CABRIABANUS – A ROMANO-BRITISH TILE CRAFTSMAN IN KENT

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To date, everything we know about Cabriabanus is based on 16 fragments of tile that have been found on four Romano-British sites in Kent and London in the last 250 years. Of these, 12 are in now in the care of Maidstone Museum. The two largest and most informative fragments were acquired by a church rector in Plaxtol in 1858 and taken to his new parish some 70 miles away. Somehow they survived, and were returned to their original parish 140 years later and then reunited with the other pieces in Maidstone Museum. This group of Romano-British artefacts is unique because each fragment is characterised, in whole or part, by a Latin inscription, in relief, in which Cabriabanus names himself as the tile manufacturer (Fig. 1).

The Course of Discoveries

Cabriabanus’ existence first came to light with a recorded find of a fragment of Romano-British flue tile by the eighteenth-century antiquarian, Bryan Faussett. This was lodged in Liverpool Museum until lost in an air raid in 1941. Attached to the tile had been an initialled note in Faussett’s handwriting, dated 1773:

A portion of a flat, red Roman tile, with letters upon it was found together with a beautiful profile and many other fragments of Roman tiles and sherds of urns, in digging the foundations of the offices belonging to the new Excise office, which is built on the ground on which Gresham College lately stood – viz, in Broad Street, near Bishops Gate Street, London.
(Item no. 6134, Mayer Collection.)

Many years later this tile fragment was recognised as having come from the same die as 7 fragments of tile inscribed with the name ‘Cabriabanus’ which had been found at Plaxtol (see below) in 1858 (Haverfield 1910). However, Haverfield, perhaps rather perversely, concluded that: ‘It does not seem to me very likely that examples of
Fig. 1 Dies 31, 59 and 73.
Die 31 (1a) is a reconstruction of the Cabriabanus inscription derived from a number of tile fragments. Die 59 (1b) is a variant die of the same Cabriabanus inscription. Die 73 (1c) shows three examples of pattern and belongs to the same fabric group as dies 31 and 59.
this elaborate inscription should occur in both London and Plaxtol and I should prefer to think that Faussett’s specimen was really found in Plaxtol’. The provenance of this tile was thus placed in some doubt and because subsequent commentators have tended to reflect Haverfield’s views, it is worthwhile reviewing the circumstantial evidence supporting its London origin. Apart from Faussett’s note, it is also a matter of historical record that Gresham College (which stood on the site of the present day Nat West tower in Old Broad Street), was scheduled by Act of Parliament to be demolished in 1768 so that it could be replaced by an Excise House. In addition, there is a print in the Guildhall Library showing the newly-built Excise House, which is dated 1772. It is clear, therefore, that the demolition of Gresham College and the building of the Excise House took place between 1769 and 1772; Faussett’s note of 1773 thus seems strongly validated. Further support comes from the Royal Commission report on Roman London:

Prior to 1805 was found foundations and remains of pavements behind the old Navy Pay Office in Broad Street. The principal find near Broad Street has been the tesselated pavement unearthed in Feb 1854 under the vaults of the south-east part of the old Excise Office, on the east side of the street’. (RCHME 1928)

In 1857 a farmer in Plaxtol, undertaking deep ploughing for hop cultivation, unearthed Roman remains which were partly excavated the following year (Luard 1859). Luard drew up plans of a building which were later identified as a Roman bath house (Haverfield 1910), although since that time its exact site had become lost. Among a number of Roman artefacts that Luard bequeathed to Maidstone Museum were seven fragments of flue tile.

More than a century later, in the 1960s, three more fragments were found as a result of an unrecorded excavation by members of Tonbridge School on the same bath house site at Plaxtol. The number at Maidstone Museum reached 12 in 1990 with the return of two fragments from Holy Cross Church, Sarratt, Herts., as mentioned above.

The next, fresh site to produce evidence was the Dareth Roman villa, 12 miles north of Plaxtol where, in 1969, was found a single fragment of an inscribed Cabriabanus tile (Philp 1973). It was confirmed later that this came from the same die pattern (No. 31, see below) as all but one of the Plaxtol tiles (Frere et al. 1990).

