

Breaking London's code



Epigraphist Roger Tomlin has one of the rarest jobs in the country, but one that contributes significantly to the archaeological record. Becky Wallower visited him in Oxford to probe both his work and the results of a major project for MOLA.

For our occasional *Just the job* series, which highlights the more unusual jobs in archaeology, Roger Tomlin is an ideal subject. Not only is his profession as an epigraphist uncommon, but his specialism in Roman cursive, handwritten script is tackled by only a few people worldwide – and his own fascination with the work is highly infectious.

Over the past year, Roger and his work have had unprecedented media attention, because he was responsible for deciphering and interpreting the 405 Roman wooden writing tablets recovered from the Bloomberg site in the City of London. Excavated by MOLA from 2010 to 2014, these finds more than doubled the number of previously discovered tablets, and their potential for revealing new evidence about the people and history of Londinium caught the public imagination at an early stage. Since Roger's monograph for MOLA on the tablets was published in 2016 (see p 20), he has appeared on TV, radio

and the internet, been interviewed for publications from the *New Scientist* to the *New Yorker*, and lectured widely: a poster sitting on a pile of post in his kitchen that advertises a presentation in Pisa speaks to the international appeal.

The London tablets represent one of his greatest challenges, but certainly not the first. Having read *Greats* at Oxford, and completed post-graduate research in the late Roman empire, he found himself teaching at Durham. There he joined David Thomas who with Alan Bowman was working on the Roman writing tablets from Vindolanda. At Oxford, where he became Lecturer in Later Roman History, Roger also encountered Sheppard Frere again, for whom he had dug at Bowes. Other opportunities to expand his work came via Barry Cunliffe, who asked him to look at another type of cursive inscriptions: the Bath lead curse tablets. Although he has worked mainly on British inscriptions, Roger has

collaborated with others in Europe and beyond. With the epigraphist Richard Wright (whom Roger followed as Lecturer at Durham) and R G Collingwood, he has co-authored *Roman Inscriptions of Britain (RIB)*, the authoritative work on the subject begun in 1965, and writes the annual chapter on inscriptions for *Britannia*.

From his first exposure to cursive inscriptions, he was hooked. 'The text was sitting there and someone had to do it,' he says of his work on the Bath tablets. 'There was no template, but as soon as I started I loved it.' The selection of Sudoku, Codeword and other puzzles also scattered around his kitchen are a clue to the appeal: he views both puzzles and epigraphy as forms of code breaking. Like codes, the inscriptions can be ephemeral at best, are often incomplete, and commonly use both abbreviations and specific conventions. In addition, cursive Latin varies from hand to hand and the style changed over time.

Inscriptions on wooden tablets offer the extra complication of the wood itself. Ninety-four percent of the Bloomberg examples are silver fir from continental Europe, which probably included staves recycled from imported wine barrels. Unlike the inked tablets found at Vindolanda, these were hollowed out on one side, and the recess filled with a shallow layer of beeswax blackened with a burnt resinous material. The writer used a metal stylus to inscribe through the wax to the pale wood below. Over time the tablets had been preserved in the waterlogged, anaerobic conditions of the Walbrook, but the wax had decomposed, leaving only scratches in the wood, interrupted by distinctive perforations between the grain of the fir.

The beauty of stylus tablets, and often their curse for the epigraphist, is that they could be reused. Linked together in pairs, the tablets could be sealed, addressed on the outside and sent off. Once read, the wax could be smoothed over with a spatula (an example was found on the Bloomberg

ABOVE Roger Tomlin, working on one of the Bloomberg writing tablets in his Oxford study
RIGHT an historically significant tablet recording the first ever use of the name London ('LONDINIO MOGONTIO' – in London, to Mogontius)
Both photos © Andy Chopping/MOLA



site) and the tablet reused. However, as earlier inscriptions were then written over, interpretation can be challenging.

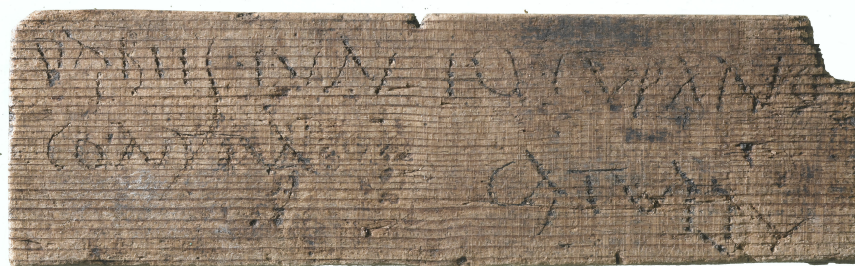
Deciphering the inscriptions

The analysis of the Bloomberg tablets was a difficult exercise, for which Roger employed technology, photography, drawing and inspiration. The task demanded so much concentration, he was only able to work in intense, hour-long bursts.

Each fragment of tablet had been photographed four times by Andy Chopping at MOLA, using raking light from different angles. By viewing these on screen and the tablets themselves under magnification at his desk – and ignoring the grain as far as possible – Roger was able to produce his own version, part drawing, part tracing.

