

# Roman and later pits at 5 Billiter Street, City of London

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## Introduction

During December 2000 and January 2001 an excavation was carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) at 5 Billiter Street, City of London, EC3 (Figs 1 and 2). This followed the monitoring of groundworks and the archaeological excavation of a geo-technical pit during October and November 2000. This, in turn, followed an evaluation undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd in March 2000.<sup>1</sup> All archaeological material was fully excavated in advance of the construction of new

office accommodation. The work was commissioned by Mills Whipp Projects Ltd on behalf of Winterthur Properties Ltd.

A fair proportion of the site suffered from modern truncation associated with the pre-existing building. This was in the form of piles, pile caps, ground beams and a large sewer running through the centre of the site.

The only archaeological activity represented on the site, from the early Roman period through to the 17th century, is pitting. There are no buildings of any kind and the only structure was the brick

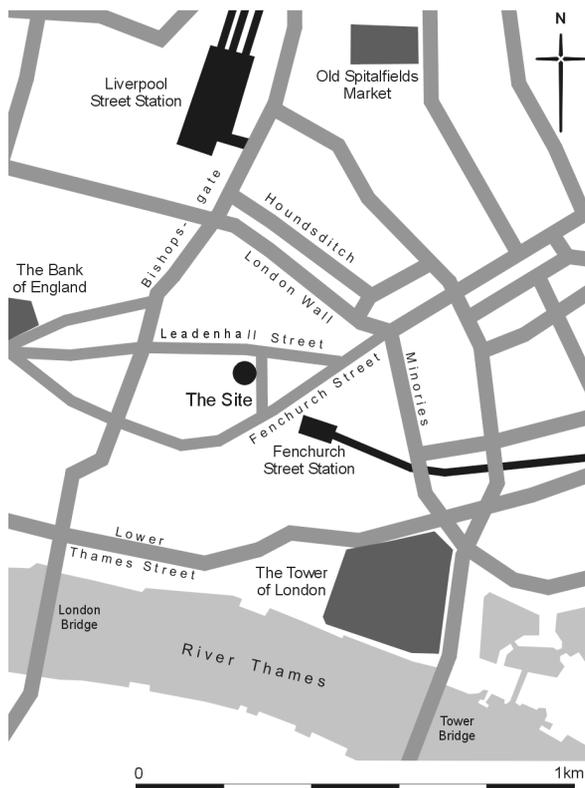


Fig. 1: site location

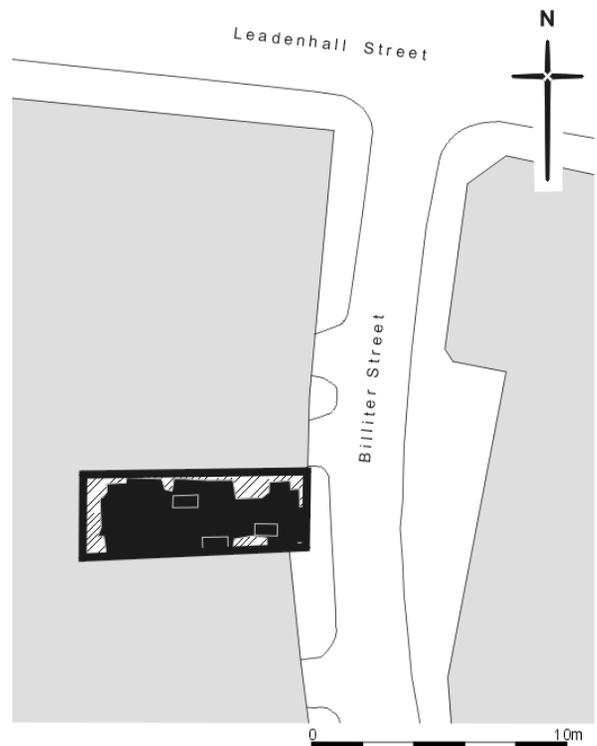


Fig. 2: site outline

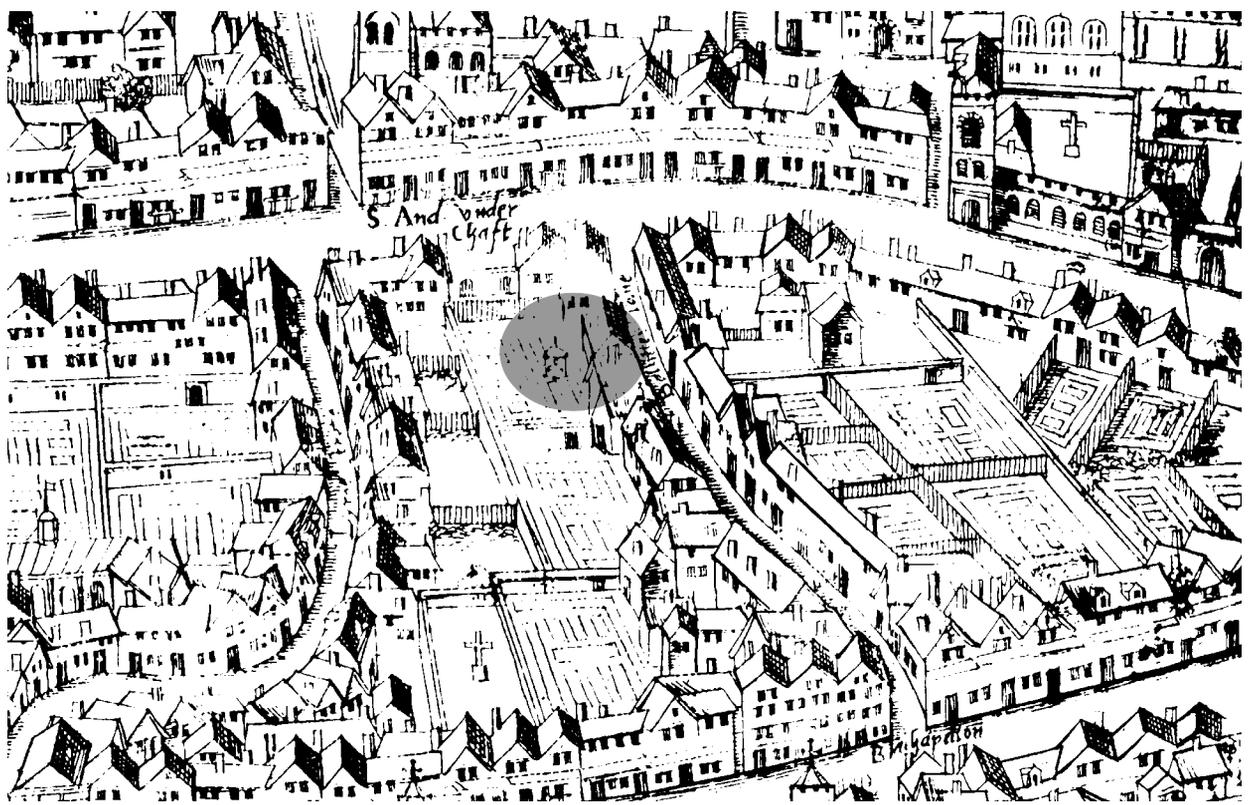


Fig. 3: detail from the Copperplate map c. 1553

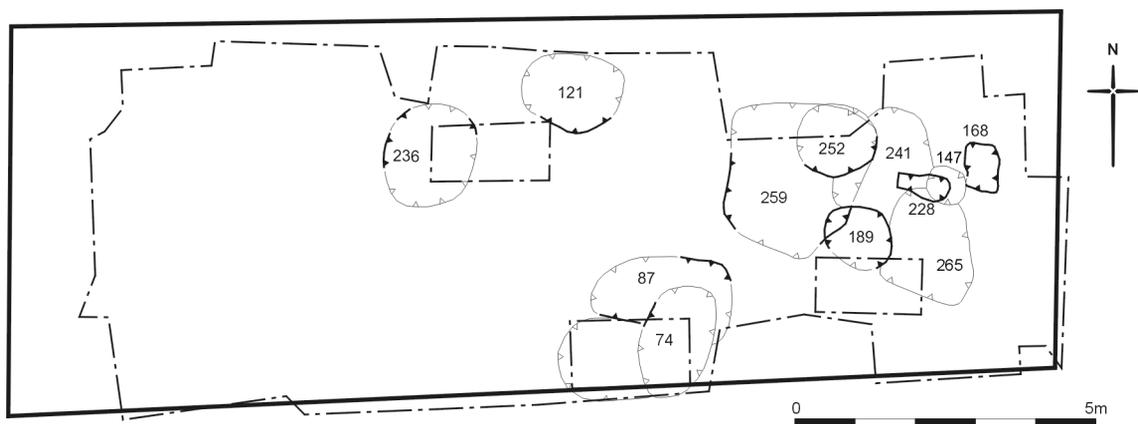
lining of a post-medieval cesspit. Of particular note is a very large assemblage of pottery from a single early Roman cesspit. This assemblage may have implications for the accepted dating of some Flavian pottery.

