

Letters from Roman London

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THE RECENT SERIES of excavations at *Vindolanda* (Chesterholm) on Stanegate just south of Hadrian's Wall have justly claimed a great deal of attention and publicity. The finds from the site have proved particularly spectacular and amongst these surely the most important must be the series of fragmentary wooden writing-tablets still retaining their original message. Their true significance will not be apparent until they have been fully translated and published. Finds of such material are so infrequent not only in Britain but throughout the Empire as a whole, that it is perhaps worth pulling together the evidence that shows that London too has in the past provided a remarkable series of tablets. They are of course of a different nature from the *Vindolanda* examples, in that they originate from a civil and business centre rather than a military site.

This note does not present any new material, but simply brings together from their otherwise rather scattered published sources, the best known of the London tablets. Except in one or two cases no attempt has been made to re-interpret the already published texts.

The writing-tablets from London fall into two types. By far the most common are the tablets where one side of the tablet has been recessed to receive a thin film of wax surrounded by a raised border. The message would have been scratched on the wax surface with the point of a *stylus*, and could be erased and the surface flattened by using the spatulate end of the instrument. With this type of tablet messages survive because the *stylus* has been pressed too heavily and the words and letters have been scratched and recorded in the wood below. Many tablets show indications of this, though more often than not the surviving scratches are indecipherable because the tablet has been used several times and many different hands are present and muddled together.

The inlaid wax tablets in general conform to a standard pattern, in that they are rectangular slabs of wood, usually of fir, and measure on average 110 x 130mm and 5-8mm thick. Two were usually hinged together by a string or leather thong through holes along one edge of each of the tablets, and together formed a diptych. Greater multiples were also bound together, three forming a triptych, or if more, a



Fig. 1. Wall painting from Pompeii showing a girl about to write a letter. In her left hand she holds four wooden tablets bound together and a stylus in a case. Her right hand holds another stylus.

polyptychon. A whole cluster of tablets constituted a *caudex* (or *codex*), literally translated, a block of wood. At all times of course the wax covered surfaces were on the inside leaving a plain wooden surface or cover on the outside. Often this outer side has a neatly cut shallow groove some 20-25mm wide cut across it to receive the seal impressions of any witnesses that the document may have required.

The second type of writing-tablet is represented by two examples from London, one of which is listed below (no. 1) and there are fragments of another similar in Guildhall Museum (Accession No. 24479; unpublished, probably from the Bucklersbury House site). These tablets are of a closer grained wood, and the message has been written directly and deliberately onto the wood in carbon ink. They are of a different shape being thin strips of wood, the surviving measurements of the largest being c.260 x 50mm with a thickness of c.2mm. Both the examples have a common feature in that the strip is in fact two separate pieces or leaves meeting at a cut vertical edge in the centre. Somehow they were bound together to

form two hinged 'pages', but there is no indication how this was achieved. The writing appears in two columns, one on each leaf.

Clearly these two tablets represent a type of tablet that differs from the common wax type described above and must indicate a type for use with ink. The messages on the new *Vindolanda* fragments are in ink and the tablets may well prove to be of this type. One other example of a writing-tablet with a message in ink is known from Britain, from a well on the site of the Roman villa at Chew Stoke, Somerset¹. Here, however, the tablet was originally made to receive an inlaid wax surface, though for some reason this had been dispensed with and the message had been written in ink directly onto the wood surface in the area where the wax should have been.

With one exception (no. 1) the five London tablets listed below all come from the Walbrook, thus indicating that they are likely to fall into the period A.D. 50-155², and can most likely be assigned to the beginning of the second century. The one exception was excavated from a timber-lined pit on the Temple House site, Queen Street, though this too belongs to the beginning of the second century.

No. 1 Guildhall Museum (Acc. No. 22038). From Temple House, Queen Street, 1959. 260 x 50mm. Writing in carbon ink³.

