

An example of pictorial Roman graffiti from Cannon Street Station in the City of London reconsidered

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The site

The ground reduction in 1868 that preceded the construction of Cannon Street Station in the City of London revealed various monumental Roman masonry foundations founded on timber piles and transverse beams, plus various high-status masonry buildings. One room measured about 15 by 12m and was floored with 'coarse red concrete', while other rooms had tessellated floors (Fig 1, A). The walls of some rooms possessed *in-situ* painted wall plaster including stripes, a 'trellis-pattern' and a 'powdering of fancy-coloured spots' (possibly to imitate marble cladding), implying that there was structural survival above dado level.

The associated finds included 'pottery, glass and articles of personal and domestic use', plus 'roofing, hypocaust and building tiles... On many of these tiles were the letters PP. BR. LON.',¹ signifying that they were either manufactured by or for the Procurator's office in London.²

Subsequent archaeological investigations to the east of the station have established that these unplanned foundations included at least two east–west aligned terrace walls (Fig 1, B). A number of monumental buildings were constructed on the upper terrace during the late 1st century AD, which have been interpreted as a single gigantic complex, which possibly served as the provincial governor's palace.³ More recent fieldwork has established there was

not a vast monumental complex constructed as a single entity. Instead, it appears that this complex was actually smaller than has been previously claimed.⁴ However, 'there is sufficient evidence to suggest a very substantial complex of monumental buildings of scale and character to suggest that either this was an official residence or a major administrative complex.'⁵

In 1988–9, the redevelopment of the viaduct approach to Cannon Street Station (on the north side of Upper Thames Street) offered a unique opportunity to re-examine part of the area developed in 1868. Excavations revealed a north–south aligned water channel or part of a waterfront lined with two parallel tiers of horizontal timber baulks (Fig 2). To the north was constructed an east–west aligned

terrace retaining wall. Both structures date to c. AD 80 (Fig 1, C).⁶ Previous investigations suggest that this terrace was occupied by a courtyard dominated by a large oblong ornamental pool. To the north of the courtyard there was another east–west terrace wall, on which was partly founded a huge rectangular masonry building,⁷ which has been described as a palace 'state room' or a hall.⁸

Thomas Gunston collected a number of finds from the 1868 development and displayed them in his private museum. Exhibits included a red ceramic Roman brick of Lydion type (475 x 290 x 50mm). It measured roughly one Roman foot by one and a

