

Alchester

In search of Vespasian

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27 August 2003: the Alchester team reports the discovery of an inscription. My reaction: a mixture of excitement and disbelief - only one complete stone inscription and two single fragments of others have ever been found in Oxfordshire. Roman inscriptions are extremely rare in southern Britain, especially away from the big cities and fortresses. Is it possible that we have found another? All that is visible so far is an X-shaped decoration; the rest is still under unexcavated deposits which have to be drawn, and it is another day before we can start recovering what proves to be part of a tombstone - including the first and the family name of the deceased. Within the next two and a half weeks, another 19 fragments come to light, plus one from a second epitaph. Each new block reveals more of the puzzle, and, sometimes in oblique torchlight, the inscription is, bit by bit, deciphered. It is clear now that our team has found not just fragments, but virtually the whole tombstone; and not just any tombstone, but one which forces us to rewrite the history of the Roman invasion and conquest of Britain.

Where was it found? Alchester is a Roman small-town ten miles north of Oxford. A team of volunteers has been exploring this site since 1996, first under the auspices of the Oxford University Archaeological Society, then under that of Leicester, Oxford and Edinburgh Universities. Our fieldwork focused initially on a Roman military parade ground and marching camp near the later Roman town (see CA 157), and then on an annexe to a large military compound (CA 173). In 2003 we excavated the town wall near the west gate. This had been robbed out in post-Roman times, except for two stones *in situ* and the wall's rubble foundations. It was here in the foundations of the later town that we found all the inscription fragments, smashed up to provide building material. Obviously, the town defences had been strengthened by a wall in some haste, probably not

before the late 3rd century.

The archaeological context thus tells us little about the date of our tombstone - but the text does.

This text provides our first biography of any inhabitant of pre-medieval Oxfordshire. Our man, Lucius Valerius Geminus, had not been born here, though. He was a Roman citizen, as indicated by his three names and his voting tribe, Pollia. All citizens belonged to such a tribe. (These were not tribes in the usual sense, but artificial constituencies that had grouped citizens together to participate in elections. To vote, in what were by imperial times mock elections, you had to be in Rome, so the tribes were now little more than symbols of Roman citizen status.)

His birthplace, where the majority of people are thought to have belonged to the Pollia tribe, was a marginal community in

Vespasian was in his sixties for most of his reign (AD 69-79). The youthful portrait, found at Carthage in North Africa, is thought to date to the early years after his accession - still close to what he may have looked like when he led the Second Augustan Legion during the Roman invasion in AD 43, then aged 33?



North-West Italy. Only three inscriptions in addition to ours (and no literary source) record its name, invariably in abbreviated form. We are not even sure how it was called: Forum Germ(anorum), 'the market place of the Germans' or, possibly, Forum Germ(anici), 'the market place of Germanicus'. Ours is the earliest testimony so far. He was either from the centre of the community at San Lorenzo di Caraglio in the foothills of the Alps, or from a smaller settlement at the edge of the north Italian plain or an Alpine valley nearby.

