

The long and satisfying 28,000-year history of the dildo

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The Vindolanda wooden phallus. Credit: Newcastle University

A headline bound to get you up in the morning—a 2,000 year old dildo from ancient Rome has [just been discovered](#).

The 16-centimeter wooden phallus was originally uncovered at the Roman fort of Vindolanda in Northumberland in 1992. It was originally

catalogued as a darning tool—a sewing technique for repairing fabric with a needle and thread—likely because it was discovered next to a number of garments and craft waste.

However, after a series of "very interesting discussions," researchers have decided the real purpose of this tool was a little less darn and a lot more damn.

"I have to confess, part of me thinks it's kind of self-evident that it is a penis," said Rob Collins, a senior lecturer in archaeology at Newcastle University who coauthored the paper breaking the news. "I don't know who entered it into the catalog. Maybe it was somebody uncomfortable with it or didn't think the Romans would do such silly things."

The phallus was a powerful symbol of strength in ancient Rome, used to invoke fertility and ward off evil. Even so, researchers are skeptical to declare this phallic object was used solely for decorative purposes—primarily because it was notably smoother at the end, suggesting it had been well used for some undecided purpose in its time.

28,000 year old dildos and famous Hohle

While this headline may seem shocking to many, those more familiar with the sex lives of ancient civilizations know this 2,000-year-old dildo barely makes a dint in the longstanding history of sex toys and aids.

In the history of human inventions, this is one of the oldest and longest-enduring tools. At our current estimate, the oldest known dildo dates back to at least 28,000 years ago. It was discovered by a team of researchers from Tübingen University in 2005, exploring the famous Hohle Fels Cave (near Ulm in Germany's Swabian Jura region).

After piecing together all 14 fragments, they were left with a 20cm-long,

3cm-wide siltstone object, destined to be the subject of similar archeological debate.

However, the object's distinctive form and the etched rings around the top are "a symbolic representation of male genitalia", as the leading researcher Nicholas Conard stated. The researchers comparably noted that the object was highly polished at the end, suggesting it had been well used.

While this siltstone phallus is certainly the oldest suspected sex toy, it is far from the only discovery from the ancient world. Archaeological discoveries in Eurasia have revealed the existence of suspected dildos that date back to 40,000-10,000 BCE.

A Mesolithic site in Motala, Sweden, unearthed a 4,000-6,000-year-old model, while similar models have been found in Pakistan from the same period. In Turkey, sculptures of genitalia dating back to the 6th century BCE have been identified.

Hallie Lieberman's research indicates that double-ended dildos have a history that extends back at least 13,000-19,000 years. A commonality in many of these discovered is the phallic shape, etched rings, and smooth ends that indicate some sort of use.



An ancient double-ended dildo. Credit: The China Museum of Sex

What would Jesus do? Biblical dildos and classical toys

Our knowledge of dildos isn't just limited to amusing archeological finds. We see evidence of dildos in a range of art and literature from the ancient world.

Dildos assume a prominent role in Aristophanes' comedic play *Lysistrata* (411 BCE). In a bid to end the Peloponnesian War, Lysistrata instructs the women of the warring cities to refuse sexual favors to their husbands and lovers until the men negotiate peace. To prevent their own frustration, she instructed them to satisfy their needs in the meantime with use of their "eight-fingered leather dildos... as a sort of flesh

replacement for our poor cunts."

However, the first literary appearance of the dildo may well outdate even ancient Greece. In fact, the first literary reference to dildos is believed to take place in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 16:17, God reprimands the people of Jerusalem because they "took the gold and silver" that He has given them and made "phallic images and fornicated with them".

According to a [video](#) by Dan McClellan, theologian and scripture translator, the original verb used to describe this fornication is "zanah," which is often used in a metaphorical sense in the Hebrew Bible to refer to worshipping other deities—symbolically committing adultery against the God of Israel.

While this passage could thus be read as a metaphorical fornication with "phallic images," he states that it is also very plausible to interpret this passage literally. Ezekiel features a number of quite sexually shocking moments, so it's quite likely the people of Israel were depicted to be fornicating with dildos as a way of illustrating how depraved they had become.

When in Rome...

With the considerable length of dildo-history in mind, why should we care that the ancient Romans were also exploring all of the joys that wood has to offer?

Ancient Rome is readily remembered as a place of sometimes surprising sexual liberality. Tourists flock to the remaining sites of the city of Pompeii to admire the penises carved into walls and pavements, explore the preserved brothels, and view the highly erotic art which has survived on the walls. Yet, despite all the stories and evidence of shocking bedroom proclivities, we have yet to find a life-sized Roman

dildo—until now.

It is the first discovery of a disembodied, wooden phallus found anywhere in this supposed haven of erotic behavior. It is also remarkable because wooden objects rarely survive. While this phallus measures to 16cm now, it is likely to have once been much bigger and have shrunk with age.

It should also be held in mind that the objects categorization as a dildo doesn't necessarily equate it was sexual liberation and pleasure.

As Collins has stated: "Sometimes they [dildos] weren't always used for pleasure ... they can be implements of torture so I'm very conscious of using the term sex toy. Hopefully that is what it was used for. That is the most exciting and intriguing possibility."

While the jury is currently out on our wooden friend, the 16cm phallic representation has at least been freed from its classification as a sewing tool. Considering all we know about the history of sex toys, and all we know about the sex life of the ancient Romans, it is likely this phallus will soon be finding its place in the 28,000-year history of dildos.

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