

# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF VESPASIAN: RETHINKING THE ROMAN LEGIONARY FORTRESS AT LAKE FARM, WIMBORNE MINSTER

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*A recent geophysical survey of the Roman fortress at Lake Farm, near Wimborne Minster, first discovered in 1959, has clarified the nature and extent of the site, a major base of the Legio II Augusta during the conquest of the Durotriges and other tribes of South-West Britain in the mid-40s AD. A reconsideration of the social context and landscape setting of the legionary fortress is presented here and the suggestion is made that it was quite probably the site of Isca, as noted by the Roman geographer Ptolemy.*

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## INTRODUCTION

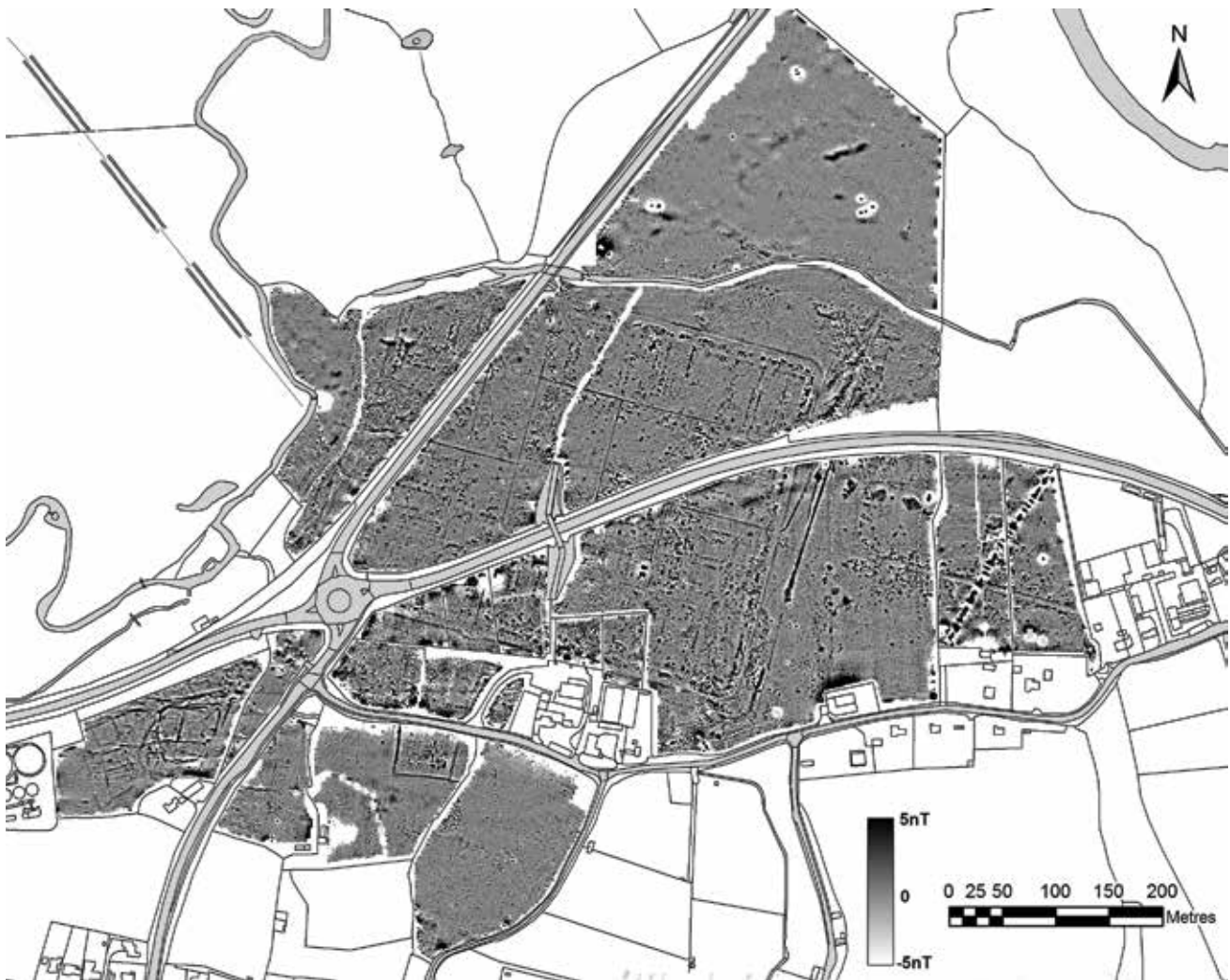
The Roman fort at Lake Farm, to the immediate south-east of Wimborne Minster, was first recognised by Norman Field in 1959 (Field and Butler 1965; 1966). Subsequent excavations conducted, first by Field, from 1959 to 71 (Field 1967; 1968a; 1969; 1970; 1971; 1992, 34–8) and later by Graham Webster, from 1972–3 (Webster 1972; 1974), together with a series of early resistivity and magnetometry surveys, conducted by Andrew David, Alastair Bartlett and Tony Clark of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory (David 1977; David and Thomas 1980; David, Clark and Bolton 1982; David and Bolton 1983), defined the establishment as legionary fortress covering an area of at least 16 hectares with a possible area of civilian settlement (*vicus*), at its north-eastern corner (Field 1992, 38–9). More extensive excavations were undertaken in 1979–81, under the direction of Ian Horsey and Keith Jarvis of Poole Museums Archaeological Unit, during the construction of the Wimborne bypass (Horsey 1980; Horsey and Jarvis 1979; 1981). Further archaeological monitoring was conducted around the fringes of the site in 1989,

2002 and 2009 (Watkins 1989; Adam and Valentin 2002; Milward 2009).

