

Summary

The paper briefly reviews the evidence for the role and history of the Classis Britannica. It was established in AD 40 or 43 and played a close-support role for army operations in Britain and the Low Countries. Its main function was, however, the supply and transportation of material to army units in Britain; this included the operation of a major iron-producing industry in the Weald. The fleet disappears from the archaeological record towards the middle of the 3rd century, when the Dover base and the iron-producing establishments were closed down.

Introduction

In any consideration of the Saxon Shore, it should be borne in mind that this defensive system represented an adaptation and extension of existing installations. It is for this reason that it has been thought worthwhile to devote some attention to the naval force known to have been based in the English Channel from the conquest of AD 43 to the 3rd century.

Knowledge of the *Classis Britannica* is tantalizingly fragmentary. The first attempt at a survey was made by Atkinson (1933), on whose work the major treatise on the Roman imperial navy (Starr 1960) draws heavily. There are short accounts in standard works on the Roman army (e.g. Stein 1933; Webster 1969) and a valuable essay by Cunliffe (1968) in his concluding Richborough report, much of which, however, is concerned with a discussion of the Saxon Shore system. The most recent study of Roman fleets and their organization (Kienast 1966) adds little to what is contained in the earlier works, apart from some prosopographical data based on recently discovered epigraphic material. The present paper does not claim to introduce new evidence, with the exception of some information on the role of the fleet in the iron industry of the Weald of Kent and Sussex; it is intended as a background survey that may pose some additional questions about the origins and organization of the Saxon Shore system.

The role of the *Classis Britannica*

Most early surveys of the Roman imperial fleets make an assumption that is not borne out by the evidence, namely that these fleets can be equated directly with the fighting navies of modern times. As a result, certain earlier commentators have found difficulties in interpreting the information at their disposal.

Following the defeat of Sextus Pompeius at Naulochus in 36 BC and the great naval battle at Actium in 31 BC, the two praetorian fleets of Misenum and Ravenna, heirs of the battle fleet created by M. Vipsanius Agrippa in 37 BC, assumed what was essentially a supply and transportation role in the peaceful waters of the Mediterranean. During the expansionist years of the early Empire, a number of provincial fleets were established—the *Classes Africana* (about AD 40), *Pontica* (AD 64), *Moesica* (20 BC – AD 10), *Pannonica* (about 25 BC), and *Germanica* (about 12 BC)—disposed around the long Imperial frontiers. These fleets were all founded to support a military campaign (with the exception of the *Classis Pontica*, which was the former Royal Pontic Fleet, embodied into the Roman forces); for example, the *Classis Germanica* was raised by Drusus for his German campaign, apparently from Mediterranean sailors (cf. *CIL*. XIII. 8322, 8843). It is clear from contemporary historians that they had two major functions: the transportation of

fighting troops and the supply of stores and matériel. At the conclusion of the campaign and the pacification of the new provinces, the fleets were not disbanded, but continued to exercise these functions, which are essentially the 'support' role of modern military jargon.

It cannot be gainsaid, however, that the sailors of the fleets retained a military function. It is known that the crew of every vessel constituted a military *centuria* (irrespective of size) and that there was a separate and parallel command structure for fighting purposes under the command of a centurion which co-existed alongside the structure required for the management of the ship, each crew member having dual responsibilities. This is acknowledged in epigraphic material, where fleet personnel are more often described as *militēs* than as *nautae*. The military competence of naval personnel is perhaps best illustrated by the I and II Adiutrix Legions, which were raised from sailors of the Mediterranean fleets by Vespasian following their prowess during the civil wars of AD 69.

The distribution of known sites of the *Classis Britannica*, as represented by stamped tiles, emphasizes this non-fighting role. Stamped tiles are known only from Bouloyne and a group of sites in the south-east of Britain; there are no proven fleet establishments in the military zones of the north and west, which would point to a support role for the fleet. There were certainly harbour installations in association with the legionary fortresses and auxiliary forts of Wales and the north (Fryer 1973), but there is no indication in the form of stamped tiles that these were operated by the Fleet. An inscription from York referring to a *gubernator* or river pilot of the VI Legion (*RIB*. I. 653) would seem to indicate that these ports were, to the contrary, the responsibility of the army units concerned. The designation by the excavator of the Brough-on-Humber port (Wacher 1969) as a base for a naval detachment' during the second half of the 2nd century seems to be largely unsubstantiated, especially since stamped tiles occur in profusion on *Classis Britannica* sites in the south-east during this period.

