

# Roman temple complex in Greenwich Park? Part 2

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Part 1 of this article outlined the excavation history of the Greenwich Park site, and described the fieldwork undertaken in 1999 as a joint project by the Museum of London, Birkbeck College and Channel 4's Time Team. The significant inscriptions from this exceptional site were also discussed.

## Additional finds

The pottery assemblage from 1999 is less interesting for its composition than for its distribution. A wide range of types was present, including imported fine wares such as samian, with black burnished, Nene Valley, Highgate, Verulamium and other fine and coarse wares from southern Britain. The pottery dates from the 1st to 4th centuries, with the bulk of the assemblage manufactured between AD 250 and 400 (Table 1).<sup>37</sup> The prevalence of later dates for the pottery contrasts with mainly early dates for the building material, suggesting that the buildings were in use for a long period, with early building material probably re-used in any repairs or rebuilding. The pottery forms present imply a

range of mainly domestic activities taking place across the site. The 1902/3 assemblage was apparently similar, although with more mortaria than were found in 1999. A triple vase in the Borough Museum and a reported (now lost) piece of "frilled" ware – perhaps a tazza – from 1902/3 represent the only pottery possibly associated with ritual from the site.<sup>38</sup> Symonds noted that the 1999 assemblage "seems to represent ordinary occupation quite similar to that which would normally be seen in an urban environment."<sup>39</sup>

Pottery distribution evidence points to a separation of functions between the eastern and western parts of the site. Trench 1 on the mound yielded notably less pottery than the trenches to the east of the site: Trench 2 had 20% of the assemblage, and Trench 3/6 65%. Although only 13% of the pottery came from Trench 1, 50% of the jars were found there, and correspondingly more evidence of bowls and dishes was found in the eastern trenches.

Of the 101 Roman coins found in 1999, one was a silver *denarius* of Vespasian, and the rest were bronze, most in good condition. The coins span the period from 71 to 395, Vespasian to Theodosius I. The most remarkable find is an extremely rare coin of Laelianus (Fig. 6), who reigned only a few months in AD 268. These coins are generally found only in hoards, and the surviving silver patina on this example may indicate it was kept with other coins. Twenty-one

edate	ldate							total
	100	160	250	275	300	400		
50	2	1	1				1	5
70	1							1
120		1	1					2
150							1	1
180			1					1
200							3	3
250				1	4	10		15
270							3	3
350							1	1
total	3	2	3	1	4	19		32

Table 1: number of contexts by earliest and latest pottery dates (Robin Symonds, MoLSS)



Fig. 6: an extremely rare coin of Laelianus AD 268 (Photo: John Chase, Museum of London)