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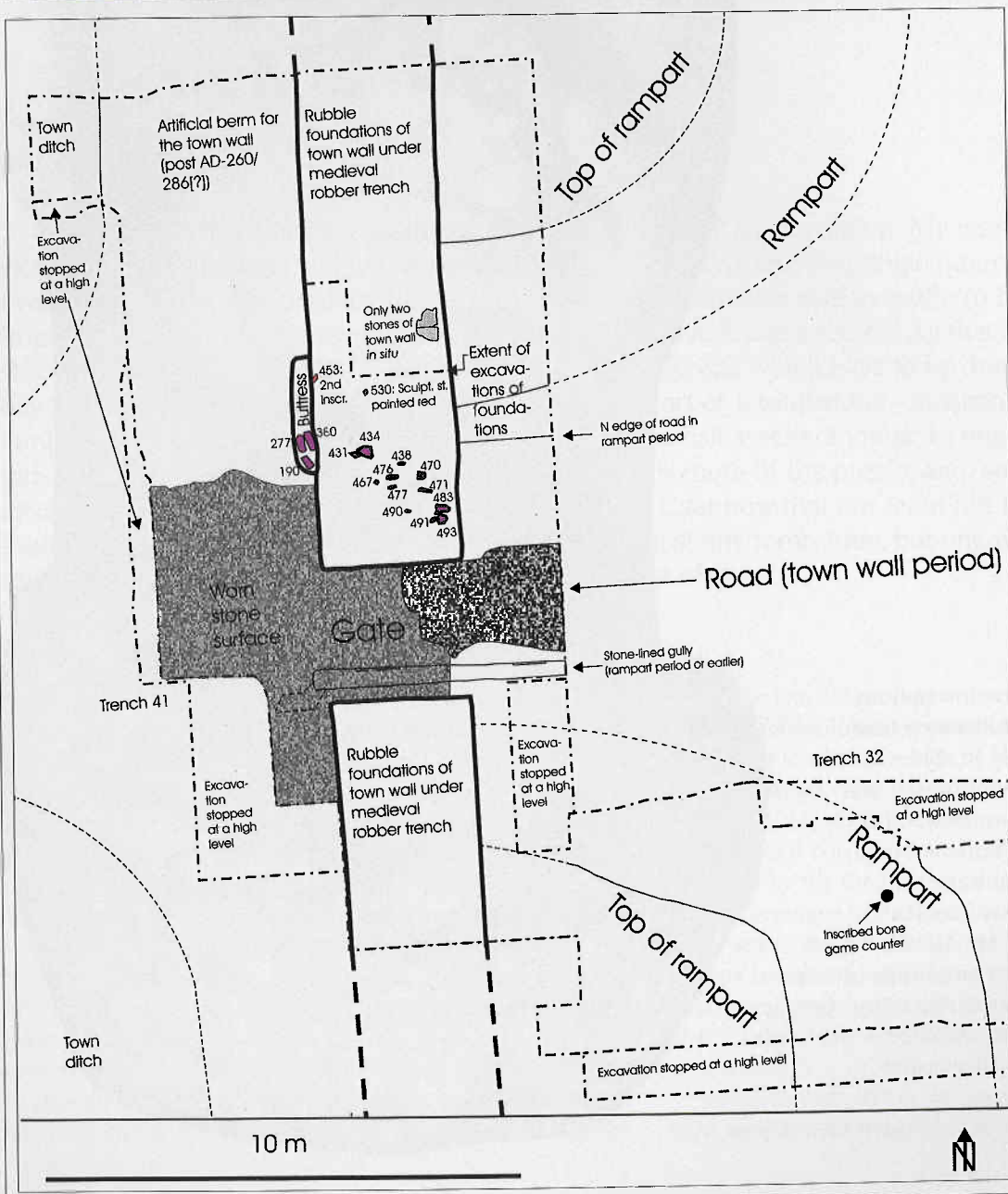
The tombstone of Lucius Valerius Geminus



