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A Zoomorphic Roman Handle from New Street, Godmanchester, TL 5246 2704

Nina Crummy and Tom Phillips

Illustrations by Gillian Greer

An unusual Roman handle of zoomorphic form and potential apotropaic meaning recovered from central Godmanchester may echo an Egyptian prototype.

Roman Godmanchester – *Durovigutum* – lies on Ermine Street near the River Ouse, just to the south of Huntingdon. A legionary fort was founded here within a year of the invasion of AD 43 and the settlement eventually grew into a small town. West of its *mansio* and possibly associated with it was a temple apparently dedicated to the god Abandinus, not known elsewhere and perhaps a local river deity (Green 1975, 201; Green in prep.).

In 2007, CAM ARC excavated a small trench at No. 8 New Street in the centre of the town, virtually on the cross roads of Ermine Street and the Cambridge to Sandy road (Fig. 1). Stratified Roman remains included pits, boundary ditches and layers. The site was particularly rich in finds, including coarse and fine ware pottery, glass and an unusual copper alloy handle surmounted by the upper body and head of an animal. This zoomorphic handle was retrieved from the fill of an otherwise unexceptional boundary ditch which also contained 2nd- to 3rd-century pottery. The creature it depicts is ambiguous; it may be a poorly modelled horse or dog, or something more exotic (Figs. 2 and 3).

Given the constraints imposed on the maker by showing the body as vertical rather than horizontal, the animal may be a horse. The crest could be a stiff equine mane, and the lines of punchmarks on the face and around the body could represent harness, with the large ring-and-dot motif representing a *phalera*; but the jaw and muzzle are not equine. Horse profiles on late Roman antler combs can sometimes be, as here, almost like those of beaked dolphins (Crummy 2001, fig. 4), but the length of the mouth on this creature is quite canine. Its nose could be an attempt to model a dog from two profiles, rather than full-face, although the absence of any other canine features, in particular ears, makes a dog a very unlikely candidate.

The animal is probably a Nilotic beast, deliberately intended to be strange in the context of the northern Roman empire and not as an accurate image of any

one specific creature. The handle is almost certainly of continental manufacture, and the animal may be very loosely based (perhaps at several removes) on an Egyptian prototype; it cannot be defined as representative of any one particular Egyptian deity. The rectangular section, decorated top and round iron tang suggest that it comes from a key of tumbler-lock type (cf. Kaufmann-Heinimann 1998, 104, no. 217, 109, no. S207). There is no reason to suppose that it is earlier or later than the 2nd- to 3rd-century date range suggested by its context.

Apotropaic animal images were often used on key handles, with lions, other large felines and rams being most commonly depicted, no doubt chosen as symbols of strength and aggression and also for their otherworldly powers, providing security above and beyond the simply practical aspect of turning a key (Henig 1984; Kaufmann-Heinimann 1998, 32-7). Similar imagery pervaded Roman life and was probably only subconsciously registered in the same way that we see, but rarely reflect upon, both secular and religious symbols today. Gods and animals, along with charms such as the crescent moon and phallus, appeared on wall paintings, mosaic floors, vehicle fittings, military equipment, knife and razor handles, *tintinnabuli*, pendants, coin reverses, lamps, ring intaglios and many other objects, as well as on specifically religious items such as model votives, temple furniture, altars, reliefs and cult statues.

The meanings attached to individual creatures were complex. The dog for example accompanied healer gods such as Apollo, Nodens and Aesculapius, but also had a chthonic aspect through its association with Mercury, the Mother goddesses and the horse-goddess Epona, among others, as the guide and guardian of the soul on its journey between life and death. It was beliefs such as this that led to dogs being sacrificed for use as funerary deposits and as both dedicatory and closure offerings; notable examples being the Cambridge infant burials placed in shafts and accompanied by dogs (Jenkins 1957, 64-5; Black 1983; Green 1997a, 176-8; Clarke 1979, 421-3, table 2, grave 400; Alexander and Pullinger 2000 45-7, 53-4;