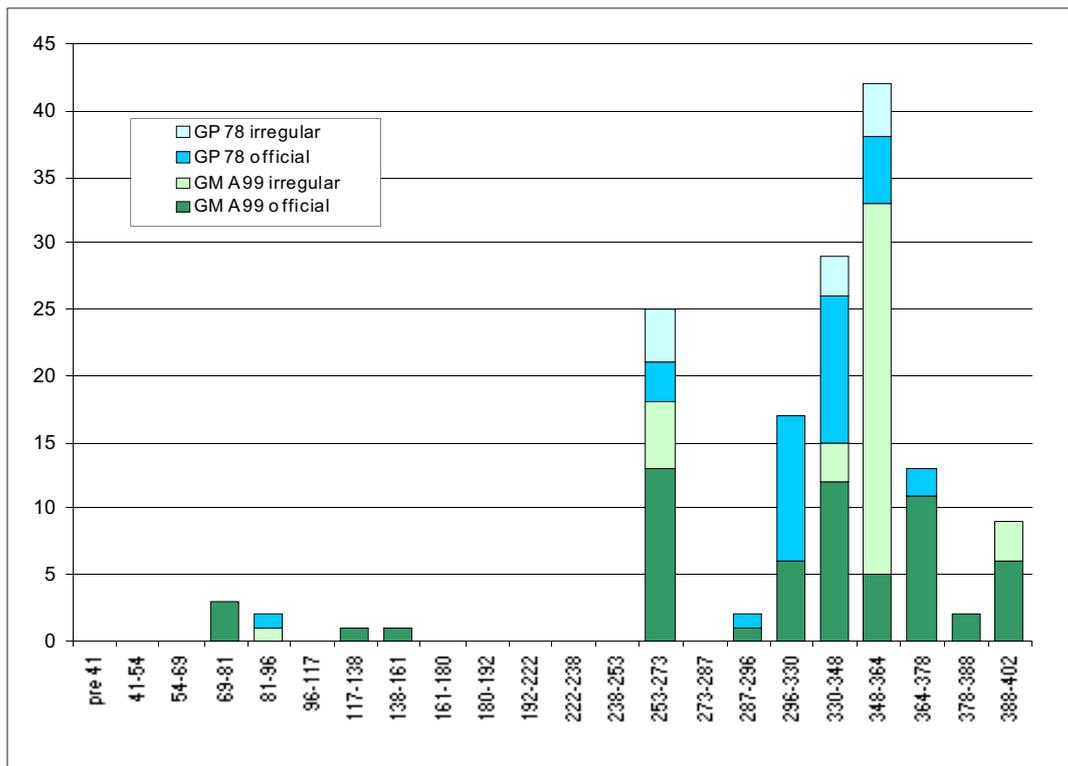


Fig. 7: Coins from 1978/79 and 1999 excavations by numismatic period

pieces were irregulars (including four Gallic irregulars), and 17 were *minimi*, the tiny coins in circulation around the 350s to 360s.<sup>40</sup> This profile is typical of many temple settings, including Uley and Lydney, where it is thought the spirit of giving was more important than the gift.<sup>41</sup> Compared with the coins discovered in 1978/9, which spanned the period from AD 86 to 375, Domitian to Valens, this assemblage is generally rather later, with coin frequency peaking in the late, rather than early 4th century (Fig. 7). Detailed comparison with the large 1902/3 assemblage (which included examples from Claudius to Honorius, plus one coin of Marc Antony found some 150 yards from the mound)<sup>42</sup> is impossible, however: Webster's catalogue did not give the number of each type, and an unknown number have disappeared. At least 24 coins were apparently from the 1st and 2nd centuries, however, representing a higher proportion than from later excavations.<sup>43</sup>

Forty-seven percent of the coins from GMA99 came from Trench 1, and about 80% of these were from robber trench A. Another 24% of the

coins were found in Trench 3/6, with the rest scattered in the five other trenches. Three 1st-century coins came from Trench 1, again indicating early activity in the mound area, and one from Trench 9. In both modern excavations, the 1st- and 2nd-century coins tended to be residual in later contexts (or topsoil), probably reflecting the demolition and disturbance on site.

The 1978/1999 coin assemblage was compared to those from sites in Southwark and Greater London as discussed by Hammerson,<sup>44</sup> and found to bear little resemblance to either urban or suburban profiles as it is so heavily weighted towards the late 3rd-4th century. Using Reece's calculations for coin loss, however, the combined assemblage produces a pattern similar to that at sites such as Lydney (temple), Gatcombe (possible temple), Ware and Coln St Aldwyn (rural sites). When analysed individually, the 1999 coins strongly align with a group of temples including Nettleton, Lamyatt Beacon, Uley and Lullingstone.<sup>45</sup>

The 1999 excavations turned up few small finds of interest other than coins, but three rare items

from 1902/3 are worthy of note in light of modern examinations. Greep's 1983 study of the two ivory items notes that only two other pieces in the country (both from Caerleon) were of similar quality.<sup>46</sup> One piece, a military scabbard chape with integral slide, appears to be more symbolic or ceremonial than functional. The other, on display at the British Museum, is a nicely carved plaque (perhaps a furniture fitting) of a female figure holding a floral-patterned shield aloft, interpreted as a Maenad. The chape may date to the late 2nd to 3rd centuries, and the plaque is perhaps earlier.

