

Roman London's First Voices. Writing tablets from the Bloomberg excavations, 2010–14, by Roger S.O. Tomlin, 2016. London: Museum of London Archaeology; ISBN 978-1-907586-40-8 hardback £32; xv+309 pp., 144 b/w and colour illus.

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Every so often a discovery sends ripples of excitement through the Classical community. The stylus tablets from the Bloomberg London Excavations (2010–2014), numbering over 400 and some apparently still legible, had such an effect. The scholarly community will feel grateful for the impressive speed with which such an important, meticulously researched and affordable volume has been made available, a testament to the dedication of the team at MOLA, Bloomberg LP and the world-leading epigraphist, Roger Tomlin. The volume has clearly been shaped by archaeologists: this is no bare presentation of the legible tablets, but, in addition to the expected commentary on letter forms and formats of the tablets, contains details of the excavations, conservation, species of wood used (largely *abies alba*) (chapter 1), manufacture (recycled from barrel or cask staves) (chapter 2), archaeological provenance, socio-historical context and significance (chapter 3) and wax employed (chapter 6). The stylus tablets, of which 79 contained writing recoverable by Tomlin, are set out across 200 pages (chapter 4.1–4.4) following modern epigraphical norms with high-quality photographs and Tomlin's ever-helpful drawings (11 tablets of interest but without writing are also catalogued in this section). Roughly the same number of tablets is then presented in the next section (*descripta*, chapter 4.5), but these are described as 'inscribed but illegible' (p. 6). Next follow two stylus tags or labels (chapter 4.6). Chapter 5 contains the meagre haul of two ink tablets, before appendices including information on the c. 300 writing tablets previously found across London and the concordance of all 405 catalogued and non-catalogued tablets from the site. The volume concludes with summaries in French, German and Italian, underlining the international importance of the finds, bibliography and indices.

The site from which these tablets have been recovered has been dubbed 'the Pompeii of the North' and expectations were high given that the third-century Temple of Mithras was excavated here, in the heart of the City of London, in the 1950s (Shepherd 1998). In all, 1.2 ha were excavated in a diamond shape between Queen Victoria Street, Queen Street, Cannon Street, Bucklersbury and Walbrook, immediately to the south of Number 1 Poultry, another site of archaeological renown (Hill & Rowsome 2011; Rowsome 2000). Roman London is thought to have been founded immediately to the east of the site within a couple of years of the Claudian invasion, and this excavation therefore provides another crucial snapshot in one of the best explored major Roman urban centres. Amongst the stunning finds in waterlogged context, the stylus tablets are the stars, and Tomlin has managed a quite extraordinary feat of eagle-eyed perception and experienced skill in reconstructing them in double-quick time.

Those looking for instant gratification and bold headlines in these transcriptions might be disappointed: there are no juicy tales of Boudicca or badly needed British literary compositions, nor are there any obvious letters to rival Vindolanda's birthday invitation (Bowman & Thomas 1993: *Tab. Vindol.* II, 291). But the Vindolanda cache sets the very highest of expectations. The London texts, perhaps even more so than the published ink-written documents from the fort at Vindolanda, are extraordinarily difficult to read (wax tablets are designed for reuse and only deep scratches make it through to the wood, sometimes creating complex palimpsests whose lines can be difficult to disentangle from one another, let alone from non-literate scratches and even the wood grain itself) and those that provide recoverable content seem to fit within the financial and legal sphere. The value of these texts will not necessarily be in attention-grabbing highlights, but rather in their contribution to our picture of the Roman West, the impact of which may take years to appreciate fully. Eight texts give dates, and most of the rest can be dated, thanks to the impressive control of the archaeological sequencing. Nearly all are dated to the AD 50s to 80s, covering a crucial period spanning from soon after the Claudian conquest, through the Boudiccan upheavals and beyond. The possible implication of the immediately post-destruction tablets has already been raised: the contract between Venustus and Proculus for 20 loads of provisions to be brought from Verulamium to Londinium in late AD 62 (WT 45) has been used as an indication of 'rapid recovery' and support for the earlier date for the Boudiccan destruction (pp. 55–6). Historians will no doubt debate whether this text can be made to imply so much. Economic and social historians will want to squeeze the texts for other vital information, some of which can be found in the discussions of the individual texts, and to continue the process of synthesis. How should we interpret the words '*in Icenis castello Epocuria*' (dated to AD 80/90–95) (WT 39), and how do these texts advance our understanding of the status of Roman London and its inhabitants? The summary sections, drawing together the key contributions of these texts to our understanding of Roman London and the expanding Roman world more generally, are, understandably, brief (pp. 51, 54–8).

In part this is because this volume represents the successful conclusion of one phase in the life of these tablets and the start of a new period of re-reading and interpreting which now recruits a much wider academic group. Current technologies, for example the use of Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) currently being undertaken on the tablets in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents in Oxford, and future technologies may allow more of the evanescent traces to be read. WT 52, for example, may be particularly ripe for detailed digital investigations. There have also already been alternative suggestions for understanding the texts as currently transcribed, for example WT 29 in Bowman's (2016) *TLS* review and WT 59 in that of Millett (2016). Opportunities also abound for linguists to study a chronologically restricted corpus in order to continue to build on our understanding of imperial Latin language and orthography and to explore the precise nature of letter forms. Sociolinguistics and the related and

growing subject of sociopaleography find themselves with a new set of material: this could be compared to writing tablets from elsewhere in London (c. 300 are being reassessed using digital technologies in the hope that transcriptions for more than the current 6 per cent may be provided) and beyond, particularly the military documents from across the northwestern provinces, for example Vindolanda, Carlisle, Vechten and Vindonissa. Tomlin has facilitated all this through his magisterial deciphering skills and clear and accurate presentation. If we are to continue to publish difficult texts such as these in printed volumes, we should see this as the gold standard.

These tablets are essential evidence for thinking about the complex process of Latinization in the Empire. They date to the immediately post-conquest period and show a group of males producing strikingly, if not necessarily unsurprisingly, standard Latin and using Roman formats (layout, letter forms, abbreviations, formulae, etc.). Females are not named in the texts uncovered so far and we might wonder whether they are, at least in some cases, writing for their families and associates, given the not uncommon visual representation of women's literacy elsewhere in the Empire. These tablets illustrate some of the reasons to learn Latin: it opened up a wealth of enhanced opportunities for its speakers and writers in the army, in commerce, in production, offering them access to wider markets, legal support and documentation. An analysis of the names and other contextual clues contained within the documents suggest that the characters involved are perhaps 'early adopter' provincials, many from the Continent, who are taking on Roman names (at c. 13 per cent, the percentage of non-Latin/Greek names is comparatively low) and exploiting the opportunities that a new provincial centre can offer. A recent synthesis of archaeological material from the pre-Boudiccan period concludes that migrants from Gaul were an important element in its composition (Wallace 2014). The eagerly-anticipated next two volumes from the site will help with our contextualization. We can expect to read about MOLA's newly developed view that many of the tablets may derive from so-called 'stable sweepings' brought to the site from further east in Londinium (Sadie Watson, pers. comm.), perhaps including non-official writings produced by cavalry housed (temporarily or not) in London before deployment elsewhere in the expanding province, in addition to those that were probably generated through activity at the site itself. In the years to come we will need to probe further who wrote these tablets and how they learnt to speak and write Latin.

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