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Whose good luck? Roman phallic ornaments from Suffolk

by Judith Plouviez¹

Introduction

One of the rewards of recording thousands of metal detected finds over the past 25 years in Suffolk has been seeing the unusual become less so. Copper-alloy Roman phallic ornaments were recorded from only two sites, Icklingham and Pakenham (Ixworth), prior to 1980. The number of sites has now increased to eleven, still a tiny percentage of the hundreds of locations in the county producing Roman material. This article pulls together the objects, but also tries to examine the contexts from which they derive. The significance of these objects for the Romans has been clearly described by Catherine (Johns 1982, 62) as good luck charms intended to protect the wearer from harm. I hope she will enjoy this small collection of them, hopefully seriously studied in their archaeological context just as she argued that such objects should be.

Sources

The primary sources of information are the Suffolk County Council Sites and Monuments Record, plus for recent finds the detailed descriptions in the Portable Antiquities Scheme database. Time has not allowed an extensive search for parallels for each individual piece. All the copper-alloy objects from Suffolk that were clearly intended to be phallic are included. I have, however, excluded less explicit pieces such as the examples of cosmetic grinders which have suggestively knobbed terminals and at least one pendant of similar type to Oldenstein 1976, 253, Taf. 42, 413.

Catalogue

All the objects are made of copper alloy. The general location of the findspot is given by current civil parish and two-figure national grid reference. The Suffolk SMR refer-

ence (of the form ABC 123) is given in all cases and the Portable Antiquities database reference (format SF XXXX) where applicable.

Fig. 1, 1; Elmsett TM 04 ETT 009

Mount with a single T-section attachment behind the shaft. Fairly well modelled, although there is now some damage at the tip, with an irregular concave back as cast. Length 36 mm.

Found in 1996 on a site identified by a small collection of surface, mainly detected, finds on a spur between two minor valleys. The coins include one Iron Age forged stater, a *denarius* of Mark Anthony and some 2nd- to mid 4th-century (including a *denarius* of Commodus). A small group of brooches and pottery complete the recorded assemblage.

Fig. 1, 2; Wickham Skeith TM 06 WKS 006

Mount, flat backed with two integral T-shaped bars for attachment. Iron corrosion obscures much of the front, perhaps from a secondary attachment pin? The tip is flattened to form a circular cell containing red enamel. The shaft has eight(?) transverse narrow ribs. At the base small testicles flank an area with traces of punched arc decoration. Length 31 mm.

Found in 1999 (Martin *et al.* 2000, 501, fig. 153 H) in a fairly small collection of Roman surface finds (there is also early Anglo-Saxon and later material) on the south side of a minor river. Other Roman material comprises late 3rd- to mid 4th-century coins, a pelta-shaped mount, a late Roman finger ring and a bracelet fragment.

Fig. 1, 3; Withersfield TL 64 WTH 004

Mount, similar to the Wickham Skeith example above with two integral T-shaped bars, one of which is damaged. No enamel survives in the cell at the tip, there are thir-

