

For their final talk of the winter season, the Appleby Archaeology Group invited Dr David Mason, Principal Archaeologist of Durham County Council, to speak on the subject of the Roman Navy. Dr Mason is the author of an excellent book on the subject & kept his capacity audience engrossed as he explained the part played by the naval arm of the Roman Military machine, in particular to their activities around the British coasts.

Dr Mason began by describing the sources, beginning with the usual suspect for visual evidence – Trajan’s Column. This remarkable sculpture shows a number of scenes from Trajan’s Dacian campaign, showing some of the various types of vessels in use, as well as the use of boats in a pontoon bridge. The major seagoing vessels were the triremes and biremes, based on earlier Greek ships, both of which came in warship and troop transport variations. Warships were easily identifiable by the huge wooden ram, encased in bronze, mounted at the prow. A typical trireme would be 200ft long with a 35ft beam and a complement of 180 rowers. River boats were shallow drafted biremes and the remainder of the Fleet would have been made up of barges of various sizes. The home bases of the Navy were at Ravenna & Misenum

Trading between Britain and Continental Europe had been carried on for many centuries before the Romans showed up in force under Julius Caesar in 55BC, so maritime venturing was nothing new. However, nothing could have prepared native Britons for the arrival of Caesar’s fleet, consisting of almost 100 transports conveying around 12,000 men, together with accompanying warships. In turn, Caesar was clearly unprepared for the vagaries of the weather in the Channel and he was forced to retreat to Gaul. The following year, his force was even larger and better prepared, with almost 1,000 vessels in total, conveying 30,000 men and materiel. Once again, the weather took a hand & for various reasons, no further military interventions were seen for another 90 years.

In 43AD, the commander of the invasion fleet, Aulus Plautius took an altogether more serious approach, bringing with him some 1,100 vessels of various types, including 2-300 warships, conveying around 40,000 soldiers, several thousand slaves, up to 10,000 pack mules, tents, an estimated 3,500 tons of grain, other supplies & probably elephants for good measure. The conquest of Britain proceeded apace, with the establishing of the first Provincial Capital at Colchester being assisted from the sea and thence via the River Colne. This combination of land and naval forces became the pattern for the entire conquest of the island during the next 3 decades. In our own area, the Lake District proved to be a difficult obstacle to the Roman advance and early military facilities were constructed on river estuaries for facilitate replenishment by sea. These included Ravensglass, Maryport, Kirkbride and probably Burrow Walls.

Once Rome had been established in Britain, a recognisably ‘British’ Fleet, more accurately the ‘Fleet of the British Ocean’ or *Classis Brittanica*, began to make an appearance. The earliest classical mention comes from around 70AD and the Fleet was headquartered not in Britain but in Boulogne. Roofing tiles, which were often made under military auspices and stamped CLBR have been found, exclusively in the south of England and must indicate that some temporary detachments at least were based in Britain. Possible locations include Dover and Lympne, in Kent and also Pevensey, in Sussex.

Following the expeditions into Scotland in the late 1st & early 2nd century and the construction of the Hadrianic & Antonine Walls, which was again supported from the sea, the work of the Fleet began to evolve. Naval patrols continued around the coasts and transportation of materiel by sea into the military zone north of the Ribble would also have continued. However, there is no evidence for the Classis Britannica as such in the north of Britain and it is possible that these activities were carried out by the Legions using vessels under their own command, assisted by detachments of marines. There would have been regular ferrying of troops and officials between Britain & Gaul and forth and provision of transport for natural resources from Britain to the Empire, including iron from the Weald and copper, lead and tin from further afield.

Dr Mason explained that, together with an occasional offensive operation every 30-40 years, these were the regular duties of the British Fleet until the mid 3rd century, when coastal raiding and piracy began to increase. This coincided with changes which were made to coastal installations in the southeast and some forts, including those associated with the Fleet, were rebuilt to a square plan – an intermediate phase prior to the so-called Saxon Shore forts. Excavation has revealed that these were more like fortified supply dumps than classical military forts. In the first part of the 4th century, more shore forts were built, at Cardiff and Lancaster.

By the end of the 4th century, much of the Roman military presence had been withdrawn from Britain to defend the empire elsewhere. By this time, there were few if any naval patrols. Instead, observation and signal stations were constructed along the coasts of North Wales and East Yorkshire – the directions from which threats continued to come. These stations would have been in contact with military reinforcements inland using the well established Roman semaphore signalling system.

Dr Mason concluded his talk by explaining the final demise of Roman Naval power in the seas around Britain as the precedent for the mass immigration of Saxons in the early 5th century.

After answering questions, Dr Mason was roundly thanked by the audience.

Appleby Archaeology will be organising various activities through the summer and their 2015-16 talks season will begin in October. Please see their website www.applebyarchaeology.org.uk for details.