

# Dumps and tesserae: high-status building materials from 33 Union Street, Southwark

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**Introduction**

Over the last thirty or so years developer-led archaeological investigation in Southwark has revolutionised our understanding of Roman period settlement on the south bank of the Thames.<sup>1</sup> During the first four centuries AD Southwark was essentially a series of small, low-lying islands or eyots, subject to periodic inundation by the river (Fig. 1). The northernmost eyot was chosen around AD 50 as the southern end of the bridge over the Thames (approximately where London Bridge now stands), and a major road was constructed running southwards across the eyots. This road, known in the archaeological literature as Road 1, is today followed approximately by Borough High Street and its course eventually split to become Watling Street and Stane Street. Along these roads and on the eyots developed a

great variety of Roman period settlement activity, which is gradually being characterised by excavation. This article deals with one such excavation on the southern eyot, commissioned by Stirling Developments (London) Ltd and undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology in the summer of 2003 at 33 Union Street (USS03). In spite of modern truncations, a sequence of activity that included evidence of prehistoric agriculture, Roman land reclamation and surprising finds of high-status building materials was recovered, complementing the findings made by MoLAS at 27–29 Union Street<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2).

**Pre-Roman land use**

In common with a number of Southwark sites the earliest phase of activity at the site took the form of ard marks cut into the natural sands (Fig.

3). There were several discernible phases of these marks and they were associated with a length of ditch and covered by a grey sandy layer, probably a ploughsoil. A similar sequence was recorded at 27–29 Union Street, and the presence of these features is significant. As there was little evidence for multiple episodes of ploughing (as opposed to one or two) it is tempting to interpret these cultivation marks as a symbolic act bringing virgin land into cultivation and the human world.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, the ditch and ploughsoil would suggest prolonged agriculture within a formally divided landscape, but the date at which this occurred is difficult to establish. Only two sherds of pottery were recovered from this phase; both were flint-tempered prehistoric types (perhaps of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age date) recovered from the plough scars.



Fig. 1: topography and Roman roads.  
1: 51–53 Southwark Street; 2: Winchester Palace.

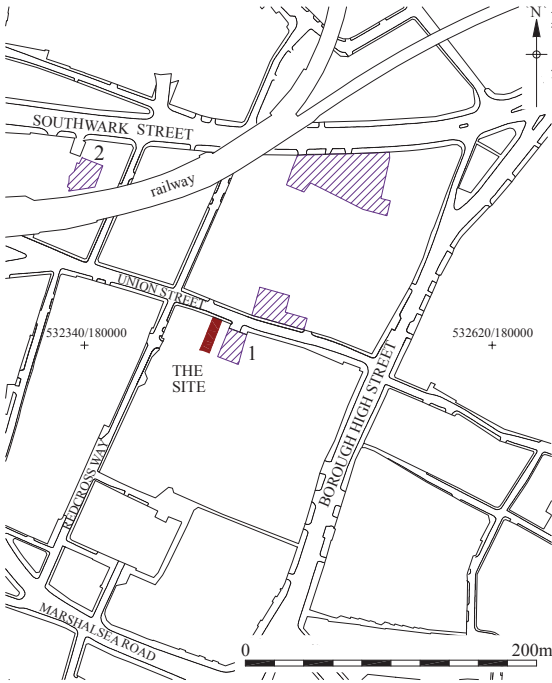


Fig. 2: site location.  
1: 27–29 Union Street (UNE03); 2: 51–53 Southwark Street (FSS96); 3: 15–23 Southwark Street (15SKS80); 4: 10–18 Union Street (USA88, USB88).

There was also a small assemblage of burnt flint from the overlying agricultural soil. The finds suggest a date in the first millennium BC for this activity.

At an indeterminate point, possibly in the Middle or Late Iron Age, a channel running north-south cut through the site, parallel to the western limit of excavation. It was only partially excavated because much of it lay beyond the area of excavation, so it was not possible to establish its full size. This putative channel might be associated with an apparent rise in sea level during the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age,<sup>4</sup> and seems to have eroded away the evidence for prehistoric agriculture in the western half of the excavated area.

