

## Heads will roll...

*A report due out early this year has the potential to change our interpretation of burial in Roman London. Chiz Harward, Natasha Powers and Sadie Watson preview key discoveries in a monograph covering 20 years of archaeological discoveries in the upper Walbrook valley.*

The study area consists of the Walbrook valley in the northern part of the City of London, around the northern side of Finsbury Circus and Eldon Street. This zone was crossed by prehistoric stream channels and it remained poorly drained, marginal land into the Roman period. Despite this, during the second half of the 1st century AD, a Roman cemetery – a discrete entity to the west of the ‘northern’ cemetery (around Bishopsgate) – was established here, north of the built-up area of the Roman town. The monograph collates earlier evidence – from antiquarian discoveries of skulls and the early 20th-century work of Frank Lambert of the Guildhall Museum – with the results of six excavations undertaken between 1987 and 2007 by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) and its predecessor, the Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA). Thematic essays discuss the Walbrook cemetery, its development, use and decline, followed by wider studies of London’s Roman cemeteries.

The period of the cemetery’s most intensive use seems to have begun

c AD 120 – when the drainage was improved and an east–west running road or track was built to give access across it. The local topography meant that the cemetery was regularly flooded: graves were eroded and body parts exposed and washed away. However, the cemetery continued in use with new graves being dug into partially eroded earlier inhumations. Because of this disturbance, the precise number of excavated individuals can be difficult to determine but at least 125 inhumations and 10 cremations were present within the study area. Most of the graves are typical of Romano-British cemeteries in London and elsewhere, with a relatively restricted range of burial rites and grave goods, and with poor representation of timber coffins. There is also some evidence for other activities amongst the graves – the grazing (and disposal) of horses, quarrying, refuse disposal.

In common with many Romano-British cemeteries (including those east and north of Londinium), there were examples of double, prone and possibly decapitated burials. The osteological data are comprehensively discussed



and compared with burial populations from across London and beyond. Evidence of disease and injury showed a population broadly similar to others from Roman London but one which experienced changing circumstances as Londinium developed. There was a significant male bias, but only limited evidence of interpersonal violence, including a woman with a fracture to the back of her hand, typically caused by punching something/someone.

The analysis provides a new perspective on the management of burial space and attitudes to the dead as it seems it was accepted that graves could wash out into the Walbrook. The unique discovery – for London – of two individuals buried with iron leg rings around their ankles raises further questions over the character of the cemetery.

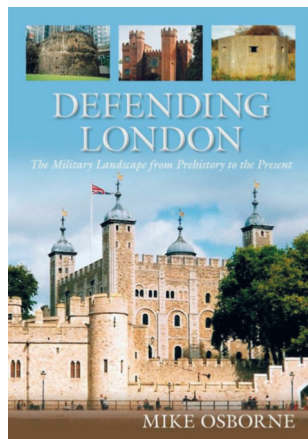
Construction of the Roman city wall (c AD 190–230) probably had a significant impact on the drainage of the Walbrook valley and the management of watercourses and drainage in this now extra-mural area may have been neglected. Whatever the precise cause, by the second half of the 3rd century AD the cemetery area

**ABOVE** Probably buried in the 3rd century AD, this young adult female was accompanied by a necklace of blue glass beads and the jet terminal from a dagger handle

**LEFT** This young man had been interred c AD 120–200 with iron rings around his lower legs, one of two examples from the site



## Defending London: The Military Landscape from Prehistory to the Present



Mike Osborne

Stroud: Historical Publications

2012

128 B&W plates,  
13 B&W figures  
Bibliography, index, appendices

£16

Reviewed by Guy Thompson

*Defending London* traces the development of defensive works in the Greater London area and their military infrastructure from the eve of the Roman Conquest to the early 21st century.

An introductory chapter up to the Saxon period summarises current thinking on topics such as the construction of the London Wall in the 3rd century and the refortification of the city in the late 9th century, and incorporates evidence from the elusive Saxon *burh* of Southwark and the moat at Fulham Palace.

Two chapters on the defensive structures of medieval London cover both familiar landmarks such as the Tower of London and the City Walls and Gates, and less visible elements such as the fortified manor houses erected in the London's hinterland in the 13th and 14th centuries. The fortified stronghouses that appeared in the City from the 14th century are discussed in the context of the civil unrest and dynastic turmoil of the later medieval period. The defensible elements of late medieval episcopal and royal palaces are also highlighted, as is the impact of gunpowder

artillery on the design of late medieval and Tudor fortifications.

While the circuit of defensive works hurriedly thrown up around London by the Parliamentary authorities in the early months of the English Civil War has left few archaeological traces, many elements of late Stuart and Georgian military infrastructure have survived in the area, including buildings at the former Deptford Dock and Victualling Yards, each of which is described and illustrated, as are the barracks built for the regular army during the wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The legacy of the 19th-century Volunteer Force and its successor the Territorial Force is seen in numerous drill halls in central and suburban London. Developments in the design and distribution of regular army barracks are discussed, and the impact of arms and munitions manufacture on the built heritage of Woolwich, Enfield and Waltham Abbey is described and illustrated.

There is a concise account of the military infrastructure of the area during the First World War. Defence of the capital against attack from the land and the air, the new airfields of the RFC and the RNAS, facilities for training, logistical services, hospitals set up or requisitioned, and the housing built for military personnel and workers in the munitions industry, are all discussed.

Osborne describes the fortified 'stop lines' designed to defend the capital against ground attack in the Second World War. Examples of surviving pillboxes and other static defences are used to explain how they would have functioned in the event of invasion. The defence of vulnerable points such as airfields and factories is described, as are elements of the anti-aircraft defences of the London Inner Artillery Zone. Munitions factories and depots are discussed, together with numerous barracks and camps. A concluding chapter about London in the Cold War describes how civil authority was expected to devolve to a network of regional seats of government in the event of a nuclear attack on London, as well as the ROC posts built to monitor the effects of the resulting fallout.

This book is an important work of reference for those interested in the historical military infrastructure of the Greater London area, and is strongly recommended for anyone involved in recording this valuable resource.

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was increasingly marshy. The road or track was no longer maintained, but occasional interments continued into the 4th century AD.

The large number of human skulls recovered from the Walbrook valley as a whole (disproportionate to the quantity of post-cranial skeletal material) has provoked colourful speculation on their origin – interpretations have included deliberate decapitation, pre-Roman dismemberment rituals and defleshing. However, the Walbrook cemetery provides clear evidence of the erosion of burials and displacement of body parts (including heads) over an extended period. Though the 'cult of

the head' may have a less dramatic explanation, the nature of the cemetery provides striking new evidence for how the living related to, and managed, the dead within a marginal landscape.

**The upper Walbrook cemetery of Roman London: excavations at Finsbury Circus, City of London, 1987–2007** by Chiz Harward, Natasha Powers and Sadie Watson, MOLA Archaeology Study Series no. 32

Available in 2014 from MOLA: email [booksales@mola.org.uk](mailto:booksales@mola.org.uk). Further details at [www.museumoflondonarchaeology.org.uk/Publications/ForthcomingTitles.htm](http://www.museumoflondonarchaeology.org.uk/Publications/ForthcomingTitles.htm)

**RIGHT A 3rd- or 4th-century AD double burial of a prone young adult male (left) and a supine adolescent wearing a copper-alloy bracelet with snake-head terminals**