Left-hand column

[] . l u s o s []
Scito me puero de . . . d fe [(?)
[] se []
[. . .] ferr [. .] . quod [. .] . s

Right-hand column

puer ille cum carr [. . .] . eratam
partem seduxisset effugit
postridie quomodo egr Londinio
[. .] ni scito me manere aput
[Duro]briuas et cababi et ar[.]to.
[. . .] ng . [.] se . d [. .] [

'Know that I (to) the boy... that boy, when (on a waggon?) he had diverted the part (that he was to...?), ran away. The next day how (after?) I (left?) London...Know that I am remaining at Durobriuae...'

Since the carbon ink was unfortunately found to have vanished after the tablet had been conserved,

1. E. G. Turner, "A Roman Writing Tablet from Somerset," *J Roman Stud* 46 (1956) 115-118.
2. R. Merrifield, "Coins from the Bed of the Walbrook and their significance," *Antiq J* 42 (1962) 38-52.
3. E. G. Turner and O. Skutsch, "A Roman Writing-tablet from London," *J Roman Stud* 50 (1960) 108-111.
4. First published in *J Roman Stud* 44 (1954) 108. The

the interpretation of the text had to rely on earlier photographs. Much of the text is therefore uncertain. The gist of the message however is clear. The writer is writing from *Durobriuae* (Rochester probably rather than Water Newton, Huntingdonshire) to someone in London, and complaining that something was given to a boy or slave, presumably to be taken to London, and that he has absconded with it. The correspondent in London is perhaps being asked to help trace the fugitive and the missing article.

No. 2 British Museum (1953, 10-2, 1) from the Walbrook, probably Lothbury, 1927. 145 x 42mm. Writing scratched onto the wood. (Fig. 2)⁴.

Outside

Londinio
L Vita(1) Ad s

Inside

Rufus callisuni salutem epillico et omi
bus contubernalibus certiores vos esse
credo me recte valere si vos indi
cem fecistis rogo mittite omnia
diligenter cura agas ut illam puel
lam ad nummum redigas

'Rufus, son of Callisunus, greeting to Eppillicus and all his fellows. I believe you know I am very well. If you have made the list, please send. Do look after everything carefully. See that you turn that slave-girl into cash'

An emendation of the last line of Sir Ian Richmond's translation has been proposed⁵ suggesting that the instructions regarding the girl do not mean that she has to be actually sold, but that the writer was instructing his London agent to extract the last farthing from a wretched girl debtor by some pressure or other. Otherwise the tablet is a letter containing a series of instructions from a master, Rufus, to Eppillicus and his fellows. They are to send an inventory that they have been making, as well as generally looking after things and dealing with the girl.

A second small emendation has also been included here in the text. Richmond's transcription of the fragmentary second line on the outside of the tablet is not entirely clear and the text published here has two alterations. The line however must give further details of the address to which the letter was sent, perhaps the household where Eppillicus was staying. The expansion of *Vital* to a common name like

main publication is I. A. Richmond, "Three Roman writing-tablets from London," *Antiq J* 33 (1953) 206-208. See also *Brit Mus Quart* 19 (1954) 39-40.

5. K. Painter, "A Roman Writing Tablet from London," *Brit Mus Quart* 31 (1966-67) 101-110. This note also includes a catalogue of all the Greek and Roman wooden writing-tablets in the British Museum.

