's own artefact and picture.)

on a litter for cremation or inhumation. (The remains of some of these couches have been found in Britain, as well as Italy and France.) The personal items that had been used by the undertakers, such as combs or perfume bottles, may have been perceived as 'special', and were subsequently buried with the body, or placed alongside the cremation urn. So it is possible that Romano-British morticians used these items to recreate the dead person's living appearance and smell, thus memorialising them for the family and the wider community.