

FOLK-LORE IN LONDON

ARCHAEOLOGY

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Part 1: The Roman Period

ANTIQUARIES of an earlier generation were prone to see ritual and magic everywhere, and in more recent times we have laughed at the fanciful notions of Victorian scholars such as J. E. Price, to whom a Roman well crammed with broken pottery could only be a ritual pit—an *arca finalis* marking a boundary.¹ We certainly need not look beyond the obvious practical explanation of this find. The disposal of rubbish was always a major problem in London before the dustman started to call regularly, and any convenient hole or dumping place attracted to itself broken or worn-out domestic jettam. Serviceable or even valued possessions were sometimes similarly abandoned by mischance, as they are today. Most London antiquities undoubtedly arrived in the places where we find them in one or other of these ways, and if people were always completely rational, nothing would ever be abandoned until it was useless, except by accident. Yet the irrational disposal of property can be seen in London today in almost any tourist centre that contains a suitable pool of water. It is reported that coins thrown into the ornamental pool at the G.P.O. Tower last year amounted in value to £87. Even the ravens' drinking bowl at the Tower usually contains coins, including sixpences—deposited why? To placate those sinister guardians, to ensure a happy return (as to the Trevi fountain in Rome) or just vaguely for luck?

Archaeologists in recent times have preferred to disregard this irrational element in human behaviour, except in certain well-defined spheres of activity. Ritual practices are accepted in burial customs and on recognised religious sites, but the evidence for them in any other context tends to be overlooked, explained away if possible in practical terms, or even glossed over as a mere aberration. When mentioned in archaeological reports, it is usually buried without comment in a mass of other detail. An objective comparative study of these odd finds might, however, throw a fascinating light on earlier beliefs and customs. The more familiar amulets and curses will therefore be omitted from

the present article in favour of a number of finds that are less obviously associated with superstition, but could, with varying degrees of probability, be interpreted as evidence for ritual practices that are known to have existed elsewhere, or that conform to a known pattern of ideas.

Most of these fall into the general category of "votive offerings." A splendid group of Roman blacksmith's tools found recently, possibly in a box, in a peaty deposit that may have been an old stream-bed, near the river Lea at Waltham Abbey Town Mead, can hardly have been accidentally lost, and seems more likely to have been deposited in such a place as a gift to a local deity than as treasure hidden with a view to recovery. Finds from the Thames itself are mostly accidental losses, but some of the most famous are more likely to have been deliberately offered to the river-god. The magnificent Battersea shield and Waterloo helmet are objects of parade and wealth that would hardly have been taken into battle. Their presence in the river-bed is therefore more likely to be due to an act of religious devotion than to a riverside skirmish, but there remains the possibility of accidental loss when crossing the river.

There is the same element of doubt about the iron tools and bronze ornaments found in great quantities in the bed of the Walbrook, associated with a range of coins that ends abruptly in A.D. 155.² The concentration seems too great to be explained by accidental loss, and it should not have been too difficult to salvage chisels, plough-shoes and other large objects from a shallow stream less than 14 feet wide, if the attempt had been made. It might be expected that the numerous coins in the Walbrook were also votive, at least in part, but if so, they seem to indicate that the practice came to an end abruptly soon after the middle of the 2nd century. In view of the usual tenacity of such customs, this would be unlikely, unless the stream for some reason (perhaps flooding or enclosure) became inaccessible.

There is a possible hint of a more sinister form of offering in the numerous human skulls

1. J. E. Price and J. H. Puleston, *Roman Antiquities recently discovered on the site of the National Safe Deposit Company's Premises, Mansion House, London* (1873) 32ff.

2. *Antiq J* 42 (1962) 38-52.



The Battersea Shield—1st century B.C. or early 2nd century A.D.; height 2ft. 6½ins.

(Photo: Trustees of the British Museum)

that have been found unaccompanied by skeletons in the Walbrook. These evidently found their way into the stream following a massacre, perhaps that of Boudicca, and remind us that the Celtic peoples were head-hunters whose victims' decapitated heads were of religious significance. Anne Ross has demonstrated the close association of such heads with sacred waters³, and their presence gives a little further support to the idea that the Walbrook, like the Thames itself, was venerated as the abode of a deity.

3. Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1967) 104-113.
4. In Coventina's well at Carrawburgh, and in Romano-British wells in Warwickshire and Wiltshire. *Ibid.* 105-6.

Anne Ross has also shown that Celtic legend abounds in stories about the supernatural powers of human heads that are deposited in wells, and quotes a number of examples of the discovery of human skulls in Romano-British wells.⁴ In the light of this, should we consider the significance of the skull found in a 1st century well at the corner of Queen Street and Queen Victoria Street? It was thrown into the well when the latter had partially silted up, and was apparently pushed down with a heavy piece of wood that rested upon it. In these circumstances it has been regarded as a somewhat macabre piece of refuse, and the absence of the lower jaw suggests that it was not a fresh head. Newly decapitated heads, however, may have been difficult to obtain in the peaceful *Londinium* of the Flavian period, and we should not entirely disregard the possibility that an early Roman Londoner was surreptitiously trying a little of the magic of his head-hunting forebears.