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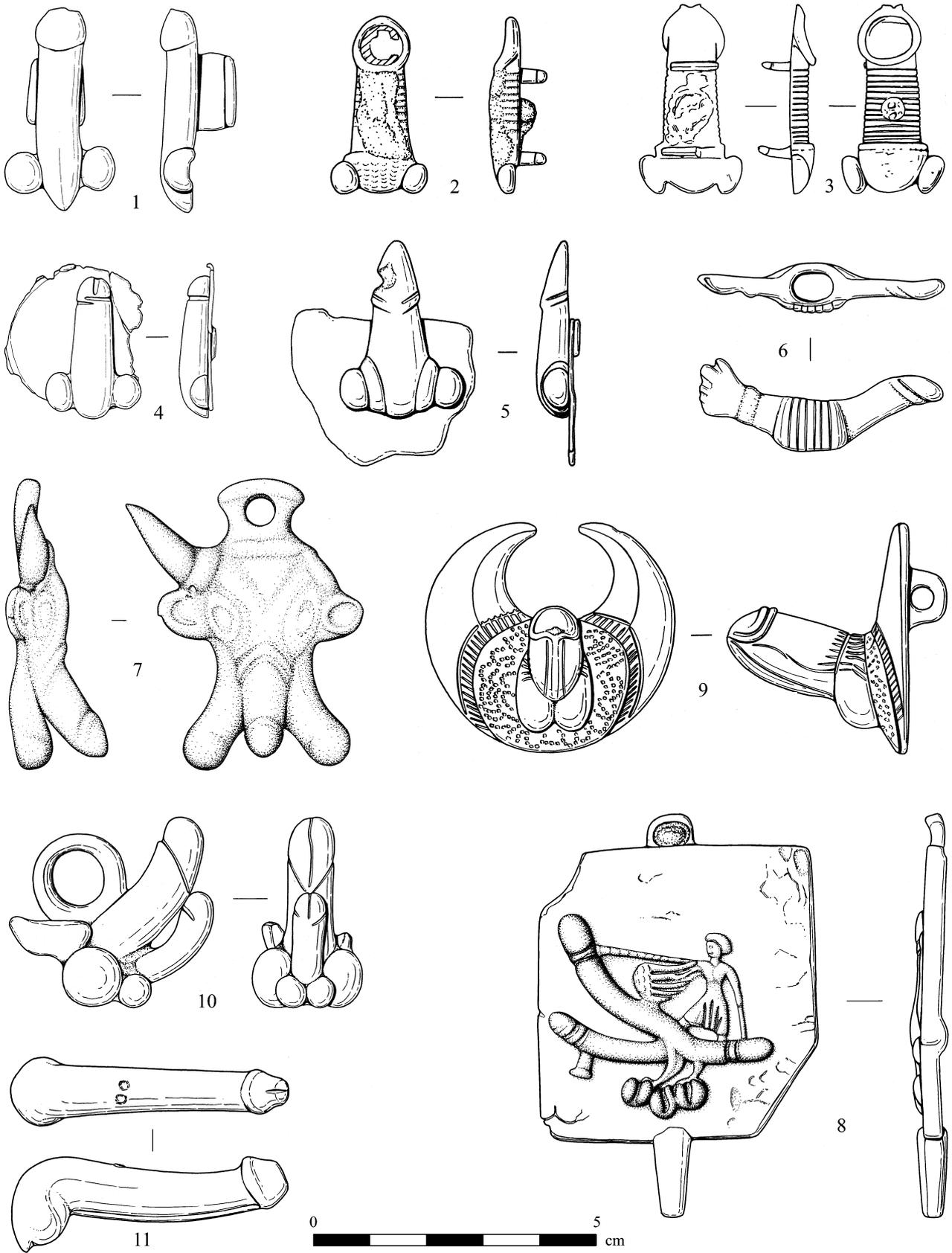


Fig. 1 — Phallic ornaments from Suffolk, numbered as in the catalogue. Scale 1:1. Drawing © Suffolk County Council.

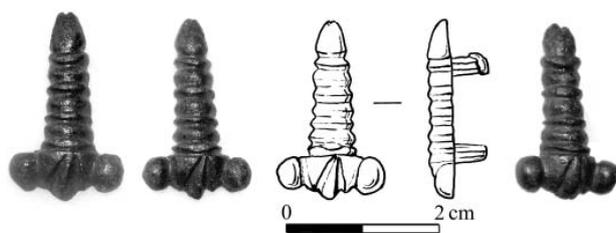


Fig. 2 — Three mounts from Pakenham. Scale 1:1. Images © Suffolk County Council.

teen(?) transverse ribs on the shaft which has a small central feature (whether this is again an iron rivet is not recorded). No decoration survived at the base. Length 34 mm.

