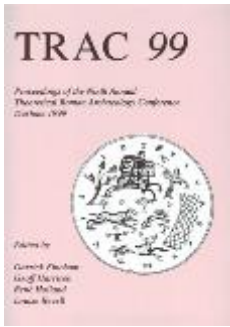

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Roman Maritime Activities Around Britain : What is the evidence and how might it be enhanced?

by Michael Walsh

Introduction

The changing nature of cross-Channel contact and trade has played a key role in interpretations of late Iron Age and Romano-British economy and society, but the majority of evidence has come from terrestrial excavations with little or no consideration of material from maritime contexts. As we shall see, this is largely a result of the dispersed and haphazard nature of the maritime evidence which has led to the tacit assumption that very little of this material actually exists. Consequently little is known about the actual mechanics and mechanisms of that trade, the ships, their cargoes, operations and ancillary facilities. The failure to consider maritime evidence is a serious oversight as there are some aspects of trade for which only wreck sites can provide adequate data (Muckleroy 1978: 70), while hypotheses based on data from secondary (terrestrial) contexts are somewhat limited. For example, how do changing quantities and distributions of traded items which survive archaeologically, such as pottery upon which much of our current knowledge is based, actually relate to a real changing pattern and scale of trade? While pottery can be used to demonstrate the existence of trade links, the greater abundance of one type over another cannot necessarily be used as evidence of the relative importance of the source areas in the volume of real trade, which is largely concealed in the archaeological record (Fulford 1978: 65).

Fulford's (1978) comparison of the archaeological evidence from the late Roman period with that from the medieval period, for which there is documentary evidence of trade, revealed that archaeological investigation would normally only reveal conclusive evidence of a tiny proportion of that trade. For example, the late 15th century customs lists suggest that the entire trade between Bristol and Ireland would probably have left no trace in the archaeological record (Fulford 1978: 67). We therefore need to establish a stronger relationship between traded artefacts which survive in the archaeological record, such as pottery, and the trade of other goods, which may be achieved in one of two ways. The most favoured method to date has been to establish a regular and structured relationship, such as that between pottery and the grain supply for the army, the so-called 'piggy-back' trade (Fulford 1984: 137), a somewhat inferential methodology. A more definitive relationship could be established through the analysis of shipwrecks in order to collect tangible evidence of cargoes, as well as to ascertain a relationship between what has survived in the archaeological record with that which may have perished. Unfortunately, at present there is minimal evidence from northern Europe of shipwrecks and their cargoes, but the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that there is considerably more evidence from British waters than has previously been assumed. Until this material has been properly collated and analysed it is impossible to ascertain the extent of the maritime archaeological record or to assess the potential contribution this evidence might make to our understanding of cross-Channel trade.

In 1978, Keith Muckleroy wrote that increased cross-Channel contact in the Roman period had not been reflected in numerous wreck sites of this period. He continued:

> At present, the sole representative of this commerce is the site known since the 18th century as the Pudding Pan Rock, near Whitstable in Kent. And similarly, the continued exchanges of the medieval period have not been matched by the discovery of a single wreck site. This is presumably because such sites will mostly lie in the dangerous and unattractive waters of the Straits of Dover and the southern North Sea; it probably also reflects the tastes and interests of those currently active in British maritime archaeology.
>
> (Muckleroy 1978: 143)

It is a sad indictment of maritime archaeology in Britain that this situation persists over twenty years later. Maritime evidence such as shipwrecks are of paramount importance because they offer the chance to study the actual mechanics directly involved in trade, the ships, the harbours, quays and anchorages, the cargoes, the storage facilities, and the bulk containers, in their primary context rather than the remains which happen to survive in the terrestrial archaeological record. The mechanisms involved in the organisation of trade, such as routes, intentionality, and causality might then be inferred more confidently from this primary evidence rather than that from secondary contexts.

