



Blackfriars ship 1: Romano-Celtic, Gallo-Roman or *Classis Britannicae*?

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Vessels of the Blackfriars 1 type

In 1967, Peter Marsden published his first detailed report on the Roman ship excavated at Blackfriars, London, in 1962–63. It had sunk in the 2nd century while carrying a cargo of ragstone from Maidstone (Kent). He described the remains of the vessel, with its carvel-built hull caulked with hazel twigs, mast-step and thick floors secured with turned nails, a distinctive construction technique with parallels in craft found at New Guy's House, London (Marsden, 1994: 97–104), Bruges, Belgium (Marsden, 1976) and more recently at St Peter Port, Guernsey (Rule & Monaghan, 1993) and Barland's Farm, Gwent (Allen, 1994: 150). He concluded that the technique represented owed little to the classical 'Mediterranean style', in which the hull planking is joined edge-to-edge by mortise and tenon construction, or to the later clinker style, in which hull strakes are overlapped. Instead he proposed that the Blackfriars 1-type vessels bear distinct similarities to ships built by the Veneti, a Celtic tribe from north-western Gaul (France). These were described by Julius Caesar as flat-bottomed vessels with oak hulls supported by thick frames secured with iron spikes as thick as a man's thumb (Handford, 1951: 98). Marsden then suggested that, since 2nd-century Britain was inhabited by tribes of Celtic or part Celtic type, the Blackfriars ship was 'built by native shipwrights according to a native tradition which survived into the period

of the Roman occupation of Britain' (Marsden, 1967: 35).

In his most recent publication, the excavator claims that subsequent discoveries have confirmed that conclusion and shown that the shipbuilding methods are part of a wider family of native techniques (Marsden, 1994: 96). The other types of vessel include the hard-chined Zwammerdam barges (de Weerd, 1978; 1988) and other craft from northern Europe such as lake boats from Switzerland (for instance Lehmann, 1990; Arnold, 1990; 1992), their only unifying attribute being that they were not constructed in the style of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean craft. There has been some discussion of the most appropriate term to describe the particular boatbuilding traditions represented: Celtic, celtic, continental, Rhenish, Western European Rhenish, Gallo-Roman and native Gallic have all been suggested (McGrail, 1977: 299–300), although 'Romano-Celtic' has subsequently been adopted by Marsden as his preferred adjective (1994: 166). This term has also met with support from Professor McGrail, who has sub-divided the known 'Romano-Celtic' vessels into sub-group A, which included the Zwammerdam barges, and sub-group B, which includes the Blackfriars 1 type (McGrail, 1995).

A rather different approach is offered in this article. It is suggested here that the Blackfriars 1-type vessels may have been built for the *Classis Britannica*, the

Roman fleet responsible for transporting the legions and their supplies from the continental mainland to and around the British Isles. As such, the origin for the construction technique should not necessarily be sought in a native boatbuilding tradition, but with the needs of the Roman military, the considerable resources and infrastructure at their disposal, the shipwrights they chose to employ and the maritime environment in which the vessels operated.

The *Classis Britannica*

The summary history of the *Classis Britannica* published by Starr (1960: 152–156) has subsequently been much extended by archaeological work (Cleere, 1989), in particular at the fleet headquarters in Boulogne (Brulet, 1989); in the Weald (Cleere, 1975; Cleere & Crossley, 1985) at the Dover fort (Philip, 1981) and even in London, where a modest but significant number of *CL BR* tiles have been recovered (Crowley & Betts, 1992; Milne, 1995: 115–116). The fleet was raised to launch the invasion of Britain, which ultimately took place in AD 43: thereafter it served to transport the legions and keep them supplied in their bases around the province. Although the invasion fleet was built in Gaul, there would have been a continuing need for robust British-built cargo vessels to undertake subsequent vital support work. Perhaps some warships were required to patrol for pirates, as was the case with the better documented Mediterranean fleets based at Misenum and Ravenna (Starr, 1960), but a more mundane supply role almost certainly formed the greater part of the duties of the British fleet, a merchant marine rather than a fighting force. This general point is supported by a recent study of the changing representations of military ships on Roman coins (Orna-Ornstein, 1995). The strength of the British fleet is difficult to calculate, but

working from the archaeological evidence of fort size and the extent of their attested interests in the Weald and elsewhere, Philip (1981: 115) has suggested that it must have been well in excess of 5000 men, that is, comparable with a standard legion.