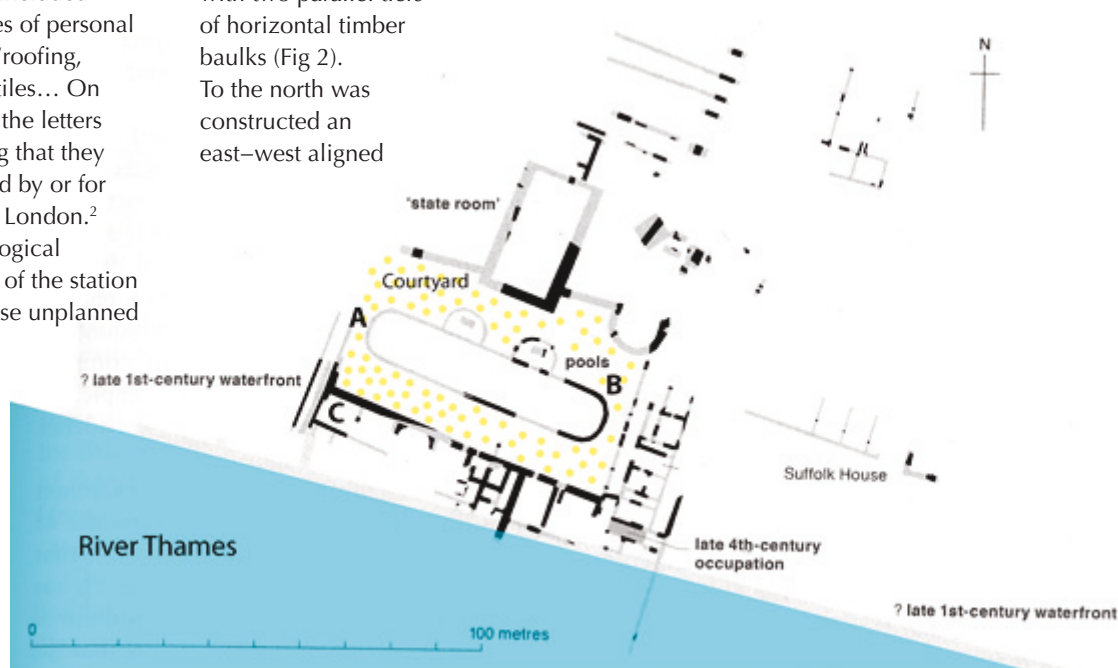


Fig 1: a largely conjectural plan of the Roman remains within the vicinity of Cannon Street Station, showing the conjectured line of the late 1st century AD waterfront.

KEY: A - approximate location of 1868 discoveries;

B - various archaeological investigations carried out during 1961–72 in the Bush Lane area;

C - 1988–89 excavations (LYD88); Light grey tone - conjectured waterfront or walls (building, pool or terrace);

dark grey tone - extent of the various foundations and waterfronts recorded between the 1840s and 1997;

yellow stipple - conjectured extent of the terrace courtyard (after Hingley 2018, fig 5.6).

half feet and bore a unique cartoon-style sketch of a human head with three strands of standing up hair (Fig 3). It is currently (minus one corner) displayed in the Roman Gallery of the Museum of London.⁹

The impression is that this image had been rapidly scored into the surface of the wet or unfired clay with a combination of a fingertip (probably used to produce the strands of hair, the 'beard', the eyes and the eyebrows) and possibly a small hand tool, which was intended to produce three parallel lines or striations (perhaps used to produce the outline of the head).¹⁰ Perhaps this tool was a tile-comb, intended to produce combed decorations on the faces of tiles to form a 'key' to help the plaster adhere. The head of this person is defined by an incomplete oval, consisting of two or three parallel lines. It has been deliberately placed in the bottom right-hand corner of the tile, presumably to make room for the hair. The eyes are two circular depressions, the eyebrows are two short horizontal lines, while each ear is a single squiggly line. The nose is a combination of one short horizontal line, topped by three short, vertical ones.

There is no mouth – the lower part



Fig 2: recording and dismantling the Roman waterfront timbers under Cannon Street viaduct (LYD88). The difficulties of excavating under the vaults were compounded due to problems with shoring, lighting and fumes (MOLA).

of the face consists of a roughly symmetrical arrangement of six parallel lines, perhaps representing successive sweeps with the combing tool, with the left-hand side being the later effort. Possibly this mass of slanting lines represents a short beard, rather than a mouth which could have been easily scratched in with a fingertip. The hair is represented by three long radiating

strands standing on end. Each strand consists of a separate long, vertical, wavy line, made up of three closely-spaced parallel depressions. It is this rather 'wild' looking hair that makes this image so distinctive. Men portrayed as Roman statues or on coins generally have short hair.

This image has been previously described as 'a rude attempt at



Fig 3: the Cannon Street Station tile (left) and the pictorial graffito (right) as drawn by J Emslie (after Price 1870, 215) (Museum of London)



Fig 4: The pictorial graffito from Neatham (length 280mm) (after Redknap 1986, fig 85, no 393, 125)

portraiture'. It was also suggested that because of the long hair the intention was possibly to represent one of the three Gorgons, perhaps Medusa.¹¹ These mythical Greek monsters had hair made of serpents and anyone who looked at their eyes was turned to stone. Today we associate the hair on your head standing up with fear.¹² Equally, the wild hairstyle and the largely bare head is very reminiscent of seeing a balding man with a comb-over on a windy day. So possibly it represents a bit of tomfoolery by one of the tiliary staff, who scratched out a humorous caricature of a balding colleague.