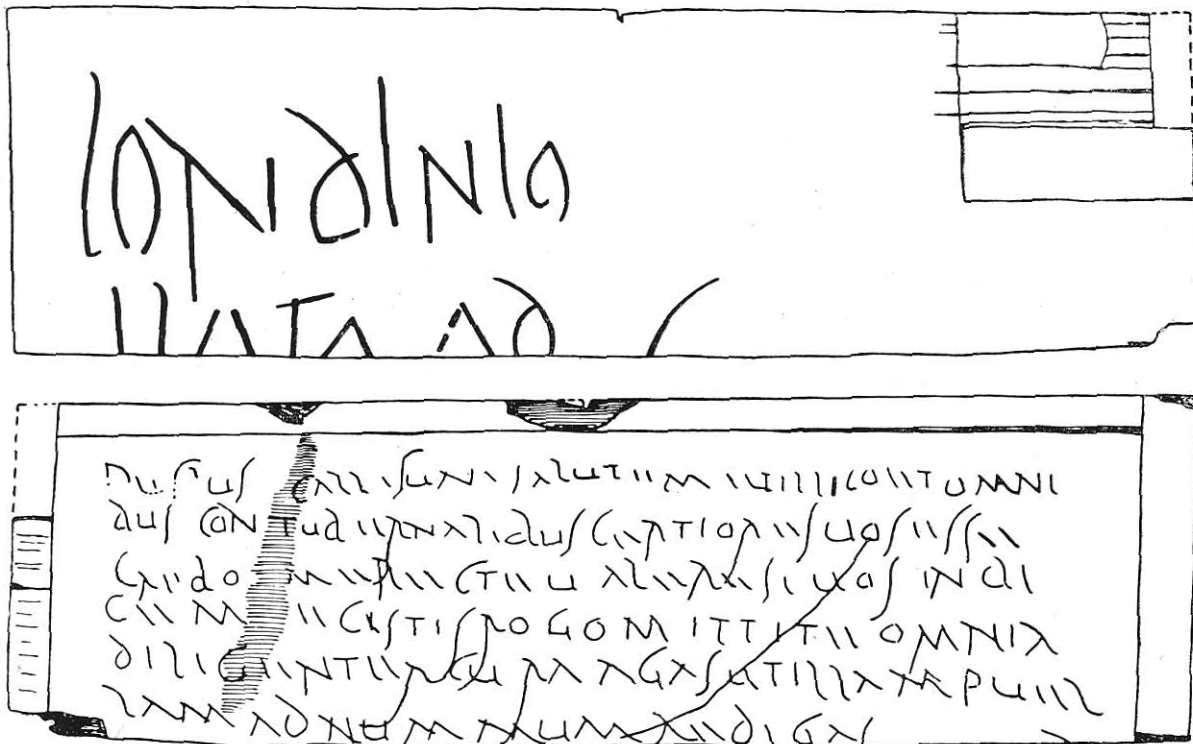


Fig. 2. Writing-tablet from the Walbrook (No. 2 in text) with the address on the outside (above) and (below) the text of the letter on the inside (145 x 42mm.). Society of Antiquaries

Vitalius would not be out of place.

It was pointed out in the original commentary that the master, Rufus, and his steward, Epillicus, were both Celts. The latter has a derivative of a well known Celtic name, and the former as well as being the son of a Celt (*Callisunus*) does not apparently have the *tria nomina* that would indicate that he was a Roman citizen and not a *peregrinus*. The important point however is that here we have an example of day-to-day business being conducted between master and servant and that it is being done in Latin. It is tempting to think that the people mentioned are of British stock, though one cannot of course be sure and they may have come from Gaul. In either case however a quick glimpse is offered of Roman society at work and perhaps also an indication, if they are British, of how effective and dominant Roman culture and civilisation had become some 50 years after the invasion and occupation.

No. 3 London Museum (29.94/11) from the Walbrook, Lothbury, 1927. 135 x 270mm. Writing

6. *London in Roman Times*, London Museum Catalogue (1946) 54-55; *J Roman Stud* 21 (1931) 247.

scratched on the wood⁶.

Outside

Po]stumo Lo[ndinio]

Inside

.....[lou]-
em optimum maximum er per ge
nium imp(eratoris) Domitiani c(a)esaris aug(usti)
Germanici et per deos patrios s..
.....et.....mer...
'... by Jupiter Best and Greatest and by the
Genius of his Imperial Majesty Domitian Con-
queror of Germany, and by the Gods of our
fathers...'

An alternative reading for the message on the outside is proposed here, suggesting that the letters . . . *tumo* . . . represent the dative singular of a proper name like *Postumus* and that the letters *lo*, which are separated from them by a space, are the start of *Londinium*⁷.