As nothing survived to infer otherwise, all the archaeological remains have been interpreted as lying in an area of open ground. While this may be true in the Roman period, it is difficult to believe that the entire area stayed open during the subsequent periods of occupation; it is more likely to be a reflection of truncation.

## Archaeological and historical background

The Roman town was established on a low hill capped by brickearth on the eastern side of the City, roughly in the present-day Cornhill area. Here, at the T-junction formed by the two main streets of the Roman settlement, the municipal centre of the town was founded. This area was later to be the location of the forum/basilica complex – the economic and social core of the

town. The site is located approximately 160 m east of this and is likely to have been outside the early town.<sup>2</sup> Between the time of the construction of the later forum (c. AD 100) and the mid-2nd century, the site would have been within a relatively built-up zone. This area, whose ‘street pattern was ordered, though not strictly orthogonal’ may have been ‘the *conventus civium Romanorum*’ – a residential area of high status.<sup>3</sup> Clay and timber buildings were constructed along the main roads, one of which ran east-west approximately 25 m to the north of the site (beneath modern Leadenhall Street). They have been recorded at 34–35 Leadenhall Street/4 Billiter Street, 65–68 Leadenhall Street/98 Fenchurch Street and 80–84 Leadenhall Street amongst others.<sup>4</sup> They were later replaced with high-status masonry buildings, recorded in the vicinity of the site, including 34–35 Leadenhall Street/4 Billiter Street, 42–49 Leadenhall Street and 41–51 Lime Street.<sup>5</sup> Later Roman activity, which included the maintenance of some of the high-status buildings, has been recorded at 34–35 Leadenhall Street/4 Billiter Street, 71–77



