

# CATHEDRAL OR GRANARY? THE ROMAN COINS FROM COLCHESTER HOUSE, CITY OF LONDON (PEP89)

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## SUMMARY

*The Roman coins from Colchester House are analysed using Reece's (1991) coin periods. The coins include a late 4th-century hoard. The site finds reveal an unusual pattern of coin loss with high peaks in the mid- and very late 4th century. The likely function of the basilican building excavated on the site is considered in the light of the coin evidence.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s David Sankey and a team from the Department for Urban Archaeology excavated a large basilican/aisled building of late 4th-century date at Colchester House in the south-east corner of the Roman city of *Londinium*. This structure was tentatively interpreted as a late Roman cathedral or large official *horrea* (granary) for the storage of the *annona* (grain tax) (Sankey 1998). However, the programme of post-excavation analysis on this site never moved beyond the assessment stage and the finds and paper archives were deposited in the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) without full analysis (D Sankey pers comm).

The excavations produced 509 coins (Tables 1–2). Of this total four coins were of post-Roman date and two objects were merely ‘coin shaped’. A further 135 coins were found in association with a pottery jar in the fill of a backfilled well (Sankey 1998, 80) and form a small hoard. The remaining coins were recovered largely by

sieving the sediment from four 1m-square ‘test pits’ through a screen with a 2mm mesh. The ‘test pits’ were dug to sample so-called ‘dark earth’ deposits (Yule 1990; Macphail *et al* 2002) overlying the building; these layers were otherwise removed in a summary fashion (D Sankey pers comm). This suggests that these coins represent but a mere fraction of the total coinage present on the site. Nevertheless they are of interest as a large group from a site within the City. Few such groups have been published (Kelleher & Leins 2008; Hammerson 2008) and it is to be hoped that this short discussion of the coins from Colchester House will aid future analyses of Roman coin loss and circulation in London.

The coins were examined as part of a wider project looking at the distribution of particularly late Roman material culture in London and Southwark. Resources were not available to undertake a full numismatic catalogue as advocated by Brickstock (2004). However, a catalogue identifying the coins to reign and type has been produced and is deposited with the LAARC. A summary listing is provided here along with a discussion of the hoard and an analysis of the site finds using the coin periods advocated by Reece (1991).

## THE HOARD

135 coins can confidently be assigned to a single hoard deposited between *c.*AD 355 and AD 363. 112 of these coins were recovered from

