

# ROMAN FINDS GROUP NEWSLETTER XII

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# **ROMAN FINDS GROUP**

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August 1996

### **Data Protection Act**

Under the terms of the 1984 Data Protection Act, The Roman Finds Group is required to ask its members whether they have any objection to personal data about them being held by the Society on computer. The personal data consists of members' names and addresses used for mailing notices of meetings, and will be released only to archaeological organisations. If members have any objections to personal data about them being held by the RFG, could they please write to the editor

## Editorial

This is a slightly lightweight mid-year edition but there are advantages to that - it will be easier to pack for late holiday reading. In this edition the debate about northern brooches continues and, in the light of this, I am grateful to the Arbeia Society and its cartoonist Roger Oram for allowing me to reproduce its publicity poster as the back cover. Anyone who has ever dug a hole will recognise the situation.

Following representations to the CBA, the RFG is to become a member of the Standing Conference on Portable Antiquities. This can only be a good thing as it means that in future Roman finds specialists will have a louder voice when the archaeological establishment gives its response to such documents as the government's recent discussion paper on portable antiquities (See the Notes and News section of the last *Newsletter*).

The deadline for the next Newsletter will be ***December 31st, 1996***. As ever, all contributions gratefully received provided they are not much longer than 1,000 words. Please send all contributions to:-

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## First century brooches on the Northern Frontier

I very much welcome Don Mackreth's article on 'Colchesters in the North' in *RFG Newsletter XI*, as it not only raises some interesting points in detail, but more importantly, takes up one of the topics raised in *Roman Brooches from Northern Britain* and carries the discussion further. It was my hope that this BAR would 'provide a useful starting point for further study' (Snape 1993, 101) and I am particularly delighted that Don has followed up the question of first century brooches from South Shields. Perhaps a little of the background is needed to illustrate the importance of this point.

The excavations by Tyne and Wear Museums in the 1980s revealed two phases of vicus buildings beneath the known mid-Antonine stone fort, and, by implication, an earlier fort somewhere in the immediate vicinity (Bidwell and Speak 1994, 14-6). The suggested dates for these two phases are Trajanic/early Hadrianic and late Hadrianic/early Antonine respectively. Interestingly, although there are no known earlier structures, recent discoveries have added to the amount of Flavian pottery from the site. The discovery of much of this pottery coincided with the final stage of my study of brooches from the northern frontier, and the presence at South Shields of some brooches of first-century date appeared to offer supporting evidence for a postulated Flavian site. However, it seemed best to proceed cautiously, to avoid accusations that I was claiming the presence of an entire fort solely on the dating evidence of a handful of brooches (seven in all!).

There were two main problem areas:

- i) the small numbers of brooches from many of the frontier sites made meaningful statistical comparisons impossible;
- ii) much depended on the precise dating of the brooches; survival into the very last years of the first century would have placed these examples into the context of the Trajanic structures rather than providing circumstantial evidence for an unlocated Flavian site.

Various other minor caveats were discussed in the BAR but, I believe, satisfactorily discounted (Snape 1993, 97-100); however the two main problems remain to be addressed.

In an attempt to overcome the first, the collections from individual sites were not considered separately; instead comparison was made between the total number of brooches from sites (of first century foundation) on the Stanegate and the

total from sites on Hadrian's Wall (*ibid.*, Table 7). Of the 375 brooches from the Stanegate, 21 were of first century date (5.6% of the total); the corresponding figures for Hadrianic sites were 231 and 6 (2.6% of the total). The results for South Shields, 209, 21 and 3.6%, indicated something other than the distribution of a site of Hadrianic foundation, but was this an indication of a Flavian site or was it simply to be explained by the Trajanic occupation? In the subsequent discussions I noted that several of the apparently first-century examples from South Shields were unusual variants - a point so clearly re-iterated by Don - and so these might be of later date than the standard forms.

In the end I had to conclude that '.... the number and variety of first century brooches from South Shields could be consistent with the rate of survival expected on a site of Trajanic rather than Hadrianic foundation. However, there remain those puzzling examples of possibly even earlier date' (*ibid.*, 100).