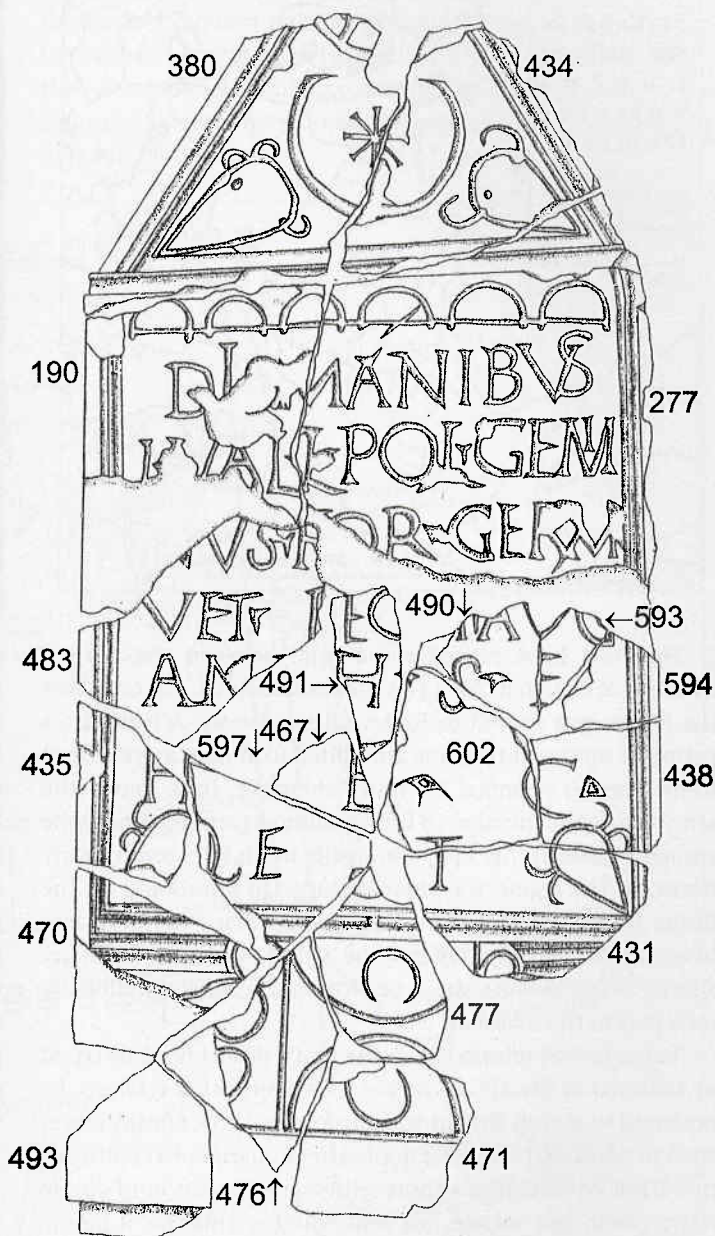
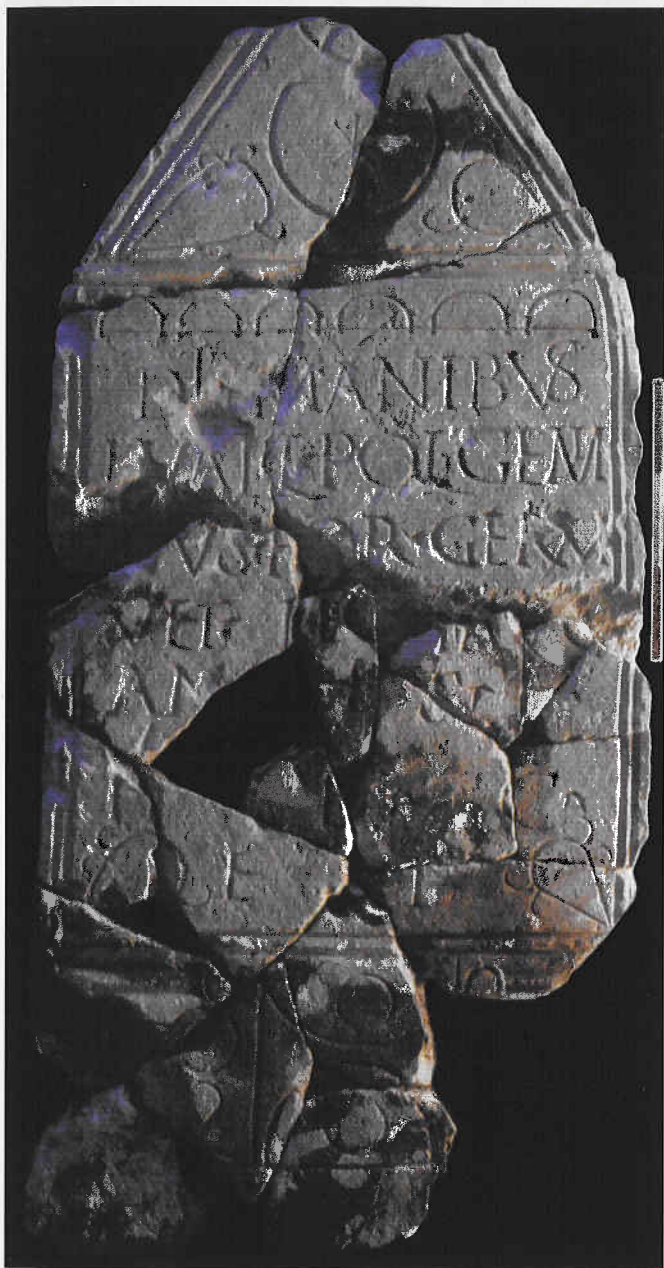
Above left Bernard Jones checks a section while Bob Hooke works his way towards the second fragment of the tombstone.

