

## The Wirral brooch: a case study in trade across Roman Britain

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The Wirral brooch is a type of Roman bow brooch found mainly on the Wirral peninsula in the North West of Britain (Map 1 below shows the location). First noted in 1999 by Philpott,<sup>1</sup> it is a distinctive type both stylistically and geographically. There are 102 brooches known plus another 10 variants. Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate the key characteristics of the type as listed here:

- A head-loop
- A stepped head - often decorated or enamelled
- A rectangular panel with 3 strips infilled with enamel in alternate colours on the upper bow
- A stud/boss at the waist of the brooch
- Steep profile to the bow
- Disc-shaped moulding on the foot
- The catchplate usually stops before the foot

Figure 1. PAS no.LVPL-3523C3      Figure 2. WAGMG 1906.75



Brooches are a ubiquitous find on any Roman site in Britain and are also found in huge numbers as stray finds. This provides archaeologists with a large data set and has enabled lots of work to be carried out with this object type including creating a typology which allows dating of the types (so helping to date sites). As well

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<sup>1</sup> Philpott, P. (1999) 'A Romano British brooch type from North Western and Northern England', *Britannia (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies)* Vol. 30, pp. 274-86.

as being found in large numbers there is also a huge variety in the types used, British types are different to those found on the Continent, but also within Britain regional variations can be seen. The Wirral brooch can be classed as a regional brooch type due to its restricted distribution and distinctive stylistic features. As a regional type it can be used to help understand various aspects of life in Roman Britain, including brooch manufacture, trade and fashion.

This paper will deal with one aspect of a MLitt thesis recently submitted by the author, which examined the Wirral brooch to understand its form, distribution and role. Brooches are portable items and can be moved around on people as easily as they can be transported for trade and so looking at their distribution is important. This paper will look at trade, and how the Wirral brooch was distributed from its place of manufacture. The majority of the Wirral brooches are found as stray finds, in rural areas, within the core distribution area.<sup>2</sup> They were produced somewhere within this area and used mainly by the people living there. Philpott in 1999 discussed the methods of distribution of the Wirral brooch within the core area and suggested it spread among a 'local rural clientele, perhaps through family or tribal connections'.<sup>3</sup> The rural distribution of the type would support this theory as they do not seem to be worn by the military in the area, but by the indigenous population living in the small rural settlements.

The rural parts of the North West of Britain have a low level of material culture, including coin use, which has led scholars to suggest that the rural communities did not participate in the market economy to any great extent.<sup>4</sup> This low level of interaction between the military (who used a market economy) and the rural communities (using mainly subsistence exchange) could explain the absence of the Wirral brooches on the military sites within the core area. However a reason must be found to explain the presence of the sub-groups. Although the majority of the Wirral brooches are found in the core distribution area, (84 out of 102), Map 1 below shows that there are also two sub-groups and some outliers. The two sub-groups have been classified as the Northern military zone (with 8 brooches) and the Scottish group (with 5 brooches); they are circled on the map below. There are 9 brooches which are classed as outliers, a feature to be expected in any grouping, no matter how tight the distribution. Table 1 below lists the brooches and their sub-groups.

The core distribution area of the Wirral brooch has often been seen as a poor area for material culture, not just in the Roman period. During the Roman period there were few large settlements, whether military or urban, in the area around the Wirral peninsula, with the few that have been found being small rural settlements. Chester, a legionary fortress was the main site, occupied on and off by the Roman military from the early AD 70s until the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>5</sup> There were also the industrial towns of Wilderspool (modern day Warrington), Middlewich and Northwich, the port of Meols and the tiler at Holt. Court Farm on Merseyside was a small rural settlement, with two Wirral brooches found there. Map 2 illustrates the places mentioned against the distribution of the Wirral brooches and shows how the

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<sup>2</sup> Defined as the Wirral, North East Wales and Cheshire.

<sup>3</sup> Philpott (1999) p.284.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>5</sup> Mason, D. (2001) *Roman Chester. The City of the Eagles*, Tempus Publishing Ltd., Gloucestershire.

Wirral peninsula itself has a high number of brooches but only Meols as a sizeable settlement. There are some small sites on the Wirral such as Ness (discovered by metal detecting, no excavation has been carried out currently) and Irby (which has evidence of bronze-working) but no large settlements are known of.

Map 1. Map showing the distribution of the Wirral brooch.