The puzzling examples - a fragment of an Aucissa, one Nauheim derivative and two Colchesters - brought into focus the second of the two main problems, that of precise dating evidence. To avoid the temptation of constructing an entire Flavian fort on the foundation of four brooches, I added the caveat that possibly these types may have had a longer life in the North than elsewhere - thus falling into other snares and delusions, as described by Don.

He has made some valid criticisms and interesting points, as shown below, but the most important thing for me is Don's endorsement of the idea that the unusual Colchester variant (and presumably the other three early brooches) could well have derived from Flavian occupation. I am delighted he feels '...there is no need to extend by a generation the *floruit* of the entire tribe of Colchester ...'. I am very happy to revert to the traditionally accepted date range, and indeed this offers hope that there are more finds of such an early date waiting to be found at South Shields, in an excavation programme which has produced so much that is new and surprising.

Turning to a more detailed discussion of the points made in Don's article. I must plead guilty to the charges of lumping together my Nauheims and my *Drahtfibeln* with others of early date and to omitting any discussion of the brooches from Camulodunum and the King Harry Lane cemetery. There are two reasons for this. The first is my lack of experience in dealing with early brooches from the south of England; although I see them illustrated in the excavation reports, the fact that I so rarely see the real things makes me wary of going into print describing



them. Secondly, for the point I was seeking to make about the South Shields brooches, it seemed sufficient to note only whether there were any examples pre-dating the 80s AD, and it did not seem relevant to discuss their pre-Flavian origins. However, with hindsight, this might have been included.

The question of what makes a northern assemblage is an interesting one. Here I should emphasise that in the context of the brooches I have catalogued, 'north' means 'northern frontier', and does not include all the towns and villas of the upland zone. The importance of this distinction is that in the study area, 'northern' surely is synonymous with 'military' or at least 'forts and their *vici*'. Don questions '.... whether the ordinary native in the north, outside Romanised nucleated sites, ever took to wearing bow brooches', and I entirely agree with him, a point made in the BAR (*ibid.*, 5-6). But unlike Don, I do not find this 'a sad truth'; on the contrary, it is a rather useful one, if it will enable us to distinguish between soldier and native, romanised and unromanised.

What makes a northern assemblage? Don has given us an answer in relation to date ranges. I attempted to define the difference in terms of the relative proportions of different types (*ibid.*, 8), and found a higher percentage of penannulars and plate brooches in the northern frontier sample. This would fit in well with Don's remark above, about the lack of popularity of bow brooches in the region. However, it should be said that the comparison was made with one other assemblage, and much more work would need to be done. Interestingly the same comparison showed a lower percentage of repaired brooches in the north than the south, but again, I think more work would have to be done before Hilary's 'canny northerners' could be replaced by carefree spendthrifts. Don and I disagree on the question of whether there are any specifically northern brooches. I feel that the headstud just possibly might have originated in the north (*ibid.*, 14), but I don't see it as a vitally important point.

Far more interesting to me is Don's point that the Roman army favoured the old-styled, and specific varieties may have been made out of proper time for a specific clientele. Unusual examples will stand out amongst the very standardised Romano-British brooches; this holds out the hope that eventually sufficient numbers of diagnostic examples might be found to offer some clues about trade routes, movements of itinerant craftsmen or even the identities of military units themselves.

As to the brooch catalogue itself, it was always intended to focus quite narrowly on a group of brooches from the northern frontier, and it certainly contains more raw data than discussion.

Sadly it does also contain its errors and omissions - readers are now warned to ignore the sweeping generalisations about the closing date of Colchesters. But I am still very influenced by one of the favourite sayings of the person who made me want to go into archaeology in the first place, the late George Jobey; his advice was, 'Don't get it perfect, get it published'. I certainly have no immediate plans for any revising or rewriting. The demands of field archaeology are keeping me busy, so the catalogue will have to stand as it is for the present. However, I hope it succeeds in its aim of providing a corpus of useful data.