Found in 1986, part of a fairly substantial collection from a south facing spur; there is a cremation cemetery recorded in the valley about 300 m to the south. The large coin group (345 recorded) show a fairly normal Roman loss pattern (compared to Reece 1991 and county norms defined in Plouviez 1995) but with unusually high levels in the later 3rd century. Other items include 1st- to 2nd-century brooches, finger-rings, nail-cleaner, needle and pottery, but only a small amount of tile.

Fig. 1, 4; Coddendam TM 14 CDD 017

Flat-backed phallus attached by a single rivet to a probable disc with a scribed line around the surviving margin. Phallus length 25 mm, original diameter of the complete object about 28 mm. Perhaps a pendant, the suspension loop having been lost from the damaged top edge of the disc, or a seal box lid comparable to one from South Shields (Allason-Jones 1983, 125, fig. 72, 89).

Found in 1991 on the east side of the small town at Baylham Mill, Coddendam, which is identified as *Combretovium* in the Antonine itinerary. This site has a late Iron Age background, two 1st-century forts, and continued as a substantial centre into the 4th century. The area of detected finds lies about 350 m north of the forts and about 300 m east of a crossroads. Other finds in the detected area include coins, personal ornaments, toilet implements and a seal box.

Fig. 1, 5; Freckenham TL 67 FRK 038 (SF5735)

Mount attached to a sheet fragment by a single integral rivet. The phallus is pointed, with an area of damage on the side, and the tip is defined by a slight ridge. The shaft broadens to the base, where the junction with the testicles is defined by a curved ridge. Phallus length 32 mm. It is impossible to tell whether the sheet backing was part of a pendant or a larger object and, though similar to the Coddendam example, this one seems too large to be a seal box lid.

Found in 2001 (Martin *et al.* 2002, 209, fig. 47G) within a substantial, multi-period site. Roman finds are mainly from a hillock on the north side of a river valley. Few coins are recorded, including at least one late 2nd-century *denarius*. There are numerous 1st- and 2nd-century brooches, a finger ring, bracelet, hairpins, late belt-fittings and a steelyard; pottery is predominantly 3rd and 4th century.

Fig. 1, 6; Ufford TM25 UFF 011 (SF1327)

Fist-and-phallus pendant, badly corroded especially at the fist end. Flat backed but thickens where the two elements join with a central oval hole of maximum 7 mm diameter. The glans is defined by a slight rib and groove; the front of the central area has vertical grooves. Length 43 mm, height at centre 10 mm. The simple fist-phallus pendant is more commonly made in bone (Crummy 1983, 139, fig. 164, 4258-4259). A similarly flat-backed copper-alloy example from Corbridge (Bishop & Dore 1988, 181, fig. 85, 170) does not have the central hole and has the fist and phallus the other way round.

Found in 2000 (Martin *et al.* 2001, 70, fig. 16 I) in a thoroughly-explored surface collection on the east edge of a small valley. Iron Age coins are followed by the full range of the Roman period including one *denarius* fragment, though with a bias to the 4th century. Late Iron Age and Roman brooches include one enamelled horse as Hull type 205 and one chicken as Hull type 214 (as Bayley & Butcher 2004, 175, fig. 150). There are also two late Roman buckles and a bracelet fragment. Although pottery was collected no tile is recorded. Undated evidence of bronze- and perhaps silver-working was also noted.

Fig. 1, 7-8; Icklingham TL 77 IKL Misc.

7) Moyses Hall Museum 1981-68 (OS).

Bull's head phallic pendant. Missing one horn and very over-cleaned; much of the detail is lost. A projection on the top of the head has a 5 mm diameter hole, perhaps slightly worn around the top. The surviving horn and the projecting ears seem realistically modelled and there are traces of lentoid-outline eyes. A phallus projects centrally from the nose, with traces of a well-modelled glans and shaft junction. Less clear is whether the rounded projections to the side are intended to be the bull's nostrils or dangling testicles. The back is slightly concave as cast. Height 50.5 mm, width at ears 36 mm, weight 38.53 gm. A tiny amulet from Colchester has a similar arrangement of phallus and bull's horns (Crummy 1983, 51, fig. 54, 1804).

