

Augusta which the old timers call Londinium

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IN DESCRIBING the events of AD 367 when Britain was being vigorously assailed by a variety of barbarian attackers, Ammianus Marcellinus refers to Count (*Comes*) Theodosius arriving “at the old town of *Londinium* which posterity has called *Augusta*” (*ad Lundinium* (sic) *vetus oppidum quod Augustam posteritas appellavit*)¹; a somewhat similar expression is used further on in the text (see title above)².

Much has been written on the subject of this changed name, for example, Rivet and Smith regard *Augusta* as “an honorific title awarded to London and evidently used in official parlance”³, while Frere favours the theory that London was given the title of *Caesarea* in honour of Constantius Chlorus who saved the city in AD 296, and *Augusta* when he was elevated to Augustus in AD 305⁴. Other commentators are more discreet⁵.

This article examines the evidence for the name, *Augusta*, suggests a simple, and even obvious, reason for the acquisition of the title and considers some of the implications which arise.

Augusta as a title

The *Notitia Dignitatum* is a list of civil officials, and of generals with names of the units under their command and which for the Western Empire at least dates to *c* AD 420 or a little later, principally because one unit listed in it, the *Placidi Valentinianici Felices*, clearly relates to Valentinian III (AD 425-455)⁶. In the *Notitia* there is another mention of *Augusta* – an official is named as *Praepositus thesaurarum Augustensium* who seems to be based in the British provinces⁷. This post is interpreted as that of a finance officer based in London, perhaps the treasurer of the diocese (the group of the then five provinces of Britain)⁸.

The Ravenna Cosmography is, basically, a compilation of the names of towns, rivers and islands

1. Ammianus Marcellinus *Res Gestae* XXVII.8.7.
2. *Ibid* XXVIII.3.1.
3. A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (1981) 260.
4. S. Frere *Britannia – A History of Roman Britain* (3rd edn) (1987) 199.
5. E.g. P. Salway *Roman Britain* (1982) 317, 575.
6. A. H. M. Jones *The Later Roman Empire 284-602* vol. 2 (1986) 1423-4.
7. O. Seeck (ed) *Notitia Dignitatum* (1876) Oc.XI. 37.

known to the Romans, which was compiled shortly after AD 700 from original source material but is often corrupt. Under Britain one of the mentions of London styles the city as *Londinium Augusti*⁹. Looking through the lists of other British towns it is noticeable that Caerleon is listed as *Isca Augusta* and Chester as *Deva victris*¹⁰.

The obvious inference is that these two legionary fortresses acquired their suffices from the names of the units stationed there: *Legio II Augusta* and *Legio XX Valeria Victrix*. The same double-names occur in the Antonine Itinerary¹¹ and, effectively, in Ptolemy¹². Ptolemy also refers to York, transliterated, as *Eboracum*, *Legio VI Victrix*¹³, as does the Antonine Itinerary¹⁴, but Ravenna does not give that town a suffix¹⁵.

With the three British legionary fortresses acquiring an appropriate suffix from the unit stationed there, the deduction must be that at one time in the late Empire the 2nd Legion was transferred to London. This conclusion gains support from the fact that Caerleon was abandoned in *c* AD 290 at the beginning of the usurpation of Carausius¹⁶, who may have decided to regroup the whole legion in London in order to counter any threats to his illegal regime from the continent.

Funerary Inscriptions

Of the six inscriptions found in London relating to the three legions, two name the 2nd Legion and may be dated to the 3rd century; the inscriptions of the other two legions date to the first two centuries.

One of the inscriptions of the 2nd Legion is a funerary bas-relief depicting a soldier, Vivius Marcianus, in ‘undress uniform’ and carrying a stick in his right hand. The monument was found in 1669 when Wren rebuilt St. Martin’s church, Ludgate Hill, but was not necessarily *in situ*. Although the inscription does not

8. S. Frere *op cit* fn 4, 201.
9. Rivet and Smith *op cit* fn 3, 208, no. 97.
10. *Ibid* 207, nos. 52 & 86.
11. *Itinera* II and XII in Rivet and Smith *op cit* fn 3, 157 & 173.
12. Ptolemy *Geography* II.3.11 & 13 in Rivet and Smith *op cit* 143 & 144.
13. *Ibid* II.3.10 in Rivet and Smith *op cit* 142.
14. *Iter* I in Rivet and Smith *op cit* 155.
15. Rivet and Smith *op cit* 208, no. 137.
16. G. C. Boon *The Legionary Fortress of Caerleon – Isca* (1987) 43-4.