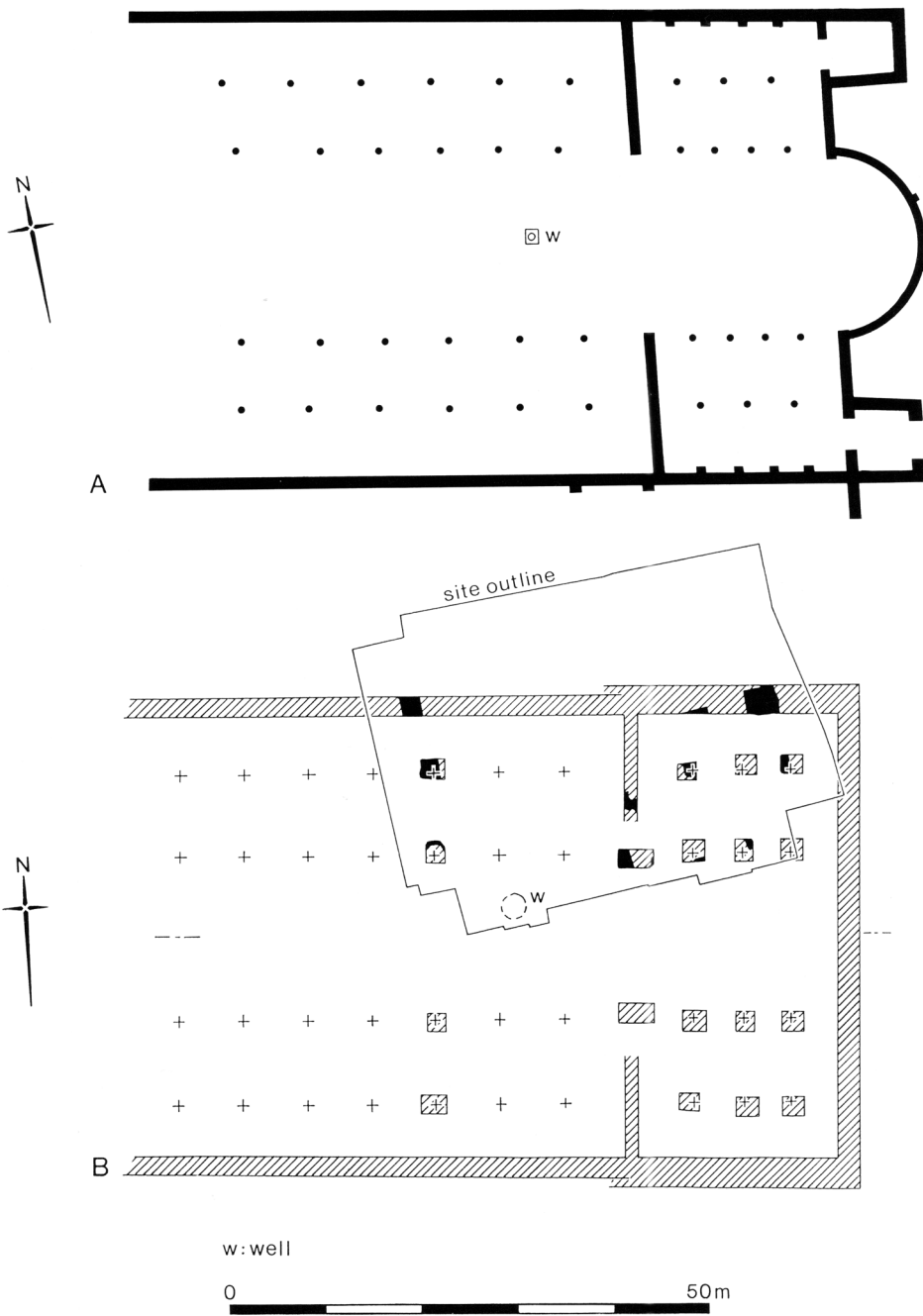


Fig 1. Plan of the excavated building at Colchester House and the late Roman cathedral dedicated to St Tecla in Milan (from Sankey 1998, fig 17; reproduced by kind permission of MoLA and the Journal of Roman Archaeology)

Table 1. Summary of the coins (excluding the hoard) from Colchester House by Reece (1991) period

Reece period	Date (AD)	No. of coins	Per mills
1	Up to 43	0	0.00
2	43-54	0	0.00
3	54-68	0	0.00
4	69-96	1	3.29
5	96-117	1	3.29
6	117-138	0	0.00
7	138-161	1	3.29
8	161-180	0	0.00
9	180-192	0	0.00
10	193-222	0	0.00
11	223-238	0	0.00
12	238-259	3	9.87
13	259-275	16	52.63
14	275-296	32	105.26
15	296-317	1	3.29
16	317-330	2	6.58
17	330-348	73	240.13
18	348-364	94	309.21
19	364-378	38	125.00
20	378-388	4	13.16
21	388-402	38	125.00
Illegible	-	70	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>374</b>	

the top of a well associated with demolition debris and a pottery jar. The remaining 23 coins have provenances suggesting they

come from either the same deposit or 'dark earth' immediately overlying the well.

The earliest coins in the hoard are a single irregular radiate (AD 270–290) and an issue of Allectus (AD 293–296). However, most of the coinage (44%) can be assigned to the period AD 330–348 and includes irregular VRBS ROMA, CONSTANTINOPOLIS, GLORIA EXERCITVS, and VICTORIAEDDAVGGQNN coins. The remaining coins include an example of each of the regular FEL TEMP REPARATIO issues (hut, galley, phoenix and fallen horseman) (AD 348–355) and many small fallen horseman copies (AD 355–363; 28%) of well-known type (Brickstock 1987). These copies range from 8mm to 15mm in diameter with the majority being smaller than 12mm. In general terms the hoard is typical of groups of coins assembled during the late 350s or early 360s (Brickstock 1987; Robertson 2000).

