

An inscribed Roman brick from Houghton Street, City of Westminster

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Introduction

Archaeological investigations were carried out by Archaeology South-East (ASE, UCL Institute of Archaeology) at the London School of Economics and Political Science prior to redevelopment. The site is now occupied by Centre Building, a state-of-the-art flexible and highly sustainable academic and teaching building, located on Houghton Street, London, WC2A in the City of Westminster (Fig 1).¹ The site lies within the Strand Conservation Area and is located c. 350m to the north of the River Thames and 50m to the north of the Aldwych.

An archaeological evaluation comprising eight trenches and three trial pits was carried out by PCA in 2015, which revealed evidence of Saxon, medieval and post-medieval activity.² The footprint of The East Building was subsequently selected for open area excavation, while, in the remainder of the area, ground reduction was monitored by a watching brief with a provision for archaeological excavation where required.³ The Saxon, medieval and post-medieval evidence will be the focus of publication currently in preparation.⁴ This article deals with one Roman find from the site, of particular intrinsic interest.

An unusual find

Among the most intriguing finds collected from the Houghton Street site was a piece of Roman brick. The layer from which the Roman brick was retrieved was of medieval date, and therefore the brick, along with a small assemblage of late Roman pottery from the site, were all recovered as residual finds and represent material redeposited during the post-Roman period. No features of Roman date were identified during the excavation.

The identification of this fragment as a Roman brick rather than tile is based upon the measurable thickness of 35–40mm. The brick is manufactured in a dense and evenly fired, slightly micaceous red-orange fabric with common fine quartz, sparse medium quartz and calcareous deposits. The fragment is distinctive due to the presence of two lines of hand-written script on the upper surface (Fig 2).

Roman brick and tile frequently display surface decoration, in the form of arcs, or tally marks. These may be as simple as a series of inscribed lines or crosses on a tile surface, such as those recovered from Beauport Park bath-house in East Sussex,⁵ although numeric tally marks are also known. The choice of one or the other is most probably a reflection of the numeracy of the tiler or the preferences of a particular tile kiln.

Several examples of Roman ceramic building material (CBM) from the Roman tilerly at Great Cansiron, also in East Sussex, display Roman numerals on their surface, including two examples securely translated to numbers 214 and 220, the former marked with a pointed instrument and the latter with fingers.⁶ Supported by further marked examples from elsewhere in the empire, it is suggested that a figure in the region of 220 tiles was what was expected for individuals to produce per day.

