

# Ear Scoops and Toothpicks: Tiny Toilet Tools and Western Material Culture

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## Abstract

In the late 1990s in the plowzone at James Fort in Jamestown, Virginia, a silver and very ornate artifact that combined an ear scoop at one end and a toothpick featuring a whimsical dolphin—or sea dragon—at the other end was excavated. Probably belonging to one of the first male English colonists to arrive at Jamestown, this expensive piece of jewelry was likely worn openly at his neck or suspended from his waist from a belt and proclaimed (or advanced) his high status and standing in his new community. Ear scoops and toothpicks have been used by all levels of society from the late Iron Age to the present and could be made of bone, ivory, wood or metal and reflect the material culture of the era. The Roman toilet tool typically featured an ear scoop only. Similar artifacts have been excavated in Anglo-Saxon graves of both men and women that are attached to the deceased at the neck or waist. By the late 1500s, silver was commonly used to create combined ear scoop and toothpick pendants but the sea dragon motif was by no means unique. Fashion had begun to transform western society in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and elite men and women liked to display the pendants as explicit markers for social status, distinction and aspiration. Personal hygiene, as it was understood at the time, dictated that only the face and hands be kept clean and that earwax and plaque or “scales” from teeth be removed. The sea dragon depicted in the colonist’s pendant reflected the voyages of exploration and discovery in a time of economic stress as well as England’s long history of dragon lore. However, with more recent advances in medicine, dentistry and hygiene, along with the rise of mass production, toilet tools—Q-tips and toothbrushes—became cheaper and affordable to almost anyone throughout western culture and toiletry sets were no longer a mark of distinction.

### Roman Ear Scoops



### Anglo-Saxon Ear Scoop



### Jamestown Ear Scoop-Toothpick



### Post-Medieval Artifacts from England



### Modern Western and Japanese Toilet Tools