As for the end of their operations, the base at Dover was abandoned early in the 3rd century when a major campaign was launched in the far north of the province; the fleet's iron-working interests in the Weald (which, it is argued here, included shipbuilding) did not continue beyond the mid-3rd century; the fort at Boulogne had also been abandoned by the end of that century. The latest datable inscription which can be associated with the *Classis Britannica* is from Arles and dates to c. AD 240. The military units which were serving in Britain in the later 3rd and 4th centuries obviously still needed transport and supplies, but such services were presumably organized wholly by the individual legions themselves, since they do not seem to have been rendered by a fleet under the name of the *Classis Britannica* beyond the mid-3rd century.

The Fleet's sphere of activity

The zone in which the *Classis Britannica* operated included all of the British Isles which were under Roman rule, the Channel and the northern coast of the continental mainland, as far as the mouth of the Rhine where the *Classis Germanica* took over (Milne, 1990). This area can be identified archaeologically by the distribution of stamped tiles and inscriptions associated with the fleet, and possibly by the metal ingots stamped *C Br* found on the Ploumanac'h wreck (Parker, 1992: 320–321), together defining an area extending from Boulogne to Hadrian's Wall. Significantly this is precisely the same area within which all of the wrecks of the Blackfriars I-type vessels (McGrail, 1995: sub-group B) and the isolated finds of the

characteristic cone-headed nails lie: in other words, the distribution and dating of the *Classis Britannica* is mirrored by the distribution and dating of the Blackfriars 1 vessel types. The area was peopled by many different Celtic tribes, but is not centred on the homelands of the Veneti, whose particular shipbuilding prowess was remarked on by Caesar (Handford, 1951: 95–100). It is therefore suggested that the Blackfriars 1 shipbuilding technique owes more to the needs of the Roman fleet than to any one of the Celtic tribes within that region.

A similar point can be made for the *Classis Germanica* and the Zwammerdam-type barges; again that particular fleet, with its particular requirements, seems to have developed a particular type of vessel (McGrail, 1995: sub-group A) to provide the military supplies and support desired on the Rhine frontier. One of the additional tasks with which the *Classis Germanica* was heavily involved was the large-scale quarrying as well as the transportation of stone, particularly from the Brohl Valley stone quarries near Rheineck between c. AD 80–160 (Starr, 1960: 151). By way of an interesting parallel, the *Classis Britannica* is known to have been involved with the construction of Hadrian's Wall in AD 122–128, as no less than three inscriptions testify (see e.g. Philp, 1981: 114). The fact that the Blackfriars 1 vessel was itself carrying a cargo of ragstone, perhaps for London's defensive wall, is also of significance here. Clearly the construction of the town wall with an estimated 45,000 tonnes of ragstone requiring over 1700 voyages from vessels the size of Blackfriars 1 (Marsden, 1994: 83) must represent an officially-sanctioned project, and thus the involvement of the official fleet might be expected. Indeed, the *Classis Britannica* may have had a major interest in the Medway stone quarries comparable to that of the German fleet in the Brohl Valley.