**Early Roman land division AD 60–120**

The first phase of activity assignable to the Roman period was very limited in extent, and took the form of three pits containing a few sherds of pottery dated to between AD 60 and AD 70/80. The virtual absence of pre-Flavian occupation – despite the construction of Road 1 to the east in AD 50 – is paralleled at a number of sites in the vicinity and is unsurprising.<sup>5</sup>

The years after AD 75 mark the real beginning of intensive Roman activity on the site (Fig. 4). The channel, which had remained open from the late prehistoric period onwards, was filled in with dumps of dark grey silty clay and occupation debris. These dumps are well dated by a coin of Vespasian minted after AD 75 and two hundred sherds of pottery dated to between AD 60 and 80. Interestingly, despite the channel being deliberately infilled, a line of posts replicated its course, presumably as a property boundary. Features excavated at 27–29 Union

Street appear to share the alignment of these posts and also the approximate line of Road 1 further to the east.<sup>6</sup> This suggests planned land division of a reasonably large area.

There is little evidence for activity within this fence line. A number of stakeholes share its line but are difficult to interpret: they may be a modification to the boundary or form one side of a small enclosure. The fence was not long-lived, and its line was soon covered by dumps of rubbish mixed with silty sand, that raised the level of the ground. They were presumably laid down to combat flooding; a new boundary was constructed on the same alignment of the fence but a little to the east. This new boundary was formed of a short length of ditch combined with a fence of small stakes set in the base of a ‘palisade trench’ a little to the east. This fence line may have had a return continuing beyond the limit of excavation at its southern end. South of this return were a number of stakeholes that might represent further fence lines. A series of pits were dug contemporaneously with these fence lines and could represent a variety of activities. Some were used for rubbish disposal.

Pottery associated with this phase of activity can be dated to no later than AD 120, and thus it seems that this intensive period of land reclamation, dumping and fence construction should

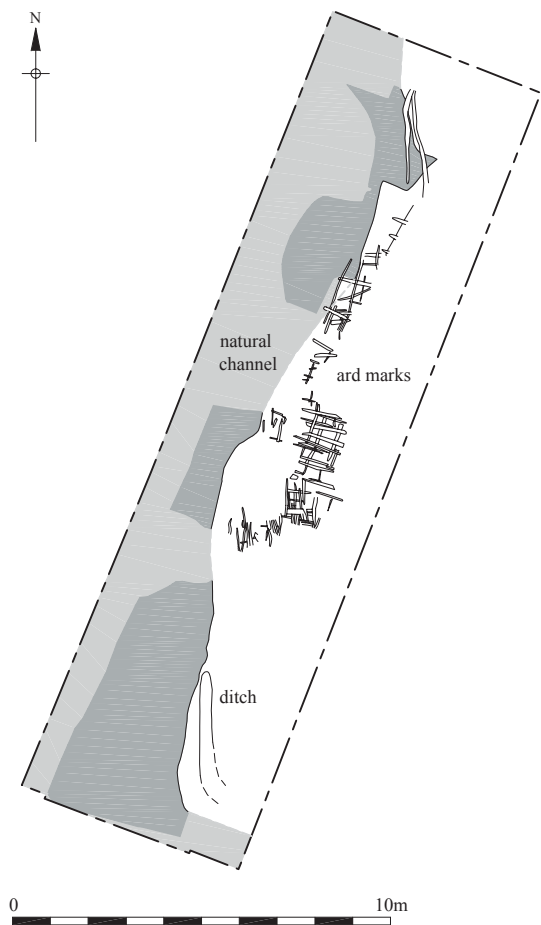


Fig. 3: prehistoric ploughing

be dated to the period AD 75–120. Presumably this land reclamation and division is to be associated with the Flavian and later expansion of London after the post-Boudican depression of the AD 60s.<sup>7</sup>

**Roman dumping AD 120–270**

The next discernible phase of activity presents a less coherent picture than the preceding sequence (Fig. 5). Further dumps of silty sand, occupation debris and building materials were deposited in an episodic fashion across the site; some of these dumps were laid specifically to level the slumped and compacted fills of earlier features. During this phase of dumping a variety of cut features were dug. They included a number of ditches and gullies, several pits and many postholes. However, unlike the preceding phase, few of these features could be interpreted in any meaningful way. The ditches probably represent boundaries or drainage features and they share the alignments established earlier in the Roman period; some of the postholes

