

EVIDENCE FOR THE ROMAN ARMY IN SOUTHWARK

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A number of Roman finds which may be military in origin have been found in Southwark, the suburb of Londinium which lies directly opposite to it on the south bank of the Thames. The strategic significance of Southwark was that it lay at the first place upriver which could be reached by roads from the major entry points on the south coast, and where the Thames could be bridged.

The detailed excavations in Southwark during the last decade and a half have provided evidence of two major roads approaching the river bank, but neither need have been built until c. AD 50. Permanent activity in Southwark (and indeed Londinium) may not have begun until that date, though the need to guard supplies and communications may be envisaged thereafter.

It is likely that the main Claudian invasion route from Kent (Watling Street) bypassed North Southwark, reaching the Thames further upriver, close to where Westminster Bridge now stands, by a more southerly route. This long held supposition is supported by the lack of evidence for early road construction in Southwark.¹

Study of the ancient topography also demonstrates that much of the land near to the Thames between the more obvious crossing places in North Southwark (London Bridge) and North Lambeth (Westminster Bridge) was low lying, consisting of inlets and creeks surrounded by mud-flats likely to be submerged at high tide.²

A fort may be postulated near to where the armies of Claudius crossed the Thames and this could have remained in use throughout much of the invasion period irrespective of the subsequent construction of a downriver crossing at London Bridge. There is no evidence for it though both Morris (1982) and Fuentes (1985) have advanced suggestions for its location. Topographic evidence would favour the latter's hypothesis and several sites near to the Elephant and Castle which might throw some light on the matter may shortly be examined in the context of re-development.

Evidence for the construction of the roads in North Southwark and the topography have been discussed previously.³ It seems probable that the road-building and associated engineering

work (land drainage, revetting and bridge building) was carried out by the Roman army. It is also likely that the military were involved subsequently in the use of land on both banks as a base for the transport and distribution of supplies.⁴

At the time of writing some thirty pieces that might be classed as items of military equipment have been found. Of these, some might be pre-Flavian, though many come from Flavian or later contexts.

Excavations have also produced 10 regular and 106 irregular Claudian coins. These are most common on sites in Britain where the army was present during the pre-Flavian period: the earlier copies are of good style and the later ones are poor. The commonest Southwark types are of an intermediate grade which were perhaps struck c. AD 50-55.

The proportion of copies (92%) is one of the highest in Britain. Comparison of the 1st century coin distribution in Southwark with other sites shows that it is most similar to those from coastal or estuarine supply bases of this period such as Richborough, Fishbourne, Fingringhoe and Sea Mills.⁵

A list of Roman military objects discovered in Southwark is given below. The numbers refer to those on the distribution map (Fig.2).

Harness or Belt Fittings: 1. Topping's Wharf
2. Bonded Warehouse, Montague Close
3. 199 Borough High Street
4,5,6. Courage Brewery

'Auxiliary' Cavalry Harness Pendants:

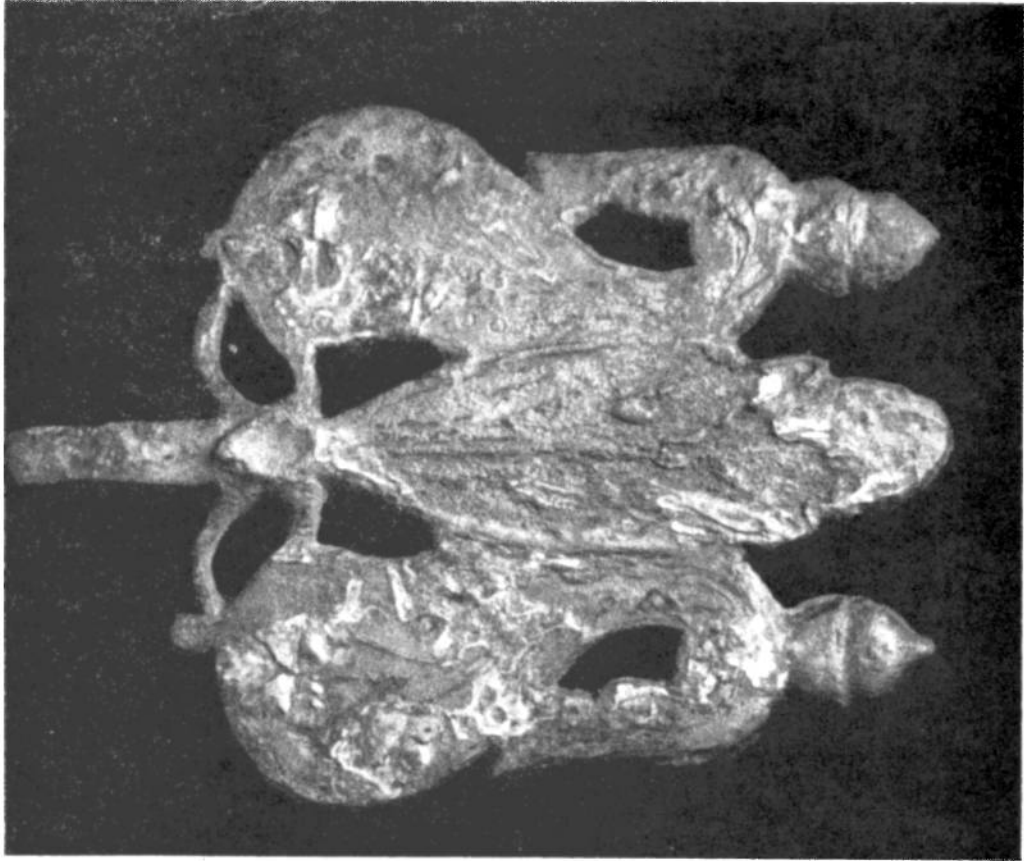
8. Topping's Wharf
9. District Heating Scheme
10,11. 15-23 Southwark Street
12. Courage Brewery