The 2/3 life-size fragment of fine limestone statuary represents the right arm of a female figure, elbow bent, holding in her hand folds of drapery and a rod-like object (only the drilled hole remains). Henig has recently re-examined the piece and determined that it is similar to the Hadrianic Diana of Versailles type of statue – a *Diana Venatrix* based on a 4th-century BC Greek prototype.<sup>47</sup> If this is a cult figure, some sort of hunting, or possibly military, activities may be inferred.

## Results and possibilities

The 1999 excavations have produced further important finds and the remains of at least three buildings and a ditch to add to the body of evidence. Some significant problems remain, however, both in considering the finds data, and interpreting the site overall:

The location and orientation of the floors and walls found in 1902 are still not certain, so we cannot know how structures from later digs relate to them. The enclosed patch of *tesserae* may be in its original position, but it is set in cement and its current location on the surface does not accord with excavators' accounts of it being 1.5-2 feet below ground level; the floor may also have been disturbed when the tree standing next to it was removed before 1969.

The mound has been disturbed by landscaping, root action, animal burrowing, erosion and much unrecorded archaeological investigation. By their wholesale stripping of the mound surface, Jones and Webster created complex new stratigraphy to an extent perhaps not recognised by later excavators.

The material from the early-20th-century excavations is unstratified, mostly uncatalogued and partly lost. Only some of the building material has been re-evaluated in recent years. The 1978/9 finds assemblage, which, apart from the coins, has not yet been assessed, holds potentially useful information.

The 1999 excavation was quick and, in part, cursory. It has been possible neither to relate sections of the site to one another, nor to phase the activity on site, because of incomplete records and plans. The areas selectively excavated, and the use of metal detectors, may have skewed some of the finds data (Fig. 9). Some features (such as wall B) may have been interpreted on site with insufficient evidence.

Notwithstanding these problems, the evidence from the three main excavations is consistent on a number of points. At least one structure of high



**Fig. 8:** Trench 2 yielded a substantial ditch, the earliest dated feature on site, which may have delineated a *temenos* area. (author)



**Fig. 9: Metal-detecting of spoil as features were excavated enabled the recovery of numerous coins, particularly the *minimi* from Trench 1. (author)**

status, with raised tessellated flooring and painted plaster walls, stood on the mound, probably from about AD 100. Stratigraphic evidence from 1902/3 and 1978/9 points to rebuilding of the structure at least once, and the site was in use, probably continuously, until around AD 400. The five inscriptions, statuary, procuratorial tile and large number of coins all argue for a public building.

Sheldon and Yule made their case for a probable Romano-Celtic temple mainly on the basis of location (near the crest of a hill overlooking the river, near the course of Watling Street), high-status finds and the likely shape of the structure based on the robbed out masonry wall. The evidence of 1999 robber trenches A and C adds weight to that case. The four mound robber trenches (A, C, X and Y) taken together can be construed as the typical plan of a Romano-Celtic temple, albeit a small one, with external ambulatory walls about 13m<sup>2</sup> and a *cella* about 6m<sup>2</sup>. Other features found in 1999 are also typical of such temples. The newly discovered early

