

A ROMAN MILITARY DIPLOMA FROM LONDON

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A fragment of a bronze Roman military diploma was discovered in London in 1978, during excavation of a house in Watling Court, 41–53 Cannon Street, to the south of Cheapside¹ (Fig. 1). The house seems to have been erected in *c.* AD 80, and had mudbrick and timber walls on stone sills; the excavated portion comprised a single range of rooms, possibly one wing of a courtyard building. It was finely decorated with plastered and painted walls, black and white floor mosaics, and a mortar floor with inset *tesserae* crosses which is unparalleled in Britain and may be the work of Italian mosaicists².

The diploma was found in a layer containing scorched mudbricks, tile fragments and charcoal flecks, and was itself severely damaged by fire. The layer is interpreted as debris from walls and internal partitions which collapsed *in situ* during a fire of the Hadrianic period. If this is correctly associated with the large conflagration in London that is normally placed in the early part of Hadrian's reign, a *terminus ante quem* of *c.* AD 120–5 may be suggested for the issue of the diploma. Although the fragment is quite small, sufficient internal indicators are present for a late 1st or early 2nd-century date to be suggested, thus agreeing with the archaeological evidence.

The tablets known as military diplomas were issued to members of the Roman armed forces during the period *c.* AD 52–306, to the best of our present knowledge. We do not know what the Latin term for these tablets

was, but those granted to the auxiliary soldier gave him Roman citizenship and other benefits if he had served 25 or more years and consisted of two bronze tablets held together by wire. The main component of this fragment is an irregularly shaped piece from the middle of the first tablet (*tabella I*); the part of the formula preserved on the outer face shows that it belonged mainly to the lower portion of the tablet which included, and ran down from, the level of the binding holes. These holes were normally punched through a blank space which was left running parallel to the shorter sides of the two rectangular tablets which made up the diploma. Wires were threaded through them, which were sealed on the outer face of the second tablet, the purpose being to prevent fraud. The formula of the grant made to the recipient was inscribed twice – once on the outer face of the first tablet and a second time on the inner faces of both tablets. If an official suspected that changes had been made in the outer text the seals could be broken and the inner faces examined for agreement between details of the two scripts. No marks of binding holes are preserved on either side in this case. The position of the fragment in a complete diploma is shown in Fig. 2. Part of the second tablet (*tabella II*) has become cemented to the inner face of the first, presumably through the heat of the fire, and the adhesion between the two is such that it has not, so far, proved to be possible to separate the two tablets. The fragment of *tabella II* is not as large as that of *tabella I*, so that a few letters on the inner face of the latter may be seen. On *tabella II*, to the right of a blank space (scored with a vertical line, possibly representing the area where a box was attached which would have covered the seals on the wires holding the tablets together) are three letters. These are almost

certainly the initial letters of the name (*cognomen*) of one of the seven witnesses who normally testified to the accuracy of the diploma as a copy of a *constitutio* conferring the grant, which had been set up in a public place in Rome.

After careful conservation and cleaning (see Appendix)³ it has been possible to read the outer face of *tabella I*. Radiography has produced several further letters belonging to the inner faces of the two tablets but these are insufficient for a complete restoration of the text to be attempted. From their positions, and from the general appearance of the two tablets, it is probable that the letters visible on the inner face of *tabella I* form part of a list of auxiliary units. It is not possible to say with certainty that this diploma was issued in Britain, although the find-spot strongly supports that attribution. There is a chance that the man who owned the diploma was a native Briton who had been recruited for service in a unit stationed in another province, and who had elected to return home after his discharge.

The maximum surviving measurements of various sections of the fragment are: height (*tabella I* and *tabella II*) 590 mm; width (*tabella I*) 510 mm, (*tabella II*) 400 mm; thickness (*tabella I*) 1.85 mm, (*tabella II*) 1.23 mm; combined thickness at the centre 3.06 mm – these figures are averages.

Transcription, expansion and translation of *tabella I*, exterior text (letters enclosed in square brackets are restored by comparison with other diplomas; letters in round brackets are completions of abbreviated words):-

[Imp(erator) Caesar, divi Nervae f(ilius), Nerva Traianus Augustus, pontifex maximus, tribunic(ia) potestat(e) . . . , co(n)s(ul) . . .]

