

## O FORTUNA: A SIDEWAYS LOOK AT THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD AND ROMAN MILITARY EQUIPMENT

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There is an essential conflict at the heart of archaeology, deeply rooted in the academic origins of the discipline. This is the fundamental dichotomy between artefacts and their context (the technical sense, 'a stratigraphic unit', can be read alongside the normal meaning), a rift that is largely a construct of archaeologists. It is as well to highlight the human contribution to this dilemma at an early stage, for it will prove to be a Leitmotif in the course of this short paper, which derives from some preliminary thoughts on loss mechanisms for military equipment,<sup>1</sup> but concerns itself with questions and doubts about the validity of our contemporary image of the Roman soldier.

Of particular relevance to this line of inquiry is the question of how much an artefact has to tell about the context in which it is found, as opposed to what the context seems to be telling about the artefact. This relationship is complex, but is one approach more valid than the other? In the days of Lysons or the Lindenschmits, artefacts were of prime importance to the antiquarian, but archaeology has now progressed to the modern doctrines of theory and practice, where some excavation reports marshal their small finds into context groups, subordinating the artefact to the context. Yet there is an underlying assumption here that the context is important; perhaps it is, but it is impossible to ignore the perennial problem of residuality. Now would seem the right time to ask two questions: 'have we gone too far?' and 'are we missing something?'

### CONCEALMENT

An attempt has already been made to explore the reasons why military equipment may have been deliberately deposited in the first century A.D.<sup>2</sup> This was apparently related to the way in which it was produced, damaged, and recycled or scrapped. However, what has possibly received insufficient stress here is the selectivity of the evidence, for only items left behind by the army can be found in the archaeological record (and, incidentally, implying that they had lost their original scrap value). Yet there is still another level to this argument, for only items which were susceptible to damage in the first place stood a chance of ending up in the ground. One example will serve to illustrate this point.

It has recently been argued anew that finds of 'lorica segmentata' denote the fact that auxiliaries were equipped with this type of armour.<sup>3</sup> However, 'lorica segmentata' seems to have been especially prone to damage and the pieces in the Corbridge Hoard show that frequent repairs were necessary to the many fragile fittings.<sup>4</sup> A high attrition rate meant that it was more likely to enter the archaeological record. Lorica hamata, on the other hand, was far less likely to suffer peripheral damage to the integrity of its structure

(in other words, pieces fell off less frequently), so it is consequently rarer. This raises the question of whether it is possible to draw conclusions about the armour of auxiliaries from the archaeological evidence: as a direct result of the contrast between the vulnerability of segmental armour and the low attrition rate of mail, it would seem that the presence of lorica hamata in the archaeological record is being effectively 'masked' by finds of 'lorica segmentata'.<sup>5</sup>

#### BURIAL RITES

It is now accepted that Roman military equipment occurs in funerary contexts within the Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it is recognised that it was not normal practise for Roman soldiers, whether legionary or auxiliary, to be interred with their weapons or armour.<sup>7</sup> The problem here lies in gauging just how representative those burials we know of really are. The Camelon and Mehrum soldiers were both equipped with Roman-influenced (or even produced) arms,<sup>8</sup> but is it possible to relate them to their fellows in the army at that time, or should the very fact that their burial practices differ warn that caution is necessary? It is indeed ironic that the Nawa burial,<sup>9</sup> apparently that of a noble serving in the Roman cavalry in the Antonine period, should include the only known complete set of Roman military horse equipment from the first two centuries A.D.<sup>10</sup>

A burial from Lyon, complete with UTERE FELIX belt fittings and long sword, has been associated with the events in Gaul of 197,<sup>11</sup> but is such an explanation acceptable? This certainly seems to be a non-Roman burial with Roman equipment, as in the other cases mentioned above, but need it relate to one particular battle just because the latest coin present dates to A.D.194? Had it been a mass grave, then it would most certainly be a different matter, but the very fact of the individuality of the burial must cast some doubt upon that interpretation (without, of course, rendering it totally inadmissible).

#### DEDICATORY

Some of the best finds of early imperial military equipment, particularly the larger items, have come from rivers and a large proportion of the helmets illustrated in Robinson's book<sup>12</sup> were found in this way. Many of the richer findspots are biased towards major navigable rivers, where dredging activities are known to have been carried out, but much has been gleaned from the Thames by 'mudlarking'. The distribution of much of the Roman military material seems to fit with prehistoric deposition patterns, as Torbrügge has noted.<sup>13</sup>