It might be a rather tired old cliché trotted out by maritime archaeologists, but past experience has proven the greater survivability of artefacts, particularly organic remains, on waterlogged or submerged sites. Given Fulford's (1978) conclusion that only a fraction of traded goods normally survive in the archaeological record even minimal evidence may have a major impact upon our understanding of trade (see Todd 1986: 262-4). For example, the volume of Roman trade in glass into Britain appears to have been very slight which may be very misleading as the survival of glass vessels on terrestrial sites is very much a matter of chance. Broken glass is very likely to have been melted down for re-use, in which case the trade in glass may have been much larger than surviving fragments suggest (Price 1978: 76-7). A consignment of glass on a wreck site has a much better chance of survival, particularly as a coherent lot, and might radically alter this impression. It has been suggested that a wreck containing glass may be located in the vicinity of Lulworth Cove, Dorset following the discovery of a number of glass vessels on the seabed in the area (J.D. Hill *pers. comm.*). In order to ascertain how best to utilize and to enhance the maritime archaeological record for the Roman period, and to assess the potential of this evidence it is first necessary to briefly establish the nature, range and quantity of the existing material.

Existing evidence from British waters : Ships

Currently there have been only five Roman vessels discovered in British waters, none of which originated in the Mediterranean. These are the Blackfriars I ship (Marsden 1994: 33-91), the New Guys House boat (Marsden 1994: 97-104), the County Hall ship (Marsden 1994:109-28), the St Peter Port ship (Rule and Monaghan 1993), and the Barlands Farm boat (Nayling *et al.* 1994). Only two of these vessels, the Blackfriars I and the St. Peter Port, could be described as genuine 'wrecks', providing any substantial evidence of cohesive cargo which in both cases was primarily fairly ordinary building material which contributes little to our understanding of cross-Channel trade. However, despite the fragmented nature of the latter wreck, and the fact that the main cargo was pitch, the excavators were able to tell a great deal about the vessel's sphere of operation and the nature of trade undertaken, concluding that it was a *caboteur* or coastal tramper (Rule and Monaghan 1993: 130). The other vessels are thought to have been

abandoned thus having been stripped of useful evidence. Only the St. Peter Port vessel from Guernsey was found in a maritime context, although two of the other finds, the Blackfriars, and the County Hall, both from London, are believed to have been sea-going.

The earliest of these vessels from Roman Britain dates from the mid-second century AD so there is a lacuna of at least two centuries in which we know there were Roman maritime activities but for which we have no evidence of this kind. In fact the hiatus in our knowledge of ships and cargoes in Britain extends even further back, to the prehistoric logboats of the Humber estuary. The preponderance of local craft amongst vessels discovered from the late Roman period would suggest that the major ports of northern Europe were mainly filled with local ships and boats, with possibly the occasional visit of a Mediterranean ship (Marsden 1977: 282) for which we have no evidence. This would appear to support Hopkins (1980) suggestion that the recording of significantly smaller numbers of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean from after AD 200 was possible evidence that long distance trade may have declined after this date. It may also be significant that this is the date at which we see a rapid decline in the importation of samian ware. Fulford (1984: 137; Millett 1990: 62) suggests that this decline may represent the equalization of material culture throughout the empire so Britain was no longer dependent upon imports . This decline coincides with growing unrest in this part of the Empire which may have inhibited cross-Channel trade.

However, Todd (1986: 262) warns against facile deductions about fluctuations in commercial activity based upon external threats; we should look instead at the changes sweeping across the entire field of social relations. For example, he suggests that the causes of the decline of the port of London, around AD 260, lay in the rise of the villa estates rather than in the threat from piracy or economic turmoil. Furthermore, fewer discoveries in the Mediterranean after AD 200 may simply reflect a bias in recovery, as vessels in the early Roman period may have hugged the coastline and were therefore wrecked in shallow, easily accessible water, while later vessels may have crossed open, deeper water. This would appear to be borne out by the discovery, using new deep water technology, of the so-called 'Isis' wreck dating from the late fourth century, found off the coast of Sicily (see McCann & Freed 1994). Further discoveries in British waters may help to resolve this question, but at present it is far from certain that evidence from the Mediterranean can be applied in northern waters. Until we locate a wreck from the Mediterranean in northern waters we have no primary evidence of trade between the core of the Roman Empire and the periphery.

Ports, Harbours and Storage Facilities

Very little work has been undertaken on Romano-British ports and harbours, the notable exceptions being the port of London (and more recently Dover), which is due in part to our inability to identify these facilities. Milne (1990) suggests that the so-called 'Saxon-Shore' forts could be seen as principal fortified ports. The study of further harbour facilities could considerably enhance our understanding of the mechanics of Roman trade on the periphery of the empire. As Marsden (1990: 66) has stated, it is now possible to assess Roman boat finds from London in the wider context of later discoveries and improved archaeological examination such as dendro-chronology. For example, the discovery of contemporary waterfronts and trade goods in Roman London have made it possible to assess how the ships might have been used, thus providing a more rounded understanding of trading operations. The discovery of further harbour facilities should also lead to the discovery of associated storage facilities. A study of the provision of storage and handling facilities could provide some insight into the scale and scope of trade passing through it. For example, Milne (1985: 78) has been

able to show that the storage facilities at London were not compatible with the notion of London as a major port.

