Overtly sexual imagery, occurring graphically and in abundance, is a familiar characteristic of the Roman world. Images of both male and female sexual parts appear in quite a range of materials (gold, silver, copper alloy, lead, bone, antler, and stone) and in a variety of functional forms: as pendants, rings, harness fittings, furniture mounts, and on drinking cups, the lids of seal boxes, and many other everyday objects. Naturally, they can be found in their usual anatomical position when associated with figurative works, but how this image is used when it is divorced from the rest of the body is of particular interest. Phallic carvings (if we want to be technical, they are a form of ‘petrosomatoglyph’ – an image of a human body part in stone) offer a unique opportunity to discuss the phallic image in a Roman context. They are different to the majority of phallic forms encountered – fixed, static, artistic elements associated almost exclusively with buildings rather than small, portable, and exchangeable objects.

Many Roman sites have yielded single examples of phallic carvings, but they are predominantly found in military garrisons and a significant number come from the Hadrianic and Antonine frontier zones. While it is more usual to find only a single example at a site, there are exceptions, notably Chesters and Vindolanda forts on the Hadrianic frontier, which each have five. Archaeological investigations continue to locate these objects, with recent discoveries made at Loftus (2013), Binchester (2014), and Catterick (2014).
Attitude problems

When approaching Roman phallic imagery it is very important to tune out from modern concepts of taboo and appropriate social behaviour. Phallic imagery is everywhere in the Roman world, but it is only sexualised when associated with human or animal characters, be they mortal or divine. The more commonly encountered form is a phallic image on its own, and its use in this form is discussed by the Roman writer Varro:

Wherefore anything shameful is called obscaenum, because it ought not to be said openly except on the scaena [stage]. Perhaps it is from this that a certain indecent object that is hung on the necks of boys, to prevent harm from coming to them, is called a scævolā, on account of the fact that scaeva is good.
(On the Latin Language, 7.97)

Catherine Johns, in her influential *Erotic Images of Greece and Rome* (1982), commented that, even in antiquity, there may have been those who would find such images amusing or embarrassing. This is an important facet of understanding the image: finding such images humorous, offensive, embarrassing or challenging is not entirely anachronistic. The image was first brought over to Britain in quantity by the Roman army in the 1st century AD, but over the course of three and a half centuries Britannia became a cosmopolitan place. As such, there were inevitably a huge range of physical, thoughtful or emotive reactions to the phallic carvings by both soldiers and civilians. That being the case, these images should not be seen simply as idle doodles – the carving of a petrosomatoglyph requires a commitment of time and, generally, some rudimentary skills with masons’ tools.

Phallic forms

Within each province there exist local interpretations of the phallic carving, incorporating various elements. The universally recognisable form is the ‘basic’ type, featuring an ithyphallic (erect) phallus and testes, carved in low/medium relief within the confines of a rectangular frame. In situ this carving is almost always horizontal. Around half of all phallic carvings from Roman Britain take this simple and recognisable form.

A second, more unusual group can be defined by the stylised nature of the carving. Often, this is produced from the carving having been incised or crudely chiselled rather than carefully carved in relief. These examples can be quite abstract in their execution, such as the example from Binchester, which is comparable to a pair of closed scissors.

It is understood that combining the phallic image, in its various forms, with other images of power can be used to enhance the protective capabilities of the icon – a safety-in-numbers effect.
The fist-and-phallus combination noted from various sites in Britain incorporates a clenched fist or a *manus fica* (a fist with thumb inserted between the index and middle fingers). Other hybrids include zoomorphic images to increase the efficacy of the phallus, such as bull’s horns or wings. Only rarely are male and female sexual organs depicted together, and no certain examples in stone survive from Britain. The phallus is, however, frequently multiplied with other phallic images (polyphal- lism) creating some eye-popping creatures. The combination of such images into a narrative scene creates perhaps the most interesting carvings to be found in Britain and represents a third subgroup. An example from Long Bennington (Lincolnshire) shows a human rider saddled on an enormous walking phallus, one from Vindolanda depicts a phallus pointing towards a group of trees or a town, and another from Chesters fort shows a phallus between a human figure and an altar.

**Lucky charms**

In 1969, Ralph Merrifield, the pioneer of contextual magical studies in Britain, described the Roman phallic image as ‘a kind of lightning conductor’ for bad luck – an excellent metaphor for the contextual use of phallic carvings. Many writers have noted the use of phallic carvings at boundaries, and in Britain these include doorframes, windows, courtyard floors, storehouses, bridges, curtain walls, and cemeteries: places that encounter a lot of physical footfall and may be considered hotspots for bad luck. Exactly what this bad luck might include can only be speculated about, but protection from other people is almost certain at the core of this logic. As magical and protective symbols they are not used in any ritual activity; there is no evidence to suggest that they need to be spoken to, touched or otherwise invoked to work properly. Instead they remain entirely passive, built into their physical structures and, presumably, last as long as the life of the building. Broken examples are occasionally recycled in other structures in the 4th century, possibly signalling a decline in their perceived magical vitality over time.

The function of the phallic image as an apotropaic icon is exemplified in the carvings on the several examples that depict the phallus attacking the evil eye. The evil eye is the Roman embodiment of bad luck, danger, and misfortune. Disembodied phalluses can be seen attacking the eye, showing their prowess as protective symbols. In certain cases they literally discharge the evil eye. At least two examples of this fight can be found in Britain. A further example from Braceby and Sapperton (Lincolnshire) may show just the phallus attacking an evil eye, while another example from Catterick may show just the phallus and its discharge. On portable objects the phallus is sometimes joined by other apotropaic symbols to attack the evil eye as a group, depicted as the ‘all-suffering eye’. In their guise as protectors against the baleful influence of the eye, there can be little doubt that these phallic images would have been a comforting sight to those who took heart from their magical properties.