## References

Bidwell, P.T. & Speak, S.C., 1994. *Excavations at South Shields Roman Fort, volume I* (Newcastle upon Tyne)

Snape, M., 1993. *Roman brooches from northern Britain: a classification and a catalogue of brooches from sites on the Stanegate* BAR235, Oxford

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## **Roman Finds from Northamptonshire**

### **Northampton City Museum, 27th April, 1996**

This was the Roman Finds Group's first meeting to be held on a Saturday. Well over thirty people attended, and it was good to see local, non-RFG members amongst the audience. The morning got off to a splendid start with David Neal's slide presentation reviewing the location and dating of mosaics discovered in *Britannia* in general, and in Northamptonshire in particular. Twenty-two sites, containing some 48 mosaics mainly of late date, cluster along the Nene and Welland valleys. Three figured mosaics of c. AD 360 were highlighted for containing fine workmanship in depicting the figures, probably by the same mosaicist, but also for being surrounded by inferior quality infilling. On stylistic and dating grounds Neal then went on to pick out the works of three main itinerant groups of mosaicists in the county who were also laying mosaics elsewhere, including the London site at Poultry. The remaining part of Neal's presentation was a display of his own meticulously drawn and painted illustrations of the Northamptonshire pavements. These were inspected while he spoke about each, and answered questions put to him. His corpus of British mosaics is soon to be published by British Museum Publications, and first of four volumes will appear in August 1996.

Mark Curteis of Northampton City Museum followed with a talk intriguingly entitled 'When is a villa not a villa?' Curteis questioned assumptions about the nature of finds that make up a 'typical' assemblage on a villa or any other type of site. Curteis reviewed material from Northamptonshire sites to demonstrate the need to provide both a quantitative as well as descriptive analysis of site small finds. For example a structure that produces large quantities of Romano-British brooches or an unusually high number of coins cannot be automatically be considered to be a villa site, but is more likely to be a shrine or temple. His message was that it is the groupings of associated material that are the clues to a structure's or site's function, and it is in this area of comparing finds assemblages that more work needs to be undertaken.

Roy Friendship-Taylor, the days' organiser, spoke about Piddington. This started as a collection of Late Iron Age roundhouses with evidence of military activity around the Conquest period. By the end of the 1st century, a building identified as a villa, was established on the site. During the 4th century, the buildings were modified to such an extent that instead of one homestead, several living units were probably established.

Against this chronology, Friendship-Taylor highlighted several individual and groupings of artefacts. For example, the early military phase is represented by military metalwork, mid 1st-century brooches, and Cunobelin and Claudian pottery. He invited help from the audience to explain the function of the many sheep's metacarpals found on site that were highly polished from heavy use and with strange wear patterns. Also enigmatic were the eighteen ceramic finials and chimneys made in three fabric types. Several were



painted red both inside and outside. They either had V-shaped or arched perforations, and some had pie-crust or crimped banding. The 2nd century ceramic tiles were also interesting. They were stamped with imperial lettering that showed they had been modified from TIB.CLA.VERI to TIB.CLA.SEVERI, indicating continuation of manufacture on the site between the reigns of Verus and Severus. Of equal interest is the tile that bears the ivy leaf motif impression which resulted from leaving a wet clay tile to dry on a mosaic floor for which no other evidence on the site now survives. David Neal had earlier shown a drawing he had made, reconstituting as much as possible of this lost Piddington mosaic.

The last speaker of the morning, Ian Meadows, looked at the gravel extraction sites at Wollaston; an area he had surveyed, maintained a watching brief over and partially excavated. Both Iron Age and Roman settlements were identified in the valley down which ran a minor road linking Irchester and Towcester. This rural farming landscape, however, produced a major surprise. A series of rectangular, level trenches with lines of irregularly spaced post holes, initially proved to be features difficult to identify. Analysis of the pollen taken from the soil samples extracted from these flat trenches, however, revealed what had been grown in them. The pollen was from vines and is the first direct proof of viticulture on a commercial scale in Roman Britain. Unfortunately the nearby Roman buildings have not been investigated, so it is uncertain whether the grapes were processed on the local villa estate or in nearby Irchester. Meadows suggested that there must be evidence for other vineyards in Roman-Britain. The classical vineyard landscape is very diagnostic on a large scale, but even smaller areas could be detected if more soil samples were taken for pollen analysis.

The afternoon session was given by three members of the Roman Military Society. They demonstrated and discussed the armour, dress and weapons of the Roman Army, ranging from an Augustan legionary to a 4th-century soldier. The speakers were entertaining and enlightening, speaking from their own experiences in making and wearing the equipment. Two junior members of the audience were particularly enthralled by the full-scale replica of a Roman ballista, not to mention the other assorted weapons shown and their tactical uses explained.