8) Moyses Hall Museum 1981-69 (OS).

Rectangular plaque, missing two corners and very heavily cleaned. A small lug at the top is flush with the back and slightly behind the front face; it is not pierced although the irregular centre may suggest that it was intended to be. At the bottom edge a faceted shaft is

slightly thicker than the plaque and tapers to a very blunt point. The design, in low relief, shows a figure in a tunic, and perhaps a hat or helmet, riding on a triple phallus, two facing forward and one back from a centre point below the figure. The figure's left arm is holding a rope or bar attached to the backward facing phallus and his right arm similarly joins the larger upper phallus. This larger phallus has a wing and has one leg (and probably a second, although this meets the backward-facing phallus) which might be horse or bird; the feet, of which there are two or three, are large with a cleft on the upper side. The lower of the front-facing phalli has a small T-shaped projection below the shaft. Plaque 51 mm by 49 mm and 3.5 mm thick (a maximum 5.5 mm with the relief), total height including lug and shaft 71.5 mm. Weight 73.51 gm. The back is flat but slightly irregular. Presumably designed to be held on something by the lower shaft.

Both the Moyses Hall objects are old finds, probably 19th century², but catalogue records in the museum are incomplete and no location is given other than the parish. However the main Roman site in Icklingham is the small town complex which includes at least one temple (various votive objects include the notorious Icklingham bronzes, looted from the site in 1981), pottery kilns, a bath house (Prigg 1878), and several cemeteries including a Christian one associated with a possible church and baptistery (West with Plouviez 1976).

Fig. 1, 9; Little Waldingfield TL94 WFL 015

Crescent-shaped mount or pendant with a phallus projecting from the centre. At the back of each crescent arm is a pierced lug. The piece is a solid casting with a flattish back. The phallus is well-modelled with a slight rib defining the glans; there are incised lines at the base and on the top of the testicles which hang down. Behind is an area stippled with punched dots, perhaps representing pubic hair. The edge of this area is defined by incised lines giving a hatched band at the base of the crescent arms, which strengthens the impression that these are bull horns. The horns have a flat triangular section and are undecorated. The pendant is 45 mm wide and the length of the projecting phallus is 27 mm.

Found in 1998 (Martin *et al.* 1999, 357, fig. 94 I) within a substantial surface collection of Iron Age and Roman material on fairly high ground overlooking the valley of the River Box to the west. Late Iron Age finds include coins, terret and a mount; brooch types span the late Iron Age and Roman period well into the 2nd century and include a continental type (Riha 1979, Typ 7.1.1) mainly found in North France and the Rhineland and

uncommon in Britain. Coins include a couple of Republican denarii and an early 3rd-century *denarius*; the recorded group is small and spans the entire Roman period. There are also various box and casket fittings including a lion-head stud, plus a finger-ring, a terret, lead steelyard weights, bottle glass and a range of pottery but little evidence of tile.

Fig. 2; Pakenham (Ixworth³) TL97 PKM 002

Ipswich Museum 1946-134

A set of three almost identical mounts. The backs are flat, mainly as cast but slightly flattened by filing; each has two integral rivets between 4.5 and 6 mm long, some with a flattened end. There is a notch at the tip of the otherwise plain glans area. The rest of the shaft has a series of rib and bead transverse mouldings. At the base are two angled deep notches and plain testicles on each side. Lengths are 24 and 25 mm, widths 14 mm, thickness excluding rivets 3.5 mm. Similar to one from South Shields (Allason-Jones & Miket 1984, 188, n^o3.588).