Roman ditch in Trench 2 could fit the description of an early *temenos* enclosure, and may be related to eroded gullies found in 1978/9 on the south of the site. Normally, as at Greenwich, these are filled in, and replaced by walls:<sup>48</sup> wall D may be such a structure. The gravel metalling found in 1978 to the south of the wall, and in 1999 in Trenches 2 and 3/6, is typical of *temenos* and/or pathway surfaces sometimes found around temples.<sup>49</sup> The structures represented by the collapsed wall in Trench 2 and robber trenches D and E could fit the description of ancillary buildings sometimes found within the *temenos* (e.g. at Caerwent, Silchester). Lewis sees these as possibly display houses for votives, subsidiary chapels, or for the use of caretakers,<sup>50</sup> and others interpret them as either priests' quarters, or shops selling votive offerings or food to pilgrims.<sup>51</sup> Paths or roads, such as that in Trench 8, may surround *temenos* enclosures (e.g. at Springhead). The tessellated and *opus signinum* floors, masonry and tile buildings, and plastered and painted walls are also typical of temple sites. If, as the presence

of flue tiles suggests, a hypocaust did exist somewhere on site, it would be unusual for a temple site, but might be associated with high-status accommodation for priests or pilgrims (possibly along the lines of Uley and Lydney, which incorporated baths and inns). Many of these features could, of course, be found in other types of high-status developments, but taken together point most firmly towards a temple complex.

The finds evidence fits the temple theory reasonably well, but is not conclusive. The inscriptions, if not necessarily diagnostic of a temple, certainly point to a public building. The distribution of 1999 finds indicates a demarcation of functions between the mound and the more easterly structures. The mound trenches contained more coins, less pottery (but more jars), and more animal bone, especially head pieces, perhaps more consistent with temple usage; the other trenches yielded more domestic finds. Possibly more than any other category of artefact, the coins strongly suggest a temple, putting Greenwich in good company with the major temple sites in southern Britain.<sup>52</sup> They certainly set the site apart from others in Greater London: the whole of Southwark, for example, produced only about twice as many coins from 51 sites over two decades.<sup>53</sup> The small-finds evidence is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, two of the five inscriptions are interpreted as being dedications to the spirits of the emperors, the statue may be a Diana cult figure, and the ivory pieces are unusual, high-status and possibly religious in nature. On the other hand, no votive offerings (other than coins), and no ritual paraphernalia have been found, except perhaps for the triple vase and conjectured altar and tazza from 1902/3.

Martin Millett has noted a parallel with temples in Britain (e.g. Brean Down and Hayling Island) and in other parts of the Roman Empire (such as the shrines to the Celtic goddess Nehalennia at Colijnsplaat and Domburg on the Schelde estuary, and the circular Romano-Celtic temple at Barzan at the mouth of the Gironde).<sup>54</sup> He posits that the position of the Greenwich buildings, on high ground overlooking the river and *Londinium*, could similarly represent a landfall site for seafarers where they could give thanks for a safe

arrival or promise offerings for protection on a journey.<sup>55</sup> As David Bird notes, siting the building on the line of Watling Street made it a conspicuous focus for road travellers as well.<sup>56</sup>

Alternatives to the temple hypothesis are thinly supported. The relatively small size of the structure with the massive wall A, the spread of coins across the site and the five inscriptions mitigate against a residential complex. Although soldiers probably used the site (depositing, for example, coins, a hipposandal from 1902/3 and a possible military stud from 1999), finds evidence doesn't support a military establishment. Some sort of *mansio*, territorial office or other type of wayside complex with an official procuratorial function is perhaps a possibility, but such a function could equally have been combined with a temple, and could fit the profile of the complex of buildings emerging on the east of the site.

Dating the site features is problematic as only the evidence of the 1999 dig has been assessed in detail, and most of the dating evidence from that excavation relates to backfill or destruction debris rather than primary contexts. A possible, though still speculative, chronology gives the following provisional development sequence. A Romano-Celtic temple, with a masonry *cella* (A), and perhaps a timber and clay walled ambulatory (X), was built around AD 100. A number of dedicatory or memorial slabs were fixed to its walls and a cult statue perhaps erected in or near it. It was surrounded by a gravel-surfaced *temenos*, which was delimited initially by a ditch (F). The ditch was filled in, probably within a few decades. In this early period, the *temenos* also enclosed at least one high-status, possibly residential, building (D), the wall of which may have abutted or formed part of a later *temenos* boundary wall. Some time in the 2nd century (perhaps coinciding with the fire noted by Webster),<sup>57</sup> this ancillary building collapsed. Between 150 and 250, the site may have declined; in common with much of Roman London and Southwark, artefactual evidence is scarce from this period. The rebuilding of the ambulatory (C and Y) and construction of a new building (E) could have taken place in about AD 250, following a revival of activity in London in the first half of the third century. The date of wall B – if it is a wall – and its relationship to the temple is