He deciphers letters and words as an entity, seeking clues from each to interpret the other. He acknowledges that imagination is required, but tries to be as objective as possible, rigorously testing each hypothetical interpretation, to avoid the error he discovered in the work of Edward Nicholson. Head of the Bodleian Library and keen antiquarian, Nicholson had translated the cursive Latin on a lead tablet from Bath as early evidence of Christian faith, arguing against the 'Arian heresy'. But when Roger examined surviving photographs decades later, he found that, turned around, it read as a bog-standard curse on a thief, who was to be deprived of sleep until the unknown object was returned. Warned by this example, Roger now checks each reading upside down, just in case.

Deciphering the content as a whole requires research and an apparently



© Andy Chopping/MOLA

encyclopedic knowledge of the people, places, language, terminology, history, law, literature, social structures and conventions of the Roman empire, as well as of the body of currently known inscriptions. Such knowledge enables Roger to link the brewer named Tertius on Bloomberg tablet 12, with the word Tertius scored on a barrel-head found in Gresham Street, and Tertius the brewer identified on a stylus tablet from Carlisle, all potentially the same person.

Significance of the tablets

The Bloomberg tablets have added new perspectives on London's history. It is not only the scale of the new evidence that is important, but also the nature of the documents, and of the parties sending and receiving them.

The tablets provide the names of 92 people (apart from emperors and others used as reference points), who are connected to London, though not necessarily residents. Among them are merchants, traders, slaves, freedmen and military men. The total of nine officers and men from the military represent three auxiliary cohorts and the governor's bodyguard – more than 1500 men. The most noteworthy of these is Classicus, named on tablet 33 as prefect of the Sixth Cohort of Nervians. He was Julius Classicus, a kinsman of the newly appointed, post-

Boudican procurator, Classicianus.

As the tablets date from both before and after the Boudican revolt, they also corroborate evidence for the date of the conflict. Although given by Tacitus as AD 61, most scholars now favour the view that it was AD 60. The tablets tend to support the earlier date: for example one dated 21 October AD 62 describes the transport of 20 loads of provisions from Verulamium to Londinium, indicating that both recovered quite rapidly. Other tablets give oblique references to the status of Londinium both before and after the revolt, and add to knowledge about matters such as judicial authority.

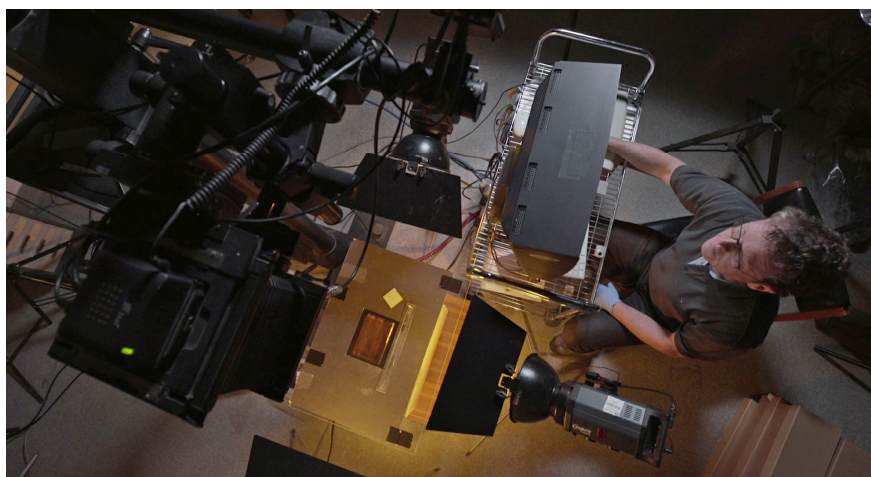
A number of tablets have details of trade or transport, and many are legal documents. Tablet 44 is Roger's favourite as the debt it records was attested on another precise date, 8 January AD 57, making it the city's earliest known financial document. The two parties are freedmen, and Roger speculates that one, Tibullus, might have been named by his owner after the poet, one of the great elegists.

Epigraphy and archaeology

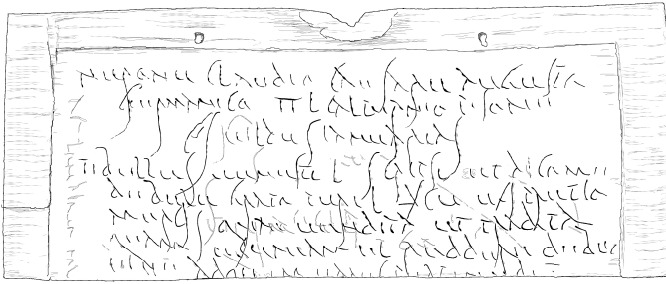
Roger finds working with and alongside archaeological projects stimulating. He's made welcome by archaeologists, and describes the relationship as symbiotic, providing benefits in both interpretation and in the development of new techniques and processes.