The second of the pre-metal detecting finds, these were discovered in a 5 foot (1.5 m) deep pit excavated by Basil Brown⁴ and a T. Prentice in 1937. The material from the pit also included a largely complete grey ware face pot (Fig. 3), which raises questions about the nature of the

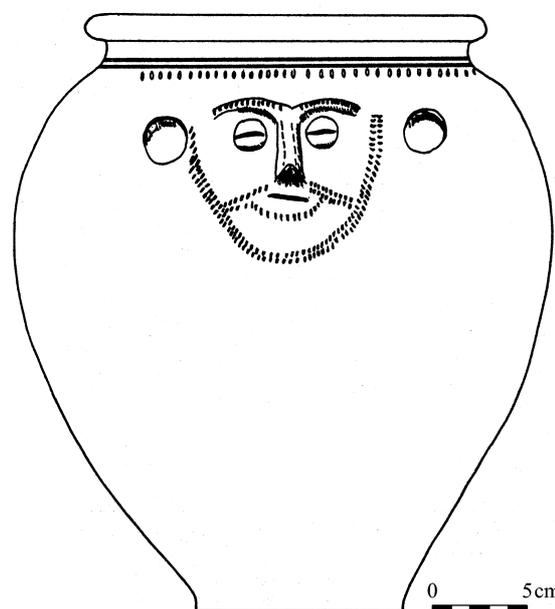


Fig. 3 — Face pot from Pakenham. Scale 1:4. Drawing © G. Braithwaite.

² And possibly originally in the collection of Edward Acton, 1818 – 1861.

³ The findspot is in Pakenham parish, but it is referred to as Ixworth in Ipswich Museum and Basil Brown's records because it lies at the southern end of Ixworth village.

⁴ Basil Brown is famous for his discovery of the Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon boat burial, but was a keen explorer of Suffolk's archaeology throughout the middle years of the 20th century.

deposit, discussed further below. The findspot is within a small town and about 85 m north of a 1st-century (almost certainly post-Boudicca) fort; other evidence from the settlement is also discussed below.

Fig. 1, 10; Somersham TM04 SSH 003

A pendant consisting of two phalluses; the larger upper one has a small pair of wings above the testicles. On both the glans is defined by an incised line. The large suspension loop, on top of the larger phallus, is worn at the top. Length 38 mm.

Found in 1994 (Martin *et al.* 1995, 337, fig. 76 C) in a substantial group of surface finds on high ground at the head of a minor valley. Late Iron Age finds include a stater and a terret fragment; the Roman coinage spans the period, including a *denarius* of Domitian (AD 81-96) and a very small group of early 5th-century Honorian *siliquae*. The 1st- and 2nd-century group of brooches includes an enamelled horse-and-rider type (as Hattatt 1989, 359, fig. 218, 160) and a lion (as Hattatt 1989, 363, fig. 222, 1193). Other items include finger-rings, a late strap-end, a button-and-loop fastener, a vulvate mount (as Oldenstein 1976, Taf. 34, 269-270), a cosmetic mortar (with a knobbed, rather phallic terminal), a box hasp, a vessel foot, a flagon lid, a key handle and a steelyard. Although pottery was collected only one tile fragment is recorded.

Fig. 1, 11; Walpole TM37 WLP Misc

Well-modelled solid casting, probably a pendant but the only possible trace of an attachment is two scars on the top which might merely be corrosion. Length 50 mm.

Found in 1997, with no other Roman material recorded from the location, nor any in the near vicinity.

