Roman occupation of *Ratae* (the Iron Age name for Leicester) appears to have begun immediately following the Roman conquest of Britain in AD 43. By the early 2nd century AD the Iron Age town had been reorganised and a new rectangular street grid with gravelled roads was laid out. This coincided with *Ratae*’s appointment as the *Civitas* capital of the local *Corieltavi* tribe.

From this moment new and increasingly sophisticated buildings began to line the new streets and from the middle of the 2nd century major programmes of public and private building were undertaken in the town. These included the *forum* and *basilica* (1), the Jewry Wall public baths (2) and at least one temple identified as a *Mithraeum* (dedicated to the Persian god Mithras), as well as private buildings including a variety of domestic, commercial and industrial premises, such as those found at Vine Street (3).

In the late 2nd or early 3rd century, the town was provided with defences. At first these were simple ditches and earth ramparts but a substantial stone wall was added in the late 3rd century. The wall was three metres wide with towers (4) and may have been about four metres high, and would have been as much a symbol of civic pride as a discouragement to would-be-invaders.

By the late 3rd century, commerce was booming and the town had established trading links across Britain and Western Europe. New buildings, such as the *macellum* or market-hall (5) were built although other parts of the town were still open spaces, probably serving as storage yards, market spaces and kitchen gardens.

What happened to Leicester in the 4th century is less certain but the town may have entered a prolonged period of decline from the mid-4th century onwards.

*Roman Leicester (Ratae Corieltavorum) from the north-west, as it may have looked during the late 3rd century AD.*

*Artwork: Mike Codd.*
In 2004, archaeologists began a large excavation at Vine Street in Leicester. It would prove to be the single largest archaeological project ever undertaken in the city.

In total, it took more than forty archaeologists the better part of three years to excavate the site.

Initial hints at the importance of the site began to emerge in the 19th century when part of an elaborate Roman mosaic pavement was unearthed next to Vine Street. This area was also believed to be in the vicinity of the lost medieval church of St Michael’s which was demolished during the 15th century.

Above: Archaeologists at work at Vine Street. Note how deep they are. The fence at the back of the photo is at street level. In places archaeologists had to dig down two or three metres to reach Roman archaeology.

Right: This aerial photograph shows Vine Street during the archaeological excavation.

The photograph is looking west. The busy road to the left is Vaughan Way and All Saints’ Church can be seen at the top of the photo. Leicester city centre is to the left of Vaughan Way, beyond the edge of the photograph.

**Where is Vine Street?**

Vine Street was a street on the north side of Leicester city centre. Today, it no longer exists because it has been replaced by the John Lewis multi-storey car park.

Left: The site of the Vine Street excavation today. This photograph looks north across Vaughan Way to the John Lewis multi-storey car park.
PHASE 1: The excavation revealed a complex sequence of Roman buildings constructed between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD on the junction of two streets. Occupation initially began as a scattered development of timber buildings amongst fenced paddocks and yards.

PHASE 2: These survived for about fifty years before being replaced by a mixture of more sophisticated stone houses and commercial buildings. One of these houses possibly contained a bath suite incorporating a room and sunken pool heated through a small hypocaust system (underfloor heating).

PHASE 3: In the early 3rd century AD three of the stone buildings underwent a massive transformation into a spacious townhouse. This measured 40m by 40m and, with four ranges of rooms linked by corridors surrounding a central courtyard, it is the largest Roman house ever excavated in Leicester.

PHASE 4: By the mid-4th century AD the courtyard house was in poor condition. Parts of it had been knocked down whilst other rooms were being used as a smithy and as workshops making bone pins. A hoard of 500 Roman coins was found buried under the floor of another room.
CURSE TABLETS

Whilst excavating the site of the Roman town house at Vine Street, archaeologists discovered two thin sheets of lead. At first they seemed unremarkable, until it was noticed that both were inscribed with lines of Latin script. This made them extremely important as the first written texts from Roman Leicester (apart from a few instances of graffiti). They were deciphered by a specialist and identified as ‘curse tablets’.