**Fig. 4: early to mid Roman pitting c. AD 65–160**

Leadenhall Street/32–40 Mitre Street and 2–4 St Mary Axe.<sup>6</sup>

Following the departure of the Romans the area lay vacant, and there is little sign of activity until the late 11th century. The establishment of the Holy Trinity Priory at Aldgate in 1108 marks the onset of the re-development of the area in the medieval period. Fenchurch Street was known as Fanchurche Strete by 1283,<sup>7</sup> while Leadenhall Street was known as Algatestrete by 1095.<sup>8</sup> Billiter Street was known as Belthoteslan (or Belzetterslane) in 1282<sup>9</sup> and is likely to refer to bell founders, although Stow in his survey of London in 1598 suggests that the street was named after ‘the first builder and owner thereof in the area.’<sup>10</sup> With the number of churches in the city, the bell-founders’ guild was prosperous and it was ‘here (Billiter Street) that they made their bells and rang them’.<sup>11</sup>

Also owning land in this area of London was Evesham Abbey. In 1540 the Crown granted land formerly owned by the abbey to Edward and Alice Cornwallis. This was ‘a messuage called the Principal Place with a garden and with tenements and stables in Billiter Street (“Kelles” alley) and on the High Street (Leadenhall Street)’.<sup>12</sup> Sir Nicholas Throckmorton (ambassador to France and Scotland under Elizabeth I) purchased the house in 1562 and by 1582 it was known as Throckmorton House and described by Stow as ‘a fair house with diverse tenements adjoining’.<sup>13</sup>

Part of the Roman street pattern must have been maintained, or at least was still visible in this

period, as medieval buildings recorded on the adjacent site were constructed on the Roman alignment.<sup>14</sup> Below-ground structures and pits of this period have been recorded on many sites in the Leadenhall Street – Fenchurch Street area.<sup>15</sup>

As seen on the Copperplate Map of 1553 (Fig. 3), the area was heavily built-up by the 16th century, with housing fronting onto streets with some gardens to their rear. Billiter Street only just escaped the Great Fire. Strype writing in 1720 described Billiter Street as ‘full of poor and ordinary houses inhabited by beggarly people’, which gave rise to a common contemporary saying: ‘a bawdy beggar of Billiter Lane’.<sup>16</sup>

## Results of the fieldwork

### *Prehistoric*

No features produced material *in situ* from this period. Fragments of burnt flint and a single piece of worked flint retrieved from later features may, however, indicate a presence in the general area.

### *Early to mid Roman (AD c. 65–160)*

Of the 15 pits dated to this period (Fig. 4), four were used as cesspits and for the disposal of domestic waste while the remainder were for brickearth extraction. Although the quarries were generally backfilled with a dirty brickearth-derived material, some contained small amounts of domestic waste.

While the pottery from the quarries is relatively bland and contains very little out of the ordinary for a site in the City, the same cannot be said of

the pottery from the cesspit [121]. This pit contained a total of 767 sherds representing at least 39 complete to near-complete vessels. The pottery from the rest of the site presents no discernible evidence for any particular activity, whereas the homogeneity of the pottery from this assemblage suggests a single event (such as a house clearance) as opposed to a continual process.

Most of the assemblage is domestic and utilitarian in character. It is mainly in the form of kitchenware jars and flagons. It should also be noted that there is much less imported pottery in this assemblage than is the norm for sites in London.

All of the illustrated vessels are from cesspit [121], and show the range of pottery found in this large, very closely-dated assemblage ( Figs 5–9). It is rare to find a pottery group (which is neither a grave nor a shipwreck) in which all of the pottery types represented are so obviously contemporary with each other, and which were likely to have been deposited either on a single occasion, or else over a quite short period of time.

The pottery present in this large assemblage, that would normally be dated to AD 70 or later, included two beakers (P4 and P5), two flagons (P26 and P28) and a mould-decorated samian bowl fragment form Dragendorff 30 (P1).