Finally, the latest site to produce an example of Cabriabanus-inscribed tile was the Sedgebrook villa in Plaxtol, excavated in 1986-9 by the Kent Archaeological Society, situated under half a mile north of the Roman bath house/villa recorded by Luard. This tile fragment was also a product of die 31.
Box and Vousoir tiles - their function and distribution

The Cabriabanus-inscribed finds are all fragments of the type of hollow 'vousoir'-shaped box tiles used to build an arched roof over the hot bath area of a Roman bath house (Fig. 2). This form of room heating was devised following the introduction of the hollow box tile around AD 60-70. The heat and smoke from the hypocaust were transmitted up the tubes of hollow box tiles, which were fixed to the walls, and thence up through the hollow vousoir tiles. To prevent smoke and fumes escaping into the room it was the general practice to plaster over both the wall tiles and the arch tiles. Prior to plastering, it was necessary to key their surfaces and this could be done by combing/scoring or by roughening the surfaces with an impressed relief pattern, before firing in a kiln. This second method of impressing a relief pattern was

Fig. 2 Bath House elevation showing vousoir tiles partly resting on the wall and partly on the box tile. In many other examples the vousoirs are shorter and rest on the box tiles alone.
the one used by Cabriabanus and others. This particular practice was the subject of a study (Lowther 1948) which concluded:

- Relief-patterning of the flue tiles served the same purpose as combing or scoring, namely, to roughen the surface of the tile prior to plastering.
- The distribution of all relief-patterned tiles implied a centre for the industry in London but also suggested that the craftsmen travelled about the country, from site to site, manufacturing flue tiles when facilities existed.
- Manufacture of relief-patterned tiles was confined to non-military sites at which the craftsmen, probably paid according to output, would have needed to have their own work easily identified. Hence the patterning would serve as a form of trademark. The most common patterns used were variations of chevron, diamond and lattice.
- Evidence as to date, though scanty, suggested AD 80-150 as the period within which most of the dies were in use. Later re-use of tiles rendered the date of their final production somewhat obscure, but there was no evidence of their use later than (or as late as) AD 200.

Lowther made the following comment on the Cabriabanus tiles in particular. After pointing out that the Cabriabanus tiles were unique in being inscribed, he goes on to say: 'The design, consisting, as it does, of roughly executed lettering, can have no decorative value. The purpose of the patterning is to provide a key to which mortar would adhere. The tiles from Plaxtol emphasise the 'trademark' nature of the whole group'. Lowther's conclusions in 1948 were largely endorsed by a comprehensive study of relief-patterned tiles (Betts et al. 1997) which contains a catalogue of the 124 individual die patterns identified to date. The main additional conclusions of the 1997 study were:-

- The technique of keying box tiles with an impress from a wooden roller, which Lowther had postulated, derived from first-century practice of using a wooden roller to key daub walls of clay-and-timber buildings. Examples were cited at London, Colchester and St Albans.
- The production of box and voussoir tiles with relief-patterned keying would normally have been an integral part of brick and tile manufacture.
- There is firm evidence, based on tile fabric analysis, that tile was transported quite considerable distances on occasions.
- Lowther was undoubtedly correct in seeing roller-patterning as an alternative to keying with a comb or knife and also in citing the existence of Cabriabanus tile as a powerful indicator that patterns on relief-patterned tile must have served an additional purpose, most likely to mark the work of a particular tilemaker or tileworks.

- It was clear that, on occasions, rollers were taken from one site to another, confirming Lowther's finding that there was some evidence of tile makers being itinerant.

- The distribution of relief-patterned tile also confirmed Lowther's initial findings, i.e. that they were predominantly distributed in S. E. England, particularly in the counties of Essex, Herts., Kent, Surrey and Sussex, with London having the greatest concentration.

- Very few known tile kilns can be stated with certainty to have produced relief-patterned tiles, although a number of relief-patterned tiles have been found in the vicinity of known or suspected kilns.

Fig. 3 Pattern-Rolling a Box Tile.
The Cabriabanus inscription

Haverfield described it as follows:

These tiles are covered all over their four faces with an irregular pattern of raised lettering, impressed on the clay before firing and seemingly produced by a clumsily-cut wooden stamp whose wooden fibre and rough hacking can be traced on the better preserved fragments.

