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Late fourth and early fifth century coins from Trelai Park, Cardiff, south Wales

By NICK WELLS, OLIVER DAVIS AND NIALL SHARPLES

*This short note discusses recent Roman coin finds from near to Ely Roman Villa, Cardiff. Two coins are of particular interest – a *VIRTVS EXERCITI* Emperor and Victory type struck by Honorius at Cyzicus in AD395–401, and a *GLORIA ROMANORVM* 3 Emperor type of Arcadius or Honorius struck at an uncertain eastern mint in AD406–8. The latter represents the latest Roman coin yet found in Wales and one of only a handful known more broadly in Britain. Its presence has implications for the date of abandonment of Ely villa, but also suggests cooper alloy coin use and supply extends into the fifth century AD.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, Cardiff University's impact and outreach programme 'CAER Heritage' has been investigating the large hillfort of Caerau Camp, located in south-west Cardiff. Since 2020, the research has focussed on examining the hillfort's environs. This is not straightforward as the hillfort is surrounded by modern housing, but around 1,500m north-east of the site is a large open space known as Trelai Park. In the centre of the park are the remains of Ely Roman villa, originally identified by John Storrie¹ and subsequently excavated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1922.² The villa is located approximately 3,300m west-south-west of Cardiff Roman Fort, and around 600m south of the line of the Roman road (RR60c) from Cardiff to Cowbridge (Bovium) where it crosses the River Ely (Fig. 1). Wheeler³ argued that the villa was built at some point in the first half of the second century AD, while he placed its abandonment in the mid AD 320s based on the latest identified coin, a Constantine I dated 320–4.

The park therefore represented an obvious target for further archaeological investigation. Geophysical survey in the summer of 2022 by the CAER Heritage team revealed an intriguing enclosure located around 200m south of the villa. Our assumption, based on its morphology and proximity to the villa, was that this newly discovered enclosure was most likely Late Iron Age in date. However, subsequent excavations⁴ have demonstrated conclusively that it has origins in the Middle Bronze Age (c. 1500 BC), although it was likely still visible as an earthwork in the Roman period. A range of Roman material has been recovered from the excavations including a small pottery assemblage and an iron spearhead⁵ as well as a group of Roman coins which are the focus of this report. No archaeological features have yet been excavated that can unequivocally be dated to the Roman period, and all of the coins were found with the aid of a metal detector in subsoil deposits or the spoiltips of the opened trenches. There has been some ground disturbance through the creation of a drainage system and the levelling of field boundaries in the mid-twentieth century, but it is considered unlikely that material has been moved any distance from its original place of deposition.

THE ROMAN COINS

As part of the project methodology a metal detector survey was undertaken in the excavated areas, finding a total of 57 coins. Most (38) were modern, two were thirteenth-century and seventeen were Roman, ranging in date from the early second century to the early fifth century AD.

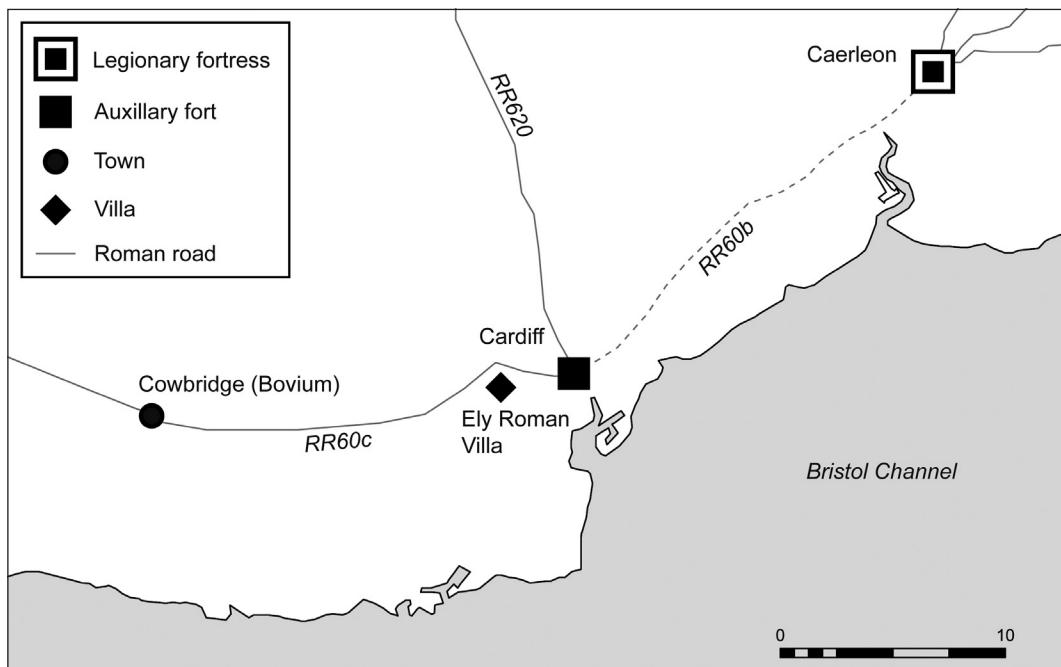


Fig. 1. Map showing location of Ely Roman Villa, south Wales.