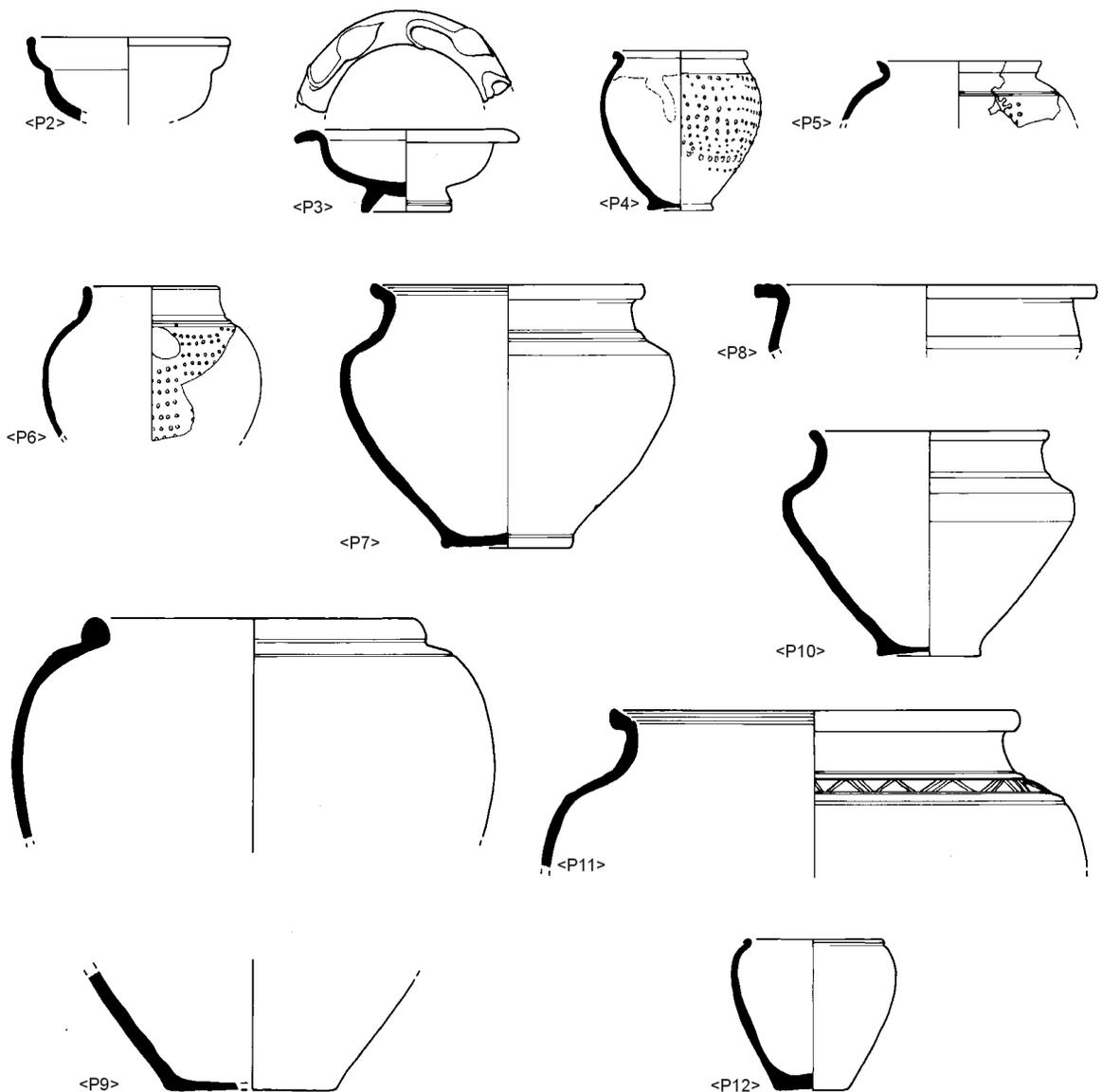
**Fig. 5:** fragment of a mould-decorated bowl in La Graufesenque samian ware (P1) (scale 1:1)

On the latter, the ovolo is probably by Iustus (G Dannell, *pers comm*). The core within the ovolo is similar to the one found on nos. 2670 and 2671 from York.<sup>18</sup> On the left of the decoration is part of a poppy-head motif as on bowls by Iustus.<sup>19</sup> No. 2670 from York also has the poppy-head motif and the tendril-binding (bow tie or ‘butterfly’). The large leaves with corrugated edges, although not a characteristic feature of Iustus, does appear on his mould-stamped bowls.<sup>20</sup> The rather blurred figure between the leaves is likely to be a goose.<sup>21</sup>

Following the York evidence, the date-range is probably AD 65–85, although most pottery types of Dragendorff 30 by Iustus are thought to be Flavian.

The pottery types that are most commonly used to date Flavian pottery, however, are completely absent. These include Highgate Wood ‘C’ ware, samian bowl form Dragendorff 37 and the samian cup form Dragendorff 33. In such a large assemblage the absence of these common types must be significant. Their absence suggests the assemblage was deposited before the most common forms of Flavian pot came into use. Thus it could be argued that the types normally dated to AD 70 or later that are present must, in fact, be slightly earlier forms. There is, on the other hand, evidence to suggest that the pottery was deposited after the Boudican revolt of AD 60/61: there appear to be no types present that are likely to be pre-Boudican and there is an unusually low percentage of burnt (or sooted) vessels from this pit. This would imply the forms in question were made in the period following the Boudican revolt and prior to AD 70 (i.e. post-Boudican/pre-Flavian). In other words, this assemblage must have been deposited very close to AD70, either just before it or just after.

The presence of pottery types in other pits [226], [265] and [241] such as Highgate Wood ware C, Verulamium region ware and Dragendorff form 33 in La Graufesenque samian ware point to a post-AD 70 deposition. Two sherds of Alice Holt Surrey ware were also found in pit [241] indicating a date of AD100–160, while a number of sherds of various jars in black-burnished ware from pit [206] indicate a date range of AD 120–160.