It is clear that there were three lines of Latin script cut on the wooden roller. The first line, in relatively small letters, was interpreted by Haverfield as the word parietalem and although Lowther thought it might have been parietalis, Betts et al. agree with Haverfield’s interpretation. There is general agreement that the second line contains the word Cabriabanu, written in large letters, followed by a stop indicating the end of the word. The third, most difficult line is interpreted by Haverfield as fabricavit. Betts et al. favour a minor modification, to fabricavi.

Haverfield’s interpretation was based solely on seven tile fragments from Plaxtol and the single fragment from Bishopsgate London, which he personally examined but which, he said, added nothing to the Plaxtol examples. A re-examination of the 15 extant fragments still leaves us with an incomplete picture of the third line but the recently discovered fragment from Sedgebrook villa adds further detail which tends to confirm that fabricavi is the correct interpretation of this line.

The three lines of script were applied to all four surfaces of the tile, as below:--.

PARIETALEM (the whole line written upside down)
CABRIABANU (omitting the final ‘s’ was common practice)
FARBICAVI (the letter ‘R’ upside down and preceding ‘B’, mis-spelling fabricavi).

The script can be translated as: ‘I, Cabriabanus, made this wall tile’.

The choice of Latin words that Cabriabanus used is interesting. He uses fabrico fabricavi – to build or construct, to make out of wood, stone, metal, etc., instead of the more usual facio feci – to make. He also uses the little-used adjective parietalis, meaning ‘of or belonging to walls’ and the assumption is that tubum [hollow tile] is omitted but understood. If, as the writer deduces from the dimensions of the voussoir tile from Plaxtol, these voussoir tile were partly seated on the bath house wall itself (Fig. 2), there is some reason to describe them as parietalis. It is quite possible that the choice of the words parietalis and fabricavi was influenced by the need to fill up the space on the roller with words of about the same number of letters as Cabriabanus.
The explanation for the first line being upside down probably stems from the fact that when Cabriabanus (or someone else) cut the first line on the wooden roller, he correctly anticipated that he would need to cut the letters in reverse, in the form of a mirror image. However, he seems to have made an extra, unnecessary adjustment by also cutting the letters upside down. Having cut out the first line, he then must have tried it out, discovered his error and stopped cutting the letters upside down in the second and third lines. The second line, containing the name, is given prominence by cutting the letters in larger form than the first line and by its central position. In the third line, it appears that he confused the order of two of the letters when reverse-cutting the ‘R’ and the ‘B’, letters which have a very similar form; he also cut the letter ‘R’ upside down, perhaps reverting to the same type of error committed in the first line. The crudity of the workmanship and the errors made in cutting the letters indicate that this was probably a first time effort.

It is interesting to compare Cabriabanus’ method of inscribed roller impression with the general practice of the Romano-British building industry as a means of preparing box and voussoir tiles for plastering. A sample of 253 box tiles showed that roller-patterned box tiles only accounted for 12% of the total, with combing and scoring accounting for the other 88% (Brodribb 1987). As for voussoir tiles, i.e. the type of tile Cabriabanus produced, the percentage of patterned dies used, compared with combing or scoring, was very much smaller, with only 2 examples of roller-patterned out of 54. Cabriabanus is also exceptional in choosing not to use a professional die cutter and by advertising his name on the die. It is, perhaps, significant that all the tiles marked with Cabriabanus’ die were hollow voussoir tiles. Technically, voussoir tile is the most demanding to produce of all the hollow box tiles because of their wedge-like shape and the requirement for accurate measurement to achieve an arch of the right width over the walls of the hot bath. An examination of the widths of a sample of recorded hot bath rooms from villa sites indicates that most of these rooms appear to be 8, 9 or 10 Roman feet in width. Consequently, voussoir tiles had to be tailor-made for every hot bath room.

As for the name Cabriabanus, there is no other instance of the name occurring among Roman inscriptions in Britain although in Bonn (Germany) there was a funeral inscription to a Cabrio who was a senior standard bearer (aqualifer) in the legion (CIL 1863). Cabriano is listed as an old Celtic name in Alt Celtischer Sprachschatz (Holder 1896).