The associated pottery fragments, adjoining unabraded sherds apparently from a single vessel, would appear to be the container which held this coin hoard. The vessel is an unusual necked jar in a hard, sandy buff-brown fabric (MoL code: SAND). The entire rim circumference is present and three-quarters of the base circumference survives. Between two incised bands around the body of the vessel are two wavy lines which contain stabbed decoration. The rim

Table 2. Summary of the coins from the hoard

Type	Date (AD)	No.	%
Irreg. Radiate	270-290	1	0.74
Allectus	293-296	1	0.74
Urbs Roma, Wolf and Twins	330-335	4	2.96
Constantinopolis, Victory on prow	330-335	6	4.44
Gloria exercitus, 2 standards	330-335	10	7.41
Pietas Romana	337-341	2	1.48
Pax Publica	337-341	2	1.48
Gloria exercitus, 1 standard	335-341	21	15.56
2 Victories	343-348	15	11.11
Fel Temp Reparatio, hut	348-350	3	2.22
Fel Temp Reparatio, galley	348-350	1	0.74
Fel Temp Reparatio, phoenix	348-350	2	1.48
Magnentius	350-353	1	0.74
Fel Temp Reparatio, fallen horseman	354-361	38	28.15
Lead disc		1	0.74
Illegible		27	20.00
<b>Total</b>		<b>135</b>	<b>100.00</b>

is decorated with semi-circular, possibly rouletted, depressions. The source of this vessel cannot be ascertained with complete confidence but the fabric and form suggest a 4th-century product and similar decoration to that exhibited on the rim can be seen on other 4th-century jars (eg Brown 1994).

### THE SITE FINDS

The finds represent a relatively unusual pattern for a site in the City or Southwark (Fig 2). Coinage of the 1st and 2nd centuries is so sparse as to be almost non-existent. The only such coins from the site are two *denarii* (of Vespasian and Antoninus Pius) and an *as* of Trajan. The silver content of the *denarii* means that they could have been in circulation until the early 3rd century. However, their relatively unworn state may preclude this. The *as* of Trajan could also have circulated until the 3rd century. This, combined with the absence of illegible 1st- and 2nd-century coins, may indicate that there was little activity on the site in the early Roman period or that such activity was

truncated by the construction of the large late Roman structure (Sankey 1995, 115–16).

In common with many British sites the mid- to late 3rd century marks a watershed. This period of increased coin loss is to be associated with the massive production of low-value official and unofficial radiate *antoniniani*. It terminates with four coins of Carausius and Allectus before the usual slump in the early 4th century associated with the reformed coinages of the Tetrarchy and the early Constantinian period.

The years from AD 330 to 348 see a large spike in lost coins. These are largely irregular copies of VRBS ROMA, CONSTANTINOPOLIS, GLORIA EXERCITVS and VICTORIAEDDAVGGQNN types and such peaks are known from many Roman sites in Britain. However, what is unusual is the scale of the peak (higher than that for the radiate coinage) and the fact that coin loss during the period AD 348–364 (the period of fallen horseman copies) is even higher. It is difficult to explain this phenomenon. Superficially it seems possible that these coins could be