[equitibus et peditibus qui militaverunt in alis (number given) et cohortibus (number given) quae appellantur . . . (list of units) . . .]

[et sunt in Britannia (?) sub (name of governor) . . .]

[quinis et vicenis pluribusve stipendiis emeritis dimi]s[is ho]nest[a missione], [quorum nomina su]bscripta sunt, [ipsis liberis posterisque] eorum civitate[m dedit et conubium cum] uxoribus, quas tu[nc] habuissent, cum est c[ivitas] iis data, au[t, siqui caelibes essent, cu]m iis, quas pos[tea] duxissent dumtaxat sing[uli] singu[las]. [a. d. . . (day date)]ndro Ver[. . . (?) . . .]ant[. . .]

'The Emperor Caesar Nerva Trajan Augustus, son of the deified Nerva, high priest, in the (..) year of his tribunician power, consul for the (?) time, gave to the cavalry and infantry who served in the (?) alae and (?) cohorts which are called . . . , which are in Britain (?) under . . . , having served twenty-five or more years and having been honourably discharged, whose names appear below, citizenship for themselves and for their children and descendants and the right of legal marriage with the wives they had when citizenship was given to them, or if they were unmarried with those they might marry later, limited to one wife each.

(Day and month) when [. . .]nder Ver[. . .] and . . . were consuls.'

The name of the unit in which the recipient served, its commander, and the status of the recipient would follow, with his full name, as entered on the books of his unit, and his place of origin, together with the name of his wife, her

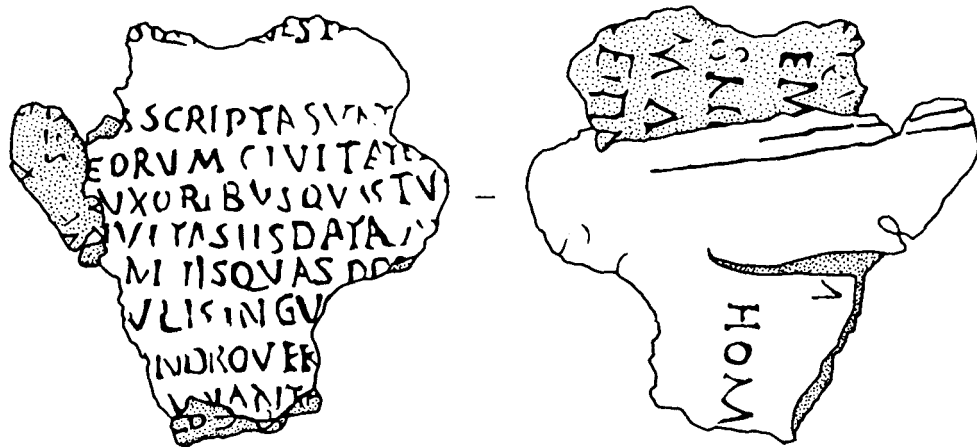


Fig.1 Roman Diploma: The two fragments from Watling Court.

place of origin, and the names of their children (if any). The final section of the formula dealt with its certification as an authentic copy of a bronze tablet set up in Rome. Transcription of *tabella I*, interior text:-

EM *A/**
AC
SN) M
MA C
ETIIN

(* Letters shown in *italic* were seen through radiography.)

Transcription and expansion of *tabella II*, exterior text:-

[Q. POMPEI] HOM[ER]I

The date of the diploma.

The main portion of the text has been restored through a comparison with other diplomas of the auxiliary army. We may be certain that it was issued before AD 140 because at that time the formula of auxiliary diplomas was changed so that existing children of veterans were excluded from the grant. Up to that date, although soldiers were not allowed to marry legally during service, children born of a union between an auxiliary soldier and a woman with whom he had formed a regular relationship had been included with their fathers as recipients of Roman citizenship. This diploma clearly mentions children – [*ipsis liberis posterisque*] *eorum civitate[m dedit]*. Another factor providing a clue to the date of issue is the lack of abbreviation of words in the text of the outer face. Roman scribes and copyists commonly used abbreviations in inscriptions of all kinds. A rough rule of thumb is that when a particular formula is first used it is given in full. Later, when custom had presumably made it well known, abbreviations occur. These usually take the form of lopping the ends of words. With diplomas (apart from some Neronian examples *CIL XVI* 4 and 5, and one or two cases of the appearance of the word *iis* as *is*, in *CIL XVI* 42 of 98 and *RMD* 8 of 105, though in the latter case on the inner face) there is no abbreviation in the section of the formula with which we are concerned before AD 114 (*CIL XVI* 61). On and after that date various word