**Fig. 6: illustrated vessels from cesspit [121]**

**P2–3: La Graufesenque Dragendorff 27 (P2) and 35 (P3) cups;**

**P4–6: beakers with barbotine dot decoration in fine reduced ware and fine micaceous ware, forms 3E (P4–5) and 3F (P6);**

**P7–8: Alice Holt Surrey ware form 2C jar (P7) and form 4A bowl (P8);**

**P9–11: early Roman micaceous sandy ware form 2A12–13 jar (P9), form 2C jar (P10) and form 2D jar (P11);**

**P12: early Roman sandy ware B form 2A jar.**

A copper ring fitting, part of a Hofheim cup dated AD 40–70 in naturally coloured glass, and a small fragment of a vessel in amber glass (the only fragment of strongly coloured glass found on the

site) dated to AD 40–100 were also found in the same cesspit. A fragment of a ceramic lamp dated to the mid-1st century AD was found in a late Roman pit [144].

Environmental evidence includes bones from the main domesticates of cattle, sheep/goat and pig with a number of juvenile sheep/goat from the same individual. Other bones included chicken, fish (herring, mackerel, eel and smelt), cat, mouse/vole and weasel. The presence of fly puparia indicate that the smaller fish bones are likely to have been deposited within human waste, while the mineralised remains of fig, elderberry, blackberry, apple and plum/sloe confirm this as a cesspit. Charred wood and poorly preserved charred wheat were also present, likely to have been domestic hearth waste. Marine mollusc shell fragments and occasional eggshell were also present.

Roman building material recovered from this period included brick, roofing tile, red and yellow ceramic tesserae and combed box-flue tile. A small amount of painted wall plaster, predominantly found within earlier Roman pits, was also recovered.

### ***Late Roman (AD 200–400)***

Twenty-three pits have been assigned to this period (Fig. 10) and, although concentrated in the western half, extended across the site. This, and a greater degree of residuality within the pottery assemblage, may reflect a more intense period of activity in the later Roman period. It appears that a higher proportion of the pits were for the

disposal of domestic waste than in the earlier Roman period.

Kitchenware vessels dominated the assemblage, usually in the form of jars, beakers and dishes. These were mostly in pits [91] and [170] in Nene Valley ware (AD 250–400) and in pits [47], [89], [104], [117], [172] and [243] in Alice Holt Farnham ware (AD 250–400). Some sherds of continental pottery were also found in pits [117], [144], [170], [182], [238] and [245].<sup>22</sup>

Building material from this period included roofing tile and some thin fine-grained sandstone, possibly used for roofing.

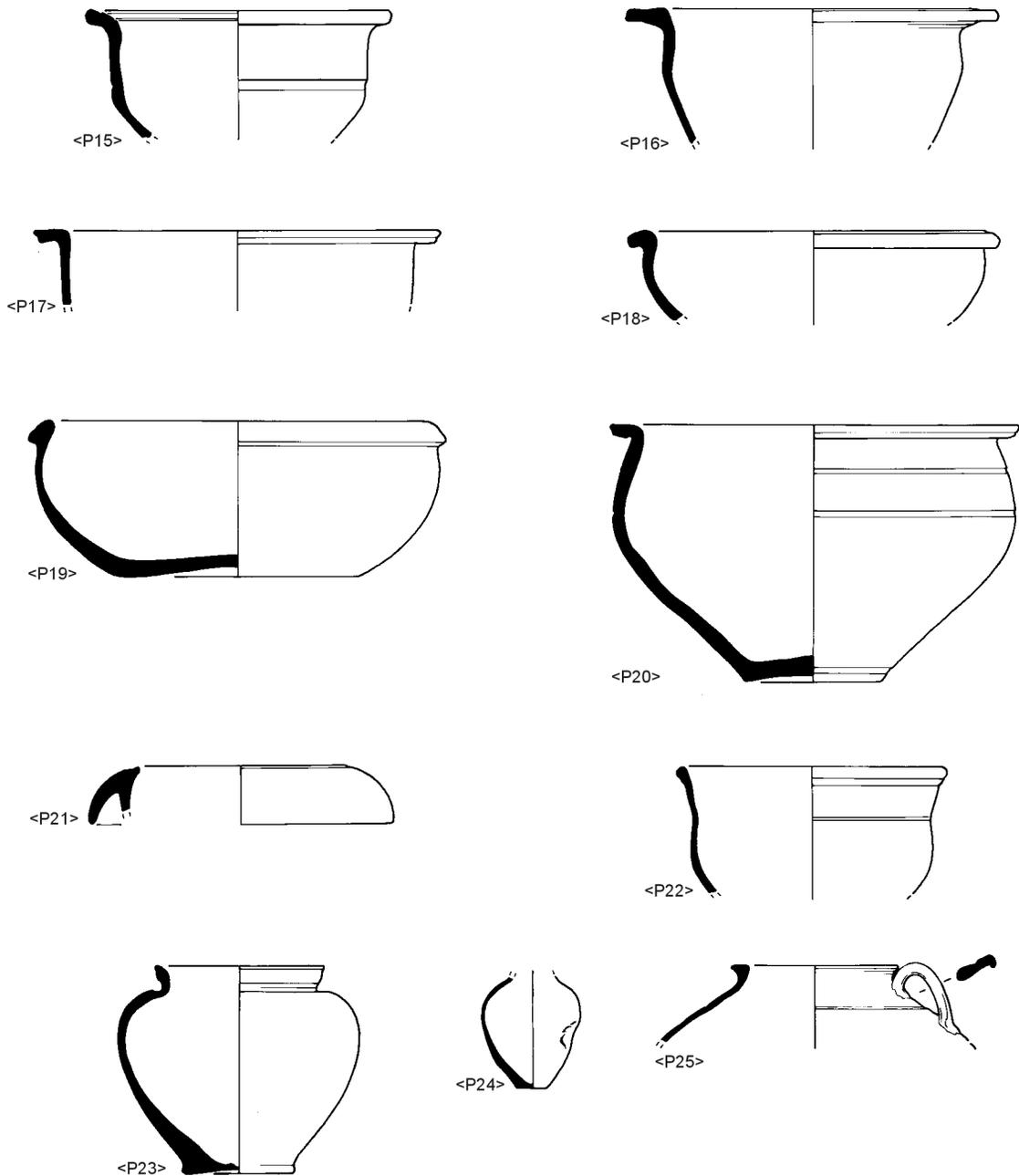
The pits contained varying amounts of mineralised remains, plant stem fragments and seeds of apple, fig, cherry, plum and elderberry. Charred wood likely to have been hearth waste was also present in small amounts. Large amounts of fish bones were recovered from one pit. They were mainly eel and herring, but some mackerel was also present. Small numbers of sheep/goat and pig bones were also retrieved.