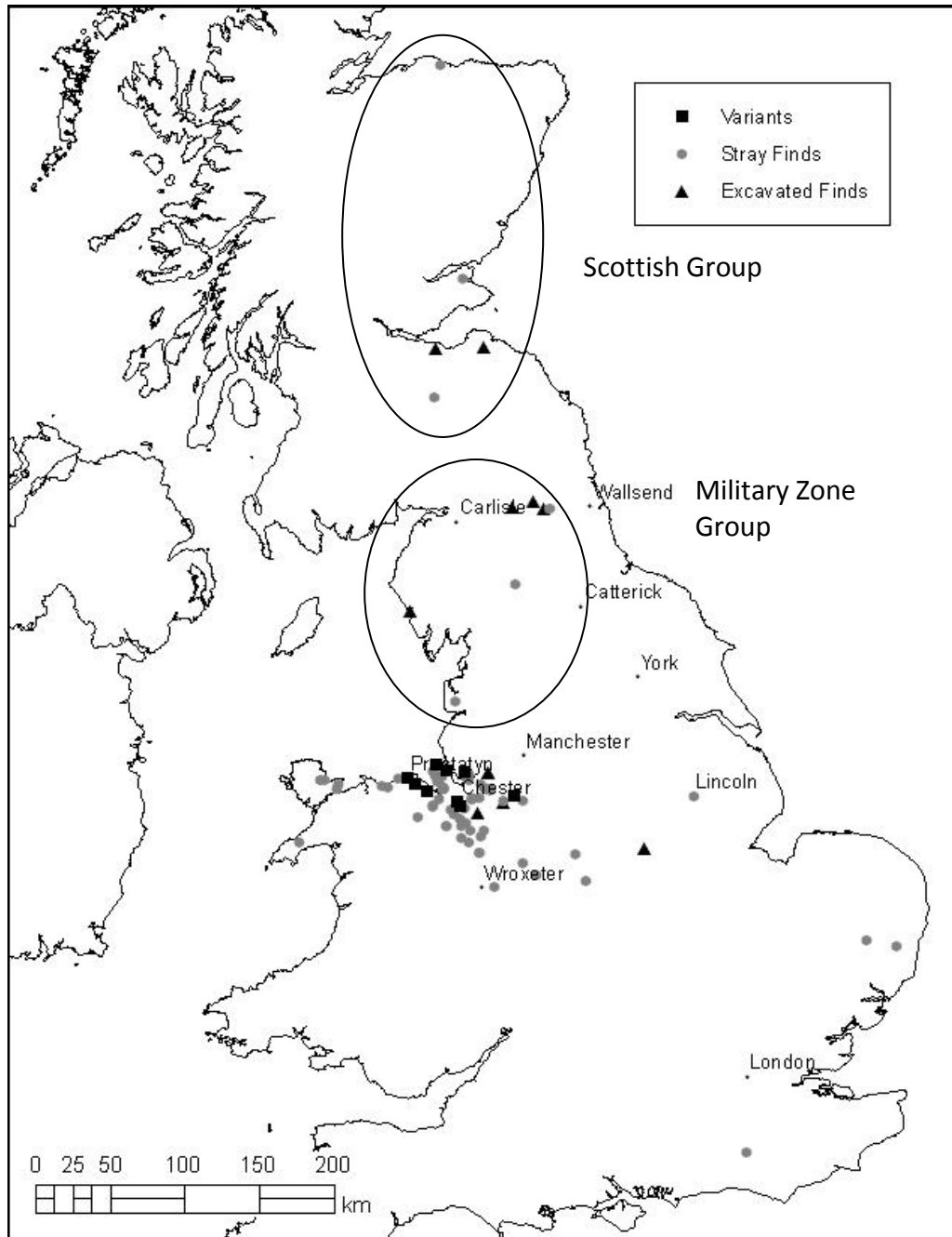
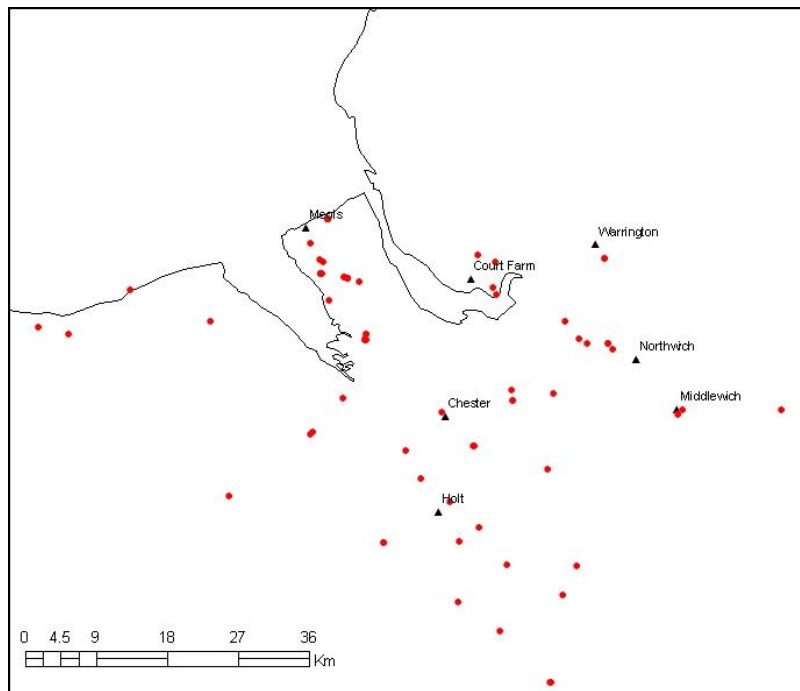


Table 1. Showing the three sub-groups and the brooches in each group.