Stone	Source	number of fragments
Campan vert	Pyrenees	7
Campan rouge	Pyrenees	1
Carrara	Italy	2
Pink mudstone with shelly inclusions	?Mediterranean	1
Greyish-white and yellow breccia	?Mediterranean	1
Purbeck marble	Dorset	1
Kimmeridge shale	Dorset	2
Unidentified white and grey stones	unknown	7

Table 1: decorative stones from 33 Union Street

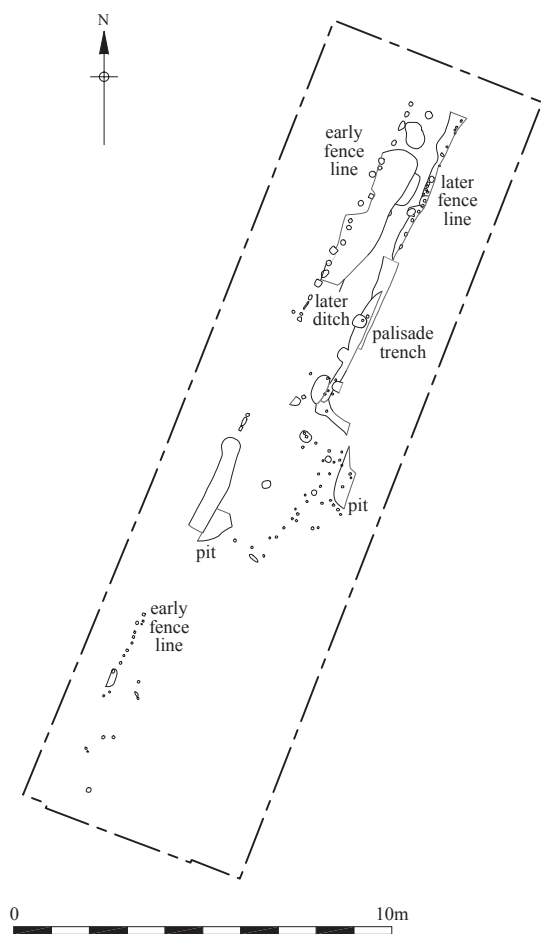


Fig. 4: early Roman fence lines

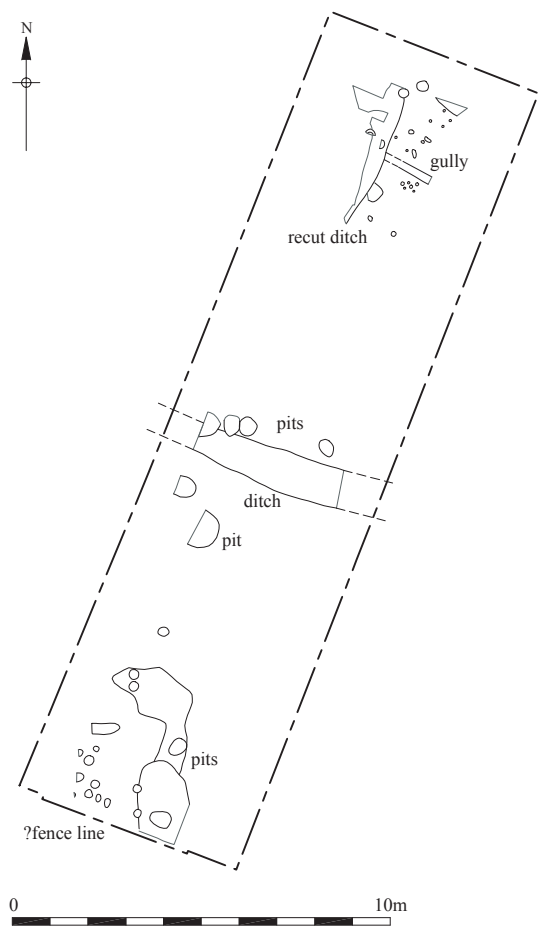


Fig. 5: Roman ditched boundaries

may indicate fence lines or other structures of varying degrees of permanence.