Does this complex of custom and belief, surviving into later Roman—or even post-Roman—times also account for the discovery of the great bronze head of Hadrian in the Thames? For that matter why should a dismembered bronze hand, of the same or another Roman statue, also have found its way into the Thames; while another was dropped into a well near Seething Lane? Surely the rational means of disposal of an unwanted statue in valuable metal is the melting-pot?

Then what are we to make of the curious discovery in Newington Causeway at the Elephant and Castle of two dog skeletons found with three broken Roman pottery vessels of the 2nd century, in a square wooden box at a depth of seven or eight feet below the modern road surface? This was apparently not a well, since there is said to have been undisturbed natural soil just below the bottom of the box, and its top was only just below the ancient ground level. Since it was only observed in a workmen's trench, however, an element of doubt remains. All that can be said is that if this were a ritual burial of two dogs in Roman times, it would not be difficult to find other examples in circumstances which really do suggest that the dogs were sacrificed to the dark powers of the underworld. Two dogs, cremated in this instance, were found at the bottom of a ritual shaft near the mausoleum at Keston.⁵ The bones of two dogs were likewise found, apparently as the primary deposit, in a ritual shaft at Biddenham, Bedfordshire.⁶ The dogs at the Elephant and Castle were

5. *Archaeol Cantiana* 82 (1967) 184-90.
6. J. E. Price and J. H. Puleston, *loc. cit.* 39. Anne Ross has pointed out the occurrence of these ritual shafts in the Belgic parts of England (*Anne Ross, loc. cit.* 27-8).

buried in a shallow pit, not a deep shaft, but in each of these three instances we have two dogs, buried not in a casual way at the same time. Were they perhaps offerings to a pair of deities—Dis and Proserpina, or their Gallo-Belgic equivalents?

This might also be the explanation of a curious recent find of two pairs of complete pots and a pair of lamps at intervals of about two yards in a Roman ditch at Fordcroft, Orpington.⁷ As the pots were complete and were not associated with burials, they are likely to have been votive, and their position in a ditch suggests that they or their contents may have been offerings to powers of the underworld. A burial of the late 1st century, found near the Old Bailey in 1966, also contained a pair of lamps placed in the amphora which contained the cremation, and these, if not intended for the use of the soul of the deceased, must also have been gifts to the deities of the dead. Further investigation into this question of dual offerings might produce interesting results.

Votive deposits associated with buildings, most of them probably substitutes for foundation sacrifices, are by no means uncommon, and several Roman examples have been recorded in the London area. Sometimes the offering consists simply of a complete pot, now empty, set into a floor or buried beneath it, or built into a wall. It seems likely that the pot originally contained food or drink of some kind, but usually no trace of this remains. One at Lullingstone Roman villa, however—where five were found, two in pairs—contained the bone of an animal, possibly a sheep, and a snail-shell.⁸

Almost certainly the so-called "sepulchral urn," found in 1847 closely associated with a Roman house in Nicholas Lane, was something of this kind. The site was very near the centre of Roman London, a most unlikely place for a burial, and the pot is said to have contained charcoal, burnt clay, small pieces of iron and lead, and portions of the unburnt bones of a small animal.⁹ The contents are similar to those of an undoubted foundation pot found upright against the wall footings of a late 1st century house in Colchester. This contained minute fragments of charred bone and equally minute pieces of unburnt bones of a small animal.¹⁰ They also resemble the contents of three votive pots, which may or may not have been associated with a vanished building, found on the Upchurch Marshes. These, dated to about A.D. 200, contained charcoal and fragments of animal bones, but in this case

7. I am indebted to Mrs. M. Bowen for this information.

8. G. W. Meates, *Lullingstone Roman Villa* (1955) 78

9. *J. Brit Archaeol Ass* 2 341; *Coll Antiq* 1 146, pl. 49.

10. *Trans Essex Archaeol Soc* 16 20ff.

the animals were identifiable. Each pot contained the remains of a young dog — and as we have already seen, dogs seem to have been especially acceptable to the deities of the earth.¹¹

One votive pot in London contained a coin. This was a cavetto-rim jar set in the make-up beneath the floor of a corridor of a Roman building in King's Head Yard, Southwark.¹² In the bottom of the jar was a copper coin (*as*) of Antoninus Pius, dated to A.D. 140-44—considerably earlier in date than the late Antonine floor in which it had been placed. A 1st century example of the same practice is a bead-rim pot containing a *dupondius* of Vespasian, found covered by two pieces of amphora under the floor of the Roman villa at Farningham.¹³