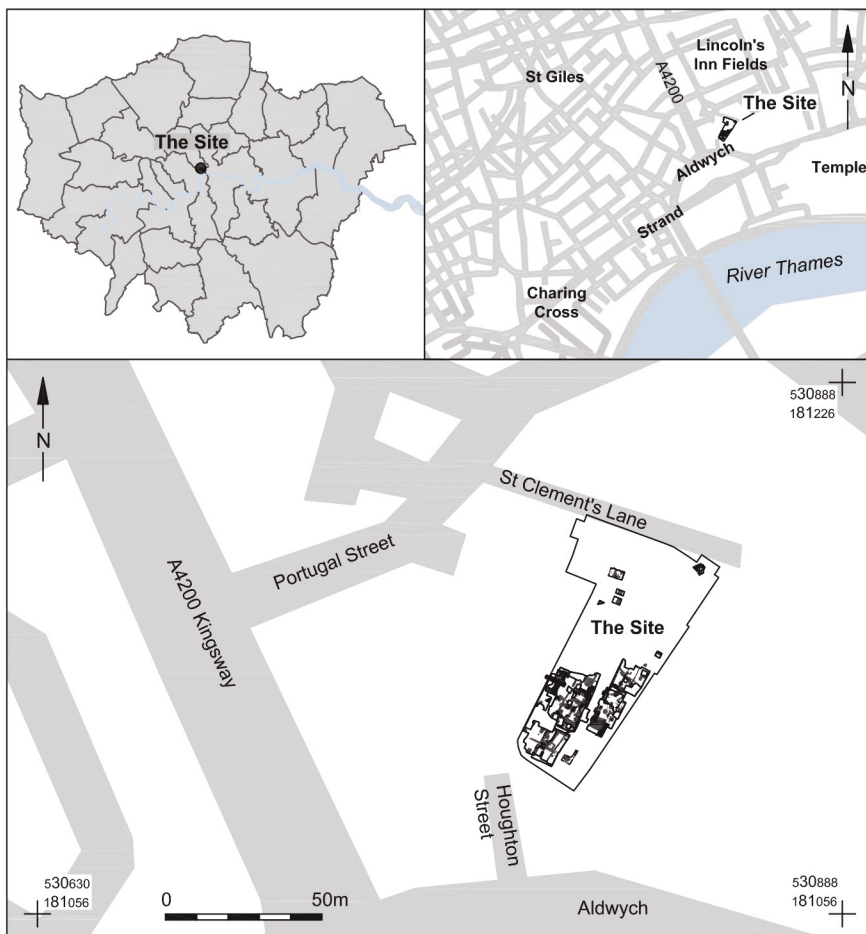


Fig 1: Site location

The graffito

The Houghton Street inscription is very partial, consisting of only six legible characters in a cursive script:

III N[...]

IV[...]

[...]

However, extrapolating from the legible letters, it has been translated by Roger Tomlin⁷ as a form of tally mark, consisting of a written-out date:

III N[ONAS] | IV[NIAS]

or III N[ONAS] | IV[LIAS]

'3 (days before) the Nones of June / July' 'Nones' is the Roman term for the day after the first quarter or 'half moon' phase of the lunar cycle. 'IV' translates as the first two letters of either June or July – this is impossible to differentiate from the surviving script, but the Nones would fall on 5 June or 7 July respectively for each. Tomlin also suggests there may have been a batch-total in the line below, and that the date was present to enable the manufacturer to assess how long the brick-batch in question had been left to dry, prior to firing.

Hand-inscribed bricks such as this example are not common. Rapid research of other Romano-British sites across south-east England has produced only a few examples of tiles displaying handwritten script. Much more common are the basic tally markings described above, abstract signature marks including 'arc' decoration,⁸ and stamps that are associated with establishments of the Roman state.

For example, Roman CBM bearing the stamp 'PPBRLON' – thought to translate as 'the procurators of the province of Britain at London' – have been found across London,⁹ and brick and tile stamped with the initials of the 'Classis Britannica' (the fleet of Roman Britain) have been found more

widely dispersed across London and the south-east.¹⁰

Few comparable examples of Roman CBM bearing handwritten inscriptions could be identified. These include a lydion brick in the Museum of London etched with the statement: '*Austalis, for 13 days, has been wandering off by himself, every day*'.¹¹ Intriguingly, this statement appears to have been written by two different hands, as discussed by Kruschwitz.¹²

A fragment of *tegula* from Roman Leicester is also inscribed with several lines of handwritten text, which appear to be a list under the translated title of '*Of the civitas of the Corieltauvi*'.¹³ Tomlin remarks that this text 'does not look much like the usual tile graffito', and unfortunately too much of the text is missing to establish what the motivation was for using the damp brick as the medium for the surviving information, but it is an interesting example.

The importance of ownership is shown by the 'PPBRLON' and Classis Britannica stamps described above, and also by stamps found on tiles that proclaim tiles to be from the estates of the emperor, or '*from the Favorianus claybeds owned by Calventia Maxima*'.¹⁴ However, proprietorship was evidently also important on an individual level as evidenced by two co-joining fragments of lydion that have been roller-stamped with the words '*I, Cabriabanus, made this wall tile*'.¹⁵

Discussion

Without doubt the most common rationale for the marking of CBM was related to the organisation and quality control of brick and tile manufacture, whether that be through abstract signature marks, simple tally marks or the more explicit dating, as shown on the Houghton Street example. Taking



Fig 2: the brick fragment with hand-written graffito

ownership or indicating affiliation was also of great importance, as shown through stamps, but some examples reveal a more spontaneous motivation, unrelated to the logistics of tile manufacture – unsurprisingly those of a spontaneous nature were written by hand. Despite containing what may seem to be a mundane missive, the Houghton Street tile represents a valuable addition to what is currently a very small corpus of published Roman hand-inscribed brick and tile.

Acknowledgements

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7. Roger Tomlin, pers comm.

8. *Op cit*, fn 5.

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12. *Ibid.*

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15. British Museum no. 2007.8032.1.