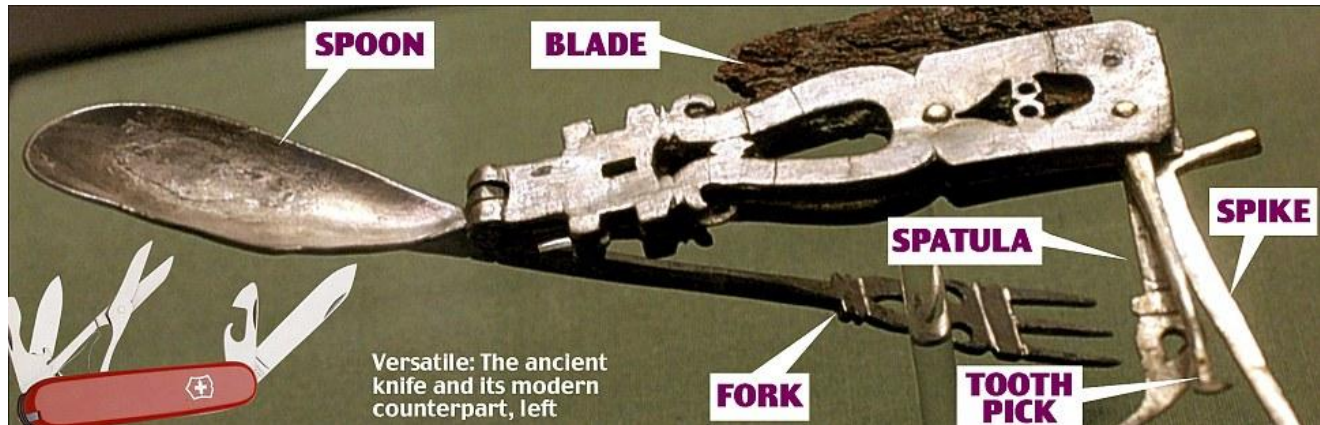


The Roman Army Knife:

Or how the ingenuity of the Swiss was beaten by 1,800 years

The world's first Swiss Army knife has been revealed - made 1,800 years before its modern counterpart. An intricately designed Roman implement, which dates back to 200AD, it is made from silver but has an iron blade. It features a spoon, fork as well as a retractable spike, spatula and small tooth-pick. Experts believe the spike may have been used by the Romans to extract meat from snails.



Inspired: The Roman army pen knife, a precursor to today's popular Swiss Army accessory. It is thought the spatula would have offered a means of poking cooking sauce out of narrow-necked bottles. The 3in x 6in (8cm x 15cm) knife was excavated from the Mediterranean area more than 20 years ago and was obtained by the museum in 1991.

The unique item is among dozens of artifacts exhibited in a newly refurbished Greek and Roman antiquities gallery at the Fitzwilliam Museum, in Cambridge. Experts believe it may have been carried by a wealthy traveler, who would have had the item custom made. A spokesman said: 'This was probably made between AD 200 and AD 300, when the Roman Empire was a great imperial power.'

'The expansion of Rome - which, before 500 BC, had just been a small central Italian state - made some individuals, perhaps like our knife-owner, personally very wealthy. This could have been directly from the fruits of conquests, or indirectly, from the business opportunities the empire offered. While many less elaborate folding knives survive in bronze, this one's complexity and the fact that it is made of silver suggest it is a luxury item; perhaps a useful gadget for a wealthy traveler.'

Modern Swiss Army knives originated in Ibach Schwyz, Switzerland, in 1897 and were created by Karl Elsener. The knives which provide soldiers with a 'battlefield toolkit' have since become standard issue for many modern day fighting forces thanks to their toughness and quality. Nationalist Elsener decided to design the knives after he realized the Swiss army soldiers were being issued with blades manufactured in neighboring Germany.