Of the Roman group the latest two are of particular interest due to their rarity as site finds in Britain. The first (SF 526) is a VIRTVS EXERCITI Emperor and Victory type struck by Honorius at Cyzicus in 395–401 (mintmark //SMKA, RIC X 68/LRBC 2-2581). This is a very rare find in the western provinces, circulating mostly in the east. Up to 2016 only three examples of this VIRTVS EXERCITI type had been found in Britain—two from Ffrith, Flintshire⁶ and one from the Isle of Wight.⁷ Since then, a further seven have been recorded (PAS Database).⁸

The second (SF 500) is rarer still, a GLORIA ROMANORVM 3 Emperor type of Arcadius or Honorius struck at an uncertain eastern mint in 406–8 (RIC X 141a ff.). It represents the very rare evidence we have for copper alloy coinage making its way to Britain in the early fifth century after the last bulk supplies had been received. Only three examples of the GLORIA ROMANORVM 3 Emperor type were known from Britain in 2016;⁹ one from a group of coins found at Great Chesterford, Essex,¹⁰ another found by a metal detectorist in the Didcot, Oxfordshire area in 1984¹¹ and the most recent in a small group of coins found just north of Halton Chesters fort on Hadrian's Wall in 2007.¹² None have been recorded since 2016 and the Trelai example is the fourth found in Britain, and only the second found with archaeological monitoring.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COINS

As mentioned above, both coins are notable for their rarity in Britain. In particular, the GLORIA ROMANORVM 3 Emperor type is particularly significant not only in being evidence for the longevity of copper alloy coin supply and use in early fifth-century Britain, but also that it represents the latest Roman coin yet discovered in Wales.

The question then turns to the evaluation of their findspots. Both coins were found in deposits within the interior of a Middle Bronze Age enclosure 200m south of Ely Roman villa. The distance between the findspots and villa is clearly too great to provide an unequivocal link and neither of the coins were found in feature-bound deposits. However, their presence, along with the rest of the group of seventeen Roman coins deserves some explanation. It is possible, for instance, that the coins derived from material redeposited from the villa site onto the area of the Bronze Age enclosure. This material may have accumulated either slowly, perhaps from waste dumping, or more quickly as part of a larger scale landscaping event or other activity. If this is the case then activity on the villa site can be extended from the 320s AD as postulated by Wheeler from coin evidence,¹³ to the early fifth century AD. Further work should clarify the nature of any relationship.

Details and images of the two coins can be found on the Portable Antiquities Scheme Database <<https://finds.org.uk/database>>; NMGW-F0A319 for SF 526, VIRTVS EXERCITI Emperor and Victory type and NMGW-F0F0A6 for SF 500, GLORIA ROMANORVM 3 Emperor type.

NOTES

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3. Ibid., 31 and 33.
4. Davis, O. and Sharples, N., 2023. *Trelai Park, Cardiff: An Interim Report on the 2022 Excavations* (Cardiff: Cardiff University), Cardiff Studies in Archaeology Specialist Report No. 39.
5. Ibid., 34–5
6. Davies, E., 1949. *The Roman and Prehistoric Remains of Flintshire* (Cardiff: William Lewis Ltd), 234–5. The provenance of these is questionable.
7. Walton, P. and Moorhead, S., 2016. 'Coinage and collapse?—The contribution of numismatic data to understanding the end of Roman Britain', *Internet Archaeology* 41 <<https://doi.org/10.11114/ia.41.8>>, Section 3.3.
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9. Walton and Moorhead loc.cit.
10. Mattingly, H., 1934. 'Finds from Great Chesterford, Essex' *Numismatic Chronicle* 94. 227. Kent, J. P. C., 1954. 'The search for fifth-century coins in Britain', *The Archaeological Newsletter* 5, 119 note 8.
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12. Collins, R., 2008, 'The latest Roman coin from Hadrian's Wall: a small fifth-century purse group', *Britannia* 39, 256–61.
13. Wheeler op. cit., 31.