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A ROMAN PROVINCIAL LEAD SEALING FROM BURGH CASTLE

by David Gurney

In April 1993, a metal-detector rally was held on the fields around the Roman fort of the Saxon Shore at Burgh Castle, adjacent to but excluding the Scheduled Ancient Monument. This resulted in the recovery and on-site recording of more than five hundred Roman coins, and a wide range of Roman, Saxon and medieval and post-medieval artefacts, found by more than five hundred metal-detectorists who attended this event.¹

Among the finds recovered and retained for further study was a circular lead seal depicting a standing stag in front of a tree and the inscription P B S. This was found by Mr Rod Halsey from Buckinghamshire, who subsequently has kindly donated this important find to the Norfolk Museums Service.²

This sealing is of Roman date, and belongs to a small group of inscribed provincial examples in lead.³ The letters P B S are for *P(rovinciae) B(ritanniae) S(uperioris)*, 'Seal of the province of Upper Britain'. The stag appears to have been the badge adopted by *Britannia Superior*, the southern of the two provinces established (according to Herodian) by Septimius Severus (AD 193-211), or by Caracalla (AD 196-217) in whose reign the earliest inscriptions occur. *Superior* covered all of southern Britain and included the military bases at Caerleon (*Legio II*) and Chester (*Legio XX*).

The only other recorded sealing from the province (now lost) with stag *couchant* and inscription P B R S was found in 1875 at Combe Down (Avon). This came from a Roman building believed to be a headquarters for procuratorial officials.

Slightly more common are the seals of the northern province, *Britannia Inferioris*, inscribed P B I. Examples are recorded from York, Binchester (Co. Durham) and Aldborough (N. Yorks). A fourth is said to have been 'picked up at Felixstowe' (Suffolk) before 1847, and this may therefore have come from the Saxon Shore fort of Walton Castle, lost in the 18th century though coastal erosion.

The two provinces from which these sealings derive ceased to exist by AD 314, by which time reorganisation had seen the creation of four new provinces with new names. The walled fort at Burgh Castle is generally taken to date to the latter part of the 3rd century, but earlier occupation, perhaps of a military nature, cannot be discounted.

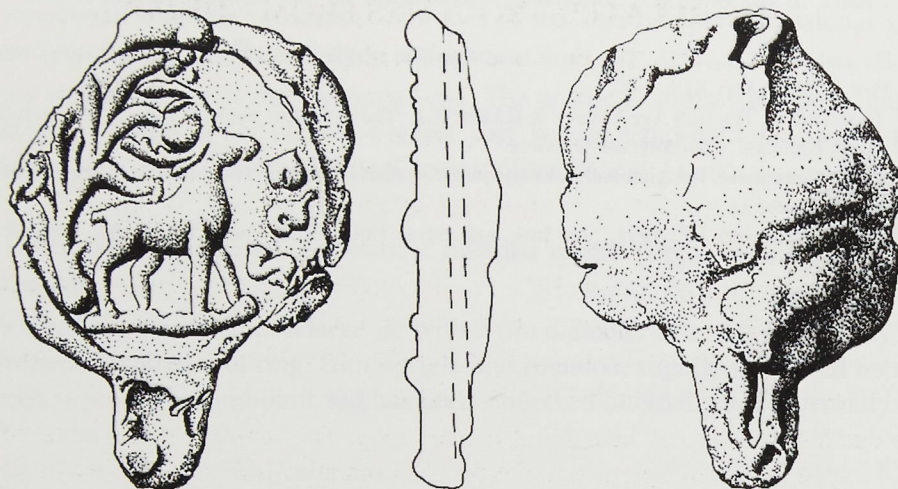


Fig. 1
Roman sealing from Burgh Castle. Scale 2:1
Drawn by Sue White.

The seal described here is therefore likely to have been used at or to have reached Burgh Castle sometime during the 3rd century, attached to an official document. As the boundary between the two 3rd-century provinces is unknown, it is not possible to say for certain if Burgh Castle and/or Walton Castle fell in *Superior* or *Inferior*, and the lead sealings do not help to resolve this. Salway⁴ suggests a boundary running from the Wash to the east to Chester to the west, which would put both forts into the southern *Superior*. The movement of official documents within each province and between the two provinces must, however, have been a fairly common occurrence, although surprisingly few of the lead seals which would have been attached to them for security and to show their authenticity have been recorded.

1. For details see the Norfolk Sites and Monuments Record. A summary is published in *Treasure Hunting*, June 1993.
2. Norfolk SMR Site No. 13227. Accessioned by the Castle Museum, Norwich.
3. Frere, S.S., Roxan, M and Tomlin, R.S.O. 1990 (eds), *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, Volume II, *Instrumentum Domesticum* (Personal Belongings and the like), Fascicule 1, The Military Diplomata; Metal Ingots; Tesserae; Dies; Labels; and Lead Sealings (RIB 2401-2411), pp 92-94.
4. Salway, P. 1981, *Roman Britain* (Oxford), Map VII.