The 'close support' plus fighting role of the *Classis Britannica* during military campaigns is, of course, attested in the contemporary records, as will be discussed below, and it would seem likely that 1st century harbour installations at, for example, Fishbourne, Fingringhoe, Hamworthy, Sea Mills, and Topsham may have been operated directly by the fleet during the conquest period (Cunliffe 1968, 255–6), when fighting men could, perhaps, not be spared for such work from the legions and auxiliary units. However, since the practice of stamping tiles appears not to have been introduced until the 2nd century this must remain speculative.

further support for the view that the role of the fleet was essentially one of supply and transportation may perhaps be gained from a study of the careers of the very few prefects of the *Classis Britannica* that are known. Inscriptions

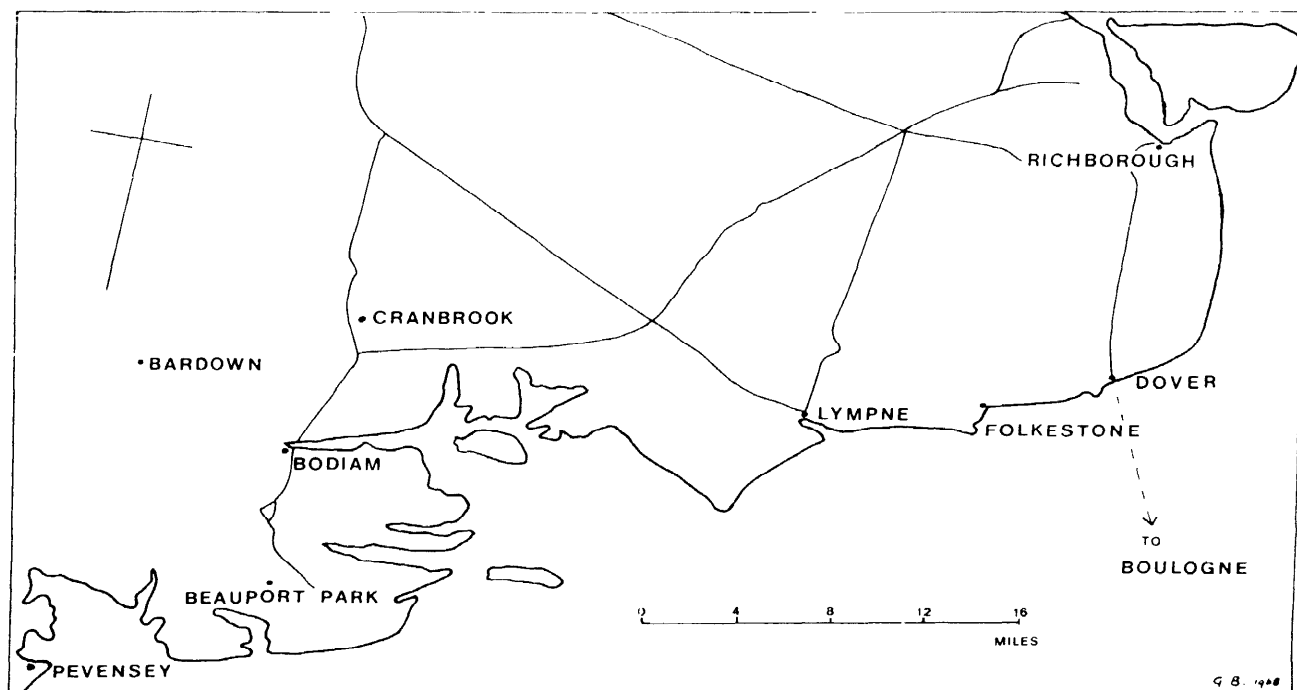


Fig 4 Sites producing CL BR stamped tiles (from Brodrribb 1969)

show that a fleet prefecture often formed part of a *cursus honorum* that embodied one or more procuratorships (Kienast 1966, 35 ff.), and this is well illustrated for the British fleet by M. Maenius Agrippa L. Tusidius, who under Antoninus Pius combined the offices of *praefectus classis britannicae* and *procurator provinciae britannicae* (CIL. XI. 5632; Pflaum 1960-61, No. 120). This would appear to support the attribution of a basically non-fighting role to the fleets and their commanders.

That the command of the British fleet was an important one is demonstrated by the fact that only this and that of the *Classis Germanica* qualified as centenary commands, all the other provincial fleets being ranked as sexagenary commands (von Domaszewski 1908, 153, 160 ff.). This is perhaps best understood by reference to the long coastline of Britain, which would require a considerable force of men and vessels. The German fleet probably qualified for equal ranking by virtue of the long and troubled frontier formed by the Rhine.

The Evidence

Evidence for the extent and role of the *Classis Britannica* comes from three main sources: stamped tiles, inscriptions, and literary references.

Stamped tiles The distribution of finds of stamped tiles of the *Classis Britannica* is shown in Fig. 4, taken from a recent survey (Brodrribb 1969). The sites may be divided into coastal and inland locations. Of the former, only Richborough (Cunliffe 1968) and Dover (Philp 1971 a, b) may be said to have been excavated or interpreted recently, and of the latter only Bardown (Cleere 1970) and Beauport Park (A G Brodrribb and H F Cleere, unpublished work). Dealing first with the *Boulogne* finds, these are undated and can serve only to confirm the fleet's association with the port of Gesoriacum/Bononia. Only one tile was found at *Richborough*, apparently in association with the postulated supply base of AD 44-85 (i.e. before the erection of the Great

Foundation). Cunliffe (1968, 258) does suggest, however, that the main base of the fleet during the later 1st century may lie outside the existing Saxon Shore Fort.

Excavations at *Dover* have revealed a major *Classis Britannica* base, discussed elsewhere in this volume (pp 20-1). It appears from the provisional interpretation to date from the early 2nd century to the early 3rd century, and so it may have succeeded (or have been built to supplement) the hypothetical base at Richborough.

The evidence from *Folkestone* comes from a villa located on a magnificent site overlooking the Channel, excavated in the 1920s (Winbolt 1925, 103 ff.). Complete tiles with the CL BR stamp were found *in situ* in part of the villa dated to the mid-2nd century. It has often been suggested that this villa was in fact the residence of the prefect of the *Classis Britannica*, and the location and luxury of the complex make this an attractive hypothesis.

Lympne was excavated by Roach Smith (1850, 257-8) and produced, in addition to the Aufidius Pantera inscription referred to below, a number of stamped tiles built into the walls of the later Saxon Shore fort. It is possible therefore that there was a fleet establishment there before the Saxon Shore fort was built. *Pevensey* has been examined only once in the present century (Salzman 1908). Unfortunately, there is no indication in an otherwise admirable excavation report (having regard to its early date) of the exact provenance of the tiles found. However, here again it is not unreasonable to postulate a fleet base antedating the surviving Saxon Shore fort.

Tiles from the inland sites (*Bardown*, *Beauport Park*, *Bodiam*, and *Cranbrook*) are all associated either directly or indirectly with the iron industry. Their significance is discussed in a recent paper by the present author (Cleere 1975). Briefly, it is believed that the *Classis Britannica* took over a small-scale pre-Roman industry in the area of Hastings and Battle, and expanded it, shipping finished iron from one or more ports on the estuaries of small rivers opening into the area now covered by Romney and Wal-

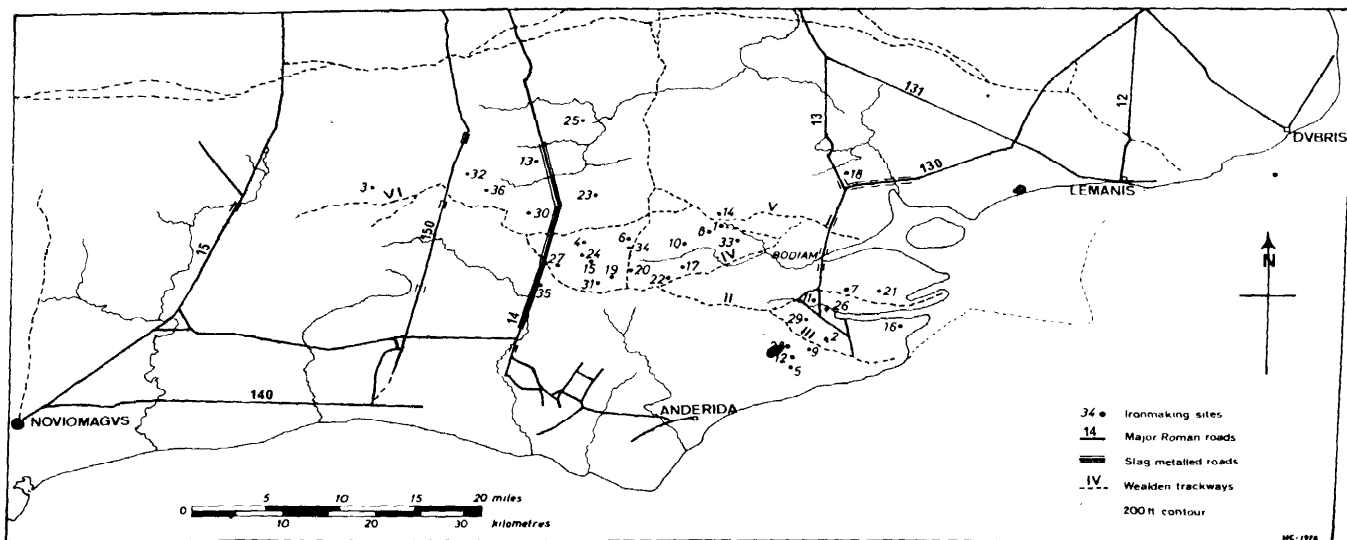


Fig 5 Distribution of Roman ironmaking sites in the Weald (from Cleere 1975). Sites mentioned in the text are Bardown (1) Beauport Park (2), and Cranbrook (18)

land Marshes to fleet bases at Richborough, Dover, Lympne, and/or Pevensey. In the first part of the 2nd century the industry expanded inland to the High Weald, but came to an abrupt end around 235-245, when Bardown and Beauport Park at least were clearly abandoned. Of the four sites listed above, Bardown and Beauport Park were iron-producing centres, Bodiam was an estuarine port on the river Rother, and Cranbrook appears to have been an administrative centre of some kind. The distribution of Roman ironmaking sites in the Weald is shown in Fig. 5 (from Cleere 1975). There is a strong case for describing the Weald as an Imperial mining estate, examples of which are known from elsewhere in the Empire.

Inscriptions The best known inscription is probably the barnacle-encrusted altar built into the east gate of the fort at Lympne, dedicated by Aufidius Pantera, prefect of the *Classis Britannica* and dated to c. AD 140 (*CIL*. VII. 18 = *RIB*.1.66). There are also two inscriptions on Hadrian's Wall, from Netherby and Birdoswald, recording the work of detachments from the fleet (*CIL*. VII. 864, 970 = *RIB*.1.1944, 1945). A building slab found in the portico of the granaries in Benwell fort (*RIB*.I.1340) records construction work by a vexillation of the fleet. These are the only inscriptions from Britain specifically naming the *Classis Britannica*, but the Lydney Park dedication by Flavius Senilis, who describes himself as *praepositus reliquationis classis*, should not be overlooked (although the interpretation of this mosaic inscription is still a matter of dispute).

Outside the province, there are a number of interesting inscriptions from Boulogne (*CIL*.XIII. 3540-3547). Among the officers whose names are recorded is that of T. Claudius Aug. L. Seleucus (*CIL*.XIII. 3542), a freedman of the Emperor Claudius from the eastern Mediterranean. Also of importance is the inscription from Arles (*CIL*.XII. 686) relating to Saturninus, an officer of the fleet during the reign of Philip in the mid-3rd century; this is the latest reference to the *Classis Britannica* by that name, by which time it was following the custom of the day and naming itself after the reigning Emperor by the addition of *Philippiana*.

The fleet is referred to as part of the *cursus honorum* on a number of inscriptions from other parts of the Empire. An unknown knight of the 2nd century (*CIL*.VI.1634), following appointment as sub-prefect of one of the praetorian fleets, commanded the Pannonian, Moesian, German, and

British fleets—successively, according to Starr (1960, 161, fn. 58) or jointly, for the purpose of the campaign in Britain of Septimus Severus (Kienast 1966, 44). Another member of this order, Bla . . . (*CIL*.XIV.5341), followed procuratorships in Armenia and Cappadocia with the command of the *Classis Britannica*, and then graduated to command the praetorian fleet based at Ravenna. A more modest career was that of S. Flavius Quietus, who was promoted from the rank of *primus pilus* of the XX Legion to prefect of the *Classis Britannica* in the reign of either Antoninus Pius or Caracalla (Pflaum 1960-1. No. 156bis).

Literary sources There is no literary reference in the classical historians to the *Classis Britannica* by that name. However, Dio (1x.19.4ff.) stresses the role of the fleet used, in three squadrons, for the invasion of AD 43. A fleet from Britain ferried the XIV Legion to the Low Countries at the time of Civilis's revolt and was virtually destroyed in a surprise attack by the Canninefates (Tacitus, *Hist.*, 4, 79).

Fleet operations in a war situation are perhaps best illustrated by the campaign of Agricola. He conceived of it as an integral part of his invasion of north Britain, both as a supply arm and in an aggressive role. Tacitus tells us that it was used as a raiding force: *igitur praemissa classe, quae pluribus locis praedata magnum et incertum terrorem faceret*, (*Agric.*, 18, 24). The fleet also carried out a major feat of navigation for a Roman fleet, notorious for a fear of Ocean, in rounding the north of Scotland, subjugating the Orkneys en route, and sailing a little way down the west coast before returning to its operational base on the Forth of Tay (*Agric.*, 10. 12. 38).

Beyond these somewhat sporadic references, little is to be learned of the work of the fleet during the subsequent two centuries, which in itself would appear to support the view that it had reverted to its permanent support role.

Historical summary

From the information presented in the preceding sections, it is possible to construct an outline history of the *Classis Britannica* during the first two centuries of Roman rule in Britain.

The fleet's foundation is usually attributed to Claudius, as part of his provisions for the invasion of AD 43. However, there is a case to be made out for the initial establishment being due to Gaius, at the time of his abortive invasion

preparations in AD 40. These extended to the construction of the harbour installations at Gesoriacum, and it is likely that the fleet assembled there at that time would not have been totally disbanded.

Its activities in the first century were at first in a close support role for the invasion, the suppression of the Boudiccan revolt, and the campaigns in Wales and Scotland. It was also engaged in military operations across the Channel on at least one occasion. However, during this period it also appears to have been engaged in building up a supply and ordnance base in the south-east, which included the exploitation of the iron-ore deposits of the Weald. Up to AD 85 the base was probably at Richborough, and was then transferred or extended to Dover (and perhaps also to Lympne and Pevensey). The function of the cross-Channel establishment at Gesoriacum is not easy to understand. The close link with the army (and also possibly with the procurator's department) in Britain would seem to militate against the unit's headquarters remaining there, as is usually assumed. However, tombstones of at least three trierarchs found there imply a fleet establishment of some importance. It is possible that Gesoriacum was the continental base, loading goods and supplies for shipping to Britain, and perhaps distributing materials originating from that province; the production of iron in the Wealden installations was so large as to imply a considerable export outside Britain (Cleere 1976).

During the 2nd century the fleet would appear to have carried out primarily a support role, supplying and servicing the army units in the military zones of the north and west and occasionally helping in other ways, as on the Wall, although it was doubtless called upon for close-support activities from time to time. The Severan campaign obviously required a return to close support on a massive scale, since the operations were such as to require no fewer than four fleets to be brought under a single command. It seems likely that the rebuilding of the bath-house at Beauport Park dates from this period.

The *Classis Britannica* as a unit disappears from the record some time towards the middle of the 3rd century. The Dover base was abandoned and slighted so comprehensively that the later Saxon Shore fort was built on a different alignment, and the iron-making establishments at Bardown and Beauport Park came to an abrupt end. This was apparently not the result of any kind of incursion, since the Beauport Park bath-house was systematically stripped of re-usable materials such as lead piping and window glass and allowed to collapse. The latest coins found were of Caracalla and Severus Alexander at Bardown and Beauport Park respectively, not incompatible with the date for the Aries inscription. It is interesting to observe that the *Classis Germanica* appears to have disappeared from the record at about the same time, at least under that name.

Further studies

This incomplete survey of the history and role of the *Classis Britannica* raises several interesting lines of research. The most obvious relates to the mid-3rd century and its disappearance from the archaeological record. It would appear that the British Fleet as such ceased to exist: the large numbers of stamped tiles from the later phases at Beauport Park and Dover make it seem unlikely that this practice would have been abandoned when the formation was relocated, although the fact that the abandonment of the practice of stamping tiles may have coincided with this move means that the end of tile stamping must not be interpreted as firm evidence of disbandment of the fleet. The abandonment of Dover and the two ironmaking establishments is less easy to explain in this way. Nevertheless, the army would continue to require naval forces for supply and close-support purposes, and so it seems reasonable to postulate a radical reorganization, which may well have affected fleets on both sides of the Channel, perhaps involving the disbandment of the fleets as such and the reallocation of their vessels and

personnel to army units on the frontiers. This would go some way to explain the move from the relatively long-established base at Dover. That there was a well organized naval force is amply borne out by the adventures of Carausius later in the 3rd century.

The other areas for possible future study concern the Organization of the fleet during the 2nd and early 3rd centuries. The role of Gesoriacum vis-à-vis Dover needs elucidation, and also the relationship of the *Classis Britannica* to the army on the Rhine frontier. On this side of the Channel, the relationship of the fleet in organizational and logistic terms to the army units in the west and north is by no means clear, and it is to be hoped that greater attention will be paid to the implications of harbour installations adjacent to legionary fortresses and auxiliary forts in the future.

In conclusion it may be stated that a greater knowledge of the Organization and distribution of the *Classis Britannica* is potentially of great interest for Saxon Shore studies. The extent of the 2nd century establishments and the 3rd century reorganization could throw a great deal of light on the structure and growth of the Saxon Shore defensive system.