endings are omitted. In our specimen all the word endings that are preserved are complete, which would accord with a pre-Hadrianic date (that is before AD 117). However, the most significant pointer lies in the *cognomen* of the witness found on the outer face of the second tablet. Witnesses to auxiliary (and fleet) diplomas were drawn from among clerks in a government department in Rome from the Flavian period onward and the same names recur frequently over certain date ranges. So far, Q. Pompeius Homerus is the only known witness with that *cognomen* (indeed the only witness whose *cognomen* begins with those three letters). His name appears in diplomas between AD 98 and 108⁴. In the witness list of the London diploma Homerus appears to be in fourth place (see Fig. 2), but since this is a reconstruction there can be no certainty. However, the general conclusion that we have here a diploma of the reign of Trajan – or perhaps that of Nerva – seems reasonably clear.

Diploma type.

In the first half century or so when diplomas were first issued (that is from the latter part of the reign of Claudius until *c.* AD 110) there were three main types of diplomas whose formula varied according to whether they were issued wholly to serving soldiers (Type I), to a mixture of serving soldiers and veterans (Type II), or solely to veterans (Type III)⁵. Because it is possible to read [*dimi*]s[*sis ho*]nest[*a missione*] as part of the text the diploma may be recognised as either Type II or Type III. The text has been restored as a Type III diploma, but if it was issued before AD 108, as the presence of Homerus in the witness list suggests, it may have included serving as well as veteran recipients.

Discussion.

If the diploma named a British garrison the governor's name should have followed Britannia in the transcript. There should also have been a list of auxiliary units whose members qualified to receive the diploma grants at that time, but unless it proves possible to separate the two