mention a rank, Marcianus is usually regarded as a centurion because of his stick and because an ordinary soldier would not be able to afford such a monument¹⁷. His *sagum*-type cloak and long-sleeved tunic indicate a late date for the relief, while the ring-buckle places it specifically in the 3rd century¹⁸. The stance and dress are reminiscent of the 'church parade' of the 20th Palmyrean Cohort mural at Dura-Europos¹⁹.

The other late epigraphic mention of the 2nd Legion is another funerary bas-relief found at Blackfriars recording the death of Celsus who was a *speculator*, a quasi-military policeman whose duties included those of messenger, executioner and field security; the tombstone was erected by three comrades of the same rank. In the 3rd century ten *speculatores* served specifically at the headquarters of every legion²⁰. Because the suffix *An[toninia]ne* is added to the legion's name, the inscription may be dated to the reign of Caracalla, AD 213-222²¹.

The partition of Britain into two provinces in AD 197 or soon after could partly explain the absence of late inscriptions relating to the 6th and 20th Legions. The later partition of the island into four provinces, and then five, would further the process of isolation.

Other archaeological evidence

A varied quantity of Roman weapons and other pieces of military equipment have been found both in the City and in Southwark. No detailed analysis of this body of evidence has as yet been undertaken, but it doubtful whether any light would be thrown on the hypothesis that the 2nd Legion was stationed in London.

However, the prime piece of evidence for a legion in London must be the discovery in 1983-4 of fragments of a marble inscription on the site of Winchester Palace, Southwark. The fragments were found in the backfill of a stokehole of a large masonry building; the deposit also included pottery of a late 3rd to 4th century date²². The fragmentary state of the inscription makes its original purpose unclear, but it certainly contains a list of male names listed under at least three cohorts which must belong to a legion (Fig. 1). The presence of at least four Aurelii, and possibly as many

17. R. Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) 181 & pl. 96;
- J. Hall and R. Merrifield *Roman London* (1980) 26.
18. M. C. Bishop and J. C. Coulston *Roman Military Equipment* (1989) 61.
19. F. Cumont *Fouilles de Doura-Europos (1922-1923)* (1926) pl. L.
20. Hall and Merrifield *op cit* fn 17, 10, 13 and fig. 23; M. Gichon 'Military Intelligence in the Roman Army' in *Festschrift to G. Walsler* (1989) 166-7.
21. R.I.B. 19.
22. M. W. C. Hassall and R. S. O. Tomlin 'Roman Britain in 1984 - II Inscriptions' *Britannia* 16 (1985) 317-322.
23. A. Birley *The People of Roman Britain* (1979) 18.

as eight, results from the edict of AD 212 when Caracalla gave Roman citizenship to all free men in the Empire; these men assumed the Emperor's *gentilium* (family name) of Aurelius²³. This edict would enlarge the number of men qualified to join the citizen-only legions.

The implication of the find-spot of this inscription is that a legion, or a detachment of one, was stationed in Southwark. Because of the suffix *Augusta* applied to *Londinium*, this unit must surely be the 2nd Legion. Hassall has suggested that the inscription's closest parallel appears to be the dedication in Lambaesis to Marcus Aurelius made by centurions and others of similar rank, with five to eight men listed under each cohort; his reservations about