Coins were also used by themselves as votive offerings when buildings were constructed, and this may account for the discovery of a coin of Aelius (A.D. 137) embedded in the mortar of the city wall of Londinium.¹⁴ In this case the coin was about 60 years old when it was dropped into the mortar. Another example from Roman London is a small copper coin (*quadrans*) of Hadrian, found embedded in the yellow mortar of a brick pier, attributed to the forum, on the site of All Hallows, Lombard Street.¹⁵ In neither of these instances can accidental loss be ruled out; but there is also the case of the deliberate burial of 32 little barbarous radiate coins of the late 3rd century, almost certainly when a new building was being constructed. An earlier Roman building on the site of Lloyd's in Lime Street had been demolished, and the foundations of a more substantial building were laid. At this stage, and evidently before the laying of the new floors, the coins were dropped into a hole made with a pointed stick beside the new foundations, inside a corner of the building.¹⁶

Roach Smith believed that the numerous Roman coins of all periods that were dredged up near Old London Bridge, were deliberately deposited when the Roman bridge was built or repaired.¹⁷ In the excavation by the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society in Tooley Street, in 1967, on the line of Old London Bridge, a much corroded Roman bronze coin was in fact found at the bottom of a large post-hole.¹⁸ It is possible that the post

11. *Archaeol Cantiana* 64 (1951) 170-1.

12. K. M. Kenyon, *Excavations in Southwark* (1959) 21, 75.

13. Now in the Dartford Museum.

14. *J Roman Stud* 41 (1951) 134.

15. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London* (1965) 136.

16. R. Merrifield, *Ibid.* 54; and *Numis Chron* 6th Series 15 (1955) 113ff.

17. C. Roach Smith, *Illustrations of Roman London* (1859) 20-1.

18. Information kindly given by Mr. B. Beeby in advance of his report.

was a pile of the Roman bridge, but rather more likely that it belonged to a quay or jetty. The coin was indecipherable, and could only be dated by its size to the late Roman period. What is quite certain, however, is that it was deliberately deposited, since it was covered by a piece of Roman tile, and there can be no doubt that it was put there as a foundation deposit when the timber structure was built, or was repaired by the insertion of a new pile.

There are three recorded instances of a single coin being found at the very bottom of a Roman well in London; a coin of Allectus in a well in Moorgate (R.C.L. 135), a *sestertius* of Commodus in a well on the site of the Midland Bank in Poultry (R.C.L. 177) and a *sestertius* of Postumus in a wall on the site of St. Swithin's House, Walbrook (R.C.L. 264).¹⁹ In the last case, the coin was firmly embedded in the chalk puddling at the bottom of the well, and must have been dropped there at the time of construction. Again, there is a possibility of accidental loss, but a strong suspicion that the coin was deliberately deposited to ensure the favour of the gods towards the new structure.

Finally—and in this case there is no room for doubt—we have the copper coin (*as*) of Domitian found in the mast-step of the Roman barge which sank near the mouth of the Fleet at Blackfriars.²⁰ The depositor had made doubly sure of good luck by selecting a coin that bore the effigy of the goddess Fortuna holding a ship's rudder. It is significant that he chose this coin, although it was worn and had evidently been in circulation for a long time, rather than a more recent issue with a less appropriate reverse type.

Peter Marsden has shown that the custom of placing a coin for luck in the mast-step of a ship is one that has survived into modern times as the nautical equivalent of a foundation offering.²¹ The most recently recorded example was the golden sovereign put in the mast-step of the racing yacht *Sovereign*, the challenger for the America's Cup, reported in *The Times* in 1963. It seems, however, that the favour of the goddess of luck was not to be purchased so cheaply, either in ancient or modern times.

These offerings to unseen powers can all be loosely defined as "votive," but it is clear that a change in attitude accompanied the modification of the offering itself. The primitive idea was probably to create a beneficent tutelary deity, or at least to renew the life of an existing deity, by means of human sacrifice—including the Celtic head-hunting. The substitution of animals gave greater emphasis to the idea of feeding the god; and finally the use of money reduced the transaction to a purely commercial one—a payment, like any other, for favours

19. References are to R. Merrifield, *loc. cit.*, *Gazetteer*.

20. P.R.V. Marsden, *A Roman Ship from Blackfriars*, London 36-7.

21. P. R. V. Marsden, "The Luck Coin in Ships", *Mariner's Mirror* 51 (1965) 33.



Mast-step of Roman barge, Blackfriars, with coin placed there for luck.

(Photo: Guildhall Museum)

received or expected.

In its later forms the practice has survived into recent times—either as an admitted superstition, or rationalised as a "commemorative" deposit, as with the coins that are so often placed in or beneath foundation stones. There are, for example, sets of coins in Guildhall Museum from the foundation stones of old Blackfriars Bridge (1760), the City of London School (1835), and Guildhall Council Chamber (1883).

Customs and beliefs that have survived from Roman times to the present day might be expected to occur in the intervening centuries, but here our evidence from London is scanty. In a second article, however, a number of curious finds from later periods will be discussed. Some appear to have affinities with the votive deposits and foundation offerings of Roman Britain; others relate directly to the witch mania that swept through the country in post-mediaeval times. All, as we shall see, lack any obviously practical purpose, and can best be explained as examples of the irrational element in human behaviour.