The most surprising aspect of this phase is not so much the episodes of dumping and subsequent activity, but the origins and contents of the dumps. The material used to raise and level the ground surface seems to have been predominantly demolition material from a high-status early Roman structure that may have been a bathhouse. Building materials from these dumps (and redeposited in later contexts) include a small but notable collection of twenty fragments of imported marble and coloured stones that probably served as flooring and wall veneers (Table 1 and Fig. 6). The bulk of these ornamental stones are from Pyrenean and Mediterranean sources with Purbeck marble and Kimmeridge shale from Dorset being somewhat under-represented in the assemblage.<sup>8</sup>

The ceramic building material also presents a relatively unusual picture. Of note are nineteen fragments of ceramic

water pipe in Fabric 3006. These pipes are fairly uncommon in London, but do occur on other sites in Southwark and clearly indicate that the building from which this redeposited demolition debris is derived had, at the very least, a piped water supply. The small number of flue tiles from the site suggests that the building need not necessarily have been a bathhouse.<sup>9</sup> However, as these tiles are a specialised form, they may have commanded a higher value than other ceramic building materials and thus been reused more conscientiously than other types of tile.

Finally, it is worth considering the wall-plaster, *opus signinum* and *tesserae* from these dumps. There is a small collection of forty-four fragments of plaster. Red fragments were noted alongside a possible dado scheme of grey splashes on a white background and borders painted in combinations of green, ochre and red paint suggesting richly decorated rooms. Further indications of opulence come from a piece of wall plaster with a *tessera*

embedded in it and fragments of moulded *opus signinum* mortar with indentations made by *tessera* being set in the mortar while it was still wet. These are unlikely to be flooring materials and may be derived from wall mosaics or mouldings around basins. Loose *tesserae* included examples cut from tile, chalk and Kimmeridge cementstone and, most unusually, over one hundred and forty glass examples.

The bulk of the glass *tesserae* were blue, with a lesser number coloured green and a single deep turquoise example. These *tesserae*, alongside the 1200 recovered in excavations at 27–29 Union Street, form the largest collection of such objects from any site in London. Little work has been undertaken on this type of find and it is worth taking the opportunity to discuss glass *tesserae* in their wider London context. Analysis of their distribution (Fig. 7) reveals that they are thinly scattered through the city, with a clear concentration of finds toward the southern end of Borough High Street, with the Union Street finds

being a particular 'hotspot'.<sup>10</sup> This is not a product of archaeological intervention. Plotting finds of procuratorial tile stamps on the same map produces a radically different and almost mutually exclusive pattern.<sup>11</sup> In some ways the distribution of the *tesserae* is surprising. If they were a high-status building material then one might expect them to be concentrated in the City. However, it has recently been suggested that rather than being true *tesserae*, these handy pieces of glass may have been convenient pieces of raw material for use in bead making or enamelling.<sup>12</sup> Thus the concentration of finds in Southwark may indicate bead making or enamelling workshops. The lack of mortar on the *tesserae* from 33 Union Street and 27–29 Union Street could be seen as supporting evidence for this hypothesis.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the true building materials, it is apparent that the group of finds from this site is a significant assemblage. The pottery and associated finds suggest deposition in the 2nd century after AD 120, which in turn suggests that the building was constructed in the late 1st century. Early tile fabrics favour the former date, while the presence of coloured marbles might

indicate refurbishment of the building in the 2nd century.<sup>14</sup> The presence of water pipes and moulded *opus signinum* might hint that the building was a bathhouse, and the indications of wall mosaics suggest an extremely well-appointed structure. Indeed, it may not be going too far to suggest that this material was derived from a public building. What is certain is that the demolition rubble from the structure is very similar in terms of composition to material from contemporary deposits at 27–29 Union Street.<sup>15</sup>