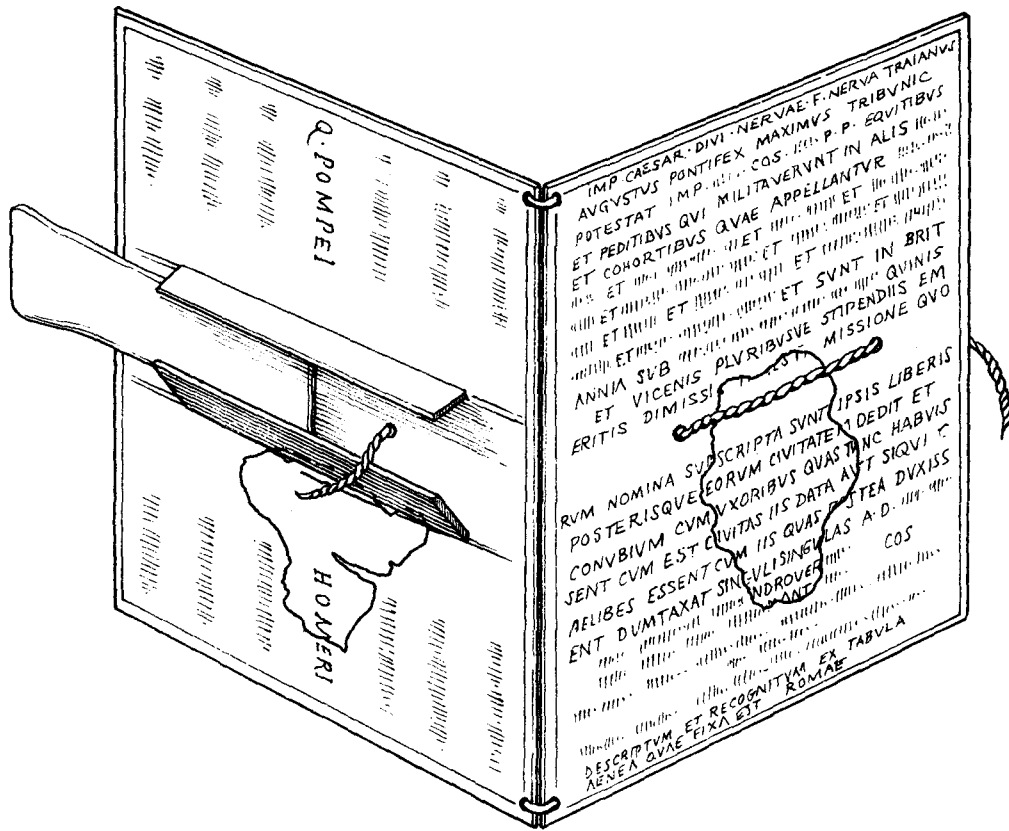


Fig. 2 Roman Diploma: Reconstruction of a complete diploma showing the approximate position of the London fragments and the box protecting the witnesses seals based on a recent find from *Lussonium*, Hungary

fragmentary tablets this information is lost. The only, very tentative, reconstructions that may be attempted are noted in *Britannia*⁶, where it is suggested that the letters . .]EM[. on the inner face of *tabella I*, may represent the end of a numeral – *septem, novem, or decem* – indicating the number of either *alae* or *cohortes* listed in the diploma. If this is the correct interpretation the editors observe ‘the latter is more likely since, on grounds of space, there would have been fewer than seven *alae* (the minimum if this suggestion is correct) before the *cohortes* including *cohors II Nerviorum*’. The presence of this cohort in the list is suggested from the

letters in the last preserved line of the inner face, which may represent . . *et II Nerviorum*], a cohort that is known to have been in Britain at that time.

After the main part of the standard formula, ending with *singuli singulas*, a day date was inscribed, followed by the names of the two consuls in office at the time the *constitutio* was published. The letters]NDROVER[, which appear on line 8 of the outer face, are in the correct position to be part of the name of one of the consuls. The spacing of the letters (a rough line count gives a possible 30–36 letters per line on the outer face of the complete tablet), suggests that there may have been

8–14 letters before the left broken edge of the fragment on this line. Unfortunately, there is considerable variation in the way in which the names of the consuls are inscribed. Sometimes the *praenomen* (signified by a single letter in most cases) is separated from the *nomen* by a fairly wide space, and there is a similar gap between *nomen* and *cognomen*. In this case, usually, the consuls' names are given on separate lines. On other diplomas the spacing is less generous and the two consuls are placed on one line, or one consul may be polyonymous so that extra names are included thus crowding the letters together in the available space. In our example it is difficult to know which version we are seeing. The names of consuls are given in the ablative case, so that the letters *..NDRO* could form the ending of a name. If the line contained the names of two consuls we should not expect an appreciable gap to be left between parts of names, and something of the nature of [*Alexa*]ndro Ver[ro] may have been engraved. This can only be taken as an example of one of the possibilities for reconstructing this line since we have no knowledge of a consul of that name at any period (these two names would be *cognomina*).⁷ All that may be ventured is the opinion that if this diploma belonged to Britain it was not issued in AD 103 or 105, since we have diplomas of those years where the names of the consuls are known. In neither case would the preserved lettering agree with them, and it is extremely unlikely (although not completely impossible) that there would be two issues of diplomas within the same year in Britain.

In the final line of the outer face the lettering is very poorly preserved. The only certain letter is an *N*. If the consular names were spaced over two lines this should represent part of the name of the

second consul. If the two consuls had already been named on the 8th line, this line would carry the title of the regiment of the recipient. There is no unit in Britain at that time in which the letters *ANT* occur together but, in view of the difficulties of decipherment, speculation concerning the interpretation to be given to these letters is unprofitable.

The main interest of this diploma must lie in its find-spot in a town house in London, particularly since the Hadrianic fire and the presumed date of the diploma tie it fairly closely in time to the original recipient. It is a reasonable assumption that we have here an auxiliary veteran who chose to settle in London after his discharge. We cannot tell if he owned the house, merely lodged there, or indeed was the first occupant, but he is the first diploma recipient we may safely ascribe to the capital⁸.

APPENDIX: THE CONSERVATION OF THE DIPLOMA HELEN GANIARIS

A summary of the conservation treatment of the London diploma provides an opportunity to stress the importance of examination techniques. The lettering on this diploma fragment was heavily obscured by copper corrosion products. A further complication was that the two tablets had corroded together so that some of the text on the inner faces was hidden.