In this case, of course, seeing the tablets in the context of the vast array of archaeology at the Bloomberg site has facilitated his work. Where many inscriptions Roger has previously examined are from collections, where the original context and even site can be unknown, the tablets at Bloomberg tended to be from known, rich contexts. Their value is enhanced by the closely dated stratigraphy from which they

TOP tablet 14, naming Junius the cooper
LEFT MOLA photographer Andy Chopping, capturing an ephemeral inscription

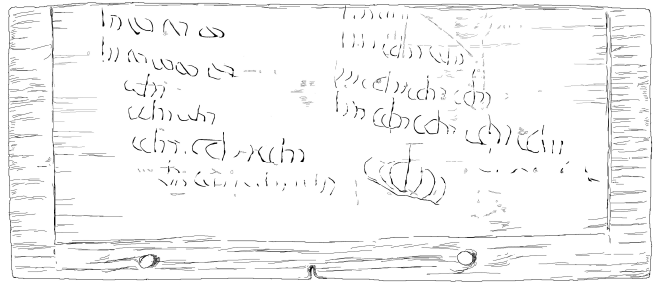


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LEFT Roger Tomlin's drawing of tablet 44, Britain's earliest dated document

RIGHT tablet 78, interpreted as a practice tablet for someone learning to write numbers. Another records alphabet-writing practice.



were recovered. Other relevant artefacts from the site, including the type of woodworking tools used for creating tablets and some 200 iron styluses, have added further important data for the epigraphy.

Future directions

Now retired from full time teaching, Roger remains a fellow emeritus at Wolfson College. Further epigraphical work is planned on largely unread stylus tablets from Vindolanda stored at the British Museum, and from Carlisle. He is also working on a complete edition of lead curse tablets from the temple site at Uley in Gloucestershire.

As much as he would like his own

sophisticated camera and lighting set up in his office in the eaves of his Oxford home, he's likely to continue to rely on other photographers. He does hope to make use of new technologies though. 'The Holy Grail comes along every few years,' he says, 'but as they stem from other disciplines that use imaging techniques, they can be hard work to adapt to epigraphy.' The latest possibility is reflectance transformation imaging, where as many as 72 photos are combined to make 3D images. 'It can even be employed in the field, but really needs a good interface to PhotoShop to make it useful.'

Roger's gift is to be able to present scholarship in the form required by researchers, while conveying his own fascination and sense of discovery. He revels in new historical evidence, in the chance to make connections in the records, and in eavesdropping on

conversations that were never meant for us. 'It helps to be a nosey-parker,' he says. 'It's that tantalising glimpse through the curtain that sets you wondering about lots of little questions – is this the first page of a will? What is *Classicus* doing in London? What was the name of that farm?'

He's not sure where the next generation of Roman epigraphers will come from. Papyrology is a strong discipline, but that is mostly in Greek. As Roman epigraphy is now more widely taught though, his hope is that the code-breaking bug will infect other classical scholars. His own publications may well provide the germ.

Roman London's first voices: writing tablets from the Bloomberg excavations, 2010-2014

by Roger SO Tomlin and many contributors
MOLA Monograph 72 £32
From MOLA: www.mola.org.uk/publications/

Letter

I read with particular interest about the set of deeper pits containing the ritual deposition of animals at Carshalton especially Pit 4376/3174 which contained, in a secondary deposit, about 30 animal skeletons, including sheep, cattle, horse, a lap-dog and a raven (14 (12)).

What immediately alerted me was the fact that much of this arrangement is closely matched by my site at Keston, only 9 miles from Carshalton. Here, a Middle Iron Age site evolved into an extensive Roman farmstead, then villa, with its own monumental cemetery. Its publication took the form of two reports.¹ Of particular significance was a group of eight large shafts that also mostly contained animal skeletons and which we largely identified as ritual.

Of extreme relevance was our Great

Shaft which, in many ways, replicates the largest pit at Carshalton. Our Great Shaft contained a total of about 85 bone groups in six zones including some 59 animal skeletons. Most were of dog or sheep, though pig, ox and horse were included. The primary deposits contained a mix: glass vessels, jars and a flagon, three dogs, five sheep, two pigs and a broken spearhead, all dating to the late 1st or early 2nd century. Equally interesting was the sealing deposit, as at Carshalton, which contained the complete articulated skeletons of two horses and an ox. The similarity here is staggering as ours also contained a raven.

What may be of importance, too, is that our pit was also bell-shaped. Our section strongly suggested that the shaft had a lower chamber, also certainly only entered from a much narrower central shaft which had collapsed and

fallen in from above. It is just possible that the Carshalton shaft also had a lower chamber. Another equally deep shaft at Keston also produced the remains of a lapdog.

As both sites were occupied for at least two centuries in the early Roman period, I think it likely that the occupants of these nearby sites probably knew of each other and certainly they were performing similar rituals, perhaps in deference to their local gods and to promote good harvest. At Keston it worked, for it continued for another two centuries as a flourishing Roman villa estate. But what happened at Carshalton? Either way, thanks to the *London Archaeologist*, the two sites can be linked again after 1,700 years.

Brian Philp
Orpington, Kent

1. B Philp *The Roman Villa Site at Keston, Kent* Kent Monogr. 6 (1991) & 8 (1999).