Discussion

The majority of the objects are pendants, the rest decorative mounts, probably fitted onto leather straps, plus one probable seal box and another uncertain metal item. Most are single phalluses with little elaboration; the matching set of three strap-mounts from Pakenham have moulded ribs across the shaft while the two very similar single mounts from Wickham Skeith and Withersfield have narrow cross ribs and an enamelled tip – appropriately red in at least one case. Of the more complicated pendants the Ufford fist-and-phallus type is commonly made of bone; Stephen Greep in the report on the Colchester finds summarised the evidence for these being 1st-century and usually found on military sites in Britain and the Rhineland (1983, 139-140). The Somersham piece increases its efficacy by both doubling the phalluses and adding wings to one, again a common Roman type (e.g. Johns 1982, 69). The association with the bull on the Icklingham pendant emphasises the fertility aspect, perhaps more elegantly expressed by the Little Waldingfield horned piece. The most complex item

remains the Icklingham plaque: what it was attached to is unclear and full interpretation of the design is difficult; an earlier description of it as ‘two-winged phalli pulling quadriga’ (Green 1976, 213) could be right (but surely a biga rather than quadriga) but the wings and legs of the main element are more bird-like, similar to one on a pottery barbotine beaker from Stonea (Johns 1996, 482-3, fig. 175.11) or other bronzes (Johns 1982, 70, fig. 53).

Although all the Suffolk pieces are unexceptional in a Roman context they are very definitely Roman rather than indigenous in character. There is a general scarcity of representational art in the Iron Age of north-west Europe, and the use of the phallus as a charm would surely have seemed very strange in 1st-century Britain. Like religious representational figures and objects associated with writing they can be seen as small indicators of the extent of cultural change in rural areas under Roman rule.

Before turning to the more general findspots there is one site, Pakenham, where the circumstances of discovery are informative and where more recent work casts additional light. Although the record of the 1937 discovery is far from comprehensive by modern standards the three phallic belt-mounts (Fig. 2) were deposited together, presumably on their original strap, in the same pit as a grey ware face pot (Fig. 3). Face pots have been shown to have some ritual significance, and are a phenomenon most often associated with the army in northern Europe (Braithwaite 1984, 100) although manufactured and used quite widely in eastern England throughout the Roman period. The remainder of the surviving finds from the pit have been rapidly re-examined: sixteen pieces of samian range in date from Flavian to Antonine, two large sherds of a white ware ring-necked flagon, a single body sherd of a late mortarium and a small group (seven pieces) of grey ware. The bias to fine wares is probably a product of selection by the finder (it is rare to find so little grey ware anywhere on this site), and the Antonine or later sherds are quite likely either from slump layers in the top of the pit or miscellaneous pieces collected in the vicinity. On balance the assemblage looks later 1st or early 2nd century; a majority of the samian sherds are from South Gaul with, unusually, several decorated sherds from Banassac (including one listed in a notebook by Basil Brown as from the pit). Without better records of the pit and its surroundings we can only speculate that the items are not an entirely typical group of “rubbish” but some kind of special deposit.

Furthermore, finds from the area of the excavations in the mid 1980s some 200 m to the south include a very fine figurine of a youthful Priapus (Fig. 4), fully described and discussed (Johns & Henig 1991) soon after its discovery in topsoil removed from the excavated area. From the excavation there was no certain structural evidence of a shrine or temple but finds included a copper-alloy letter P. The colour-coated sherds with barbotine phallic elements shown in Fig. 5 were amongst the products of pottery kilns in the excavated area.

