Roman Brooches in Britain: A Technological and Typological Study Based on the Richborough Collection

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Book Review

Roman Brooches in Britain: A Technological and Typological Study Based on the Richborough Collection


Reviewed by Richard Hingley

This volume studies the large collection of excavated brooches from the Roman site of Richborough in Kent and compares it to brooches from other sites in Britain and on the continent. It is thus the first major analysis of brooches from Roman sites in Britain since the pioneering work of the late M.R. Hull in the 1950s and 1960s. The volume is excellently and attractively produced (with financial assistance provided by English Heritage) and includes comprehensive information about the brooches, together with a detailed discussion of their significance. While it provides an invaluable tool and source of reference, this study also makes a number of original and significant observations about Richborough and the production of metalwork in Britannia.

The introduction is followed by chapters examining the following issues: the methods adopted for metallurgical analysis, the manufacture and decoration of Roman brooches, a catalogue of brooches from Richborough and other sites in Roman Britain, the historical context of the Richborough brooches, and the general results and interpretation of the study. Finally, four substantial appendices represent almost one quarter of the printed volume. A CD-ROM presents additional results from the scientific analysis of the brooches.

Richborough is a significant site. Located on the southeastern coast of England, it was probably the bridgehead for the invasion of Britain by Claudius’ army in A.D. 43 and may have acted as a supply base for the army during its advance. A port and civil settlement grew up around the invasion base, and, about 80–90, a monumental arch was added, presumably to commemorate the conquest of the province. The arch, standing approximately 25 m high and encased in white marble brought from Italy, was a symbolic gateway into the province. The civil settlement was cleared during the late third century when a small new fort was built. The earlier fortification was then replaced by a more substantial structure, one of the so-called Saxon Shore forts.

Excavations at Richborough were first undertaken in 1792, with more work done during the 19th century. The first modern excavation was conducted between 1922 and 1938 by J.P. Bushe-Fox, one of the pioneers of Roman archaeology in Britain. Further excavation was undertaken by Barry Cunliffe in 1968; additional work is currently planned.

The 1922 to 1938 excavations produced 445 brooches, which were prepared for conservation in the 1970s. These objects are compared to 3,000 brooches recovered from recent excavations at other sites across Britain and to 7,000 additional published brooches. Brooch types not present at Richborough are included to indicate the main trends through the Roman period. The extensive sample considered in this volume provides a reliable database. Continental material is also assessed, since the role of Richborough as a military and port site attests to its significant overseas contacts.

The present study provides a thorough typology for Roman brooches, as well as a useful metallurgical analysis that enables a new understanding of the manufacture of brooches and the nature of the metalworking industry across Roman Britain.
typology of the pre-Roman and Roman brooches draws in detail upon Hull’s work encompassing 10,000 brooches from Britain. Though Hull died in 1976, having published the Iron Age part of his study, his massive volume on Roman brooches is now in preparation—the current study, however, will retain its significance even when Hull’s Roman corpus is finally published.

Typological analysis plays a vital role in the dating of deposits and structures on Roman sites (for dating, see the maps and figs. [166–97] that plot the chronological development of types spreading out across Britain, complementing the gradual conquest of the province). There are some concerns, however, with the standard typologies that are developed in Roman archaeology (1, 206; cf. S. Jones, The Archaeology of Ethnicity [London 1997]). The numbered sequence of types developed by Hull is often taken to indicate chronological ordering, but some types overlap while others have a very long currency. A close look at the figures in this volume suggests that some of the types incorporate forms that show a considerable degree of variability (e.g., the variation in form and style of Hod Hill and Disc brooches, figs. 53–60 and 98–101), while the decoration of brooches in some type classes is not dissimilar from examples in others. Classification, by its very nature, forces evidence into preconceived frameworks, and it will be important, in due course, to provide a critical reassessment of Hull’s typology, but this was not the purpose of the current volume.

The scientific analysis deepens the understanding provided by the typological classification and appears to provide a degree of support for Hull’s work. Significant types of brooches were often found to consist of one alloy type (206). Types, decoration, and alloy properties may support the location of regional workshops, but further chemical analysis will be required to assess this suggestion. Comparable chemical analysis of other categories of copper-alloy objects across the empire could well provide comparable data.

One increasingly significant issue that is not explored in this volume is the archaeological context in which brooches occur on individual sites. Broad conclusions are drawn on the chronology of the occupation of sites across the province on the basis of the brooches found, but recent research suggests that much more can be done with small finds from excavations. Detailed analysis of the context of finds is beginning to contribute in significant ways to our understanding of the function and nature of sites (cf. H. Eckardt, Illuminating Roman Britain [Montagnac 2002]; N. Crummy and H. Eckardt, “Regional Identities and Technologies of Self: Nail-Cleaners in Roman Britain,” Archaeological Journal 160 [2004] 44–69; S. Willis and R. Hingley, “Roman Finds: Context and Theory,” in Roman Finds: Context and Theory, edited by R. Hingley and S. Willis [Oxford (forthcoming)]). To criticize this book for not tackling this topic, however, would be unfair not only because it originated at a time when the contextual analysis of small finds was in its infancy but also because the Richborough brooches were not recorded in any detail during excavation (2). Future contextual analysis of some of the better-recorded brooches included in this impressive volume is likely to produce further valuable insights into the Roman occupation of Britain.

Richard Hingley
Department of Archaeology
University of Durham
South Road
Durham DH1 3LE
United Kingdom
richard.hingley@durham.ac.uk

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