Pottery, Coins and Anchors

There has been no comprehensive study of the small amount of other Roman material from coastal waters, such as amphorae and pottery sherds, coins, and anchors, little of which has been studied in any detail whatsoever. My preliminary research suggests that a study of this material will eventually lead to the discovery of more coherent wreck sites by pinpointing areas from which concentrations of material have been recovered. Once identified these areas can then be more closely investigated using a combination of controlled trawls, geophysical and diver surveys. It is only once this synthesis has been achieved that the true potential of this material can be realised; while the material remains in its present dispersed and haphazard state no such analysis can be undertaken.

Enhancements to the Maritime Record

Two brief surveys recently conducted by the writer help to illustrate how even minimal effort can have a major impact on the current recorded evidence from maritime contexts and highlight the tremendous potential of this resource which has until now been largely neglected. These surveys were meant neither to be comprehensive nor exhaustive but were an attempt to assess the potential of various methods through which to enhance the existing maritime archaeological record. Research in maritime archaeology has tended towards a reactive rather than pro-active approach, responding to chance finds rather than using existing evidence to direct future systematic research into the areas of greatest potential.

The first survey was a desk-based assessment, primarily based on the Maritime Inventory compiled by the maritime section of the National Monuments Record (NMR) but it also examined evidence from other written sources such as notes in international and county journals, selected somewhat randomly, which do not appear on the Maritime Inventory. The Maritime Inventory is rather top-heavy from the 18th century onwards when Lloyd's list began recording incidents at sea. Pre-1700 the record is extremely patchy, relying to a large extent on archaeological discoveries, so considerable effort is required to redress the balance. Furthermore, many of the records were compiled from evidence dating from early this century with little work being done since to bring this evidence up to date. My research suggests that much of the material upon which these records are based appears to have been mislaid, while inadequate recording of the artefacts at the time makes attempts to update the records both difficult and tentative. For example, sketches and photographs of amphorae in some county journals would appear to depict medieval amphorae which have been incorrectly ascribed to the Roman period. The publication of individual maritime finds is generally erratic and frequently erroneous. Many were discovered by the writer quite by chance while investigating other information which would suggest that a systematic search would produce a wealth of evidence.

As previously stated, current knowledge of trade is heavily biased towards pottery, especially amphorae which are highly visible in the archaeological record but which have very serious limitations; what can be safely deduced from such evidence as amphorae about overall trade patterns, changes and reasons for change? We have minimal evidence about the use of other containers such as barrels which rarely survive in 'normal' archaeological conditions. Having said that, amphorae are the most closely associated of all pottery types with actual trade so the recording of amphorae from maritime contexts is potentially a very fruitful avenue of research. Furthermore, amphorae are potentially good indicators of wreck sites as they are unlikely to be greatly affected by post-depositional formation processes and they are highly

visible underwater. Unfortunately a search of the existing records is rather a fruitless exercise. A search of the NMR using the search term 'amphora' identifies one hundred and thirty one records of which only seventeen are recorded as recovered from secure maritime, estuarine or riverine contexts. Only four of the seventeen can be attributed to the Roman period, four are probably Roman, a further four are probably post-Roman, while there is no evidence to confirm the date of the remaining five (see Fig. 1).

Despite the paucity of data it has been possible to identify a number of associations of artefacts of similar age from similar locations which are interesting as possible indicators of sites, such as those from Selsey beach, West Sussex and from the Taw/Torridge estuary in North Devon. Furthermore, these artefacts were found early this century so it would be interesting to investigate the existence of more recent finds in these areas. A further five amphorae were discovered in random searches of County Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) and in county journals. Unfortunately the NMR makes no distinction between different pottery types from different periods or from different contexts which makes research into maritime Roman finds very difficult. Very few references to anchors or coins from maritime contexts have been found in my random searches.