Scottish group	Military zone group	Outliers
21. Edinburgh Castle	13. Brough-Under-Stainmore	4. Acton Trussel, Staffs
67. Peebles, Borders	14. Chester	5. Ardingley, Sussex
71. Pusk, Fife	15. Chesters	22. Eye, Suffolk
79. Stonewells, Moray	18. Corbridge	24. Fingringho, Essex
89. Traprain Law	17. Corbridge (Thornborough High Barns) <sup>6</sup>	25. Foston, Derbyshire
	72. Ravenglass	39. Kirkham
	74. Ribchester	40. Lincolnshire
	90. Vindolanda	66. Peasenhall, Suffolk
		102. Wroxeter

Map 2. Showing some of the Roman sites against the Wirral brooches.



Despite the low level of what scholars have in the past called ‘Romanisation’<sup>7</sup> in this area, with the arrival of the Romans having little effect on the way of life of many of the local population when it came to settlement, this area was extremely important to the continued Roman occupation of Britain. The Cheshire Plain and North East Wales were rich in natural resources which the Romans were keen to exploit, both for Britain and the wider Empire. As well as raw materials, some of the

<sup>6</sup> This has been included in the military zone group as it is so close to Corbridge and there is a high military presence in the area, however there is a Romano-British (or indigenous) site nearby also so it may be that it is linked to this settlement rather than the fort.

<sup>7</sup> The adoption, by the local population, of Roman ways of life, this change is then reflected in the material culture.

items produced in the North West were marketed directly to the military zone further north.

The salt brines of the Cheshire Plain were used for salt production prior to the Roman invasion but early forts from Droitwich and Northwich suggest that initially the Romans brought this under state control.<sup>8</sup> Evidence from these sites of large lead brine pans also indicates that salt production was carried out at a huge scale, presumably to meet the greater needs of the occupying army. Salt was essential to preserve foods, particularly in the North West provinces where sun drying was less practical than in the Mediterranean. Salt's importance also increased with the growth of towns as their population were dependant on food provided by others, so preservation was even more necessary.

In Wales, lead deposits under Halkyn Mountain were being mined from c.90 AD and the mine is thought to have been controlled by the military. Pentre nearby was processing this metal from at least c.90 AD and is likely to have had links with Meols, the small village acting as a port but also manufacturing items.<sup>9</sup> From Pentre, lead was also shipped out to be processed, lead pigs found in the river bed near Runcorn were probably en route for secondary processing at Wilderspool or Manchester.<sup>10</sup> As well as lead there were copper mines at Parys Mountain, Anglesey and at the Great Orme. This area of Wales was rich in natural resources and it has been postulated that this is one of the reasons the fort at Chester was maintained.<sup>11</sup> The industries here link various towns together and show that there would have been a movement of people between them with the goods.

Wilderspool has already been mentioned as a place which may have been processing the lead from Wales. It was an industrial town with evidence of glass working, metal working and pottery kilns. Perhaps the most important activity, especially in the study of the Wirral brooches, was the production of pottery, in particular *mortaria*. Wilderspool produced a large amount of *mortaria*, two-thirds of which was marketed to the northern forts along Hadrian's and the Antonine Wall. Even those which did not go to the forts on the walls tended to go north from Wilderspool, for example half of the *mortaria* from the fort at Ribchester was from the Wilderspool workshops. There are at least 14 attested potters from Wilderspool, Docius is one of the most prolific with his name being found at various forts, including Chester, Corbridge and Newstead;<sup>12</sup> all three sites which have yielded Wirral brooches, with another coming from the area surrounding Corbridge.

The reason the various industries from the core area of the Wirral brooches are important is that they provide a mechanism by which the military zone sub-group of brooches could reach the military zone. There would have been an almost constant stream of traffic moving from the Wirral area up and down between the military zone, (whether it was Hadrian's or the Antonine Wall), and the rest of the country. This would have consisted of troops, other parts of the military community, and traders. It is the merchants and traders which are relevant to the case study of the Wirral

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, B. and Mattingly, D. (2007) *An Atlas of Roman Britain*, Oxbow Books, Oxford, p.228.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> Mason (2001).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.214.

brooches. Whether they were trading the brooches directly, or just wearing the Wirral brooches and lost them when they were away from home, they are the most likely carriers of the Wirral brooch to the northern military zone.

Cheshire has been described as ‘a “hotspot” in the British frontier zone’ by Carrington with links being seen at various levels: ‘inter- and intra-provincial, regional and local’.<sup>13</sup> The Wirral brooch supports this, demonstrating trade at various levels both within the indigenous community and between them and the occupying Roman army. Although this is a small case-study, looking at one category of one object type, it gives us a window on the way people traded, and moved around, in Roman Britain, both in the North West and further afield.

### Bibliography

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<sup>13</sup> Carrington, P. (2008) ‘Feeding the wolf in Cheshire: models and (a few) facts’, in S. Stallibrass and R. Thomas (eds.) *Feeding the Roman Army; the archaeology of production and supply in North West Europe*, Oxbow, Oxford, p. 26.