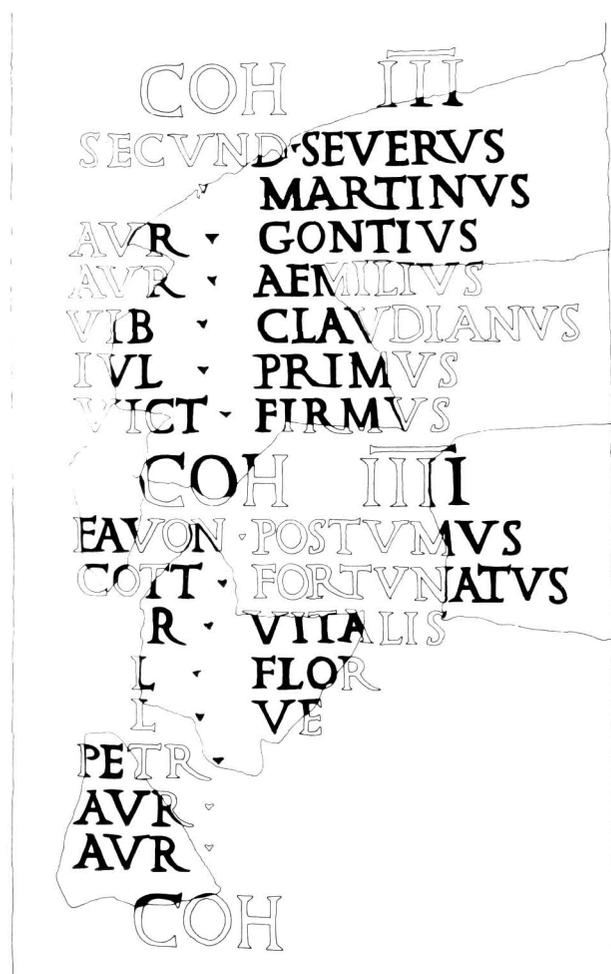


Fig. 1: part of the inscription from Winchester Palace, which lists men from at least three cohorts; another fragment with a further group of seven names appears to come above 'COH II'. Drawing: Gina Porter
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London not being a legionary base have, arguably, now been overcome²⁴.

Because the men on the Southwark slab can be seen as probably being centurions and the like and therefore with, say, fifteen to twenty years' service behind them, the earliest date for the inscription must be *c* AD 230.

The numbers of the cohorts on the inscription are III, [II]II and [V] or [V]III, [VII]II and [X], with the spacing in line nine favouring the former²⁵. In view of *cohors VII* being attested at Caerleon on a building inscription of *c* AD 253-8²⁶, and the practice attested in the *Notitia* of sometimes stationing the five 'superior' cohorts of a legion at one location and the five 'inferior' ones at another, each group under its own prefect²⁷, it would seem probable that the cohorts listed on the Southwark slab were numbered I to V. However, should the slab date to after *c* AD 290, then it may have listed officers of the whole legion.

The location of the Legion

In the north-west corner of *Londinium* was the Cripplegate fort which is usually believed to have held the governor's guards (*singulares*) of some 1000 men; it was built in the early 2nd century. There appears to be no dating evidence for the interior post-*c* AD 200, which is when the fill of the south-east corner of the fort ditch indicates that part of the defences went out of use. This date of *c* AD 200 is also the one assigned to the building of the city wall which incorporated the north and west walls of the fort²⁸.

Whether there is any connection between the building of the city wall, the deliberate sealing-off of the fort ditch, the splitting of Britain into two provinces and the posited stationing of part of the 2nd Legion in Southwark is a matter for discussion.

The apparent stationing of the Legion in Southwark, *whenever*, rather than in the City, could be for a number of reasons: the Cripplegate fort was too small for the unit, it was already occupied by another unit, or it had been demolished; there was a tactical and economic need to defend the southbank suburb, as had been the case for the trans-Tiber suburb of the Janiculum hill which was brought into the new defences of Rome by Aurelian in AD 271²⁹; a wish to avoid billeting the legion on the townspeople on the probably more prosperous north bank.

24. Hassall and Tomlin *op cit* fn 22, 321.

25. *Ibid* 321.

26. Boon *op cit* fn 16, 38.

27. E.g. Seock *op cit* fn 7, Or.XXXIX.33 & 34; Oc.XXXII.44 & 45.

28. W. F. Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London* (1968) 37-9; R. Merrifield *London – City of the Romans* (1984) 82.

29. M. Todd *The Walls of Rome* (1978) 24.

The stationing of units in towns is a particular feature of the 4th century when the mobile armies, the *comitatenses*, did not have fixed bases³⁰. In the *Notitia Dignitatum* the 2nd Legion, '*secunda Britannica*', is listed among the 32 *legiones comitatenses* of the western Empire³¹. In the context of the 4th century, particularly towards the end of it, and with the 6th Legion fixed at York, London would be the obvious location for a mobile force, ready to move out against determined incursions below the Humber-Mersey line; the most obvious danger spots were the east and south coasts. In the 4th century the 6th Legion in York was not a mobile unit but one allocated to frontier duty under the control of the *Dux Britanniarum* who was responsible for northern England³².