What is a curse tablet?

A ‘curse tablet’ is typically a small sheet of lead inscribed with a message to a god or spirit asking them to take action on the writer’s behalf. Such action usually included harming named individuals who had caused offence to the writer.

The tablets were often thrown into a sacred pool, interred with the dead or else hidden in the fabric of a building. Around 500 tablets have been discovered across the Roman Empire of which over half come from Britain, mostly from the sacred springs at Bath in Somerset and at a shrine at Uley in Gloucestershire. To come across them elsewhere is unusual and the two from Vine Street are the first to be found in Leicester.

How were curse tablets made?

Curse tablets were usually thin sheets of lead cut out and hammered flat to produce a small rectangular tablet. The curse was then scratched into the surface of the soft lead with a stylus.

The Vine Street tablets bear a style of script which was commonly used for everyday documents and letters and the style of the language suggests that they were written between AD 150 and AD 250, at least 1,750 years ago.

Why are curse tablets important?

Today, much of our written evidence for the Roman world derives from literary texts written by and for a small group of elite, literate people.

Other written sources, such as inscriptions on stone monuments, tend to be very formulaic and are often associated with the Roman army and have a martial or political theme.

Curse tablets are important because they reveal something of the voices of ordinary people which would otherwise be totally lost.
THE SERVANDUS TABLET

The Servandus tablet (named after its writer) was found beneath a pile of discarded building rubble left close to the Vine Street courtyard house. It is written on a 1mm thick piece of lead sheet which is 201mm long and 78mm wide.

When it was discovered it still had mortar sticking to it. This suggests it may have been placed within a wall, perhaps inside the Phase 2 town house or the Phase 3 courtyard house.

Translation
‘I give to the god Maglus him who did wrong from the slave-quarters; I give him who (did) theft <the cloak> from the slave-quarters; who stole the cloak of Servandus.

Silvester
Rigomandus
Senilis
Venustinus
Vorvena
Calaminus
Felicianus
Rufaedo
Vendicina
Ingenuinus
Juventius
Alocus
Cennosus
Germanus
Senedo
Cunovendus
Regalis
Nigella
Senicianus

I give (that the god Maglus) before the ninth day take away him who stole the cloak of Servandus.’

Importance
• This is the first known reference to the god Maglus. It is possibly a corruption of the celtic maglos, meaning prince.
• The tablet provides a list of twenty people who once lived in Leicester. As the cloak was stolen from a slave-quarters, the list is probably a unique roll-call of household slaves.
• The names are a mixture of latin (e.g. Silvester), greek (Alocus) and celtic (Cunovendus).
• Three women are mentioned – Vorvena, Vendicina and Nigella.
• The cloak was a sagum, a square cloak often worn by soldiers and their servants.
• Servandus decided that Senicianus wasn’t the thief and crossed his name off the list.
THE SABINIANUS TABLET

The Sabinianus tablet (named after its writer) was found amongst soil and demolition waste left behind by the workmen who knocked down the Vine Street courtyard house.

Unfortunately, because this material had been disturbed during the medieval period, we cannot say for certain whether the tablet originally came from the site or has been imported from elsewhere. It is written on a 1mm thick sheet of lead which measures 123mm by 69mm. The lead has been crudely cut to size with a knife and hammered flat. This has left curved indentations across the lead.

Translation
‘Those who have stolen the silver coins of Sabinianus, that is Similis, Cupitus, Lochita, a god will strike down in this septionium, and I ask that they lose their life before seven days.’