The second survey involved a field evaluation, examining a variety of material and information relating to maritime sites collected through contact with local groups. These sources included SMRs, museums, commercial units, local historical and archaeological societies, commercial fishermen, private collectors and diving clubs. The area chosen for this study was Whitstable and Herne Bay on the north Kent coast which, as mentioned previously, has a well known history of maritime finds from a suspected Roman wreck known as Pudding Pan (Fig. 2). This site is probably the best known and best signposted of all potential wreck sites from the Roman period in British waters although the exact location and source of the material remains unknown. The area was also about to be surveyed for the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England (RCHME) by the Oceanography Centre at Southampton University using the latest geophysics equipment and techniques and was therefore an ideal location at which to test these theories.

My survey resulted in the discovery of over one hundred and thirty previously unrecorded samian vessels from the site which has now surrendered a total of over four hundred samian vessels. These vessels provide two distinct dates, from the mid to late 1st century AD, and from the mid to late 2nd century AD, which suggests that there are probably two discrete sources of this material in the vicinity. This might account for the confusion in the literature about the source of the material being both Pudding Pan and Pan Sand which are some distance apart. Twelve amphorae were also identified some of which were completely intact; four date from the 1st-2nd centuries and three date from the 2nd-3rd centuries thus reflecting the date range of the samian ware. The remaining six probably date from the medieval period. These new amphora finds have doubled the number from maritime contexts previously listed on the NMRs Maritime Inventory (see Fig. 3). My research in the area also brought to light an extensive range of other material from the Roman, medieval and later periods which would suggest that there are probably other wrecks in the vicinity. This material includes bottles, jugs, jars, and bowls in a variety of materials including stoneware, glassware, iron and ceramic, some of which are quite unusual. One of the most interesting discoveries was that of a one-hole stone anchor, one of only a handful found on the east coast of Britain. These artefacts came primarily from contact with local museums and fishermen; the latter proving particularly useful for providing locational information.