Lorica Buckles: 13,14. 13-14 Arcadia Buildings
15. 15-23 Southwark Street

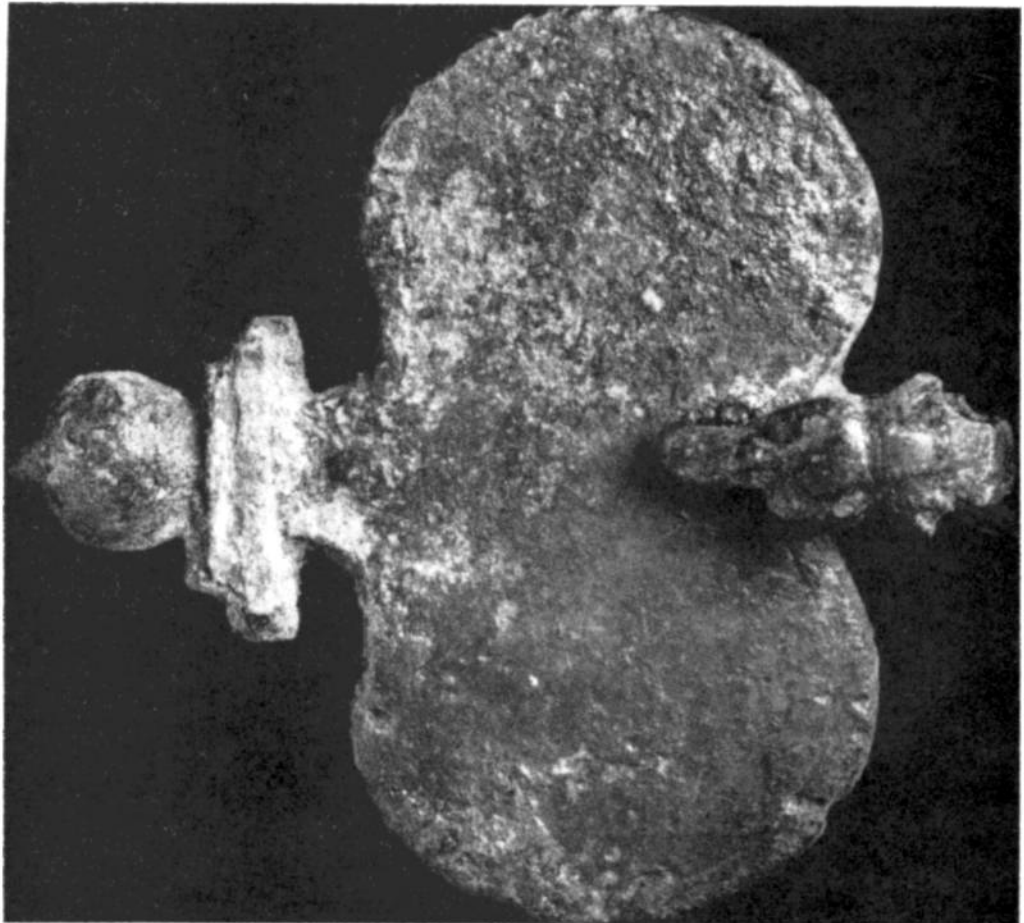
Cingulum bosses: 16. 1-7 St Thomas' Street
17. 15-23 Southwark Street
18. Hibernia Wharf