Above right The second and largest fragment is revealed - and with it the name of the veteran's home community.

Left Plan showing the west gate of the Roman town of Alchester, and the position within the fabric of the wall-foundations of the various fragments of the tombstone (shown in purple and numbered). The numbers are those used during the excavation and correspond to those of the individual pieces on the drawing, opposite right. Note that one fragment was found of another inscription, and one from a sculpted stone painted red. Some other fragments were also recovered but could not be precisely located. (Earlier and later features are excluded, and the phasing of the site is provisional.)



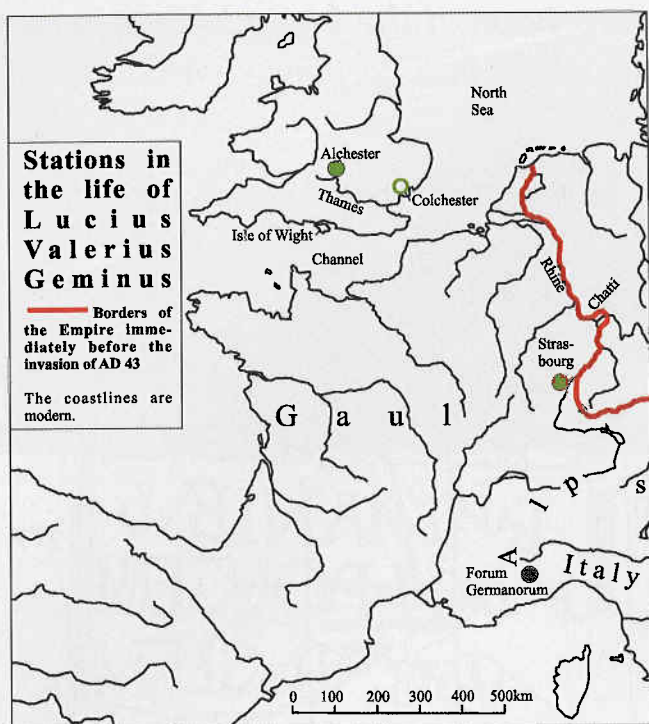
To the souls of the departed: Lucius Valerius Geminus, the son of Lucius, of the Pollia voting tribe, from Forum Germanorum, veteran of the Second Augustan Legion, aged 50(?), lies here. His heir had this set up in accordance with his will.



DIŠ [◆] MANIBVS
 L(ucius) ◆ VAL(erius) ◆ L(uci filius) ◆ POL(lia tribu) ◆ GEMI(-)
 NVS ◆ FOR(o) ◆ GERM(anorum)
 VET(eranus) ◆ LEG(ionis) [◆ I]I ◆ AVG(ustae)
 AN(norum) [◆] L [◆] H(ic) ◆ S(itus) ◆ E(st)
 HE(res) ◆ C(uravit) ◆
 E(x) T(estamento)

Above left The tombstone pieced together. The scale is 3 x 100 mm.

Above A drawing of the stone by Daniel Prior. Left The text of the tombstone, the translation of which is at the top of the page. Note: ◆ = symbol for word divider of any shape; dot beneath letter = reading uncertain; square brackets = letters or symbols lost; round brackets = missing letters of abbreviated or omitted words.