If the Southwark inscription is taken as recording the presence of part of the 2nd Legion in London, then the most likely date for their arrival is *c* AD 200 when Britain was divided into two provinces with 'capitals' at London and York. It is perhaps easier to see this happening under Caracalla (AD 211-17) than Severus (AD 197 is implied by Herodian³³). The base of the 2nd Legion at London would then balance the 6th Legion at York, each under its own governor. It might also be argued that the same event prompted the building of the city walls of London and York, whose construction occurred at about the same time³⁴.

The Barbarian Conspiracy

To return to Count Theodosius, in AD 367 the great 'barbarian conspiracy' brought about concerted attacks upon Britain and Gaul³⁵. Nectaridus, count of the maritime coast (*comes maritimi tractus*) whose title *may* equate with the Count of the Saxon Shore (see below), was killed and the Duke Fullofades was besieged³⁶.

In turn, two generals were sent to rectify the situation and then recalled, before the despatch of Count Theodosius. By then the situation had so deteriorated that the countryside in some proximity to London was swarming with barbarians laden with booty and encumbered with prisoners and cattle. As well as many deserters from the Roman army, there were other soldiers on leave who were wandering about unable to rejoin their units³⁷.

Theodosius crossed the Channel to Richborough
30. R. Tomlin 'The Late Roman Empire' in J. Hackett (ed) *Warfare in the Ancient World* (1989) 237.

31. Seock *op cit* fn 7, Oc.V.241.

32. *Ibid* Oc.XL.18; Rivet and Smith *op cit* fn 3, 220-2.

33. Frere *op cit* fn 4, 162-4.

34. J. Wachter *The Towns of Roman Britain* (1974) 161.

35. Ammianus *op cit* fn 1, XXVII.8.1 and 5.

36. *Ibid* 8.1.

where he waited until four units of *comitatenses* caught up with him; presumably it was not safe for him to ride directly to London. When in due course he arrived at *Augusta*, he split his troops up in order to pursue the bands of the enemy and to recover as much of the booty as possible³⁸. Only when the operation was successful did he enter the city “which had previously been plunged into the greatest difficulties, but had been restored more quickly than rescue could have been expected”³⁹.

The implication of this account is that London was in effect besieged and therefore was being defended – presumably by the 2nd Legion. There is no indication of the fate of other towns and forts, but the general impression from the text is that the area worst affected may equate to south-east Britain, possibly including East Anglia. There is no mention of York, nor is there archaeological evidence that Hadrian’s Wall was destroyed, although there are isolated pockets of destruction in the north including the forts beyond the Wall⁴⁰.

The Saxon Shore

In the *Notitia Dignitatum* under the command of the *Comes Litoris Saxonici* are listed nine units who appear to be stationed along the coast from the Thames estuary to the Solent⁴¹. As elsewhere in the *Notitia* the locations of these units are also given, with one or two exceptions – these, unedited, are:

Praefectus leg secundae Aug
Praepositus numeri Abulcorum

Because the usual *pictura* (a schematic picture of responsibilities) at the head of this listing contains nine location names, of which the two ‘spare’ are *Rutupis* (Richborough) and *Anderidos* (Pevensey), these two names have been allocated respectively to the 2nd Legion and the *Abulci*⁴².

In the light of the evidence discussed above, an alternative view would be to translate the first entry as ‘The prefect of the Second Legion at *Augusta*’. This move would allow the *Abulci* to be relocated to Richborough.

The text of the *Notitia* indicates that at some later date the Saxon Shore command was broken up with most of its units being transferred to Gaul. The Gallic list includes the *Abulci* and the *Ander[en]itiani*⁴³, while there is a separate mention of the *classis* (fleet)

37. *Ibid* 8.2-3, 10.

38. *Ibid* 8.6-7.

39. *Ibid* 8.8.

40. Frere *op cit* fn 4, 342.

41. For a complete reassessment see N. Fuentes ‘New Thoughts on the Saxon Shore’ in V. A. Maxfield (ed) *Proc 15th International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (forthcoming).