Other decorative bosses and studs commonly described as of

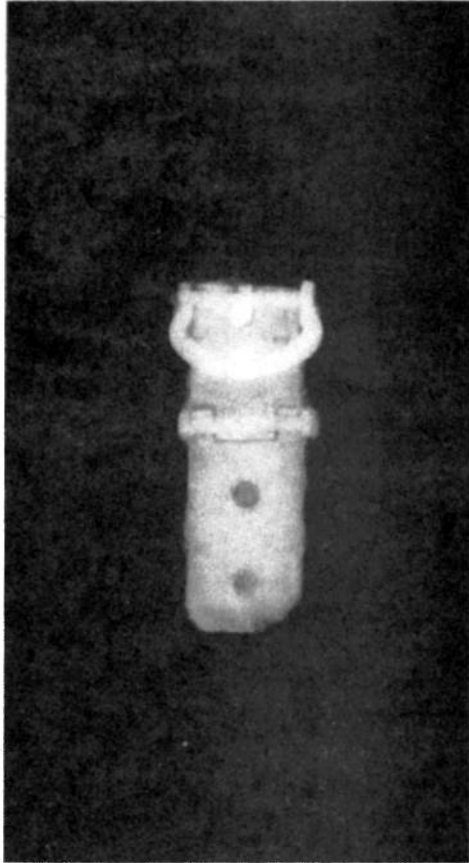
Pls.1 & 2: Auxiliary harness pendants from 15-23 Southwark Street.



Pl. 2



Pl. 1



Pl. 3



Fig. 1

Scale 3:1

- 'military' type: 19. 199 Borough High Street
 20,21. Courage Brewery
- Iron Bolt-heads: 22. 201-11 Borough High Street (see
 SLEAC 1978, fig.63,18; the object
 is of an uncommon size and shape
 (triangular section) and there is
 uncertainty as to whether it is in
 fact a weapon-head)
 23. 199 Borough High Street
- Scabbard Mounts: 24,25. 1-7 St Thomas' Street
- 'Military'-type Buckles:
 26,27. 175-177 Borough High Street
- Pair of mounts from a Dolabra Sheath:
 28. 15-23 Southwark Street
- Small Bronze Phallus with Suspension Loop:
 29. 15-23 Southwark Street
- Lead Centurial Property-identification tag, inscribed 'C Q
 Corneli Verecundi': 30. Courage Brewery
- Carnelian Intaglio, depicting an eagle between two standards:
 31. 1-7 St Thomas' Street

There is also a record (J. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc. xxiv, 1968, 309) of an iron object found in Stoney Street in 1865. This was considered to be a gladiator's trident when discovered, but it has been suggested that it is part of a military standard.

In addition to the irregular Claudian coins, which may have been struck by the army or the administration in Britain, a coin of Nero, stamped with a counter-mark of Vitellius (AD 69) was found at 15-23 Southwark Street. The late Dr C. Kraay informed us that only four other examples of this countermark are known, and that all the provenanced examples are from Britain. The countermark may therefore have been produced by adherents to the side of Vitellius serving in Britain.

Apart from coins and objects, attention might also be drawn to two ranges of buildings recently found in Southwark.

Pl.3: Lorica segmentata buckle from Arcadia Buildings (X-ray).

Fig.1: Carnelian gemstone with legionary motif from 1-7 St Thomas' Street (scale 6:1)

Firstly, at 15-23 Southwark Street (see Fig.2, no.10 for location) a large 1st century stone courtyard building with timber piles beneath the stone wall foundations may have been built in AD 74 according to dendrochronological evidence.⁶ Further early stone founded buildings lay to the west and the size and date of the whole complex suggests that they were public rather than private.

Secondly, a discovery implying a later Roman connection between Southwark and the army came from the north-west of the settlement, at Winchester Palace in 1984 (see Fig.2, no.32 for location). There, fragments of a large multi-panelled inscription came from a bath suite, probably the western part of a substantial stone building.

Most of the surviving fragments list names which have been grouped according to Cohorts, and it has been suggested⁷ that this was a dedication by a detachment of legionary soldiers. Most of the dedicatory inscription itself has been lost but the closest parallel appears to be a dedication to Julia Mamaea at Lambaesis. The frequency of the praenomen Aurelius indicates a date shortly after Caracalla's extension of the citizenship in AD 213.

In conclusion, we can therefore envisage the presence of Roman military personnel in Southwark, during the 1st century, though not on present evidence before c. AD 50. Any presumed pre-Flavian fort connected either with the Claudian campaign or later phases of the conquest is likely to be situated on firm ground to the south of the area shown on Fig.2, though the coin finds support the suggestion that a supply base was located within Southwark during much of this period.