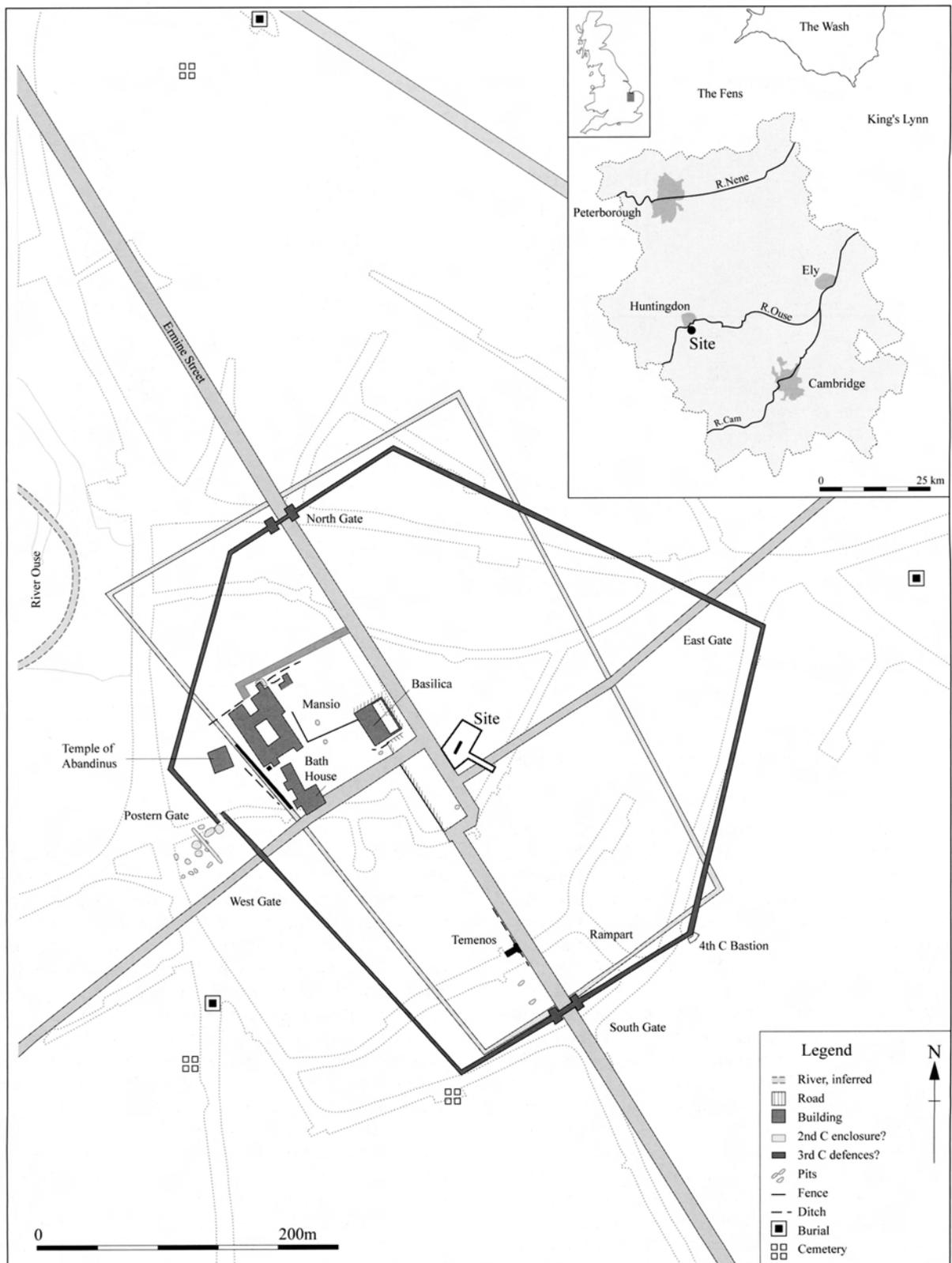


Figure 1. Interpretative plan of Roman Godmanchester, showing the development site (after Green 1975).