The lettering was first detected by routine x-radiography. This revealed letters on the front face but none on the others. Through the kind cooperation of Andrex NDT Products Ltd., it was arranged to have the diploma examined with a high definition x-ray unit. The detail on the resulting x-radiographs was sharper and several letters from the inner faces were revealed. This technique had the added advantage that enlargements could be done with less loss of detail than would occur with standard x-radiographs.

Before and during treatment there was close consultation with Dr. Roxan. Advice was

given on where letters were likely to appear, their size and style, and which parts of the text would be most diagnostic. The x-radiographs (both actual size and enlarged) were used throughout study sessions with the specialist and the illustrator.

All cleaning of the diploma fragment was done at $\times 10$ – $\times 20$ magnification using a stereomicroscope with adjustable lighting. Raking light was particularly helpful in seeing some of the more deteriorated letters. Cleaning was done with hand tools (scalpel, brush, electric engraver) because the letters are preserved in the corrosion layers. Detail in these layers would have been lost if chemicals had been used. The two inner faces were firmly attached by corrosion. Because of the brittleness of the tablets, it was decided not to attempt to separate the two faces. Cleaning was followed by application of a corrosion inhibitor and a protective resin.

The approach throughout the conservation of this diploma has followed the conservation ethic of minimum intervention. Advances in examination techniques may provide other non-destructive methods of reading the hidden letters.

Acknowledgements: We are very grateful to Dr. Peter J. Kalmarczye of Andrex NDT Products (UK) Ltd. for arranging high

definition x-radiography to be done by John Kime and Stuart Tate at Rolls Royce Ltd., Leavesden.

NOTES

1. Excavations by the Department of Urban Archaeology of the Museum of London, for the Museum and the Department of the Environment, were supervised by Dominic Perring. For the site see D. Perring and S. Roskams *The development of Roman London west of the Walbrook* (forthcoming); for a preliminary notice of the diploma *Britannia* 14 (1983) 344–345. All the finds from the site, together with catalogues and archival reports on the structures, are stored in the Museum of London under the site code WAT 78. The site accession number of the diploma is WAT 78 (225) [380].
2. As suggested by D.J. Smith in Perring and Roskams *op. cit.* in note 1.
3. The diploma fragment was conserved by Helen Ganiaris, Conservation Department; drawn by Nick Griffiths, Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London.
4. *RMD* 6, of 96 – in third place; *CIL* XVI 42 of 98 – in fifth place; *RMD* 7 of 99 – in first place; *CIL* XVI 46 of 100 – in first place; *CIL* XVI 48 of 103 – in first place; *CIL* XVI 50 of 105 – in second place; *RMD* 8 of 105 – in second place; *RMD* 9 of 105 – in second place; *CIL* XVI 55 of 107 – in first place; *RMD* Appendix p. 103 of 108 – in fourth place.
5. Discussion of the development of these types may be found in G. Allföldy 'Zur Beurteilung der Militärdiplome der Auxiliarsoldaten' *Historia* 17 (Wiesbaden, 1968) 215–227; J. C. Mann 'The Development of Auxiliary and Fleet Diplomas' *Epigraphische Studien* 9 (Bonn, 1972) 233–241.
6. *Britannia op. cit.* in note 1.
7. In *Britannia ibid.*, the suggestion is made that the consul may be C. Iulius Alexander Berenicianus, 'assuming the substitution of a V for a B (cf *CIL* XVI p. 211 B for V and 212 V for B)'. Berenicianus was consul in 116, but it is pointed out that witnesses to diplomas sometimes signed sporadically for twenty years or more.
8. See E. Birley 'Veterans of the Roman Army in Britain and Elsewhere' *Ancient Society* 13 (1982, forthcoming).

ABBREVIATIONS:

- CIL* = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Volume XVI *Diplomata militaria ex constitutionibus imperatorum de civitate et conubio militum veteranorumque expressa* (Berlin, 1936) – Supplementum (Berlin, 1955).
RMD = *Roman Military Diplomas 1954–1977*. Institute of Archaeology Occasional Publication No. 2 (London, 1978).