Later finds which might be connected with soldiers, such as the inscription from Winchester Palace, could derive from the presence in Southwark of military personnel involved in the administration of Britain.

More archaeological evidence about the nature and development of Roman Southwark is still urgently being sought and it is to be hoped that the extent of military involvement in the life of the settlement will become clearer as work progresses.

NOTES

1. SHELDON, 1978.
2. GRAHAM, 1978.

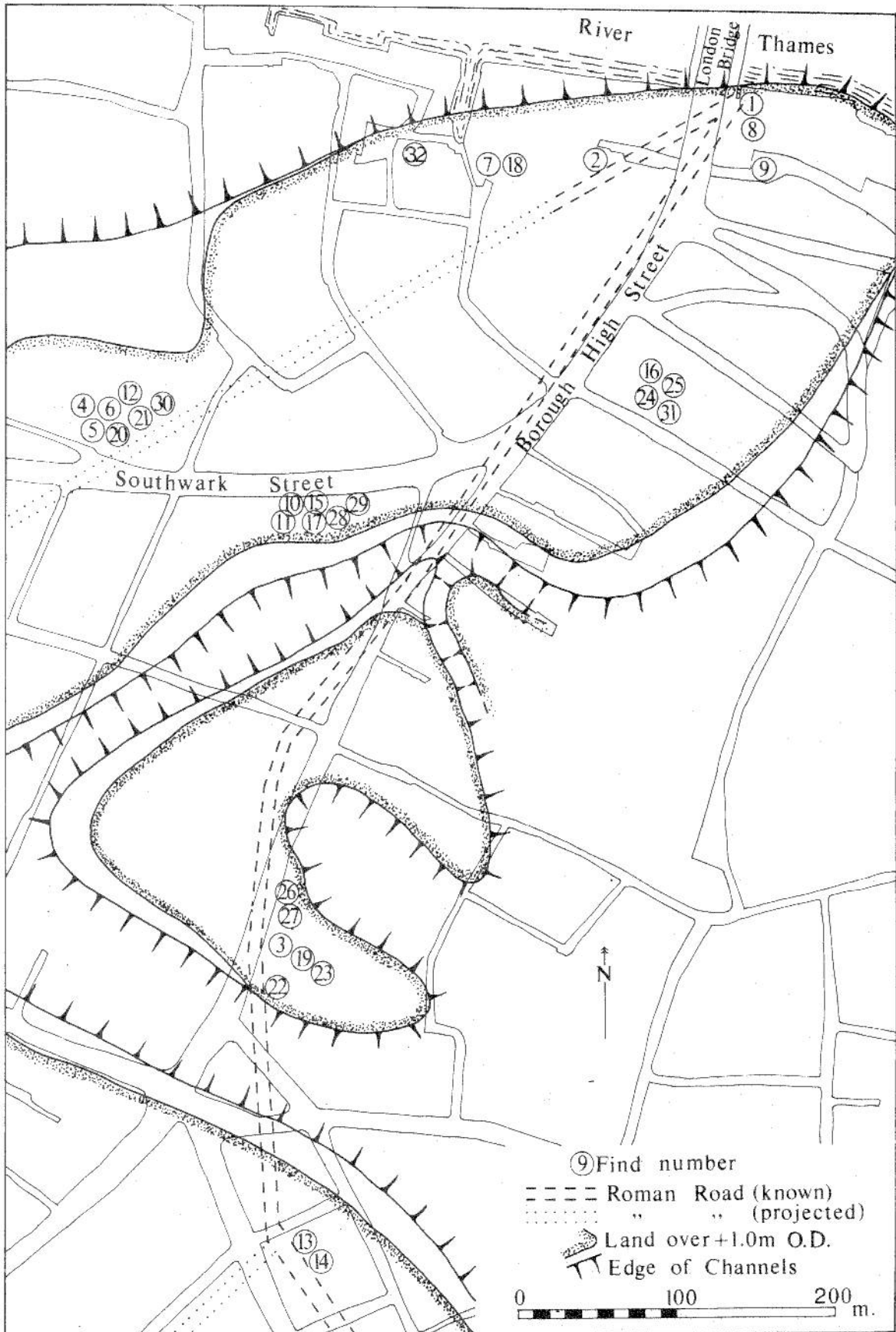


Fig. 2

3. GRAHAM, 1978; SHELDON, 1978.
4. HAMMERSON, 1978; SHELDON, 1978.
5. HAMMERSON, 1978.
6. SHELDON & TYERS, 1983.
7. HASSALL & TOMLIN, 1985.

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