### ***Medieval (1050–1200)***

Twenty-three excavated pits were dated to this period (Fig. 11). Relatively few of them have been assigned a specific function and of those that have the majority were for the disposal of domestic waste. Those without a specified



Fig. 7: jars from cesspit [121] (left: early Roman sandy ware B form 2B jar (P13) and right: form 2N jar (P14))



**Fig. 8: illustrated vessels from cesspit [121]**

**P15: early Roman sandy iron-rich ware form 4A bowl;**

**P16–18: sandy reduced ware form 4A bowls (P16–17) and form 4F2 bowl (P18);**

**P19: grog-tempered ware form 4F bowl;**

**P20: shell-tempered ware form 4A bowl;**

**P21: Aoste white ware mortarium; P22: Eccles white ware form 4P carinated bowl;**

**P23–24: oxidised ware jar and *unguentarium*;**

**P25: Verulamium region white ware form 2K jar.**



**Fig. 9: flagons from cesspit [121] (from left to right P26–29: Verulamium region white ware flagons, forms 1B2 (P26 and P28), 1D (P27) and 1E (P29); P30: white-slipped ware form 1A collared flagon)**

function could be quarries, which may point to the site being in an area of open land. As most of the pits are in the western half of the site, however, it could be that, during this period, buildings were established along the eastern part of the site. It seems, therefore, that Billiter Street dates from the medieval period.

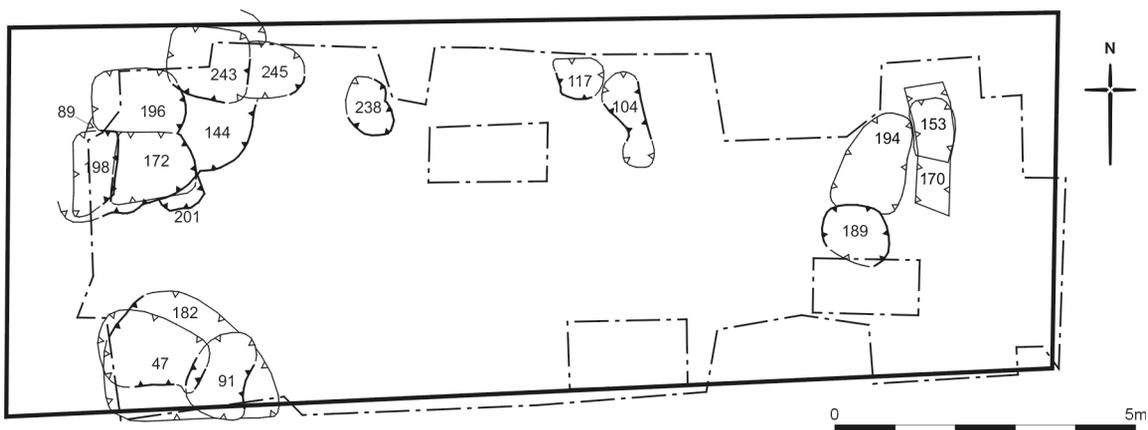
The introduction of glazing and the potters' wheel in the late 11th century changed the pottery industry in the London area. During the course of the 12th century the products of this industry came to dominate ceramic supply in London. The Billiter Street assemblage fits easily into this well-established pattern, with London-type wares the most common. Of these, cooking pots or jars in Early Medieval sand and shell ware are by far

the most common along with jugs and pitchers in the coarse variant which went out of production c. 1200. There are no continental imports in this period.