If we accept Lowther’s time span for the patterned-tile industry of AD 80-150, when and where did Cabriabanus operate within this period? It is assumed that the tile which bore his name would have
A sherd of Cabriabanus tile (85 x 45mm) found on the bathhouse site at Plaxtol in 2002. Parts of the letters ‘BRIAB’ can be identified.

been made in the relatively short span of this craftsman’s working life, as we can surely rule out any possibility that such a personal die would have been used subsequently. None of the sites producing Cabriabanus tile had provided any associated dating evidence. However, a number of commentators had drawn attention to the possibility of a tile kiln in the Plaxtol area and it was decided to carry out an investigation there in order to try and resolve these questions.

Archaeological investigations at Plaxtol in 2001-3.

In the Autumn of 2001, the Plaxtol farm where Luard found the bath house in 1858 was field walked and its site, which he part-excavated, was rediscovered in woodland. In the disturbed soil overlying the bare remnants of the bath house foundations lay another fragment of Cabriabanus-inscribed tile (Plate I). An extensive geophysical survey of the farmland was then carried out which revealed evidence of a probable villa complex and also of an isolated structure, located about 120m from the bath house. The plough soil was removed from this isolated feature and it was confirmed as a Roman tile kiln by John Shepherd of the Museum of London; the foundations were recorded and photographed (Fig. 4 and Plate II).
No attempt was made to excavate below the surface of the tile furnace or below the floor of the room in which it was located, partly in the interests of conservation and partly because the main objective, to locate and identify the site of the suspected tile kiln appeared to have been met. The tile furnace foundations were in relatively undisturbed condition but the site had been cleared of artefacts and wasters at some stage, apart from a few pieces of broken floor tile, which had been loosened by the plough. There was clear evidence of
The Plaxtol kiln, looking south. The passage from the stokehole is in the foreground leading to the heat-affected tile of the kiln foundation.

Vitrification among the furnace tile foundations, indicative of the high temperatures generated. The kiln was of the rectangular, updraught type with internal dimensions of c.1.5 x 2.5m with 5 cross walls. The cross-flues between these kiln walls sloped downwards towards the central flue. Compared with the other two civilian tile
kilns found in Kent, the Plaxtol example appears to be about the same size as Kiln B found at Canterbury, i.e. 2.4m. x 1.8m (Jenkins 1960), but considerably smaller than the Eccles kiln, 4.9m. x 4.7m., the largest non-military tile kiln found in Britain (Detsicas 1967). Outside the walls of the furnace room on the west side, there were a few indeterminate sherds of Romano-British pottery and the remains of a crudely hand-made bucket-like vessel of thick clay, with finger marks clearly imprinted. It remained to attempt to date the kiln and compare the fabric of the tile from the kiln with that from the bath house in order to establish a direct connection between the two.

Archaeomagnetic dating tests were carried out on the tile kiln by English Heritage in October 2002 (Plate III) which gave a 95% probability that the last firing of the kiln occurred between 120-165 (Linford 2002). This is within the time-frame of the pottery found on the bath house site and in a nearby Romano-British rubbish pit which were dated from the mid-first century to the mid-second century, just possibly extending to about AD 180 (Willson 1992). The results also concur with the dating of the Darenth villa: ‘Period I is here regarded as dating from the middle of the second century’ (Philp 1973). Black
has also drawn a conclusion regarding the dating of roller-stamping which narrows Lowther's earlier estimate and which harmonises with the archaeomagnetic dating of the Cabriabanus tile; 'It seems that roller-stamping is limited to the first half of the second century. It does not seem to have been used in Britain outside this short period' (Black 1996). It seems virtually certain, therefore, that the tile kiln at Plaxtol was in use during the period 125-150.