not clear. Similarly, the postholes in Trench 3 appear to post-date the masonry building E, but their function is uncertain. Whether the two untesselated floors from 1902/3 were part of the temple structure or not also cannot be determined.

Much work remains to be done on this site. Revelation of the plan of the mound building could finally determine whether it is a temple and how the building was phased. The nature, boundaries and function of the other structural remains, both on and to the east of the mound, also needs to be explored further. Further investigating the ditch would clarify its purpose, extent and date. Relationships with Watling Street, and with Roman remains said to be found in 1906 near Vanbrugh Gate, have yet to be discovered. A modern assessment of the finds from 1978/9 and 1902/3 would also be fruitful. Comparing building material, coin loss patterns and pottery assemblages in Greenwich Park with sites in London and Southwark, and with rural residential and religious sites in the vicinity might help to elucidate the nature of the complex. The significance of the temple in relation to notable earlier sites within a few miles of Greenwich would also bear investigation: sites such as the late Iron Age *oppidum* and extensive Roman cemetery at Woolwich, and the Iron Age hillfort with Roman occupation at Charlton may point to the area having some importance in the pre-Roman period that continued after the conquest, perhaps centred on the strategic position over the Thames. Likewise, possible military associations

that might be inferred from the Diana statue and ivory chape should be explored.

With its rare and high-status finds, its rural setting and urban connections, its long-term use through the Roman occupation, and its high profile location in *Londinium's* hinterland, the Greenwich Park site is both important and unusual. Further investigations may be able to shed light not only on what was there, who used it and how, but also on wider issues. The apparent official standing of the complex may provide new information about provincial government. The site could help illuminate the debate on the nature of London's *territorium*, or even the municipal status of Roman London.<sup>58</sup> Further evidence of dedications or offerings could clarify whether the buildings at Greenwich were intended principally for the population of *Londinium*, hinterland communities nearby, wayfarers on the road or on the river. An analysis of this complex of buildings compared with the few temple sites in *Londinium* and the surrounding area might provide useful data on the role of religion through the province's changing social and economic circumstances.

Excavations over almost a century have left many questions; the 1999 dig has shown that the site still has much to reveal. Further fieldwork is being discussed. More thorough and extensive excavations may at last be able to resolve what role this significant site played in Roman Britain.

## Acknowledgements

The assistance of numerous people in research

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37. R. P. Symonds GMA99: *Greenwich Park, the Roman Pottery* unpublished specialist assessment 2001.

38. Elliston Erwood, *op cit* fn. 8. Elliston Erwood catalogued the extant pottery in 1924, but did not systematically quantify the sherds present; it is nevertheless clear that very little of the collection remains in the archive.

39. *Op cit* fn 37.

40. J. M. C. Bowsher *The coins* unpublished MoLAS specialist report.

41. P. J. Casey *Roman Coinage in Britain* (1994).

42. *Op cit* fn 5.

43. *Op cit* fn 3.

44. M. J. Hammerson 'Problems of Roman Coin Interpretation in Greater London' in J. Bird, M. Hassall and H. Sheldon (eds) *Interpreting Roman London: papers in memory of Hugh Chapman* (1996) 153-164.

45. R. Reece 'Site finds in Roman Britain' *Britannia* 26 (1995) 179-206.

46. S. Greep 'Two Roman Ivories from Greenwich Park' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 34 (1983) 61-5.