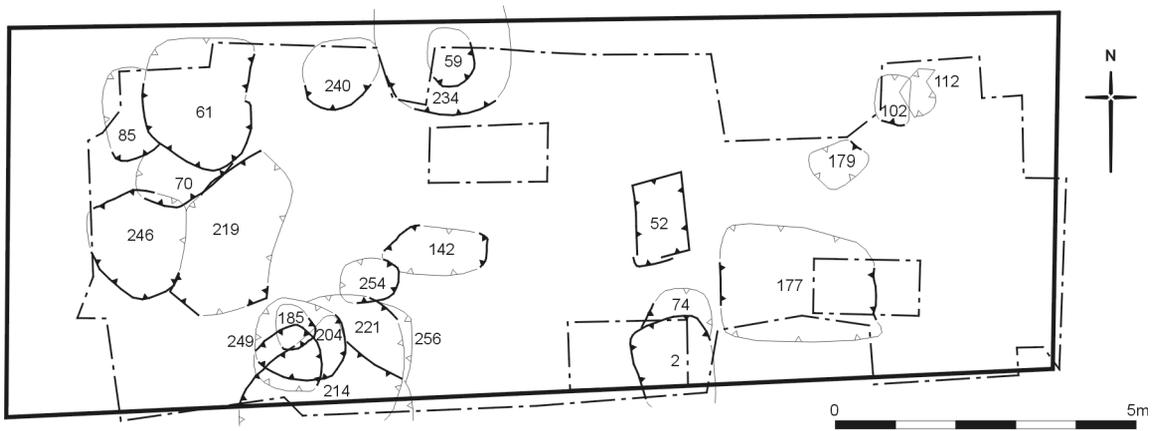
Large assemblages of mineralised plant material included species found in the Roman period such as apple, plum, sloe, elderberry and blackberry but also horse bean, cherry, opium and henbane. The latter two were used medicinally with henbane being cultivated in gardens.<sup>23</sup>

Mineralisation, abundant presence of puparia and coprolites confirm that some of these pits were cesspits.

Faunal remains included large numbers of fish bones (eel, plaice/flounder, herring, carp and



**Fig. 10: later Roman pitting AD 200–400**



**Fig. 11: early medieval pitting 1050–1200**

mackerel) indicating a large quantity of food waste along with cattle, chicken, pig, sheep/goat, mouse, frog and other small mammals.

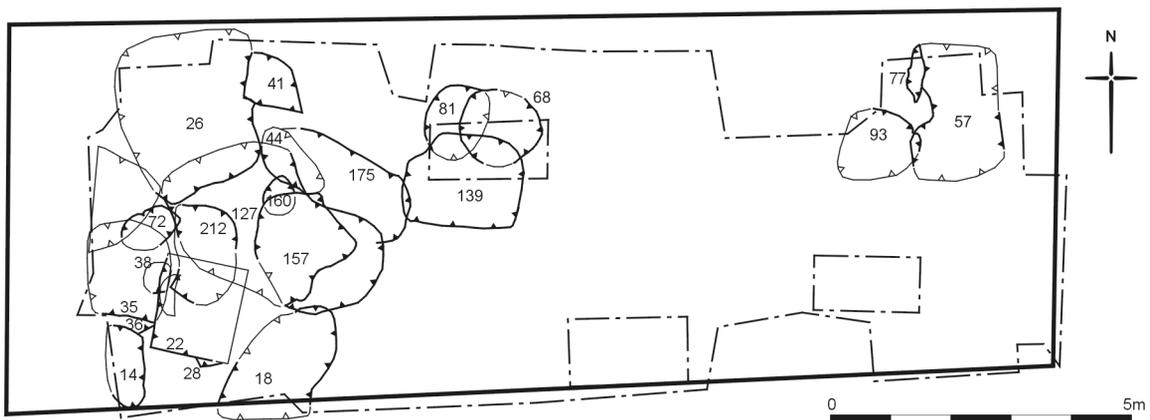
### ***Later medieval (1200–1500)***

Thirty-two excavated pits were dated to this period (Fig. 12) with the bulk of the activity again in the western half of the site, confirming the possibility that housing existed along the eastern street frontage of the site. Also in this period evidence of bell making in the area is to be found. Five pits produced 4 kg of bell mould fragments along with copper alloy casting waste associated with this industry. The backfilling of the pits has been dated to the mid-13th century. Substantially more evidence was recovered from the excavation immediately to the west at 34–35 Leadenhall Street/4 Billiter Street where actual casting took

place.<sup>24</sup> The majority of the pits, however, are rubbish pits or cesspits.

The chief 13th-century fabrics present are London-type wares; mostly jugs made in a variety of decorative styles whose introduction can be dated between *c.* 1200 and 1270. Other pottery current during this period includes Shell-sandy wares and South Hertfordshire greywares. These are unglazed, wheel-thrown coarse-wares used to provide utilitarian, everyday kitchen pottery. Relatively few contexts are dated to the late 14th to 15th centuries. They yielded mainly Coarse Border Wares, together with other fabrics in common use during this period, such as Late Medieval Hertfordshire glazed ware and Late London slipped ware. There are no continental imports present on the site in this period.