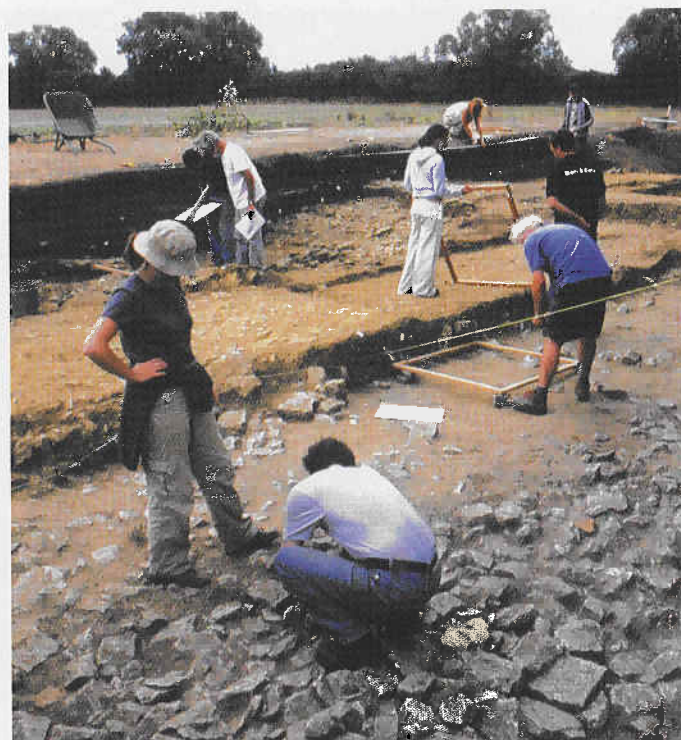


He must have retired some time between the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43 (at the earliest) and c. AD 60, when the legion was moved to Exeter (at the latest). A legionary's period of service at the time amounted to at least 25 years, but sometimes 30 or more. He must, therefore, have joined the army before the invasion of Britain, almost certainly under the emperor Tiberius (AD 14-37), probably in his late teens or early twenties. The legion was then stationed at Strasbourg on the Rhine frontier, and it is possible that Valerius Geminus was involved in fighting against the Chatti tribe in Germany shortly before Rome's attack on Britain. He then undoubtedly took part in the invasion.

Later, he was released from the army, probably while based at Alchester in the AD 40s or 50s. Like many other veterans, he preferred to stay in Britain with his comrades or family, rather than to return to his former home after a quarter of a century or more; but he died after a short retirement, aged around 50. He left an heir, but we are not told whether this was a family member - whose descendants may still be around! - or whether he died childless. It is thought that at least 100 men retired from a legion every year; and they, their dependents and the traders they attracted, ensured that Alchester - after the abandonment of the fortress - evolved into Oxfordshire's largest Roman town. The life-story of what is arguably Britain's earliest known legionary veteran reflects that of thousands of others.

Clues to a future emperor

Yet the inscription does not just tell the biography of an individual. It also provides an essential clue to the whereabouts



of the headquarters of one of the most famous figures in ancient history: for Valerius Geminus' legion, the Second Augusta, was commanded by none other than Vespasian. We learn from the ancient sources that Vespasian was in command when the legion was brought from Strasbourg to Britain; that he played a leading role in a bloody battle when an unnamed river was crossed on the army's march to the lower Thames and Colchester; that he fought 30 times with the enemy and subjugated two 'most powerful' (but unnamed) tribes, over 20 *oppida* (native forts or towns), and the Isle of Wight. Lucius Valerius Geminus is likely to have been personally involved in much or all of this. His commander, Vespasian, was later, in AD 69, to be proclaimed emperor while in charge of the forces involved in crushing a Jewish revolt on the other side of the empire. He would reign for ten years until his death in AD 79.

It has been long accepted as a virtual certainty that Vespasian and the Second Augusta Legion were based somewhere south of the Thames. Yet this 'certainty' is based on three rather shaky assumptions:

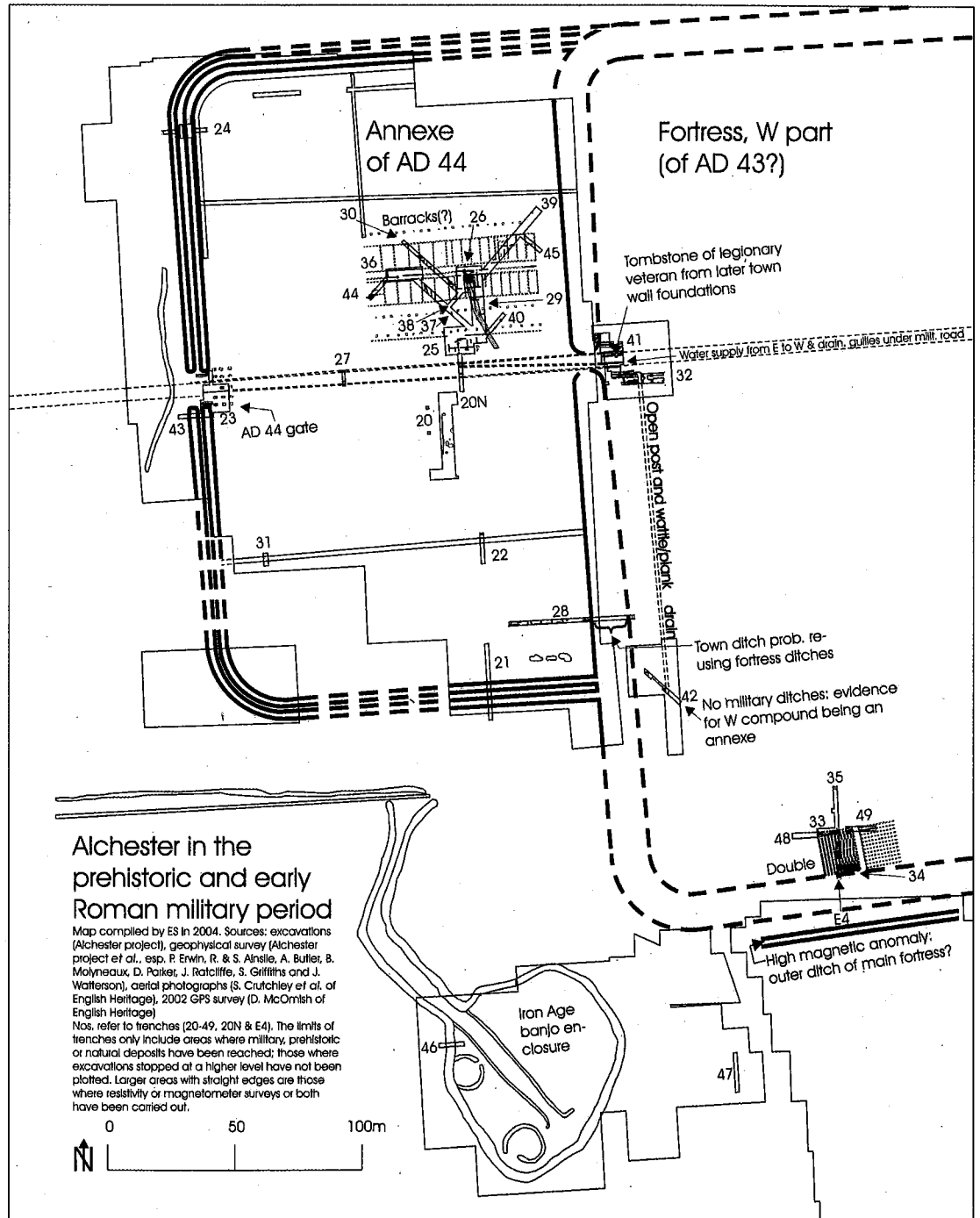
1. He had, according to Suetonius, taken the Isle of Wight, and he must therefore have been stationed in the vicinity.
2. There is probable evidence for Roman assaults on hillforts in Dorset, notably Hod Hill and Maiden Castle, and these must have been amongst the 20-plus *oppida* Suetonius tells us he captured.
3. Later the legion was stationed at Exeter and Caerleon, and thus it seems likely that it had always operated exclusively

in the South-West.

The Isle of Wight is the only specific geographic term given by any source, and we do not even know whether it was taken before or after the fall of Colchester. If the invasion army had landed on the central south coast, it would have made sense to take the island then, and this need not tell us anything about where Vespasian operated thereafter. Even if it was taken later, there is copious evidence that legions could be employed at a far greater distance from their bases than that separating

Alchester and the Isle of Wight. Similar considerations apply to the Dorset hillforts: they could easily have been captured in a summer campaign by a legion stationed in the Midlands - though there is no evidence, anyway, that they were taken by the Second Augusta rather than another unit, nor that, with the probable exception of Hod Hill, the traces of combat date to the AD 40s rather than the 50s or 60s. The later presence of the legion at Exeter proves nothing about where it was operating over a decade earlier.

Opposite left Rubble foundations of the walls of Roman Alchester, running parallel to the trench, are recorded before removal. One fragment of an inscription had already been revealed. Unknown to the excavators at this stage, many more lay just beneath the surface: enough to permit complete reconstruction of the text of the tombstone of a Roman legionary veteran.



The earliest fortress in inland Britain?

Two identical tree-ring samples date the Alchester annexe to autumn AD 44 (or possibly early AD 45) (CA 173), implying that the main fortress was established earlier, probably in the very year of the invasion, AD 43. We thus know that it was occupied during Vespasian's term as legionary legate, thought to have lasted until c. AD 47. Its size (some 14-15 ha with the annexe) is larger than the presumed size of the Second Augusta Legion's base at Strasbourg and only marginally smaller than its later base at Exeter. While much of the defensive ditches of the main fortress at Alchester seem to have been re-used and cut away by the later Roman town ditch, there is no serious doubt that the fortress existed and was of similar dimensions to the remarkably rectangular town which succeeded it: we found a military double-granary (see plan, Trenches E4, 33-35 and 48-49) at its southern margins, and this would not have been built outside the defended area.

Furthermore, Trench 42 showed that the annexe ditches did not continue to the east. If there had been just a single military compound, then we should have found the ditches in this trench either running eastwards or curving to the north. Their absence indicates that there was a T-junction between the west-east running annexe ditches and the north-south running ditches of the main fortress just to the west of Trench 42. That a mid 1st century drainage ditch appears to run along the west side of the fortress, from Trench 32 to Trench 42, equally suggests that this line was not crossed by any west-east running military ditches. We also found sections of a probable water-supply gully, running from the main fortress in the east to the annexe in the west, as well as a very early water-basin in the annexe, supplied by a ditch curving from the south-east to the north-west (under the barracks on the plan). Since the probable source of the water, a stream, flows towards Alchester from the north-west, it would have made more sense to channel the water in the opposite direction. That this was not done indicates that the water supply of the main fortress was probably earlier and that of the annexe only secondary. (Alchester is, incidentally, the first site in Britain known to have had an artificial flowing water-supply.)

Vespasian at Alchester

There is no serious competitor for Vespasian's base: Dorchester (Dorset) and Silchester have been tentatively suggested, but neither of them has yielded any certain military structures at all. (Michael Fulford, Silchester's leading excavator, now questions whether there was ever a *principia*, a military headquarters building, on the site, as previously believed.) Lake Farm in Dorset, another hypothetical base, is certainly a fortress, but the finds suggest that its foundation post-dates Vespasian's departure. Hod Hill and Chichester are early military sites, but Hod Hill is far too small for a legionary fortress, and there is no sufficient structural proof for a permanent base at Chichester.

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Above One of two tree-ring dated gate-posts of AD 44 that prove that Alchester had been occupied while Vespasian was in command of the Second Augusta Legion.

Below This small ditch alongside the road leading to the AD 44 gateway contained vertical stakes, probably sharpened to wound the feet of attackers. Sometimes parts of the stakes survived. Three pointed stakes on the left of the ditch (see foreground) were represented by voids: the result of a recent drying-out of the site?



Alchester in danger

The lower levels at Alchester are partially waterlogged, and still exceptionally rich in organic remains, but for how much longer? Alchester has contributed much to our understanding of the Roman conquest of Britain. As well as producing Britain's earliest Roman tree-ring dates, Mark Robinson has now identified the earliest British examples of parts of no fewer than four plant species: millet, coriander, celery, and Mediterranean stone pine-cones. We have also found the only waterlogged lilia - stakes in pits that were the ancient equivalent of a minefield (compare CA 195) - and many wooden artefacts. The sophisticated defences suggest, incidentally, that there was, if not open warfare, at least a high risk of organised armed resistance against the occupation force.