The RFG's first Saturday session was enjoyed by all present, including the younger family members especially in the afternoon. Several members said it was easier to attend on a Saturday than during the week. Let us hope that the Northampton conference will be the first of many such Saturday events. Our thanks to Roy Friendship-Taylor and the staff of Northampton City Museum for their hard work in organising what proved to be a most interesting and stimulating session.

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# Notes and News

## London Meeting

By now you should all have received the publicity for the next RFG meeting which will be held at the Museum of London on **Monday, 30th. September, 1996**. There is a very full and interesting programme including an intriguing contribution from Martin Dearne about three little Roman pigs. Jenny Hall and Trevor Bringham will also provide an introduction to the new Roman gallery in the Museum which we will be able to visit. A fun-packed day for the bargain price of £6. Remember to send your booking forms and cheques to Jan Summerfield (CAS, Fort Cumberland, Fort Cumberland Road, PORTSMOUTH PO4 9LD) by September 2nd.

## A new newsletter

The British section of the International Association for the History of Glass has launched a new newsletter about all things glassy, which it intends to publish twice a year. The aim is to provide a forum for notices of work in progress, reviews etc. It covers all of history and pre-history including the Roman period. The first edition includes brief notes about the huge Guildhall, London dump of glass found by MOLAS. This is thought to have been gathered together in the late first/early second century in preparation for re-melting and the production of new vessels. The first edition of the Newsletter is free. Thereafter it will cost £3 to subscribe up to the end of 1997 (3 more issues). Send cheques made payable to THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE HISTORY OF GLASS LTD to John Shepherd, Museum of London, 150 London Wall, LONDON EC2Y 5HN

## A new consultation document from English Heritage

Many members must have been to meetings over the past year or so where Adrian Oliver will have been speaking about developing a strategy for English Archaeology to update the EH (1991) document *Exploring our Past*. He has now published the fruits of his labours as *Frameworks for our Past*, sub-titled 'A review of research frameworks, strategies and perceptions'. Members looking for some useful holiday reading can get copies from him (at EH, 23 Savile Row, LONDON W1X 2HE). This is a consultation paper and EH say they are 'very interested to hear .. views concerning the conclusions of *Frameworks for our Past*' and will take responses up to the end of November 1996. After

assessing them they will 'consider how [EH] may best help to promote the development of integrated and collaborative research in a regional, national and international context.

## **Black Shiny Material**

Lindsay Allason-Jones has just published a useful little book *Roman Jet in the Yorkshire Museum* which consists of a general introduction to black shiny material and its use in the Roman period, together with a catalogue of the holdings of the Yorkshire Museum and the material from recent excavations by the York Archaeological Trust. It is full of good things including the surprising discovery from the analytical programme that three of the York pieces appear to have been made from *Spanish* jet. As its aimed at a general audience as well as the interested professional, it has the advantage of being both sumptuously illustrated and remarkably cheap. It is published by the Yorkshire Museum (ISBN 0 905807 17 0) at £4.50. They will post the book to customers for a small additional cost of about £1 for post and packing. Contact the museum on 01904 629745 (telephone) or 01904 651221 (fax) for details if you cannot find it in a bookshop.

## **MOLAS Moves**

The Museum of London Archaeology Service has moved to a new address. They are now to be found at Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, LONDON EC4V 4AB. Telephone 0171 410 2200, fax 0171 410 2201, Email [molas@molas.demon.co.uk](mailto:molas@molas.demon.co.uk)

## **Subscriptions Reminder**

Subscriptions are due on October 1st. Why not save Angela's time (and the RFG's money) by sending her a cheque for £5 made payable to THE ROMAN FINDS GROUP before she has to send you a reminder. Subscriptions (and all other membership queries) should be sent to Angela Wardle, 1 Stebbing Farm, Fishers Green, STEVENAGE, Herts. SG1 2JB



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*For a leaflet on the society, please contact: the Secretary, Arbeia  
Society, Arbeia Roman fort and museum, Baring Street, South  
Shields, Tyne and Wear, NE33 2BB*