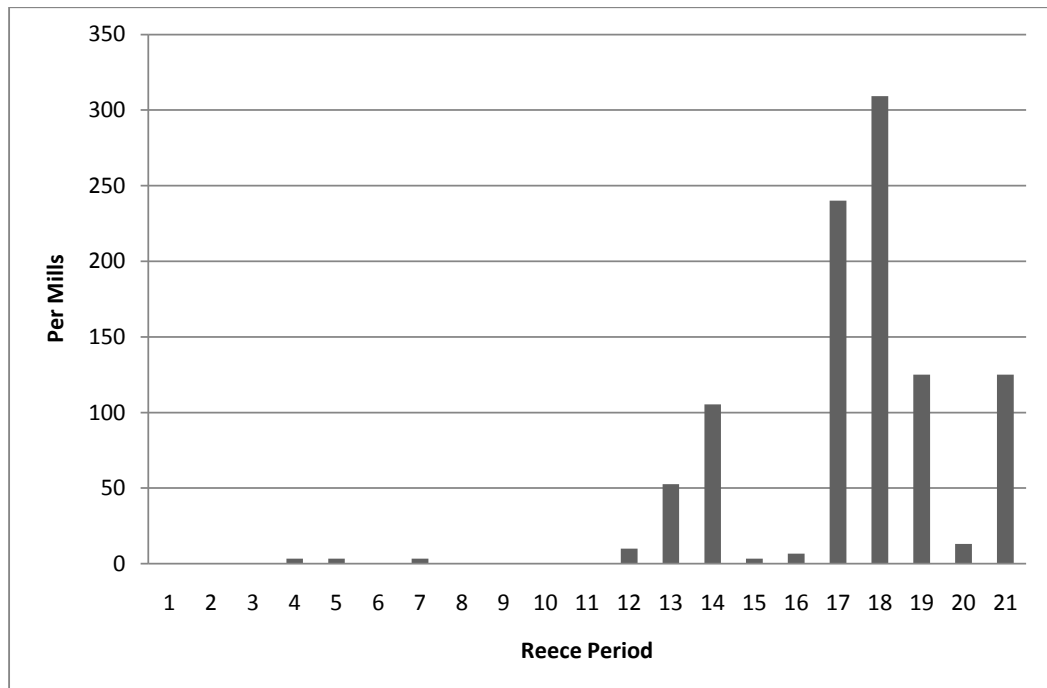


Fig 2. Histogram of the coins (per mills) from Colchester House (N=304; illegible and hoard coins excluded) (for coin periods see Table 1)

dispersed from the hoard. However, the coins were largely recovered from small areas of 'dark earth' that had been subjected to careful excavation and sieving. Thus it seems difficult to associate these finds directly with the excavated hoard (D Sankey pers comm). There is a slight possibility that these coins might be derived from another dispersed hoard. However, this cannot be demonstrated one way or the other.

Finally, the three coin periods between AD 364 and AD 402 represent one of the most interesting aspects of the coin histogram. The years AD 364–378 usually represent a fairly modest peak on British sites with Valentinianic bronze flooding into the late Roman diocese. The succeeding years (AD 378–388) generally produce negligible numbers of coins followed by a rise in the final period to a number usually lower than that for the years AD 364–378. At Colchester House the group of coins is large enough that the intervening years (AD 378–388) are represented by four coins of Magnus Maximus, his son Flavius Victor, and the legitimate emperor Theodosius I. However, the peak for the final period (AD 388–402) is equal to the Valentinianic peak.

The strength of coin loss in the final period is striking as few sites show such strong loss of Theodosian coins. Richborough is the most extreme example but Caerwent also exhibits a similar pattern (Reece 1991), suggesting that activity on the site was continuing into the first years of the 5th century. The recent publication of histograms for Number 1 Poultry and 75 Cheapside (Hammerson 2008, figs 169–70) indicates that other sites within the City exhibit similar patterns of loss in the period AD 388–402 and this suggests that some locations within *Londinium's* walls were flourishing above the norm right up until Roman Britain's 'end'. This is a significant pattern and one which deserves further investigation as it contradicts our current models of Roman London's gradual slide into decay during the 4th century.

### THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BUILDING

The building represents something of an enigma. Clearly the excavated remains were part of a massive and arguably over-

engineered structure, with stratified pottery suggesting a construction date after *c.*AD 350. The few coins stratified in association with this building support this date and suggest that it may have been being modified as late as AD 364–378. As noted above, the excavator tentatively put forward two interpretations of the building: a *horreum* or a cathedral. The latter suggestion has proved particularly controversial (Esmonde Cleary 1999, 398; Petts 2003, 64–5) but the dimensions of the cathedral of St Tecla in Milan and the Colchester House structure are very close (Sankey 1998, fig 17). It thus seems reasonable to ask whether the coins can shed any light on the structure's function.