Worryingly, several years in a row and in many different trenches we encountered organic remains well above the water-table (in some instances by as much as 500 mm). And there were voids where all wood had disintegrated but the soil not yet collapsed above each of the three gateposts recovered in 2000. There is also clear evidence that on at least one occasion in the past the water-table had dropped even deeper, and the relevant

layers had dried out sufficiently to almost destroy the sapwood on the posts of AD 44, making them un-datable. This could have happened recently, and could happen again at any stage in future. Even if noticed in time (and this is a big if), there would probably be no time to excavate more than the odd token trench, leaving the rest to perish. This is why we must not wait until the next major drought, as by then it may be too late.

Only a minute fraction of the organic deposits has been recovered to date. Much of the remainder, which is certain to contain further unparalleled evidence for food imports - and, quite probably, writing tablets - may well disintegrate in the foreseeable future. It is thanks to a highly dedicated team of volunteers that at least some of it has been rescued. We hope to be able to raise the necessary funds to recommence, with the support of the authorities, this essential task at a fraction of the costs of a commercial unit. We must not take the risk that archaeologists will discover in a few decades time that Britain's most important waterlogged archive for the Roman invasion, one of the most decisive turning points in British history, has rotted away, unrecovered, unrecorded and unnoticed.



Left Some of the Alchester volunteers carefully excavate waterlogged layers in the end of a ditch next to the AD 44 fort gateway.

Below left Alchester's waterlogged remains include vertical stakes driven into the base of a ditch that were probably pointed and planted as anti-personnel devices.

Below right But the evidence is vanishing. This stakehole shows where a pointed stake has rotted away - probably recently judging by the fact that the void has held its shape. Archaeology of international importance is in danger at Alchester.



None of these sites, moreover, has yielded a shred of positive evidence for the presence of the Second Augusta Legion. They may have been manned by other legions or by auxiliary units (against popular opinion, it is normally impossible to differentiate between auxiliary and legionary equipment). It seems unlikely that the Second Augusta was split into a vexillation at Alchester and another in the far south, since a) Vespasian could not have effectively commanded both at the same time, and b) the detachments would have been too weak to defend themselves against a serious attack, yet too far distant to support one another in an emergency.

There is therefore strong evidence that Vespasian's headquarters were at Alchester. But the strongest of all is this: without exception, all legionary veterans in Britain who chose to stay on the island either settled at the main base of their legion or at a colony. Since there is nothing to suggest that Alchester ever became a colony, then it must have been the main base of Valerius Geminus' unit, the Second Augusta Legion - unless we have the only known exception to the rule.

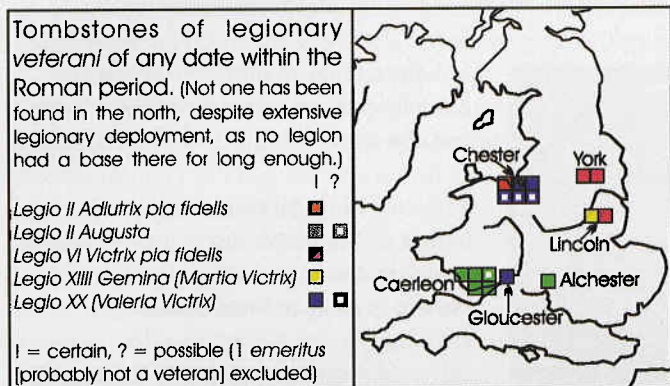
Not a single tombstone of a legionary veteran has ever been found at another type of location in Britain.

It is a strange thought that a future emperor, the man who was to build Rome's greatest amphitheatre, the Colosseum, stayed at our fortress; but there is not a single site in Britain which has anywhere near as strong a claim. Many questions still remain to be answered: when precisely, for example, was the garrison withdrawn; and was it here or at Exeter that Poenius Postumus, the legion's camp prefect, having refused his superior's direct order to march against Boudicca, committed suicide when the news came of a great victory that his legion had missed? ■

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Further information
There will be forthcoming articles in *Britannia* 36 and the *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 24.2 (both of which will appear in 2005).



The tombstone of Lucius Valerius Geminus, who fought as a legionary in the Roman Conquest of Britain, was deliberately smashed to turn it into building stone when a defensive wall was hurriedly built around the Roman town, probably in the late 3rd century AD. Thus, this crucial piece of evidence survived.