Examples of tile taken from the kiln structure, together with tile fragments from the bath house site, including the latest piece of Cabriabanus tile found on the bath house site in 2002, were submitted to Dr Ian Betts of the Museum of London for fabric analysis. On the basis of the fabric evidence, he concluded that: 'It is highly likely that the relief-patterned tile with the name Cabriabanus was made at Plaxtol. Interestingly, relief-patterned tiles in the same fabric, group six, but stamped with a different die, number 73 (Fig. 1c) have been found on other Kent sites (Lullingstone and Chalk, as well as London) which suggests that the Plaxtol kiln may have supplied tile for construction work at other villas in Kent' (Map 1). This pattern of a local kiln supplying to a local consumer and also sending its products to other consumers, some at a considerable distance, has already been noted at Ashtead in Surrey (Middleton et al. 1992).

Die 73 and the Cabriabanus dies, 31 and 59, therefore all belong to fabric group six, which almost certainly originated from Plaxtol. They also share a London/N. Kent distribution pattern with the Cabriabanus dies being found at Plaxtol (two sites), Darenth and Bishopsgate and die 73 being found at Lullingstone, Chalk and also at Bishopsgate. It was not possible to examine the fabric of the Bishopsgate tile (lost in an air raid) or of the tile fragment from Darenth (lost in store: pers comm. B. Philp) but in view of the fact that other voussoir tile emanating from Plaxtol has been found at Lullingstone, Chalk and London, it is highly likely that all these voussoir tiles were transported from Plaxtol. There is, in addition, a further connection between dies 31/59 and die 73. It was pointed out to the writer (E.W. Black pers. comm., Jan 2003) that of the 124 dies identified, only three appear to have been made by non-professional die cutters, judging by their crude execution, i.e. the Cabriabanus dies 31/59, and die 73. The evidence also indicates that, unusually, dies 31/59 and die 73 were all exclusively associated with the production of voussoir tile. It seems likely therefore that there were two craftsmen at Plaxtol in the second quarter of the second century who were both making voussoir tile and that one learned from the other how to cut his own wooden roller die. It is also clear from examples found at Plaxtol that other craftsmen were producing combed box and voussoir tiles.

As for the route of the traffic in tile from Plaxtol to these other
Map 1 River and Track Routes from Plaxtol villa.
sites, there seems to have been two possibilities. One would use the trackway that runs to the north, from just to the west of Plaxtol, which links up with the 'Pilgrims Way' track that would lead to the river Darent at Otford (Map 1) giving ready access to Lullingstone, Darent, Chalk and indirectly to the Thames and London. The second possible route would have been down the river Bourne, which runs within 50m of the Plaxtol site and then down the river Medway into the Thames. This latter route would give access to all the sites listed above and had the advantage of being an all-water route.

The method of making box and voussoir tile.

Lowther held the view that box flue tiles were made by wrapping sand-coated clay around a length of wood with a rectangular section and then roller-impressing, combing or scoring the moist clay before removing the former, prior to drying and firing (Fig. 3). This idea has been shown to be quite practical for box tiles (Morgan 1979). Lowther’s view, which is still broadly accepted today, contains the assumption that all box and voussoir tiles were made singly. However, a closer examination of the fragments of Cabriabanus tile at Maidstone Museum suggests otherwise. His roller-impress wedge-shaped voussoir tile had a short side of 152mm (6in.) and a longer side of 190mm (7½ in.). It is distinctly implausible that anyone would choose a roller to prepare the surface of a tile of such short length in preference to scoring or combing, but if they did, one would expect to find both ends of the tile rounded down by the pressure of the roller. Examination of the tile fragments shows that, on the contrary, out of nine end-edges where the roller either began or finished, there are five clear instances where the letters cut the very edge of the tile and only one possible example of an edge being rounded down. Significantly, unlike all patterned box tiles, the Cabriabanus pattern had been rolled in one direction on the left side of the tile face and in the opposite direction on the right side of the face. This would be consistent with a working method where a long length of clay was being rolled and then cut into separate tile faces, probably with the aid of a template, before assembling around the wooden former.

If this is true, and the evidence is indicative, rather than conclusive, it raises the whole question of why a small percentage of craftsmen chose to use a roller to prepare their box tiles when the majority of tile makers opted to comb or score their tile. To date, the answer has been that it allowed the craftsman to advertise his product by means of an individual die pattern. While it is clear that these tile makers did take advantage of the individual roller-die pattern in just this way, it seems possible that their basic reason for using a roller was a more practical
A combed voussoir tile where the pattern of combing indicates that the craftsman made one at a time (photo courtesy of the Museum of London)

one, namely, that they found it was a faster method of preparing a batch of box tile. If those tile makers who were using a roller to prepare their box tiles were making more than one at a time, this process would, at the very least, halve the time it took to make a box tile.