42. Seck *op cit* fn 7, OC.XXVIII.19 & 20.

Anderetianorum at Paris⁴⁴. The *Anderidos* of the *pictura* might then be allocated to a notional combined military and naval unit at Pevensey, which was later split into two components upon its transfer to Gaul and was therefore omitted from the Saxon Shore list.

If, in the context of the Saxon Shore, the 2nd Legion was stationed in London, then it would seem reasonable to find the *Comes* also based there in the same way as the *Dux Britanniarum* appears to have been based with the 6th Legion at York⁴⁵.

The Comes Britanniarum

As already mentioned, the *Notitia Dignitatum* dates to the AD 420s which coincides with the period (AD 423-9) immediately after the death of Honorius during which Johannes, the *primicerius notariorum* (head of the establishment records office in Rome) usurped the purple in the Western Empire for two years and Aetius as *magister militum* (senior general) was largely engaged in reconquering and strengthening Gaul during the subsequent four years; the latter, if not the former as well, may even have had in mind a re-conquest of Britain, in which case a plan of the former troop dispositions could have proved very useful⁴⁶.

The *Notitia* appears to exhibit a state of affairs after the command of the Saxon Shore had been discontinued, because up to five of its units appear to have been transferred to Gaul⁴⁷, and one cavalry unit is shown under the command of the *Comes Britanniarum*⁴⁸.

Perhaps the best explanation for this state of affairs would be as follows. On the last day of December of AD 406 a very large number of barbarians crossed the Rhine near Mainz and, accompanied by their families, moved westwards, plundering on their way. In Britain the garrison feared that the island might be invaded and, perhaps because of this fear, the ruling usurper, Gratian, was deposed in favour of a soldier, Constantine, possibly in the May of AD 407⁴⁹.

Constantine immediately crossed the Channel with the greater part of the British garrison, but the barbarians turned southwards to plunder Gaul and Spain. Thereafter, in brief, Constantine strengthened the defences on the Rhine, took over Spain, was recognised as Augustus by Honorius in AD 409 thus becoming Constantine III, was besieged in Arles by

43. *Ibid* Oc.VII.109 & 110.

44. *Ibid* Oc.XLII.23.

45. *Ibid* Oc.XL.

46. Salway *op cit* fn 5, 474-7.

47. Seck *op cit* fn 7, Oc.VII.84, 100, 108, 109 & 110.

48. *Ibid* Oc.VII.174 or 175.

49. E. A. Thompson ‘Britain, A.D. 406-410’ *Britannia* 8 (1977) 303-5.

an internal revolt in the same year and perished in AD 411⁵⁰.

When Constantine crossed the Channel with most of the garrison of Britain, the evidence of the *Notitia* appears to imply that he left behind on the island the *Comes Britanniarum* who has under his command six cavalry units and three infantry units, as detailed in the *distributio numerorum* (summary). The latter units were the *Victores Iunior[es] Britannici*, the *Primani Iuniores* and the *Secundani Iuniores*⁵¹; the terms *iuniores* and *seniores* appear to relate to cases in the late Empire where a unit is divided into two new regiments⁵².

Because this very late command is so heavy in cavalry, it is postulated that Constantine's original strategy was to garrison Britain with a minimum force until the emergency was over – the three infantry units could have been used to secure vital bases while the cavalry formed a rapid response force ready to move against any incursions.

It is further postulated that:

- a) the *Secundani Iuniores* were stationed in London, while the *Secundani Britones* who are recorded as being in Gaul (apparently at the same time⁵³), may have been the linked *seniores* regiment, with both units being descended from the 2nd Legion Augusta, whose late shield-badge of a red eight-spoked wheel on a yellow background is also depicted in the *Notitia*⁵⁴; the *Britones Seniores*, a palatine legion in Illyria, whose shield-badge was an 18-spoked red 'wheel' on a white background, may also be related⁵⁵;
- b) the *Victores Iuniores Britannici* were derived from the old 6th Legion Victrix and were therefore like it stationed at York, the second city of Britain;
- c) more speculatively, the *Primani Iuniores* who possibly might be descended from the *Cohors Prima Baetasiarum* once stationed at Reculver (the only reference to the unit in the *Notitia*), were assigned to Richborough in order to secure this port so vital to Constantine's cross-Channel communications. With regard to the last point, the "remarkable

volume" (22,750) of copper coins of period XX (AD 388-402) found at Richborough implies that the fort continued to be manned well beyond the last minted date of such coins, that is beyond AD 402. This interpretation is strengthened by the finding of five silver coins of Constantine III on the site⁵⁶, the only ones known from any Saxon Shore fort and therefore particularly significant in any consideration of Britain's garrison in this period.