It is also noticeable that dumps of high-status building materials seem to be something of a phenomenon in Southwark. The dumps of wall plaster at Winchester Palace are an obvious example, but a little early to be associated with the Union Street activity.<sup>16</sup> However, earlier excavations by Pre-Construct Archaeology at 51–53 Southwark Street, only a hundred or so metres north-west of the present site, did recover groups of painted plaster, building materials and large fragments of mosaic (dated stylistically to the early 2nd century) from 2nd-century dumps.<sup>17</sup> Where this material and the Union Street material originated remains an intriguing mystery. The only

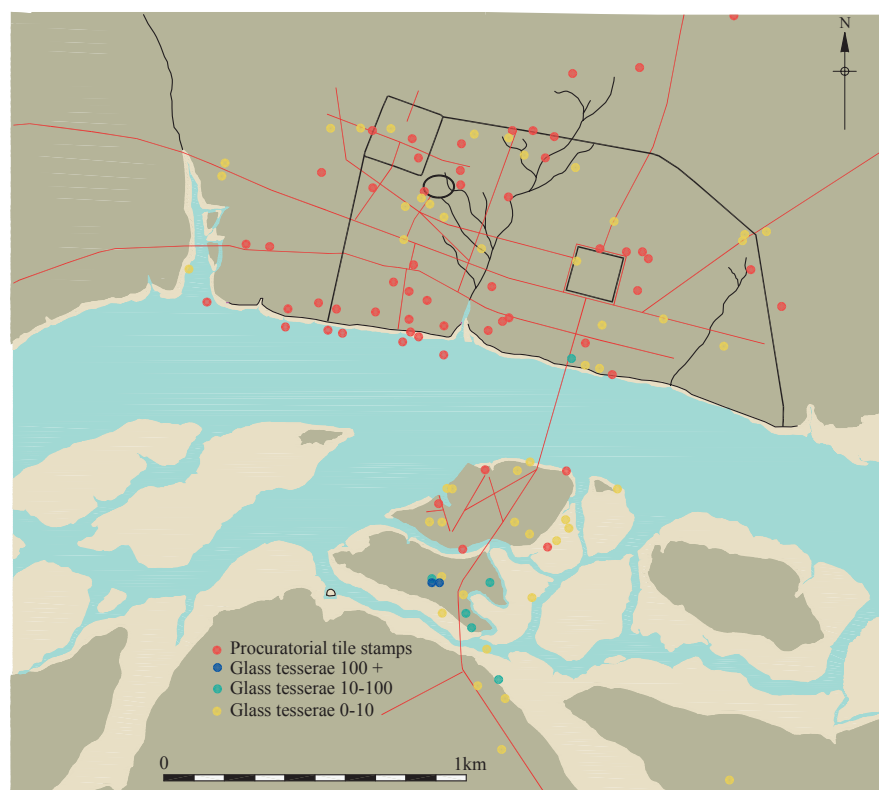
nearby and early high-status building complex are the structures excavated at 15–23 Southwark Street,<sup>18</sup> but there seem to be few links in terms of the composition of the building material between the dumps and this structure. The remaining early Roman structures in the vicinity appear to be concentrated along Borough High Street and were constructed of clay and timber.<sup>19</sup> If there are no obvious local Southwark origins for the material then we may have to consider that it originated further afield.

If the building materials were imported into Southwark, then it is tempting to speculate about how this came to happen. One 2nd-century event that may have produced large quantities of demolition rubble was the Hadrianic fire and its aftermath north of the river.<sup>20</sup> The debris from this fire may have offered a useful body of material to reclaim land in marshy Southwark, and the conflagration may have offered a useful excuse to refurbish or renew high-status public buildings north of the river. Obviously it is dangerous to speculate too much. However, clearly the presence of dumped building materials in Southwark is worth more detailed study.