The mention of Emperor Domitian and his Ger-

7. I owe this suggestion to Mark Hassall who kindly read a typescript of this note and helped with several points.

man victories date this tablet to a period A.D.84-96 and makes it important in that it provides a rare example of dated cursive script. The five fragmentary lines form part of an oath or promise that was presumably written and sealed in the presence of witnesses. It is perhaps tempting to think that the oath was made in the temple dedicated to the *numen* of the Emperor that must have existed in London⁸.

No. 4 London Museum (29.94/11) from the Walbrook, Lothbury, 1927. 135 x 39mm. Writing scratched on the wood⁹.

quam pecuniam petitionis item
scriptis solvere mihi debebit Cres-
cens isve ad quem ea res per-
tinebit ris primis
..... ss... t

'...which money by the terms likewise of the claim shall be paid to me by Crescens or by the person concerned....'

Here we clearly have not part of an oath or promise but part of a business transaction, either a loan or a purchase of some kind.

No. 5 London Museum (29.94/11) from the Walbrook, Lothbury, 1927. 141 x 36mm. Writing scratched on the wood¹⁰.

.....
....rem vendidisse
ex taberna sua
.....navem faci-
endam et permissionem dedisse
..... clavi faciendi

It is unfortunate that this tablet is so fragmentary, as it is in some ways the most interesting of the group. All we have is a disjointed collection of snippets, referring to the sale of an object from a shop (*taberna*), to the building of a boat (*navem*), and to the granting of authority for some purpose or other, including probably the making of a steering oar (*clavi*).

At first sight these tablets appear unimpressive, being so fragmentary and inconclusive, and it is not until we stop to think that they were written by some of the inhabitants of Roman London some 1800 years ago, that they make their true impact. They are primary sources offering information directly from the people on the streets of Londinium to the modern historian. It is unfortunate that the many gaps make it impossible to use this advantage to the full, and leaves so many tantalising questions unanswered. It is to be hoped that future excavations in the City, particularly along the course of the Walbrook, will produce more texts and special care will clearly have to be taken to check all thin fragments of wood for carbon ink writing, but in the meantime the many fragments of tablets already in the collections of the Guildhall, London and British Museums might well repay close re-examination.

8. *R.I.B.* 5; R. Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) 44.

9. *London in Roman Times op. cit.*

10. *Ibid.*

Roman Road at Old Hibernia Wharf, Southwark

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DURING CONTRACTORS' EXCAVATIONS on the site of Old Hibernia Wharf (just west of London Bridge), the line of a Roman road was traced for 12m. as it crossed the site from the N.E. to the S.W. The gravel metalling only survived under the modern road along the eastern side of the site, where it was observed to be up to 1.5m. thick; in the area excavated, cellar floors had removed all deposits above the natural clay silt.

However, the course of the road could be traced by the position of a completely undisturbed band of natural clay/silt, going across the site. To the south of this was a large oval area of gravel working, and to the north a line of inter-connecting gravel pits, parallel to the edge of the road. When these had been partially filled in, a large ditch was dug, again parallel to the line of the road, cutting through the northern edge of the gravel pits.

At an early stage, perhaps before the end of the 1st century, the area to the south of the road was levelled and built over, and a well associated with this occupation was

filled towards the end of the 2nd centry. To the north of the road, the area was levelled at about the same time.

A projection of the road line to the S.W., crosses the trench excavated in Montague Close (Dawson, G., *London Archaeol.* 1 no. 5 [1969] 114) where road gravels of a similar thickness were found. The evidence now strongly suggests that this was a road on a N.E. to S.W. alignment, not as originally suggested by the excavator, a north to south alignment.

When projected towards the Thames, the road reaches the modern river front about 100m. from the site, close to the western side of the medieval London Bridge. This position is very close to the point of incidence on the modern river front, of the projected line of the Roman road found in the G.P.O. trenches beneath Borough High Street, (see Mosaic) and altogether, this is very strong evidence to suggest that the Roman river crossing was close to the position of the medieval London Bridge.