47. M. Henig 'Art in Roman London' in I. Haines, H. Sheldon and L. Hannigan (eds) *London Under Ground* (2000) 62-84.

48. *Op cit* fn 17, 132.

# Books

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## **Hidden Depths. An archaeological exploration of Surrey's past**

Roger Hunt, with David Graham, Giles Pattison and Rob Poulton.

*Surrey Archaeological Society*, 2002

177 pages, many colour illus., bibliography, gazetteer, glossary, index. £12.95 plus £2.25 postage and packing if ordered directly.

*Hidden Depths* is a book about a county, but it's more than that; it is British archaeology and history in microcosm. It is written in an accessible and engaging style and will appeal to a wide range of readers, from the interested inhabitants of Surrey to archaeologists, historians and students of the subject. It is likely to become a work of reference as well as a great read.

The book opens with a useful introductory chapter providing a clear explanation of terminology and methods used in archaeological reconstruction as well as the geological context of the county. It then follows a relatively recent trend of abandoning period divisions and taking themes as the main subdivisions of the book. This works very well, showing the development of aspects of life in a coherent manner rather than plodding through time in a disjointed manner. The themes taken are 'Hearth and Home', 'Food and Farming', 'Religion and Ritual', 'Power and Protection' and 'Markets and Manufacturing'. These titles are perhaps a little laboured, however, the chapters tackle coherent and fundamental aspects of human development of all periods in a balanced manner. Too often, when a book attempts to tackle the entire archaeological

record, they are unbalanced in the weight given to certain periods. It is greatly to the credit of the authors that no periods have been singled out, and it speaks volumes about the archaeology and history of Surrey that there is a great deal to say on each period under all these themes. The chapters all draw on antiquarian and the most recent developer funded archaeology, bringing in historical sources and excellent illustrations to complete the discussions.

The final chapter, 'The Future of the Past' concludes the narrative by dwelling on how archaeology is likely to change in the future and the importance of protecting our historic environment. This is not out of place in a book written for a wide cross section of society and may help place the problems faced daily by archaeologists in front of a wider supportive audience.

The text is well illustrated with artefacts, sites, buildings and people, using photographs and also a large number of very useful reconstructions and maps. In addition to the archaeological and historical narrative, the book also contains a great deal of practical information. There is a very useful gazetteer, which contains details of all local museums (including contact details, visiting times and a potted summary) and also lists places of interest, ranging from castles and palaces to windmills and barrows, all located on one of the many useful maps in the book.

To summarize, buy this book – it's great! It is enjoyable to read, both as a serious work on the  
*(continued on p. 83)*

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49. *Ibid.*, 34.

50. *Ibid.*, 35.

51. G. de la Bédoyère *The Buildings of Roman Britain* (1991) 192.

52. *Op cit* fn 17, 47 and 123-7.

53. *Op cit* fn 44.

54. M. Millett, *pers. comm.*

55. The continental examples present some significant differences however: the Dutch sites have provided over 150 altars, and were clearly dedicated to this specific purpose (see M. Hassall 'Britain and the Rhine: epigraphic evidence for Roman trade' in J. Taylor and H. Cleere (eds) *Roman shipping and trade: Britain and the Rhine provinces* CBA Res Rep 24 (1978) 41-48). The large Barzan circular temple was situated in a town and no dedication has been confirmed. No systematic work has yet been done on the dedications, periods of use, size or relationships with settlements or military establishments of such temples (M. Millett, *pers. comm.*).

56. D. Bird 'Roads and temples: Stane Street at Ewell' *London Archaeol* 10, no. 2 (2002) 41-45.

57. Webster cites two Hadrianic coins being found with burnt wood and debris on a floor surface; *op cit* fn 3.

58. See A. Selkirk 'Roman Greenwich: the editor comments' *Current Archaeol* 167 (1999) 441.