Frequent finds include helmets, along with dagger and sword scabbards and blades. How did they get there and what does this imply about their former owners? Klumbach speculated that the Imperial-Gallic Type I<sup>14</sup> helmet found in the Rhine at Mainz may have been lost overboard by a soldier on the ferry which was thought to have existed before the bridge was built there around A.D.83.<sup>15</sup> Whilst it is reasonable to expect isolated instances of major kit loss, the sort of proportions suggested by the surviving evidence stretch credulity just a little too far. It becomes necessary to choose between an extremely

careless Roman army or an alternative loss mechanism at work. For example, was the shield boss from the River Tyne accidentally lost in the water, or was it deliberately offered in fulfilment of some vow?<sup>16</sup>

The practice of dedicating items to deities seems to be attested in prehistory and, by the time of the Romans, vow-fulfilment was a part of everyday life, as is demonstrated by altars from all over the Empire.<sup>17</sup> Greek history provides examples of equipment, particularly captured material, being dedicated.<sup>18</sup> An inscribed plaque from Tongres explicitly states that the centurion Q. Cadius Libo dedicated his scutum and lancea to the goddess Vihansa.<sup>19</sup> Now, a case can certainly be made for connecting the deposition of military equipment in water with similar practices, but this only serves to complicate matters even further; for what subtle forces are at work, unseen, selecting which items are to be offered (and therefore to survive in the archaeological record)? Moreover, were objects (as some have suggested) being specially manufactured for dedication? At this point, the Coolus helmet from Bosham Harbour will serve as a useful illustration of some of the problems involved in interpreting the evidence.<sup>20</sup> Was it lost overboard by a soldier, or was it vowed in exchange for being granted some long-forgotten divine favour? This is something that cannot be known and can only be guessed at.

These problems of interpretation can be further explored by examining two particular Roman helmets. The first was found in the River Po and has been associated by some with the civil war battle of A.D. 69,<sup>21</sup> whilst the other was recovered by excavation in the fortress of Vindonissa.<sup>22</sup> Viewing them purely as artefacts, they say something to students of Roman armour about the range and development of helmet types. However, when considered in the light of their respective provenances, they are seen from a different perspective: excavated helmets are rare by comparison with water-finds,<sup>23</sup> so it is legitimate to ask whether the latter are masking the former. If so, how does that affect the current status of helmet studies?

Besides early imperial helmets, daggers and swords, along with their scabbards, are not infrequent finds in watery contexts. It is noteworthy that very little by way of armour has come from this otherwise productive source of artefacts and no pieces of 'lorica segmentata' are yet known from rivers. Armour certainly seems to have been deposited in water in Celtic society, so it is curious to note its apparent absence in the Roman period.<sup>24</sup>

## BATTLES

It is a historical commonplace that Roman soldiers only rarely encountered battle conditions; theirs was more likely a humdrum life spent on fatigues and routine policing duties.<sup>25</sup> If this was indeed so, then finds of equipment from circumstances related to combat will, by definition, be rare. Nevertheless, the survival of major items of equipment on battlefields is, in itself, unusual, one example being the weapon head found lodged in the spine of a skeleton at Maiden Castle.<sup>26</sup> It has always been man's practice in war to strip the dead of all valuables, which for most of history has included armour and other military equipment.

Exceptions to this are rare, but perhaps the best known are the mass graves at Wisby in Gottland, where men were buried wearing complete sets of armour after being defeated by the Danes in 1367.<sup>27</sup> The apparent haste in arranging their disposal has been interpreted as indicating that the bodies were already badly decayed in the hot summer weather, so stripping them would have been thought undesirable.<sup>28</sup> Even so, hand weapons and the like were removed and do not appear in the graves. We may note in passing that many out-of-date sets of equipment were apparently used, perhaps a measure of desperation on the part of the defenders, or merely an indication of the durability of arms and armour.

Stripping the dead is a feature of warfare and we see it on the Bayeux Tapestry, in the aftermath of the Battle of Hastings,<sup>29</sup> as well as in the Plains' Indians' pictorial account of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.<sup>30</sup> This last conflict, despite evidence for widescale pilfering of the dead,<sup>31</sup> managed to leave over 4,000 artefacts for archaeologists to find during a recent examination of the battlefield.<sup>32</sup> Iron arrowheads were scarce, however, since they have always been greatly prized by tourists. Little Bighorn may have a direct bearing upon the discovery of mass cavalry graves at Krefeld, with its sparse finds of equipment and related material.<sup>33</sup> Can military equipment normally be expected to indicate the sites of battles?<sup>34</sup> It seems doubtful.

Dura-Europos, on the other hand, offers a seemingly ideal scenario for equipment preserved in action. The destruction of the mine and the resulting partial collapse of Tower 19 led to items being trapped within it, including the famous horse armours and shields.<sup>35</sup> But why were these things in the tower in the first place? If they were actually in use, then they are genuine relics from the battle, but if, as seems more likely, they were in storage, they assume a totally different identity, for they could be anything from antiques to newly produced replacement objects. It seems that caution must also be exercised here. Paradoxically, the finds from Dura also highlight one of the main problems with the rest of the East: the monuments are impressive, but hardly any equipment has been recovered.<sup>36</sup> Is it simply that it has not yet been found, or was it ever there in the first place?