Importance
- A septionium is thought to be a temple dedicated to the seven planetary deities that give their names to days of the week: the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn.
- Reference to this building in Leicester is very important, it is only the fourth known reference across the entire Roman Empire to such a structure. The others are located on the Palatine in Rome itself, in Sicily and in Africa.
- The septionium on the Palatine was built by the emperor Septimius Severus in AD 203. It appears to have been a monumental façade with fountains.
- The Leicester septionium may also have been attached to a public fountain and the curse may have been written to be thrown in water.
- Latin names such as Sabinianus, Similis and Cupitus are typical of Lower Germany and Britain. Similis especially is from the vicinity of Cologne (Germany).
- Lochita, a woman, has a Greek name which means ‘born of a slave and a freeman’.
CREATING YOUR OWN CURSE TABLET

Has someone annoyed you recently, or stolen something of yours? Perhaps they’ve eaten the last biscuit in the biscuit tin or broken a favourite possession. Why not get revenge the Roman way and curse them!

In Roman Britain, writing curses was a popular way of seeking divine punishment for wrongdoers. Curses followed common formulas:

- An appeal to a god
- To accept the gift, or hear the prayer (of the curse tablet)
- Which describes a complaint or requests intervention.
- Gives the name of the victim and the wrongdoer/s (if known).
- If the wrongdoer is unknown, various catch-all phrases are used (man, woman, slave, free, boy, girl, civilian, soldier etc.)
- The crime is described
- The god is offered part of the stolen property or the wrongdoer themselves.
- To bring the wrongdoer to account, the god is called on to deny them, or consume their health, life or blood.
- The god is asked to ‘fix’ the wrongdoer, drawing on the binding sense of ‘curse magic’, by causing bodily functions to cease working (e.g. may the thief not eat, drink, sleep, sit or lie down etc.). Occasionally death is threatened.
- To halt the effects of the curse, the wrongdoer must make amends.

Have a look at the examples below:

‘Cenacus complains to the god Mercury about Vitalinus and Notalinus his son concerning the draught animal which has been stolen from him, and asks the god Mercury that they may neither have health unless they return at once to me the draught animal which they have stolen, and to the god the devotion which he has demanded from them himself.’

Uley, Gloucestershire

‘Lady Nemesis, I give thee a cloak and a pair of boots, let he who wore them not redeem them except with his life or blood.’

Caerleon, South Wales

‘Lord Neptune, I give you the man who has stolen the solidus and six argentioi [money] of Muconius. So I give the names who took them away, whether male or female, whether boy or girl. So I give you, Niskus, and to Neptune the life, health, blood of him who has been privy to that taking-away. The mind which stole this and which has been privy to it, may you take it away. The thief who stole this, may you consume his blood and take it away, Lord Neptune.’

Hamble, Hampshire

‘May he who has stolen Vilbia [possibly a brooch] become as liquid as water. Who has stolen it: Velvinna, Exsupereus, Verianus, Severinus, Augustalis, Comitianus, Minianus, catus, Germanilla, Jorvina.’

Bath, Somerset

‘Docilianus [son] of Brucerus to the most holy goddess Sulis. I curse him who has stolen my Caracalla [hooded cloak], whether man or woman, whether slave or free, that the goddess Sulis inflict death upon [them] and not allow him sleep or children now and in the future, until he has brought my cloak to the temple of her divinity.’

Bath, Somerset
CREATING YOUR OWN CURSE TABLET

You need to:

- decide on the crime which has been committed.
- dedicate the person to a god or goddess.
- decide on the appropriate action for the god or goddess to take.
- give a list of suspects.

Tips:

- The Romans did not use punctuation for their curses and words often ran together without spaces. JOIN SOME OF YOUR WORDS TOGETHER.
- Letters, words and even entire lines of text were often written backwards for magical effect and to prevent other people reading the curse. WRITE SOME WORDS BACKWARDS.

Once you have decided what you want to write, copy the curse out on the blank tablet in Old Roman Cursive using the guide below (if you want to make a real curse tablet, use blank ‘scratch art sheets’ available from your local art store or online).

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CURSE TABLETS

Visit [curses.csad.ox.ac.uk](http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk) a website documenting the curse tablets of Roman Britain set up by the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents at the University of Oxford.

FURTHER READING

If you would like to learn more about Roman Leicester and the Vine Street Courtyard House why not read