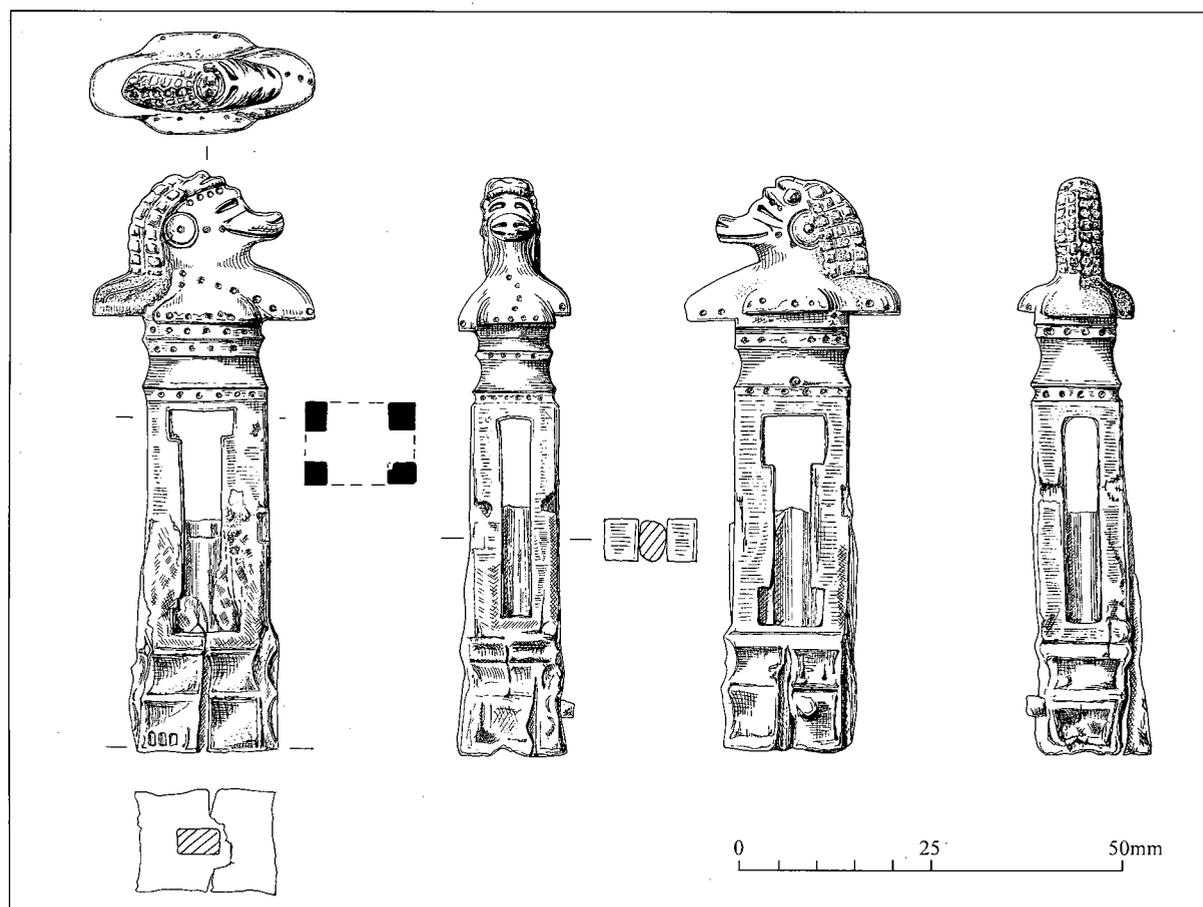


Figure 2. Roman handle from New Street, Godmanchester.

Fulford 2006, 271). The horse fulfilled a similar dual role through its association with Epona, whose images link her to fertility, healing and death, and the occurrence of elements of horse skeletons in pits and wells might represent animals who had been sacrificed or whose bones had been utilised in religious rites after they had died a natural death (Grant 1989, 137; Green 1997b, 172–3).

Representations of Nilotic creatures such as the crocodile, hippopotamus and mongoose are either very rare or even unknown in Roman Britain, and Egyptian deities and their animal emblems, such as the falcon of Horus, are similarly very scarce, being generally, although not exclusively, confined to large towns (Toynbee 1996, 218–20; Green 1976, 57–8; 1978, 28). The long jaw and nostril slits of the creature on the Godmanchester handle could be seen as crocodilian, and the unusual ring-and-dot ears are a fair match for those of the crocodile, which has mere oval flaps of skin lying behind the eyes. The rows of punchmarks might represent a harness or even a form of body chain. The lateral grooves of the creature's skin also resemble the banded scaly plates of the Nile crocodile and are very similar in appearance to the scales on a model crocodile from Hampshire, reported recently under the Portable Antiquities Scheme (Worrell 2007, 303–44).