The positioning of the head on the brick is deliberately off-centre, creating the impression of someone either peeping into or out of an opening, which raises another question about the interpretation of this enigmatic composition. A Victorian image of the graffito (Fig 3) was recently rediscovered when the back issues of *Trans LAMAS* were being formatted for the Archaeology Data Service.¹³

Examples of pictorial graffito on Roman bricks and tiles in Britain appear to be very rare. There is a

late 3rd- or 4th-century AD example of pictorial graffito recovered from the defences of the small town of Neatham in Hampshire. This ambiguous sketch, scratched on one side of a wet ceramic tile with something like a nail or a sharp twig, appears to show both the superimposed outline of a pottery vessel, probably a flagon and the upper portion of a woman's face with prominent eyes (the central parting of her wavy hair confirms her gender) (Fig

4).¹⁴ How should this sketch be interpreted? Was it produced as a riddle? For example, how can you turn this flagon into a woman? The composition is incomplete as the tile is now broken, which hinders its interpretation.

These two examples of pictorial graffito provide intriguing and spontaneous examples of composition, giving us some insight into the informal production of art in Roman Britain. Remember, the Romano-British population would have had seen, on a daily basis, various examples of representative formal art including portraits of the present emperor and his predecessors on their coinage. Also there were civic statues of emperors and perhaps gods, while images of various deities including mass-produced pipe-clay figurines probably adorned every household shrine.¹⁵ While the relief decoration on certain Roman ceramics, particularly samian ware, included human figures, animals and a variety of abstract design motifs, would have been familiar to many people.

Clearly there was plenty of visual artistic inspiration available in Roman

Britain, but what is lacking is the archaeological evidence of informal artistic endeavours. One possibility is that many of their effects were ephemeral. For instance, Christ, during his ministry, 'wrote on the ground with his finger.'¹⁶ Ceramic building material is extremely durable, so, providing pieces bearing pictorial graffito are not badly broken, then such examples can be easily recognised. After all there were various examples of animal paw prints, official stamps and possibly tally marks,¹⁷ but pictorial images on ceramic building material appear to be very rare, which makes the Cannon Street and Neatham examples so enigmatic.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin for permission to reproduce Fig 1 from their book *Londinium: A Biography; Roman London from its origins to the fifth century*. Thanks to Hilary Cool and Jenny Hall for their assistance, and to the Hampshire Field Club for permission to republish the Neatham graffito.

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1. J E Price 'Notes on Roman remains recently discovered in London and Middlesex' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 3 (1870), 212–16.

2. I M Betts 'Procuratorial tiles stamps from London' *Britannia* 26 (1995), 218.

3. P Marsden 'The excavation of a Roman Palace Site in London, 1962–1972' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 26 (1975), 14–70, figs 1 & 4.

4. The 'east wing' of the complex under Suffolk House is now interpreted as a separate residence, see T Brigham with A Woodger *Roman and medieval townhouses on the London waterfront: excavations at the Governor's House, city of London* MoLAS Monogr 9 (2001), 45–8.

5. R Hingley *Londinium: A Biography; Roman London from its origins to the fifth century* (2018), 84. The illustrations are by Christina Unwin.

6. C Spence and F Grew (eds) 'Cannon Street Station (north side)' in *The Annual Review 1989* MOL Dept of Urban Archaeol (1990), 20–1; Site code LYD88. The data from this important site has never been analysed or properly published.

7. *Op cit* fn 3, 22–31.

8. *Op cit* fn 3, 22–24.

9. Museum of London Accession No: 12819.

10. A bronze tile-comb probably from Norfolk is illustrated by G de la Bédoyère in *The Finds from Roman Britain* (1989), 59 fig 34.b.

11. *Op cit* fn 1, 215.

12. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act 1, scene V, lines 12–13) the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father speaks of: 'Thy knotted and combed locks to part, And each particular hair to stand on end' (1600–1).

13. All the articles from *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc*, 1860–2016, are now available from the Archaeology Data Service website [https://doi.org/10.5284/1088083] as part of a searchable database.

14. M Redknap 'Objects of clay in the Small Finds' in M Millett and D Graham *Excavations on the Romano-British small town at Neatham, Hampshire 1969–1979* Hants Field Club Monogr 3 (1986), 124.

15. M G Fittock 'Broken deities: the pipe-clay figurines from Roman London' *Britannia* 46 (2015), 111–34.

16. The Gospel according to St John (King James edition), VIII–6.

17. *Op cit* fn 2; I Benedetti-Wilson 'An inscribed Roman brick from Houghton Street, City of Westminster' *London Archaeol* 16 (1) (2021), 10–11.