With these scenarios in hand, it is possible to link the *Notitia's* inclusion of the *Comes Litoris Saxonici* (whose command had been dispersed) with the lack of detail of the units under the specific entry with its *pictura* for the *Comes Britanniarum*, as originally representing a temporary expedient which was intended to be reversed but never was. Honorius' letters of AD 410 to the cities of Britain telling them to guard themselves⁵⁷ may be seen as a holding stance in the hope that at some time in the future sufficient resources would be available to reincorporate Britain in the Empire. Because the western section of the *Notitia* is dated to the AD 420s and the nine units of the *Comes* are the only forces listed in the *distributio numerorum* as garrisoning Britain, then Honorius' choice of addressees would not only imply that there was no central authority in the island but also, arguably, that these units were largely still intact having been 'adopted' by the major cities. Thus the

50. *Ibid* 305-6, 316.

51. Seeck *op cit* fn 7, Oc.VII.200-205 & 154-5.

52. R. Tomlin 'Seniores-Iuniores in the Late-Roman Field Army' *American J Philology* 93 (1972) 264.

53. Seeck *op cit* fn 7, Oc.VII.154 & 84.

54. *Ibid* Oc.V.92.

55. *Ibid* Or.IX.2 & 22.

56. R. Reece 'Summary of Roman Coins from Richborough' in B. W. Cunliffe (ed) *Fifth Report on the Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent* (1968) 207-217.

57. Thompson *op cit* fn 49, 315.

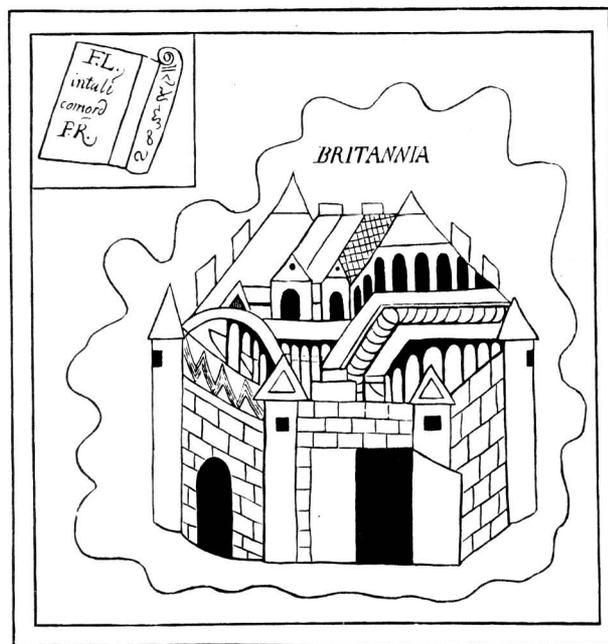


Fig. 2: the *pictura* of the *Comes Britanniarum* depicts a walled town with a semi-circular building whose curved ends terminate at two towers. (from O. Seeck, see fn 7)

Secundani Britones, with perhaps one or two cavalry units, might be seen as providing the nucleus of anti-Saxon resistance in the London area, if not the Home Counties.

Although there is no direct reference to the operational base occupied by the *Comes Britanniarum*, the most likely location would be in London. Such a supposition receives support from that officer's *pictura* of a walled town superimposed on a green island which is labelled 'Britannia' (Fig. 2). The foreground appears to contain a theatre whose back-wall has been incorporated into the town wall. Such an event has already been posited for London, based on the evidence on the hill-side to the south-west of St. Paul's (Fig. 3)⁵⁸.

If the identification of this feature on the *pictura* is correct, then it may be seen as containing other similar information: the building in the rear centre could be seen as the basilica with the forum to its right, while the enclosure in the right foreground might represent

the possible late Roman enclosure in the area of the Tower of London⁵⁹.