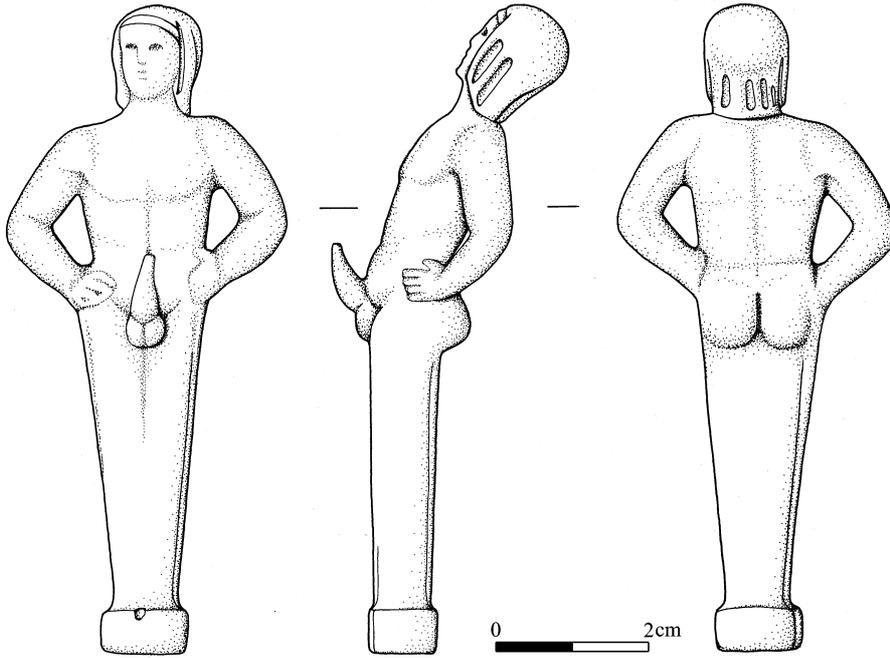


Fig. 4 — Priapus herm from Pakenham. Scale 1:1. Drawing © Suffolk County Council.

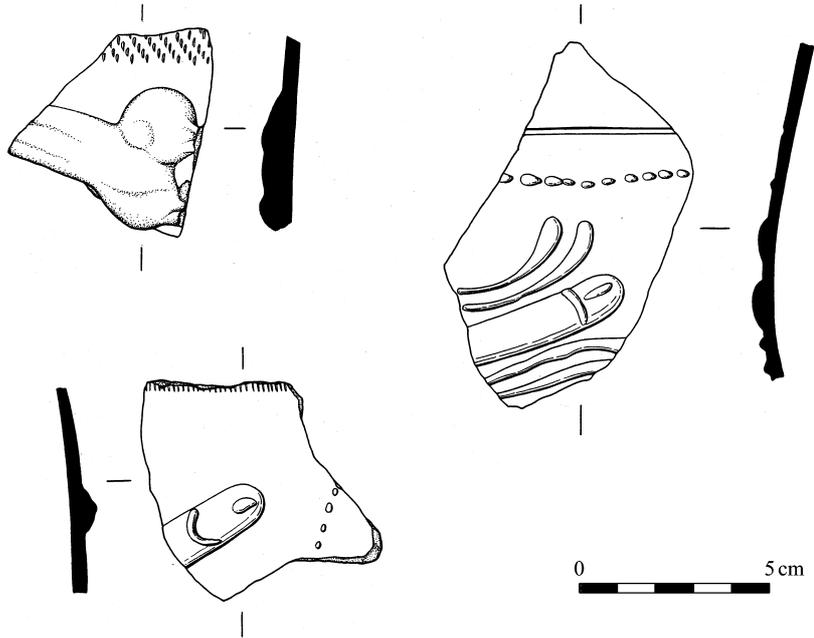


Fig. 5 — Barbotine decorated Pakenham colour-coated ware. Scale 1:2. Drawing © Suffolk County Council.

Three of the sites producing phallic items, including Pakenham, can be classified as Roman small towns. Both Coddensham and Pakenham have strong evidence for 1st-century forts; Icklingham on the other hand has little evidence of early activity. All three continued as substantial industrial and commercial centres, quite possibly with a minor administrative function, until the end of the Roman period (Plouviez 1995). These were the places in Suffolk where new products and ideas were arriving and being re-distributed.