African creatures were also used in the northern Empire to symbolise fertility and death. The Hampshire crocodile mentioned above has been interpreted as part of a Nilotic figure group perhaps associated with the resurrection cult of Isis. Two 1st-century lamps, one from Colchester and one probably from London, show a lion fighting a crocodile. The Colchester lamp came from the burial of a young child and the image is funerary, the lion not only represents the power of all-consuming death but is also the guardian of the dead, shown attacking the dangers of the afterlife symbolised by the crocodile (Bailey 1988, 84, Q1518; Crummy in Orr 2006).

Against a constant background of imagery, the animals used to ornament small objects were not necessarily intended as a reference to a specific deity in a specific role, but only as generally apotropaic. This gave them a secondary value, and in some cases the handles of broken objects appear to have been saved for use as votives, as seems to have been the case with some spatula handles in the shape of busts of Minerva, particularly examples from Woodeaton in Oxfordshire, and Sole in Hampshire (Crummy 2003, 16). The Godmanchester handle might have been similarly valued for its imagery and reused as a votive offering after its iron element had broken off. The recovery of the handle from a ditch does not lessen its



Figure 3. Roman handle from New Street, Godmanchester.

potential interpretation as an offering. Votives were not only deposited at shrines and temples but also on adjacent land in open pits and ditches and shallow scrapes in the ground, their proximity to the sacred area being considered sufficient to render them effective (Crummy 2006, 56).

Green has argued that the cult objects from Godmanchester are notable for the limited range of sky and earth deities they represent (Green 1986, 36), which would make the handle anomalous in the context of the town, but the association of a Nilotic creature (if were it recognised as such) with water would make it an appropriate offering to the town's

river god, Abandinus (*ibid.*, 39, 42), or even to Isis. More probably, the animal might have been seen in Godmanchester as a horse, or an odd-looking dog, and credited with their chthonic and healing aspects. The dog in particular seems to have played a particularly prominent role in the religious life of the town (*ibid.*, 48). The presence of 58 bone fragments from at least three adult dogs in a pit on the subject site (and remains of a further two found in a later watching brief; Punchard 2007) finds a parallel in a group of 30 pits found outside the kitchen of the *mansio* in 1970 (Green, in prep.). Nearly every pit here had two dogs buried at the bottom and in many cases only part of the carcass was present: Green suggests that these were ritual burials.

In conclusion, the zoomorphic handle, when a new and complete key, can be viewed as exotic within the context not only of Godmanchester but Roman Britain as a whole, and within the context of the northern European perception of Africa. As a broken object that might have been reused for its imagery it has significant implications for religious life in this important Roman town, perhaps even in relation to Abandinus.

Catalogue

SF 2 Figs 2 and 3. A copper-alloy rectangular-section open-work handle, with a zoomorphic terminal and the remains of a round-section iron tang preserved in the lower part. Length 75 mm, maximum width 28 mm. The base is in the form of a double plinth, now riven with cracks where the corroding iron tang has expanded and forced the metal apart. Above it the handle is open on all four sides, with column-shaped openings on the broad sides and plain rectangular ones on the narrow sides. Part of the iron tang remains exposed in the openings, and traces of iron corrosion suggest that it originally ran to the upper end, although it did not penetrate the terminal, which consists of a plinth, with round punchmarks in the grooves, surmounted by the head and upper body of an animal. The jaw and mouth of this creature are long and the muzzle blunt, with wide nostril slits. The eyes are shown by angled grooves and the ears, which are set at the level of the mouth, by ring-and-dot motifs. Two punched dots link the ears to the corners of the mouth. The face is smooth, but a row of round punchmarks above the eyes mark the beginning of lateral bands in the skin or pelt that are formed into a crest at the back. The chest of the animal projects forward beyond the muzzle, with its midline marked by a row of punched dots. There is a matching, but slightly shorter projection at the back below the crest, and the shoulders are indicated on the sides. The lower edge of each shoulder is marked by a row of round punchmarks, and another row runs across the top and down the chest to meet its central row at the edge.

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