Shipbuilding

The building of a fleet of Blackfriars-type vessels would have needed considerable supplies, not just of timber, but also of iron for the tools as well as the long, thick iron spikes, as Damian Goodburn's work on the building of a replica section for the Museum of London confirms (Milne, 1995: 103–105). It should therefore come as no surprise that the well-attested large-scale exploitation of iron in the Weald should have been under the auspices of the *Classis Britannica*. Iron-working sites such as Bardown, Beauport Park and Little Farningham Farm have all produced *CL Br* tile stamps, as has the estuarine port at Bodiam, and the possible *Classis Britannica* fort which in all probability lies below or close to the later fort at Lympe. It has already been argued that this part of the Weald was an Imperial estate from which the iron was being worked and exported on a grand scale (Cleere, 1978; Cleere & Crossley, 1985; Cleere, 1989). While that may well have been the case, it is suggested here that a proportion of that iron was being utilized directly for the building of ships for the *Classis Britannica*, particularly in the creeks around Bodiam and Lympe. This was an area with prodigious supplies of timber and iron, with creeks which at that time opened up into a natural lagoon sheltered from the Channel by a great shingle spit, although the coast is now much changed (Cunliffe, 1980a: figs 17, 19; Eddison & Green, 1988). Surely it was here that the fleet was built, or rebuilt, to meet each of the new campaigns and emergencies which beset the province. Lympe lies at the eastern end of this lagoon guarding the entrance to the great natural harbour, and it was from here that the altar inscribed with the name of Aufidius Pantera *praefectus Classis Britannicae* (RIB 66) was found in 1850 (Roach Smith, 1852: 26). Other evidence for a fleet base here includes 21 *CL Br* tile fragments and masonry re-used in the

later Saxon Shore fort (Cunliffe, 1980b: 284).

Conclusion

There is no mention in Caesar's description of Britain of any particular shipbuilding prowess among the British tribes (Handford, 1951: 119–140). Indeed, the Blackfriars 1 vessel does not seem to represent a direct development of a *British* native boatbuilding tradition, which may have been concerned rather less with plank-built craft (although the longevity of the tradition associated with the Bronze Age Dover boat is uncertain) than with logboats and coracles. This is in marked contrast to the Veneti on the Atlantic coast of Gaul for example, who surpassed the other Gallic tribes in their knowledge and experience of navigation (Handford, 1951: 95). Celtic tribes clearly differed considerably amongst themselves and did not share a common, specifically 'Celtic', shipbuilding tradition. As has been argued eloquently elsewhere, there was a rich variety of boatbuilding techniques prevalent during the Roman period, some of which must presumably reflect in some sense different pre-Roman traditions, be they Punic, Greek, Gallic or whatever. However, since no British forbear of a vessel built with sawn boards and fastened with nails has yet been found, it seems more reasonable to see the Blackfriars 1-type vessels, like bath-houses, as owing all to the advent of Roman rule (*cf.* Parker, 1992: 26). Such craft are best termed, not 'Romano-Celtic', a quasi-ethnic term, but 'Roman' (in a functional/chronological sense) since they were arguably built by and for the *Classis Britannica* and could not have been built without the support of the considerable infrastructure which such a centralized and powerful authority was able to call upon.

That said, it would be foolish to ignore the possibility that specific features such as the use of iron-fastened floors may have

been inherited from a native tribe such as the Veneti. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that vessels built especially for the fleet could not really be said to reflect a gradual, organic fusion of different traditions to produce a new 'Romano-Celtic' style: they were simply craft built to Roman specifications under Roman supervision but with whatever materials and labour were drafted in.

It is also postulated here that such craft were probably built on a scale commensurate with the extensive production of iron in the Weald, which was essential for the vessel fastenings. The most likely area for the fleet's shipbuilding activity is on the sheltered coast south of the timber-rich Weald, where roads lead from the iron-working sites to Bodiam and Lympne. The sheltered lagoon which once lay to the south of this coast is now silted up, which raises the possibility that remains of the shipyards associated with the *Classis Britannica* may have survived beneath and around what is now Romney Marsh. Remarkably few major Roman shipbuilding sites have ever been excavated. However, such sites hold the potential to resolve some of the problems surrounding the ethnicity or otherwise of contemporary craft, as well as illuminating the construction processes involved. The most profitable opportunities to do so are more likely to occur on land rather than underwater, and redevelopments and drainage scheme on sites such as the Bodiam/Lympne ancient coastline should be monitored with such prospects in mind.

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