#### BOOTY

Florus relates (II,24) that Vinnius, when he took weapons as booty from the Pannonians, broke them up and threw the items into the river, rather than burn them, as was the usual practice in war. The reason offered for his doing this was so that 'the fame of Caesar might thus be announced to those who were still resisting'.

It has been suggested that the Doorwerth cavalry trappings were taken as booty during the Batavian revolt, possibly from Vetera or one of the neighbouring castella, in which case a similar explanation may account for the Xanten pieces.<sup>37</sup> Spoils of war have also been identified in the cases of the Fremington Hagg and Seven Sisters hoards, again including cavalry equipment.<sup>38</sup> One suggestion is that the

use of silvering may have led the looter to assume an object to be bullion, but, discovering it to be only a silver foil, discard it.<sup>39</sup>

The disparate collection of material (infantry helmet, cavalry sports helmet and mask, greaves, and mail armour) said to come from a cave in Hebron shows a slightly different perspective on this: probably collected as scrap, it would of course have been illegal for a Jew to be caught in possession of Roman equipment,<sup>40</sup> hence the need to conceal it. Was it hidden by rebellious Jews and how sound is the reasoning that suggests that this was so?

This leads us on to ask whether it is possible to distinguish between booty and material still owned and used by the Romans? It would seem that in some instances it is possible, but once it has been taken, it assumes a new role in addition to that it may once have played as a piece of equipment, for it may now have scrap or prestige value (this is one way of accounting for the piece of Roman cavalry equipment from Gallanach in Argyll, Scotland).<sup>41</sup>

#### CHANCE AND PROBABILITY

Chance: the Herculaneum soldier (or marine) and the equipment in the Dura mine are cases of chance survival.<sup>42</sup> There are few possible archaeological biases involved here, but such cases are evidently extremely rare in the archaeological record. These are genuine 'snapshots' of the past, when time is frozen.

Probability: what are the chances of finding a piece of military equipment in the archaeological record? Let us consider what, for the sake of convenience, we shall call the Webster Hypothesis - that pieces of military equipment denote a military presence in their immediate vicinity. Graham Webster has used this principle in at least three of his books to deduce the location of forts in Britain which are otherwise unattested.<sup>43</sup>

If it is assumed that, whatever the mechanisms involved, one piece of military equipment is found as a stray find on a site, what can be said about it? Nothing; casual loss, redeposition, or any one of a thousand explanations may account for it. It is meaningless... until a second piece of equipment is found. If from exactly the same place, then the same explanations may be valid, but if divorced from the first piece, then what should be made of it? When numbers of items start to accumulate, we are forced to face the fact that there is an exponential increase in probability - however slight, and certainly not quantifiable, but nevertheless existing - that a genuine source for this military equipment must be taken seriously. If we then recall that the deposition of military equipment within forts and fortresses is normally deliberate and part of the cleaning-up operations,<sup>44</sup> we begin to see that the Webster Hypothesis is not so easy to dismiss as some have supposed.<sup>45</sup> Forts in the vicinity of the Walbrook in London and in the centre of Silchester remain a possibility.<sup>46</sup>

Were there accidental losses of equipment which could then be retrieved as chance finds in modern times? Undoubtedly so, but how small a percentage of the total military equipment at any one time must

they have represented? It is easy to lose a coin; the diligence of the ensuing search is usually proportional to the value of the coin, but how easily can one 'lose' a spear or a sword? If the soldier had to provide his own arms, would he not have taken special care of his kit? Did horse trappings really fall off without the cavalryman noticing (since most of them were functional, the harness would have fallen apart in many cases<sup>47</sup>)? Did 'lorica segmentata' fittings really spring off, never to be seen again, or rather did they work loose, look as if they needed repairing, and get put aside for that very purpose?<sup>48</sup>

We do not know the truth; we can only guess, but let us at least make these intelligent guesses and acknowledge that there are many possible explanations for any given phenomenon.

## CONCLUSIONS

Russell Robinson was puzzled by the apparent willingness of craftsmen manufacturing Imperial-Gallic helmets at Colchester Sheepen to ignore the threat posed by Boudica and to insist on decorating their products with bosses, eyebrows, and the other curiously peripheral aspects of that particular tradition of helmet manufacture.<sup>49</sup> Robinson's only mistake was to believe the particular interpretation of the evidence which the archaeologists chose to emphasise.<sup>50</sup>

It is certainly nice and tidy to be able to weave stories around the material we find, but by so doing, by refusing to acknowledge loose ends, we do ourselves and our evidence an injustice. The narrative school of archaeological interpretation, however great its romantic appeal - and in these days of financial stringency and the need to gain media attention, this point has perforce to be emphasised - we do not have the right to be so sure of ourselves.