Fig. 6: early Roman ceramic building materials, imported marbles and glass tesserae





**Fig. 7: the distribution of glass tesserae in London**

## Late Roman activity AD 270–400+

There were few traces of later Roman activity. Further dumps of material were laid across the site and contained relatively large quantities of material culture. This included building debris and glass *tesserae*, presumably redeposited either from earlier dumped deposits on site or nearby. Interestingly, most of the pottery from these layers was of 2nd-century date, with just a few post-AD 270 sherds. However, rather

than seeing these few sherds as intrusive, it is probably better to see the 2nd-century material as residual. The deposits included one late 3rd- or 4th-century coin and an irregular radiate dated AD 268–270 that support a late date. The only other notable find from these deposits was a copper-alloy ring key of well-known type, and the only feature assignable to this phase was a length of ditch. The paucity of late Roman activity is noticeable given the

evidence of other sites nearby.

Excavations at 27–29 Union Street produced greater evidence of 4th-century activity, and excavations across the road at 10–18 Union Street uncovered the remains of a 4th-century building and a late 4th-century pit containing a lead curse tablet.<sup>21</sup> However, the absence of late Roman deposits is probably due to severe truncation by cellars and basements in the post-medieval period. These cellars also removed virtually all the evidence (except for the bases of a few truncated cut features) for medieval and post-medieval activity.

## Acknowledgments

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1. For a general discussion of Roman Southwark, see K. Heard, H. Sheldon and P. Thompson 'Mapping Roman Southwark' *Antiquity* **64** (1990) 608–619.

2. I. Blair '27–29 Union Street, SE1: a draft post-excavation assessment and updated project design. Unpublished MoLAS report (2006).

3. The arid marks below some prehistoric burial monuments have been interpreted in this fashion. See P. Ashbee, I. Smith and J. Evans 'Excavation of three long barrows near Avebury, Wiltshire' *Proc Prehist Soc* **45** (1979) 207–300, Fig 36.

4. J. Sidell, K. Wilkinson, R. Scaife and N. Cameron *The Holocene Evolution of the Thames MoLAS Monograph* 5 (2000) 121.

5. For instance H. Sheldon 'The 1972–74 excavations: their contribution to Southwark's history' *Southwark Excavations 1972–74: Part 1. LAMAS and Surrey Archaeol Soc Joint Pub 1* (1978) 11–49, 27–36.

6. *Op cit.* fn 2.

7. D. Perring *Roman London* (1991).

8. See F. Pritchard 'Ornamental stonework from

Roman London' *Britannia* **17** (1986) 169–190 for a general discussion of marbles and Fig. 13 for the high incidence of Purbeck products.

9. S. Pringle 'Building materials assessment' in K. Hülka and F. Meddens *Phased Summary and Assessment Document of the excavation at 33 Union Street, London Borough of Southwark Unpublished PCA Report* (2004) 60–65.

10. The data behind this distribution is based on information held in the LAARC database, the PCA finds database and the MoLAS Oracle database. I am grateful Fiona Seeley and Nicky Powell for providing access to the latter source.

11. Data from I. Betts 'Procuratorial tile stamps from London' *Britannia* **26** (1995) 207–229.

12. H. Cool 'The Roman Glass', in C. Pickard 'Southwark an Urbis Italia': *Excavations at the New Wolfson Wing, Guy's Hospital, London. PCA Monograph*, forthcoming.

13. A. Wardle 'Glass mosaic puzzle' *Archaeology Matters: Southwark Special*, Summer 2005.

14. N. Crowley 'Building materials' in B. Yule *A Prestigious Roman Building Complex on the Southwark Waterfront MoLAS Monograph* 23 (2005) 90–100, 92.

15. *Op cit* fn 2; Ian Betts *pers. comm.*

16. *Op cit* fn 14, 17–22.

17. D. Killock 'Roman river bank use and changing water levels at 51–53 Southwark Street, Southwark, London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **56** (2005) 27–44.

18. C. Cowan 'A possible *mansio* in Roman Southwark: excavations at 15–23 Southwark Street 1980–86' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **43** (1992) 15–200.

19. *Op cit* fn 4.

20. S. Roskams and L. Watson 'The Hadrianic fire of London: a reassessment of the evidence' *London Archaeol* **4** no. 3 (1981) 62–65. The post-fire reconstruction work may have provided opportunities for the refurbishment of buildings undamaged by the conflagration.

21. K. Heard 'Excavations at 10–18 Union Street, Southwark' *London Archaeol* **6** no. 5 (1989) 126–131.