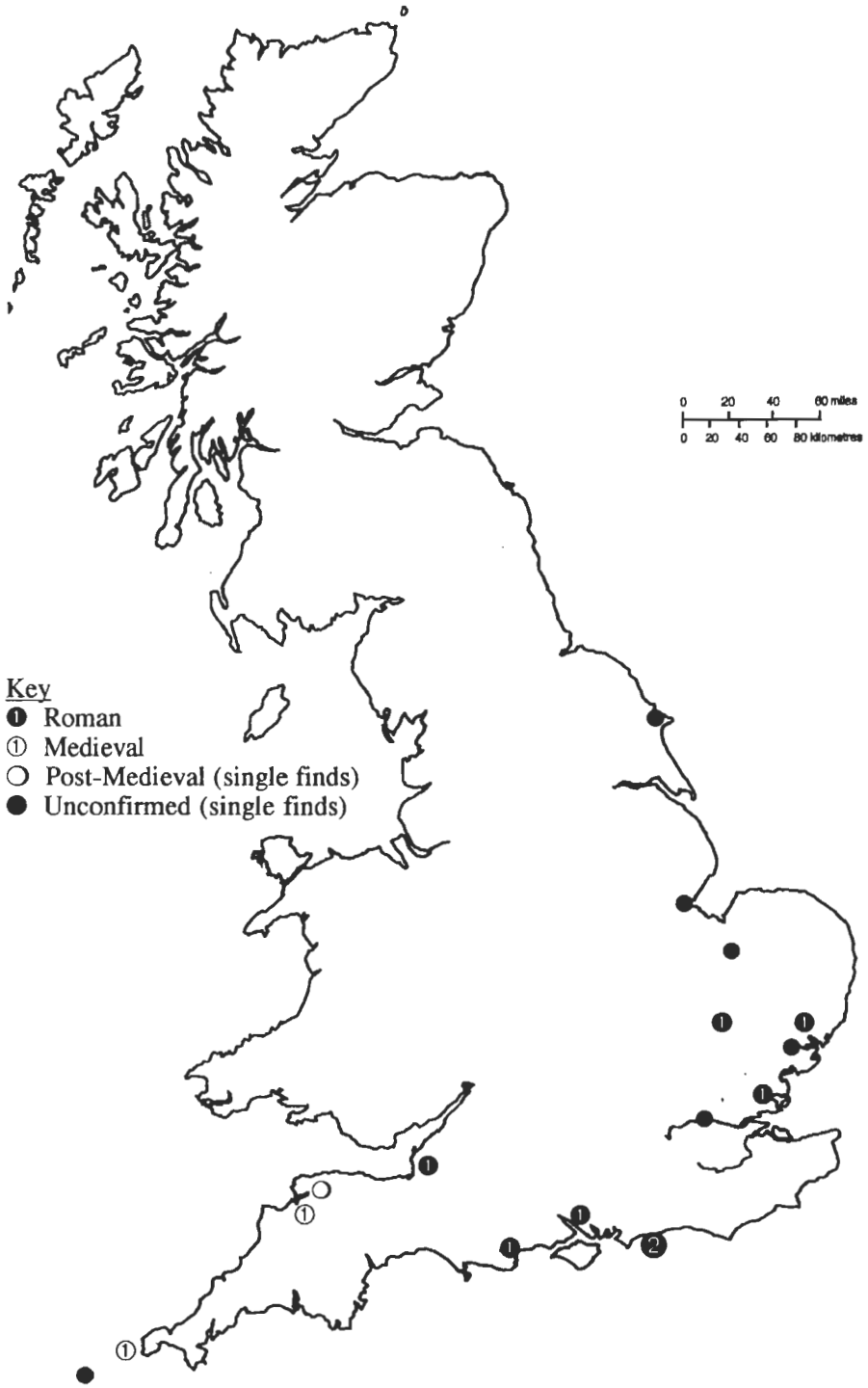

Figure 1 The approximate locations of the seventeen amphorae recorded on the NMR as having been recovered from maritime, estuarine or riverine contexts.