General discussion

The amount and variety of evidence deployed above would appear unequivocally to place the 2nd Legion Augusta in London in the 3rd and 4th centuries. The evidence suggests that in the earlier 3rd century and late 4th/early 5th centuries only part of the unit was in residence. In the first case the Legion was perhaps billeted in former private accommodation in Southwark, a mid-3rd century parallel being the quarters of the 20th Palmyrean Cohort at Dura-Europos⁶⁰; Southwark's potential as a defended area is underlined by it becoming in Alfred's day one of the strongholds of the Burghal Hidage⁶¹. In the later case when units may have been only 500 to 1000 men strong⁶², the Legion could even have occupied the possible enclosure in the area of the Tower of London, but that is one of the subjects of a further article⁶³; such a military-occupied enclosure might even have served as the location for Magnus Maximus' mint of AD 383, which had the mark of AVG⁶⁴.

The two 3rd-century tombstones of soldiers of the 2nd Legion Augusta coming from west and south-west of St. Paul's may prove to be more than a coincidence. It is of interest to recall that William the Conqueror cowed London by having two forts within its walls – the Tower of London in the east and Baynard's Castle in the west.

The concept of the six cavalry units of the *Comes Britanniarum* riding around the country ready to counter any incursion by Saxons and others might, speculatively, have served as a base-idea for the traditional role of the 'knights of King Arthur'.

It is hoped that this paper will not only firmly place the 2nd Legion Augusta in an obvious home, but will also advance by a step or so the understanding of London's role in the early 5th century and will further its discussion.

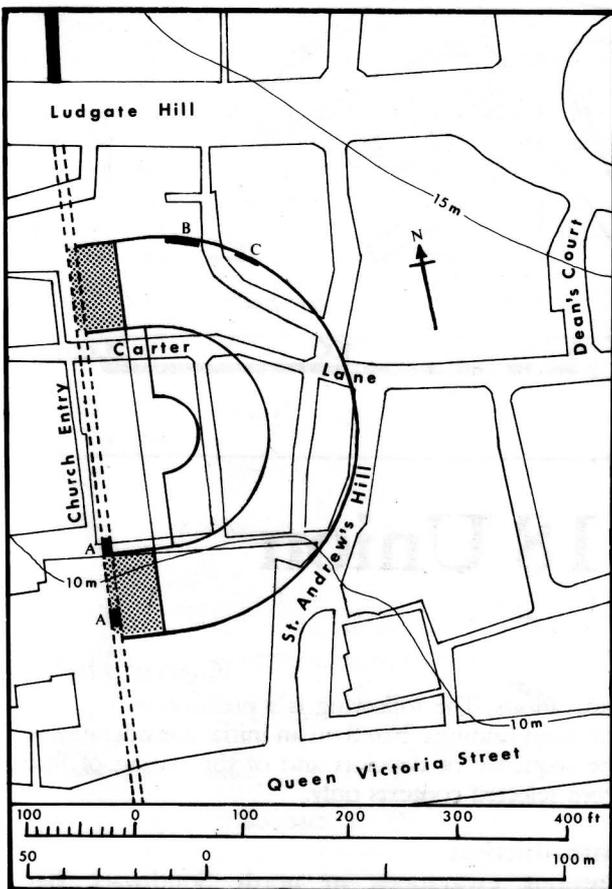


Fig. 3: the Roman theatre with its towers shown in stipple, which has been posited to lie against the city wall to the south-west of St Paul's, may equate with the semi-circular building shown in Fig. 2. Plan: Nicholas Fuentes

58. N. Fuentes 'Some Entertainment in Roman London' *London Archaeol* 5 no. 6 (1986) 144-6.

59. G. Parnell 'Tower of London: Inmost Ward excavation 1979' *London Archaeol* 4 no. 3 (1981) 73.

60. M. I. Rostovtzeff *The Excavations at Dura-Europos - Preliminary Report of Fifth Season of Work October 1931-March 1932* (1934) 203.

61. D. Hill 'The Burghal Hidage: the establishment of a text' *Medieval Archaeol* 13 (1969) 90 - Southwark's walls were capable of being manned by 112 men, i.e. 4 men per pole-length (16½ft or 5m).

62. Tomlin *op cit* fn 30, 238.

63. N. Fuentes 'A lighthouse for Roman London' *London Archaeol* (forthcoming).

64. Merrifield *op cit* fn 28, 215.