The other eight occurrences are in much more rural

locations. The Walpole amulet appears to be an isolated find, fairly remote from any known Roman sites but in an under-explored area. All the others are associated with sufficient contemporary material to suggest sites. They are distributed fairly broadly across the county, in both Icenian and Trinovantian tribal areas; five have produced Iron Age coins, and four of these also produced 1st-century Roman coins. In rapidly scanning the evidence from each site I was looking to see if there were other indications of the more Roman, and perhaps greater affluence or perhaps ritual evidence, associated with the

phallic pieces. There is no indication that any of the seven sites have enough building debris to suggest a villa-type building – although the lack of evidence is not conclusive in some cases, because the finders were concerned mainly to recover metal objects, several were thoroughly explored and a range of finds recovered. A high proportion include at least one silver *denarius* in the coin assemblage⁵. At Little Waldingfield and Withersfield the lion-head studs suggest there may have been cremation burials; other box fittings and vessel fragments at Somersham might also derive from cremations. Withersfield also had a religious aspect with statue fragments as well as animal brooches; similar brooches were found at Somersham and Little Waldingfield. There seems to be a complete lack of evidence for literacy on these sites. A recent analysis of the findspots of seal boxes from Suffolk⁶ identified fourteen similarly rural sites (excluding the small towns and temples) but at least five of them have produced building material. Several of the phallic object sites (Freckenham, Somersham) have produced pieces of copper-alloy steelyard arms, and the more commonly found lead steelyard weights turn up elsewhere (Little Waldingfield, Withersfield).

Conclusion

Attempting to characterise rural settlements by the components of their assemblages, rather than by excavated evidence and settlement morphology, is not common. The huge number of variables in the groups combined with the uncertainties in the collection methods make it risky to draw any kind of conclusions, but tempting for kite-flying. The low number of phallic items from rural Suffolk does not seem surprising given their unfamiliarity to the local people and their lack of practical usefulness. More interesting is that the rural sites do not seem to be those where wealthy landowners are investing in Roman-style substantial buildings, but do mostly seem to be at or above the average in terms of portable wealth (i.e. coins and personal ornament assemblages).

One possibility is that this reflects an association with soldiers, either serving or retired. In general the parallels for the objects within Britain derive from the northern forts or from urban contexts. A rapid survey of the occurrence of Roman phallic objects recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database shows a bias to the Midlands and North rather than the South and East Anglia (about 18:7, excluding Suffolk), the reverse of the proportions for many Roman artefacts. The potentially aggressive aspect of these charms makes the military a likely market for them.

Gillian Braithwaite has suggested⁷ that the distribution of the face pots, which are relatively common in East Anglia, may reflect areas where soldiers were granted land on retirement. There is certainly the possibility that as a result of the revolt of 60-61 there was more land available for redistribution in East Anglia than elsewhere. The association of the face pot with the phallic strap-mounts at Pakenham is interesting, particularly in a large settlement that had originated as a fort and where a high proportion of the identified ritual items currently seem to have priapic associations. By contrast the large, mainly metal-detected collection from the similar small town at Hacheston did not include any phallic pieces – and this settlement does not have any evidence for 1st century military activity, although it does produce a few 2nd- or 3rd-century items. In the Suffolk countryside presumably any farms allocated to the ordinary retiring auxiliary or legionary soldier were not particularly large or valuable. Such settlements might well leave us with the evidence of modest wealth, combined with some hints of experience of the Roman lifestyle, found on the sites where phallic ornaments have been recorded.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Jill Braithwaite for the drawing of the face pot in Fig. 3. All the items in Fig. 1 except n° 3 were drawn by Donna Wreathall for Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, as were Figs. 4 and 5. Thanks also to Bob Entwistle, Ipswich Borough Museum, for access to the Pakenham finds and to Chris Mycock, Moyses Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds, for loaning the Icklingham pieces for illustration.

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⁵ Unfortunately figures for the relative proportion of silver to copper-alloy coins in the average rural assemblage in Suffolk are not available; my subjective impression is that the numbers on these sites is above average.

⁶ For a talk at a Roman Finds Group meeting in 2001; a brief summary is published in *Lucerna, Roman Finds Group Newsletter* 22 (July 2001), 20.

⁷ At the annual conference of the Study Group for Roman Pottery in 2000, to be published in a forthcoming volume of the *Journal of Roman Pottery Studies*.

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