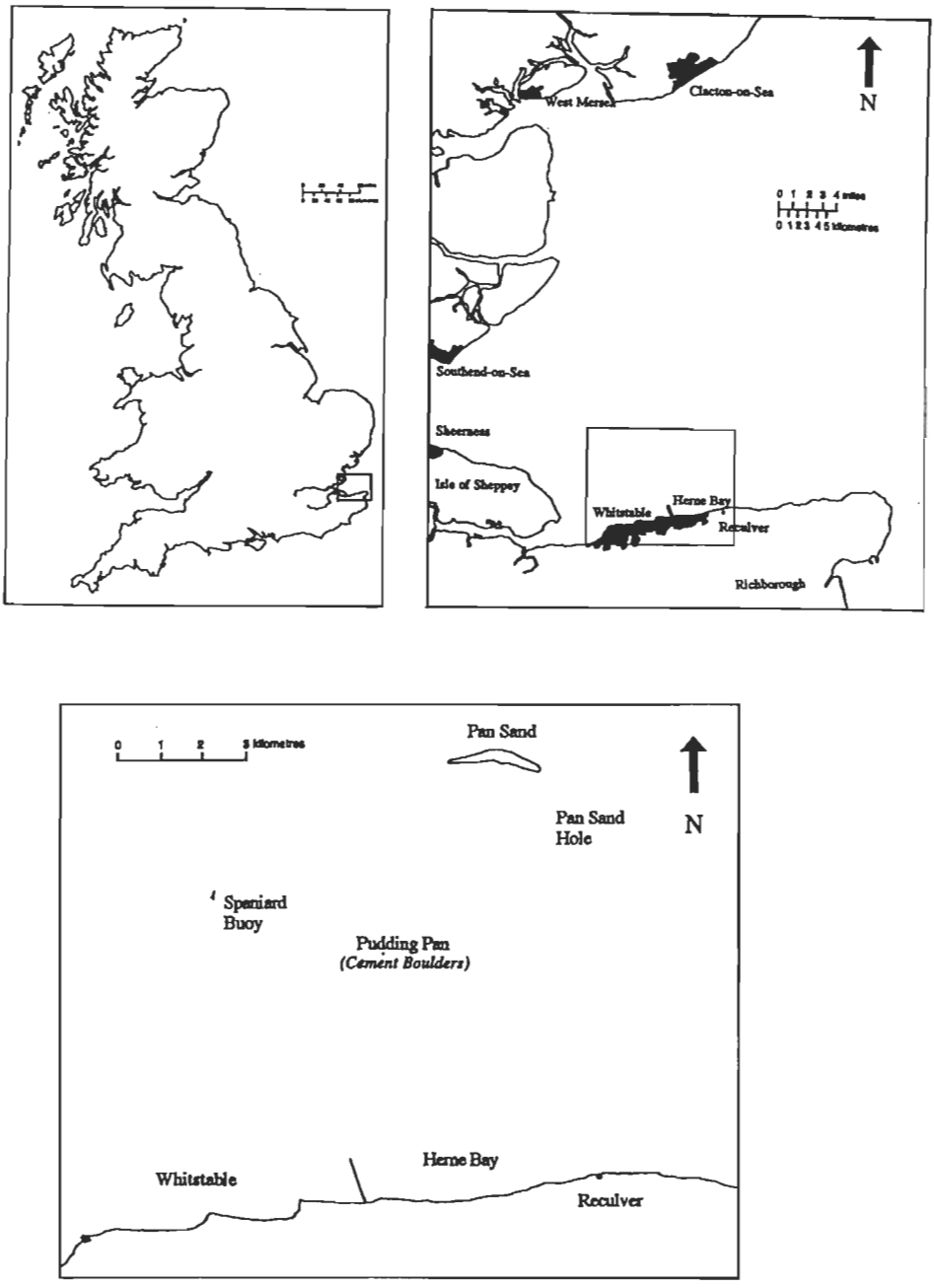

Figure 2 Location map of Whitstable, Herne Bay, Pudding Pan and Pan Sand.