There is so much the archaeological record cannot tell us: let the story of the centurion Cornidius act as a final cautionary tale. During Octavian's war against the Moesians in 29 B.C., we are told that

'No little terror was inspired in the barbarians by the centurion Cornidius, a man of rather barbarous stupidity, which, however, was not without effect upon men of similar character; carrying on the top of his helmet a pan of coals which were fanned by the movement of his body, he scattered flame from his head, which had the appearance of being on fire.'<sup>51</sup>

We need only ponder for a few seconds how such an incident would manifest itself in the archaeological record, if indeed it would. We should perhaps spend rather longer considering how long it would take an archaeologist, confronted with a helmet found in Moesia with signs of burning on the crown, to make the connection between the isolated archaeological fact and a rather purple passage in a historian of questionable merit.

## NOTES

1. Myself and J.C. Coulston intend to produce, in the near future, a detailed study of the loss mechanisms that led to the deposition of military equipment. I should like to thank Martha Andrews and Jon Coulston, who read preliminary drafts of this paper. Needless to say, whilst their suggestions have usually been acted upon, all remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the author.
2. BISHOP, 1985, 7-9, 17-18; 1986, 717.
3. MAXFIELD, 1986, 71.
4. ALLASON-JONES & BISHOP, 1988, 102.
5. The only really vulnerable part of lorica hamata was the fastening hook at the front - cf. Longthorpe (FRERE & ST.JOSEPH, 1974, Fig.31) or Colchester Sheepen (NIBLETT, 1985, Fig.63,22; 65,44).
6. BREEZE et al, 1976, 80-1.
7. Ibid., 94-5.
8. Camelon: BREEZE et al, 1976, 81-6; Mehrum: GECHTER & KUNOW, 1983, 452.
9. ABDUL-HAK, 1955.
10. BISHOP, 1988, 182 n.157.
11. WUILLEUMIER, 1950, 147-8.
12. ROBINSON, 1975.
13. TORBRÜGGE, 1972, 43-6; cf. Beilage 9.
14. KLUMBACH, 1961.
15. Ibid., 99-100.
16. ALLASON-JONES & MIKET, 1984, 3.724.
17. The vows themselves are attested on curses (HENIG, 1984, 142-5) and the dedication itself recorded when altars survive (ibid., 131).
18. For a Persian helmet dedicated by the Athenians, see CONNOLLY, 1981, 13 fig.
19. MERTENS, 1984, 63 and fig.
20. ROBINSON, 1975, Pls.73-6.
21. Ibid., 67-8, Pls.155-9.
22. HARTMANN, 1983.

23. Even a peremptory study of captions in Robinson's (1975) book reveals how many helmets come from rivers.
24. MÜLLER, 1986, 118-9.
25. WEBSTER, 1985, 269; WATSON, 1969, 143.
26. This weapon is variously interpreted as an arrowhead (WHEELER, 1972, 18) and a catapult bolt-head (WEBSTER, 1980, 109).
27. THORDEMAN, 1939.
28. Ibid., 95.
29. WILSON, 1985, Pls.71-3.
30. See JORDAN, 1986 for an account of work on the site of Little Bighorn.
31. Ibid., 810.
32. Ibid., 793.
33. PIRLING, 1971, 45.
34. WEBSTER, 1978, 111; KEPPIE, 1981, 85.
35. JAMES, 1983, 7.
36. Loc. cit.
37. Doorwerth: BROUWER, 1982, 166; Xanten: JENKINS, 1985.
38. WEBSTER, 1971, 108; DAVIES & SPRATLING, 1976, 140.
39. Cf. WEBSTER, 1971, 108.
40. WEINBERG, 1979.
41. RITCHIE, 1974, Fig.2,8.
42. GORE, 1984, 572-3.
43. WEBSTER, 1978, 18; 1980, 17-18.
44. See above, note 2.
45. But MANNING (1983) quite rightly points out the questionable nature of the postulated network of forts.
46. The Walbrook finds may have been redeposited from elsewhere in the City (Tony Wilmott, pers. comm.), but some of the Silchester material has very convincing provenances (e.g. FOX & ST.JOHN HOPE, 1901, 244.)
47. BISHOP, 1988, 100 & 116.



48. Id., 1985, 12.
49. ROBINSON, 1975, 8.
50. HAWKES & HULL, 1947, 40; 85; 91-3.
51. Florus II,26.

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