The only way that the coins can aid in the interpretation of the building's function is through inter-site statistical comparison. At the most basic level it can be noted that the ratio of radiate coins (AD 259–296) to coins struck after AD 330 stands at 15.8%:81.3%. Drawing on the work of Reece (1987, fig 5.8; 1993), this ratio places Colchester House firmly among the rural sites and the so-called 'bad towns'. Even more interesting is the fact that sites with greater late 4th-century than late 3rd-century coin loss are predominantly located in the West Country, in a swathe from Caerwent, through the Cotswolds and into the middle Thames Valley (Reece 1987, 96).

London is a long way from the Cotswolds. However, the Thames does provide a navigable link between the two regions. Is it possible that this explains the pattern of loss at Colchester House? In a study of coin finds from Wiltshire it was suggested that the prosperity of the region in the late 4th century might be linked to the historically attested export of grain to the Rhineland by the emperor Julian (Moorhead 2001, 94). Archaeologically the distribution of late Roman pottery from Oxfordshire down the Thames to London and the coastal distributions of German imports, such as Mayen ware, might reflect the movement of grain barges along the Thames and the transshipment of their cargoes on to sea-going vessels for the trip to the mouth of the Rhine (Gerrard 2005, 57–8). In this context a large granary behind London's walls to hold some of the grain destined for the garrisons on the German *limes* would be readily explicable.

It might also explain why the coins from Colchester House seem to be related to the pattern of loss exhibited by sites in the West Country.

The alternative interpretation of Colchester House as a late Roman cathedral also needs to be addressed. Given that late Roman coins occasionally carry explicit Christian symbols (such as the Magnentian issues with a large Chi-Rho on the reverse: Fig 3), the presence of such coins in abnormal numbers could be interpreted as having a religious significance. It is fair to say that none of these coins are present in the assemblage. However, this is the wrong way to approach the coin assemblage. It would be of greater significance if it could be demonstrated that the coins from Colchester House shared a similar loss profile to that exhibited by other 'religious' sites.

Some fifteen years ago Reece (1995) pioneered an approach in which the coin loss of different sites could be compared. Essentially the methodology used involves converting the raw numbers of coins to percentages per coin period, creating a cumulative percentage and seeing how it deviates from the British mean. The method was published in full and the reader seeking further details is best pointed to Reece's

discussion of the approach (1995, 182–8). It should be noted that some criticisms of this method have been aired (Lockyear 2007), but it remains a useful tool.

When the coins from Colchester House are examined using this approach, the pattern that emerges shares a striking resemblance to a group of very unusual sites (Reece 1995, fig 27) (Fig 4). The five sites include three undoubted West Country temples (Uley, Nettleton and Lamyatt Beacon), the villa and 'house-church' at Lullingstone, and a group of finds from the extremely unusual defended late Roman settlement at Gatcombe (Branigan 1977). This might be seen as favouring a late Roman religious function for the site.

If the architecture and coins can tentatively be read as suggesting that the site may have had a religious (although not necessarily Christian) function, it seems reasonable to look for further supporting evidence. Unfortunately there are no clear cut answers. However, deposits sealed below the building contained a large group of CAM306 bowls (Groves in Sankey 1995). These rather utilitarian looking vessels have been the subject of much recent research and have an extremely close connection with ritual sites in Britain and on the Continent



*Fig 3. Copper-alloy nummus of Magnentius, minted at Arles, AD 352–353, with a prominent Chi-Rho on the reverse. Coins with prominent Christian symbols (such as this example in the British Museum) were not present at Colchester House (Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)*