Two samples from pits produced only small plant assemblages, which were mineralised as in most



**Fig. 12: later medieval pitting 1200–1500**

of the other pits. Charred wood and seeds of blackberry, elderberry and hemp were found. One pit contained a moderate but diverse assemblage of fruit and wild plants including knotgrass and sedge. A small number of beetle fragments were also found in this pit.

Fish (herring, plaice/flounder and smelt) and cattle were the only food species recovered. Also present were mouse/vole, rat and other small mammals.

### **Post-medieval (1580–1620)**

The only feature dated to this period was a brick-lined cesspit at the western end of the site, with the base just scraping the top of the natural gravels.

The backfill of this feature only produced five sherds of post-medieval pottery dated to c. 1580–1620. They include single sherds from a jug and bowl in early post-medieval redware, made in the London area throughout the 16th century and part of a cauldron in Dutch red earthenware. A sherd from a double condiment dish in Red Border ware comes from the potteries of the Surrey-Hampshire borders.

No environmental information was produced for this period.

### **Discussion**

Truncation, undoubtedly, plays a large role in the interpretation of the results of the excavation. It is likely that during most of the Roman period the site lay in an area of open ground between more built-up areas. The latter were probably concentrated along the main roads that led out of the city (Bishopsgate and Aldgate) and the various smaller roads and lanes that would have run between them. Quarrying in the early Roman period probably indicates that the site lay in an area that was undeveloped in this period. The very large assemblage of pottery that came from a single cesspit in this period, however, must be associated with nearby occupation. Clay and timber buildings, which sealed early quarry pits, have been recorded on an excavation immediately to the west of the current site. It was thought that these buildings had plain red tessellated floors.<sup>25</sup> Observations of boreholes on the same site made in 1953 by members of the Guildhall Museum

noted the presence of red and yellow tesserae.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that the red and yellow tesserae found in the cesspit on the current site came from the same source. It could be inferred that this was the building that was cleared of its contents prior to demolition to make way for the Flavian expansion in this part of the city.

The lack of much activity during the heyday of Roman London may be explained by the possibility that the area was already fairly built-up. It could also, however, be the result of both historic and modern truncation. The increase in the volume of pitting in the later Roman period may point towards the area reverting to open ground. Although distortion from modern truncation in the medieval period is even greater, the indications are that the area was used for waste disposal from the mid-11th century. The distribution of pitting may indicate the establishment of Billiter Street at some time in the early post-Conquest period, with the back yard becoming smaller as the area occupied by housing increased over time. During the 13th century the area became dedicated to bell-making, though not on this particular site. By the post-medieval period the site lay within an area of dense occupation but this is not reflected on the site, probably, once again, as a result of modern truncation.

Despite the lack of direct, physical evidence for structural or occupational activity *in situ*, the overall indications from the site at 5 Billiter Street are that it lay within an area of urban occupation during the Roman period and from the medieval period onwards. Although it may have been within an area of open ground for much of this time, it is likely to have been closely associated with areas of settlement. The presence of species such as weasel, mouse, cat and dog through much of this time are an indication of the site lying within a relatively built-up area, as these species would not be present otherwise. The known presence of Roman and medieval buildings within the direct vicinity together with finds, albeit in relatively small quantities, of material such as glass, painted wall plaster and various metal objects also indicate nearby activity.

It must be noted, however, that the persistent utilitarian nature of the artefactual evidence would suggest that the site possibly lay between,

and beyond, areas of high status, despite its proximity to such areas in both the Roman and medieval periods. It may be that Strype's comment (see above) is a better indication for the general character of the occupation on the site.

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5. *Ibid.*, see under site codes LDL88, AFR73 and GM96 respectively.
6. *Ibid.*, see under site codes LDL88, LEA84 and SXE88 respectively.
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13. *Ibid.*, 252.
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15. *Op cit* fn 4.
16. B. Weinreb and C. Hibbert (eds) *The London Encyclopaedia* (1983) 66.
17. The form codes referred to are the MoLSS/MoLAS standard codes for Roman pottery found in London (based on the system devised for G. Marsh and P. Tyers 'The Roman pottery from Southwark' in Bird et al *Southwark Excavations 1972–4* (1978) 533–586; the full expansion can be found in the site archive).
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19. A. W. Mees *Modellsignierte Dekorationen auf südgallischer Terra Sigillata* (1995) Taf. 95, no. 12.
20. *Ibid.*, Taf. 94, no. 1 and Taf. 95, nos 1 and 2.
21. F. Oswald *Index of Figure Types on Terra Sigillata ("samian ware")* supplement to *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 24 (1937) Pl. LXXXVI, no. 2286.
22. These were Gaulish samian ware, Moselkeramik ware, Cologne colour-coated ware and Rhineland white ware.
23. N. Culpeper *Culpeper's complete herbal* (1653) 184.
24. *Op cit* fn 14, 7.
25. *Ibid.*, 4.
26. *Op cit* fn 4, GM92, 63.
27. The archive and associated reports relating to the site (BII00) can be consulted by prior arrangement at the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC).