

“They came, they saw, they conquered”

The Roman Legionary Fortress at Caerleon



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Figure 1 Caerleon today



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Figure 2 *Isca* as it might have looked in about AD 100

Flavius Rufus was a Roman soldier in the Second Augustan Legion who had been given the task of building a warehouse in the fortress of *Isca*. The legion was preparing to move to northern Britain after the emperor Hadrian had ordered the construction of a new wall that would become the most northerly frontier of the mighty Roman Empire; a store-building was necessary because the legion needed somewhere secure to keep everything it could not take with it to the north. It turned out that it would be a long time before the legion returned to *Isca* and it may well be that once sent away to erect Hadrian's Wall, Rufus never saw the fortress again.

Flavius Rufus must have served with distinction and he had been promoted to the highest rank possible for a normal legionary – the *primus pilus*, or ‘first rank’ centurion. Probably in his 40s at the time, the name ‘Flavius’ tells us that his family had been granted full Roman citizenship only a few years earlier by one of the Flavian emperors (Vespasian, Titus and Domitian). Perhaps his father had been a soldier in the Roman auxiliaries who, after serving a full twenty years himself, was discharged with an official diploma from the emperor that gave citizenship to his children. To be legally defined as a ‘Roman’ was an important

privilege at that time as it meant his sons could join the legions instead of an auxiliary unit (with better pay and conditions), they could own property, vote and stand for political office, and have full rights of access to the laws of Rome. Flavius Rufus must have been in *Isca* only a few years after the local tribes in western Britain, following a seemingly endless war, had been finally subdued and ‘pacified’. This was the Wild West of the Empire where Romans and Britons must have lived uneasily alongside one another – sometimes peacefully but also, sometimes, in conflict.

Flavius Rufus does not appear in any history books and until recently his existence had been long forgotten. We only know that a *primus pilus* with this name served in the Second Augustan Legion because James Goodsell, an archaeology undergraduate student, happened to be excavating the remains of a collapsed Roman building in Priory Field on the outskirts of Caerleon in southeast Wales. Caerleon has long been known to be the site of *Isca* and in the summer of 2008 a team of professional and student archaeologists from Cardiff University and UCL were in the middle of digging a large trench over a building that we had identified during a geophysical survey the previous year. Among



Figure 3 James Goodsell excavating the Rufus stone in 2008

the tumble of stones and decayed mortar, James found an unusually large square block of stone that he realised had a carved inscription on its outer face. This turned out to be a commemorative plaque that recorded the fact that Flavius Rufus, *primus pilus* of the Second Augustan Legion, built something. What Rufus was responsible for constructing is not stated, but it is likely that it was the building that James and his fellow archaeologists were digging – almost certainly the legion’s store.

We have no other details about this man other than these few letters carved onto a block of local Old Red Sandstone. The story of his life described above is speculation – educated speculation based

upon what we know of Caerleon’s Roman past, but speculation nonetheless. Yet this is all that archaeologists have to reconstruct the lives of people who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago and informed guess-work is an important part of how archaeology works. Most of the objects we dig up do not have people’s names inscribed on them, which means the building stone that James discovered is very special as it allows us to bring back to life a soldier who lived in Caerleon at a time when Britain was in the process of ‘becoming’ Roman. The other 99.99% of the finds we collected during the excavation in 2008 included tonnes of sherds of broken pottery vessels, thousands of bones of the animals that the Roman legionaries slaughtered and ate, numerous small fragments of the equipment they wore as soldiers, the brooches that kept their cloaks on their shoulders, the rings they wore on their fingers. These, as well as a whole host of other objects that we dug up, are all in their own ways as important as the Rufus stone in telling us what life was like for the legionaries when Caerleon was the fortress of *Isca*, almost 2000 years ago.

Archaeology at Caerleon

Caerleon is one of the most important sites for the study of the Roman period in Britain as it was the location of one of only three permanent legionary



Figure 4 Inscribed stone commemorating the work of Flavius Rufus, P(rimus) P(ilus)

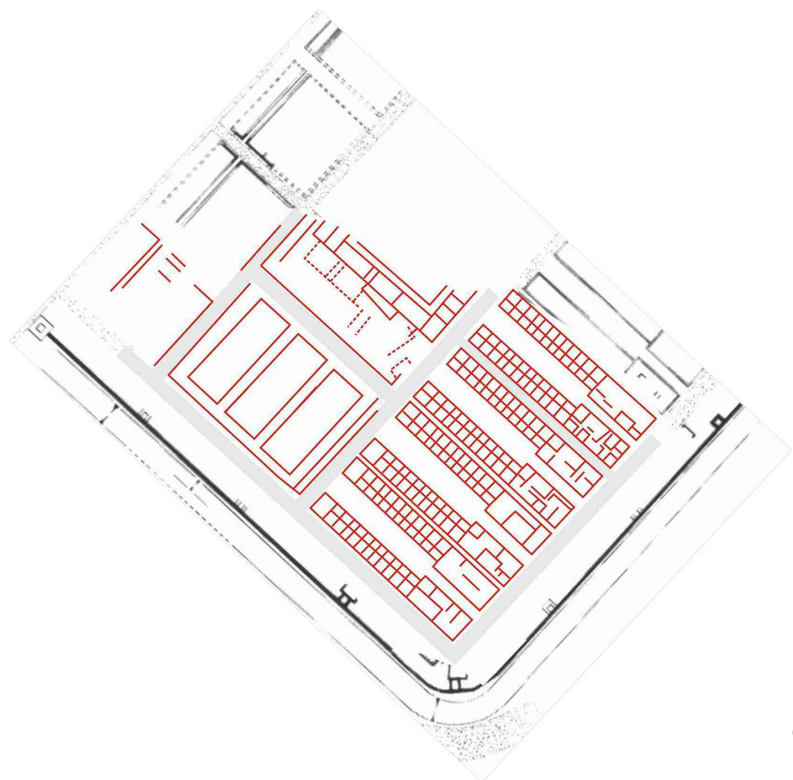
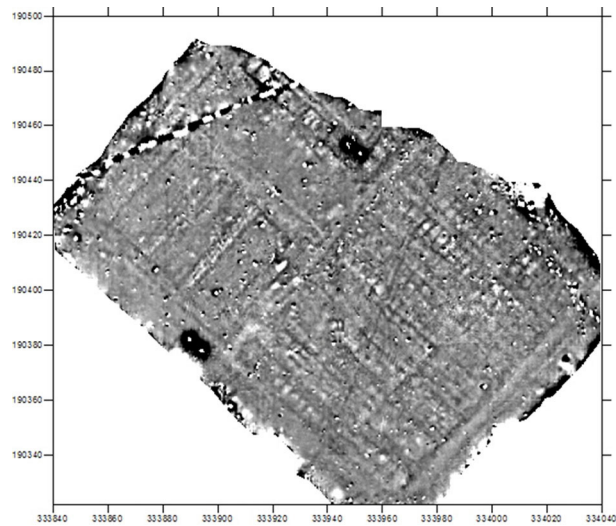
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fortresses here. The legions were the backbone of the Roman army and their legionaries were the means by which the Iron Age tribes of Britain (we invariably think of them as 'Celtic' peoples, as did the Romans) were persuaded to accept Roman rule. Empires convince other people to do things – usually against their wishes – by force of arms, and the ability of the Roman Emperor to deploy large numbers of professional, heavily armed and disciplined soldiers against his enemies meant that, by the time *Isca* was established as a military base in AD 74/75, the Roman Empire extended across a huge area of Europe, north Africa and the Middle East. The other two legionary fortresses in Britain lie beneath Chester and York where two millennia of almost continuous occupation mean it is very difficult to examine the archaeological remains of the Roman chapters in their histories. Fortunately for us, unlike these two places, Caerleon never became a great Medieval city and here we have the opportunity to excavate Roman buildings without digging through metres of post-Roman archaeology. In fact, large parts of the fortress of *Isca* have no modern buildings on top of them and in these open areas archaeologists do not even have to put a spade in the ground in order to 'see' what lies beneath the turf.



Figure 5 Geophysics: Sam Steele using a resistivitymeter



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Figure 6 Geophysics: results of magnetometer survey in Priory Field and interpretation in red

At Caerleon we are lucky that we can use geophysical techniques to locate and identify buried buildings, and between 2007 and 2011 Cardiff University undertook a series of surveys – using magnetometry and resistivity – on open ground inside and outside the fortress. What we found surprised everyone – fifteen previously unknown buildings within the fortress walls (including barrack blocks, an enormous metalworking building, granaries, and Flavius' store), as well as a huge complex of public-style buildings outside

the fortress that led to a port on the bank of the river Usk. In the old days archaeologists had to dig down to observe the remains of Roman buildings; today in a fraction of the time, effort and cost of digging we can use these non-invasive methods to plot where buildings lie. The geophysical surveys were part of the 'Mapping Isca' project, which is now completed. The result of this is that we have a very good idea of the buildings in about 80% of the fortress at Caerleon, which makes *Isca* one of the best known legionary bases in

the whole Roman Empire.

Valuable as geophysics is, the plots these techniques produce can only say so much. They can't tell us, for example, exactly how deeply buried any remains lie, or how well preserved they might be. Nor can they say when a building was constructed, what it was used for, or what happened to it at the end of its life. Obviously these are important questions to ask and to answer them we have to resort to the traditional archaeological methods of meticulous excavation and recording of everything we unearth. That is why we opened the trench in 2008 – to see how well the building's remains survive and to extract information that would confirm if it was, as we suspected from its ground-plan, a store-building or warehouse. We realised very quickly that the building is actually extremely well preserved only a few centimetres below the modern ground surface and, luckily for us, that it had not really been disturbed during the centuries after the Roman period. After twelve weeks of excavation in 2008 and again in 2010 we had retrieved as much information as it was possible to extract from the archaeology and we could begin the painstaking work of piecing together the hundreds of thousands of bits of information to tell the building's story.

Discovering *Isca*

Although there is still some way to go before we are ready to make the results known to the wider world, we are making very good progress and can begin to put flesh on the bones of the building that Flavius Rufus, and the men under his command, built. We now know that the building was a store, probably for the safekeeping of military equipment and other items owned by soldiers and their officers. It was constructed sometime around the years AD 90-120 in a part of the fortress that had been open ground since it was first established some twenty to forty years earlier. The building itself consisted of an internal courtyard surrounded on



Figure 7 Front wing of the Priory Field store building (students are jumping in the trenches where the building's walls used to be before the building stone was robbed)

all four sides by long narrow ranges that were subdivided into small square rooms, none of which had substantial floors or decorated walls. In plan the building looks like those the Romans called *horrea* (literally 'stores' or 'warehouses') that we know lined the banks of the Tiber in Rome and Ostia (Rome's great port where the Tiber flowed into the Mediterranean Sea), and the absence of any internal embellishment suggests that it was never intended to be lived in. Our trench uncovered four rooms altogether, as well as the building's main entranceway, a narrow guard-chamber and another narrow room that may well have been a stairwell (showing

that the building was at least two storeys high). Three of the storerooms were largely empty of finds, but in the fourth we found that the ceiling had collapsed at some point around AD 350 while the room was still full. Lying scattered across the room's floor and sealed beneath the debris of the building's superstructure was a remarkable collection of metal objects that included some very rare pieces of Roman military equipment.

Almost all of the iron objects had largely turned to rust in the soil of south-eastern Wales, which meant that getting them out of the ground in one piece was going to

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be a challenge. We were lucky to be able to call on archaeologists and conservators from the National Museum Wales who immediately came out to help us with the tricky job of lifting the finds off the floor where they had lain for some 1,650 years. This involved wrapping each object or group of corroded objects in cellophane and then encasing them in Plaster of Paris. Once this had dried the conservators slid sheets of metal beneath each block and lifted them out of the trench. The blocks were then taken to the National Museum in Cardiff and carefully excavated under laboratory conditions. Hundreds of fragments of iron and bronze objects were also found in the soil overlying the room's floor, each of which needed expert treatment to clean and consolidate them. Altogether the conservation of the metal finds from this one room took over two years to complete – painstaking work, but well worth the effort.

We now know that the sealed room contained several suits of the iron strip armour that legionaries wore into battle (called '*lorica segmentata*', or segmented armour) and that we recognise from films about the Roman period such as *Gladiator*. Interestingly, it seems that the armour had been disassembled and stripped of its bronze hinges and fittings, suggesting that it was in the process of being recycled when the building was abandoned and had collapsed. One of the largest blocks we lifted out of the trench contained numerous small bronze objects – pieces of scale armour, studs of various shapes and sizes, button-like objects, as well as decorated plaque-like sheets. It took nine months to excavate this single block, carefully scraping away the Caerleon soil with a wooden spatula and a teaspoon in a lab in Cardiff to reveal hundreds of individual objects. One of the bronze plaques was decorated with a small head wearing a type of cap that in Roman times was commonly associated with eastern deities such as Attis or Mithras, or



Figure 8 Kuan Lim excavating the scatter of military equipment lying on one of the storeroom's floors



Figure 9 Conservators from the National Museum Wales block-lifting the badly-corroded objects

characters from well-known stories from Greek mythology. What this and the other objects were from was something of a mystery until one of the conservators realised that she was looking at part of a *chamfron* – an elaborately decorated headpiece worn by a cavalryman's, possibly an officer's horse on parade, or more likely during tournaments performed on religious festivals and special occasions. These were called *hippika gymnasia* (literally 'horse exercises'), when Roman cavalry units would demonstrate their horsemanship and courage during carefully choreographed displays. Interestingly, a favourite theme for these performances was the Siege of Troy in which cavalrymen would

assume the roles of either Greeks or Trojans, the latter as easterners wearing full-face helmets with the same kind of cap as that shown on the bronze plaque from Caerleon (such as the Crosby Garrett helmet discovered by a metal-detectorist in Cumbria in 2010). Only five other chamfrons of this type are known from the Roman world – from Newstead and Vindolanda in northern Britain where waterlogged conditions preserved the leather backing on which the various bronze decorations were attached. The Caerleon find is the only example known from the fittings alone and it is a very good example of how archaeology continues to contribute to the study of the Roman Britain.



Figure 10a Bronze objects, possibly from a decayed chamfron (horses' headpiece). Note the leaf-shaped plaque with a head on it in the top-left of the photo – also shown in the close-up photograph.

Figure 10b Detail of the decoration on the leaf-shaped plaque, which was probably the right-ear piece from the chamfron



Figure 11 Reconstruction of a chamfron found at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall

Becoming Roman

The discoveries made at Caerleon make us think about the role of the Roman army after the initial conquest of the native tribes in Wales. The Roman period must have been dramatic for the native peoples of Britain – in a relatively short period they would have been confronted by large numbers of heavily armed men who forced them to swear allegiance and pay taxes to the emperor in Rome. Resistance was dealt with swiftly and brutally – writers like Tacitus tell us how entire tribes in Wales were eliminated or forcibly moved from their homes, but the Second Augustan Legion was based at *Isca* for some two hundred and fifty years. Legionaries were not just fighters and conquerors; they were the builders of the roads and towns of Roman Britain, they were the tax collectors as well as peace-keepers.

Roman soldiers would have also been role models for how good

Romans should behave – the idea of the *Pax Romana* ('Roman peace') required conquered natives to exchange their previous freedoms for the benefits of Roman rule, particularly stability and prosperity. Archaeologically we can see that Britons gradually became more Roman as time went on – even if this was about adapting as much as whole-scale adoption of Roman ways of doing things. They learned to read and write in Latin, they began to produce and eat new foods, lived in stone-built rectangular houses rather than their traditional round houses of wood and thatch, they had to use Roman money, worship new gods – all of which must have led to a complete change in how people viewed themselves and the world around them.

We can see the process of acculturation in the archaeological record and it is likely that soldiers like Flavius Rufus were among the first wave of Roman colonists

who brought their alien way of life to the natives around places like Caerleon. Although Roman legionaries were not legally allowed to marry while in the service of the emperor, we know that common-law wives were common and that many soldiers set up homes with local women. Their children would have been the first generation of 'Roman-Britons', perhaps adapting different aspects of their parents' backgrounds to reach a cultural compromise that everyone could live with. This is the real story of Roman Britain that makes discoveries like the Rufus stone so fascinating for academics and the general public alike. Who knows, maybe one day someone will find an object that allows us to continue the telling of Flavius Rufus' story, or those of his children and grandchildren. That is one of the great things about archaeology – there's always more to find and always much more to think about.