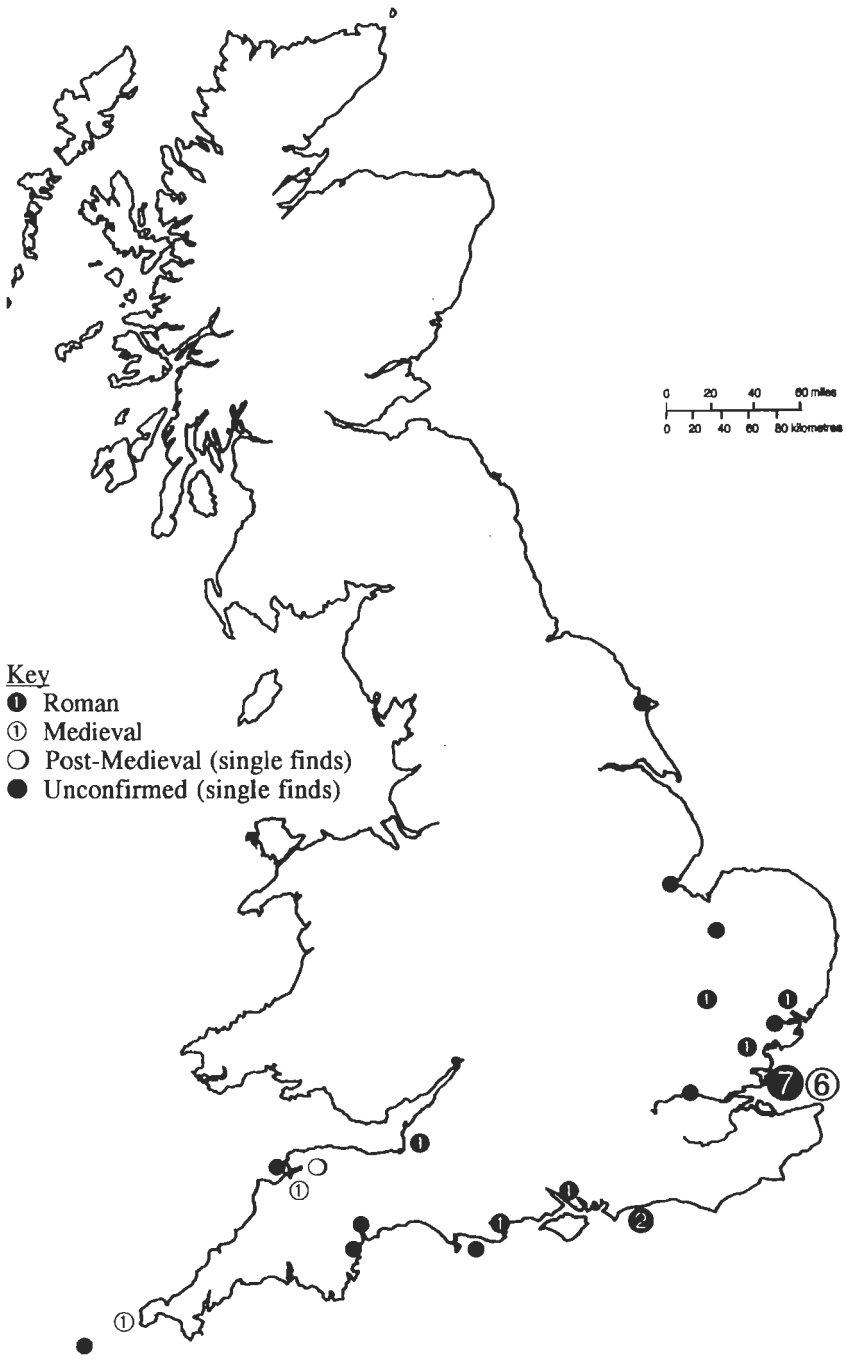

Figure 3 The approximate locations of the thirty-four amphorae (including sherds) identified in this brief survey as having been recovered from maritime, estuarine or riverine contexts.

The wear patterns, damage and marine growth on these artefacts can then be studied to establish the site formation processes which may have acted upon them in order to narrow the area in which to deploy geophysics. For example, the wear patterns on the Pudding Pan vessels indicate that they are lying upside down on the seabed and different forms show different degrees of tilt which may reflect separate packaging of different forms or may indicate different levels on the vessel reflecting the gradual exposure and denudation of the site. This may help to provide an indication of what we are looking for on the seabed. Oysters only grow in the area of Pudding Pan Rock so the presence or absence of oyster growth on the vessels can provide further clues as to its location. It is essential that we narrow down the area in which to search; the excavators of the 1st century AD Cala Culip IV wreck off the Spanish/French coast found that the bulk of the contents of 4,200 vessels covered an area of only c. 5 x 3m showing that little disturbance occurred during deposition or later (Millett 1993: 415). A geophysical survey of the area conducted last summer identified several potential sites which have yet to be further investigated. Given the high costs of this work and a potentially very small target it is imperative that exhaustive desk-based studies, field interviews and controlled trawls are conducted prior to the deployment of geophysical and diver survey. The failure to narrow the search area is most wasteful of the most expensive resource, the geophysical prospection, which is also most dependent upon factors beyond our control such as sea and weather conditions.

Conclusions

I have endeavoured to show that the disorderly condition of the maritime record is such that, in its present state, maritime archaeology has been unable to make any significant contribution to our understanding of cross-Channel trade in the Roman period owing to the paucity of evidence from maritime contexts. My preliminary research has proven that this is not because the evidence does not exist; on the contrary, minimal effort has revealed an abundance of material which has, to date, been largely ignored owing to the dispersed nature and unsatisfactory recording of this material. Once the existing material from maritime contexts has been properly recorded and analysed a secure basis will have been established from which to initiate a process of pro-active rather than reactive research in the maritime archaeological field which has for too long depended upon the chance finds of non-archaeologists to supply our raw data. Once compiled this corpus might then be used to direct future research into the most significant areas which show concentrations of closely dated material. Maritime archaeology might then be in a position to provide a considerable contribution to the field of Romano-British archaeology.

The discovery of new wreck sites would undoubtedly enhance our understanding in a whole variety of subject areas associated with trade and trading patterns ranging from the micro scale such as technological advances to macro issues examining models of trade, spheres of interaction and influence, and societal formation. Research into new wreck sites would examine ship construction and provenance, cargo-capacity,-composition and-provenance, and on-board conditions. Ship construction and cargo composition can provide clues to the loading and unloading facilities required thus guiding further research into these ancillary facilities. A comparison between what has survived on a wreck site with that which has perished (but which may have left traces) derived from the capacity of the vessel, would establish a more concrete relationship between pottery and other more ephemeral traded commodities.

The position of the wreck may provide information about the ports of origin or the destination of the vessel, about routes and the nature of transportation (long distance voyaging versus trans-shipment). The laws of probability would suggest that the detection of increasing numbers of Roman wrecks would lead eventually to the discovery of one from the

Mediterranean if, as is believed, such ventures were undertaken. As yet we have no primary evidence of direct contact between the core of the Roman empire and the periphery. Shipwreck evidence is vital to our understanding of the magnitude of cross-Channel trade and to the impact these contacts with the Roman Empire had upon the peoples of this island in the late pre-Roman Iron Age. It is clear then that our understanding of cross-Channel trade in the Roman period could be greatly improved by an enhanced maritime archaeological record. The discovery of relatively large numbers of wrecks in British waters would be central not only to future interpretations of maritime trade provided from terrestrial contexts but also to the role trade and exchange played in the dynamics of societal formation.

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