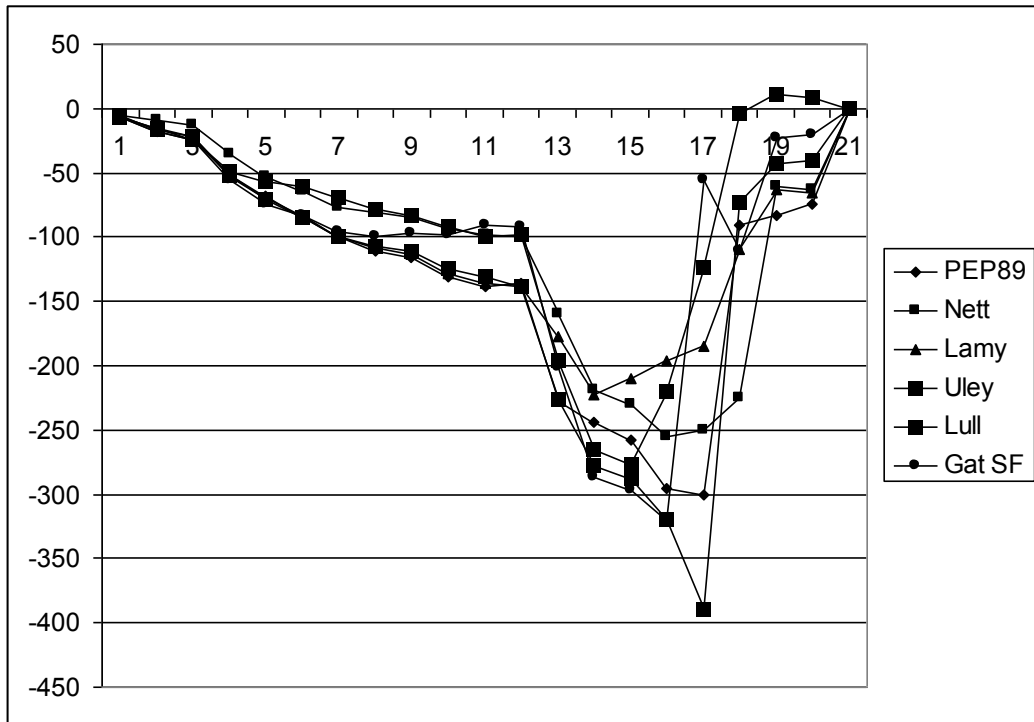


Fig 4. The deviation of coin loss from the British mean for Colchester House, Nettleton, Lamyatt Beacon, Uley, Lullingstone and Gatcombe (for coin periods see Table 1)

(Haynes 2008). In London they have been found in association with the Walbrook Mithraeum (Henig 1998, 230), at the temple site at Tabard Square in Southwark (where 55 sherds from 27 contexts are recorded: PCA unpublished data) and elsewhere. In Colchester the CAM306 is known from a mithraeum, a cemetery site and the Christian church/funerary basilica at Butt Road (Haynes 2008, 129) prompting one recent writer to comment that: 'In future we may come to see the CAM306 as strong an indicator of cult as statues, inscriptions and architectural forms' (Haynes 2008, 130). As these vessels were recovered from deposits sealed by the building they obviously pre-date the structure and thus tell us nothing about its function. Nevertheless, their presence may suggest that ritual activity took place on the site before the construction of the building. This in turn could indicate that the basilican building had been placed on a venerated site.

## CONCLUSION

At a purely empirical level the coins from Colchester House provide a useful body of data to which other coin finds from London can be compared and offer an important glimpse of the late Roman period in the City. The creation of a large structure (whatever its function) in the late 4th century should, as Sankey noted (1998), indicate that some major construction programmes were being undertaken in the City and this is of importance for our understanding of life within *Londinium's* walls in the second half of the 4th century.

Of greater interest is the close similarity of the profile of coin loss to that exhibited by a number of undoubted religious/ritual sites. This alone cannot be taken to show that the building is a late Roman cathedral or temple but it does strengthen the argument that it might be such a structure. The presence of CAM306 bowls from pre-building contexts is also noteworthy and again lends support,

albeit indirectly, to the notion that the site may have had a religious function.

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I am grateful to Mr David Sankey, Museum of London Archaeology and the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* for permission to reproduce Fig 1. This illustration was drawn by the late David Bentley on his own initiative and in his own time for which David Sankey is grateful. Fig 3 is reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

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