Examination of a large number of complete box and voussoir tiles from sites and museum stores led to two conclusions. It was clear that in the case of scored/combed box and voussoir tile, each item had indeed been made singly. In very many cases the design of the combing and scoring was tailored to fit into one side of a single tile and often resembled a St Andrew’s Cross (Plate IV). However, the evidence that this also applied to roller-impressed box tiles was absent. Here, as with the Cabriabanus tile, the roller impression tended not to stop short of the edge of the tile nor give any sign of rounding down on the edges (Plate V). The evidence strongly suggests that in the case of roller-patterned box tile, the craftsman was roller-impressing more than one tile at a time although the presence of a single join mark confirmed that, unlike the Cabriabanus voussoir tile, patterned box tiles were rolled on a wooden former.

As we know from present day painting and decorating, rollers are
A relief-patterned box tile showing the pattern created by the roller continuing beyond edge of tile (photo courtesy of the Museum of London)

an excellent means of covering a long strip quickly and this is, no doubt, the reason rollers were adopted in first-century Roman Britain in order to key daub walls during the building boom of the early civic development as is attested by the evidence from London, Colchester and St Albans. Similarly, the specialist box tile makers of early second-century Britannia were faced with an increase in demand for their products as a result of the surge in villa construction that occurred at this time. It would have been simply following an established practice for them to turn to the roller as a means of speeding up the production of box tile. This explanation would also account for the fact that there is no evidence of roller-pattering being used after the middle of the second century when the boom in villa construction had subsided and the pressure for swift production had consequently diminished.

It is clear that the techniques of rollering daub walls and rollering box tiles were being used contemporaneously in the early second century because we have the evidence at the Sedgebrook villa in Plaxtol, preserved by fire, of clay daub with an impress of lattice pattern applied with a wooden roller, together with the presence of a roller-impressed Cabriabanus tile on the same site. These two roller applications involved slightly different techniques as the lattice keying on the daub wall was much more deeply cut in the daub in
order to support the weight of plaster over a whole wall (Plate VI). Rolling daub walls and roller ing box tiles are essentially similar practices aimed at speeding up the keying process but they remain different applications belonging to separate and distinct building functions (Russell, in Betts et al. 1994).

What is being suggested is that there were two methods of making box and voussoir tiles being used concurrently in second-century Roman Britain. The majority of craftsmen were combing or scoring their box tiles and were making their tiles singly. However, a minority were roller-impressing their box tiles as a faster way of producing them. These craftsmen, who numbered over 120, judging by the number of individual dies identified, had, in all but two cases, gone to the expense of getting their roller pattern cut by a professional die cutter and are likely to have been the specialist box tile makers compared with the more general tile makers who could produce the less demanding flat tiles and even make box tiles, albeit more slowly, on a one-off basis.

It is difficult to overemphasise the importance of the tilemaker to the Romano-British building industry. Other than mortar, timber,
nails and stone, the tile maker could provide all the components for a villa complex with the range of tile products from a single kiln. He could provide the regula and imbræx tiles for roofing, the large square paving tiles for the floors, the bessalis and pedalis tiles for the hypercaust pila and the hollow box and vousoir tile for the heating system. And because all these ceramic products were made in standard sizes they could be dispatched to other sites on a simple ordering system. The tilemaker was both the key craftsman on site and also the means by which the landowner could make a profit from his clay resources by selling its products to other sites.

Cabriabanus, then, was a specialist craftsman working in a ration-alised industry, the product of Roman technical know-how and entre-preneural ability. His skills in making vousoir tile would have been newly acquired following the introduction of box tiles as a heating method in the late first century. He seems too have specialised in making vousoir tile and had clearly learned the language of his masters. In applying roller-impressing to vousoir tile he showed himself to be an innovator and his statement parietalem Cabriabani fabricavi sets him apart from his fellow craftsmen and reflects the pride of an individual tile craftsman working in the new Roman economy.

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