Unlike other legionary centres identified from Southern Britain, Lake Farm did not develop into either a more permanent base or a town, ensuring that the ground plan of this early fortress has remained relatively intact and largely undisturbed. The importance of the fortress lies in the observation that it was almost certainly the headquarters of the II Augusta legion during its conquest of Dorset and the South-West, in the mid-40s AD, when it was under the command of general, and later emperor, Titus Flavius Vespasianus (Branigan 1973, 54; Field 1992, 32).

## THE SURVEY

The legionary fortress of Lake Farm is today a Scheduled Ancient Monument, the area of protection straddling either side of the administrative boundary between Dorset and the newly formed unitary local government district of Bournemouth, Christchurch



**Figure 1** Lake Farm – the geophysical survey plot of the legionary fortress partially overlain by the modern A31 Wimborne bypass and B3078 Wimborne Road (Dave Stewart and Paul Cheetham, Bournemouth University).

and Poole (BCP). It lies on the relatively level, low-lying floodplain of the river Stour at a height of 24m above Ordnance Datum. The underlying geology consists of tertiary sands and gravels of the Poole Formation, part of the Hampshire basin complex. Two channels of the river Stour run to the north and west of the fort while a tributary stream runs 100m to the south. The fort itself is today divided into three unequally sized pieces of land by the B3078 Wimborne Road and the A31 Wimborne bypass.

In 2016, Bournemouth University conducted a full geophysical survey of the Lake Farm legionary fortress in the hope of better defining areas of Roman archaeology. The results of this survey are published elsewhere (Stewart, Cheetham and Russell 2020), but it is worth noting a few of the key

observations here for the discussion that follows. The major feature identified during the survey was the external ditch of the fortress, which defines a rectangular enclosure with rounded corners, measuring 400m east – west and 320m north – south (Fig. 1). The internal layout, as defined in the survey, indicates that the main gate of the fortress, the *porta praetoria*, was orientated to face west-north-west. Further gates appear in the rampart circuit on the west, south and east.

The interior layout of the legionary fortress is marked by linear features, which are apparently drains, running in the centre of internal roadways forming a connected grid, splitting the fort into a number of well-defined insulae or islands. Narrow buildings, representing barrack blocks grouped



**Figure 2** Lake Farm – aerial reconstruction looking south, showing the possible appearance of the legionary fortress based on the geophysical survey results. To the left is the eastern supply road passing between workshops and entering the fortress's rear gateway (*porta decumana*), whilst on the right is the road from the main gateway (*porta pretoria*) heading towards Badbury Rings (David John, Bournemouth University).

in sixes, are in evidence around each side of the fortress, as well as a line of four rectangular areas that would conventionally represent the individual houses of military tribunes (Fig. 2).

A second ditch was observed, running outside, and roughly parallel to, the main fortress ditch on its southernmost side whilst another can be seen connecting to the curve of the southern side, gradually diverging from the eastern edge of the fortress line as it progresses north. Further aligned anomalies in the field north of the fortress provide an overall minimum length for this linear feature of between 500 and 550m, extending at least 150m to the north of the legionary fortress. This ditch appears to represent the remains of an earlier phase of military construction, probably a marching camp.

To the east of the fort, two roughly parallel linear anomalies may be interpreted as the ditches flanking a 5m wide roadway. Numerous strong anomalies, representing pits or hearths can be seen in this area, apparently respecting the road, which may indicate workshops or part of a civilian *vicus* settlement. The road, which continues east beyond the area of the 2016 survey, may have been the original supply route for the fortress the line of which, although obscured by modern farm buildings, appears to have been to a possible landing place on the Stour, near

to the medieval fording point where Canford Bridge now stands.

A legionary fortress would certainly have had an external bathhouse and a possible candidate for this was found in fields below the southern gate where a ditched annexe, filled with highly magnetic material, was identified. However, limited evaluation excavation demonstrated this to result from iron-smithing activities and so the exact location of a bathing establishment remains to be identified (Cheetham *et al.* forthcoming).

## DATING AND CONTEXT

The 2016 geophysical survey strongly indicates that there were at least two discrete periods of military occupation at Lake Farm (something first suggested by Field: 1992, 40–1), namely a large marching camp, superseded by a campaign fortress of sufficient size to accommodate a whole legion (totalling around 5280 men). The precise nature of dating sequences for both these establishments depends upon the results of a detailed post excavation analysis of artefacts deriving from over half a century's worth of intermittent archaeological examination. This work is currently ongoing, but a few tentative observations concerning dates and chronology are worth noting here.

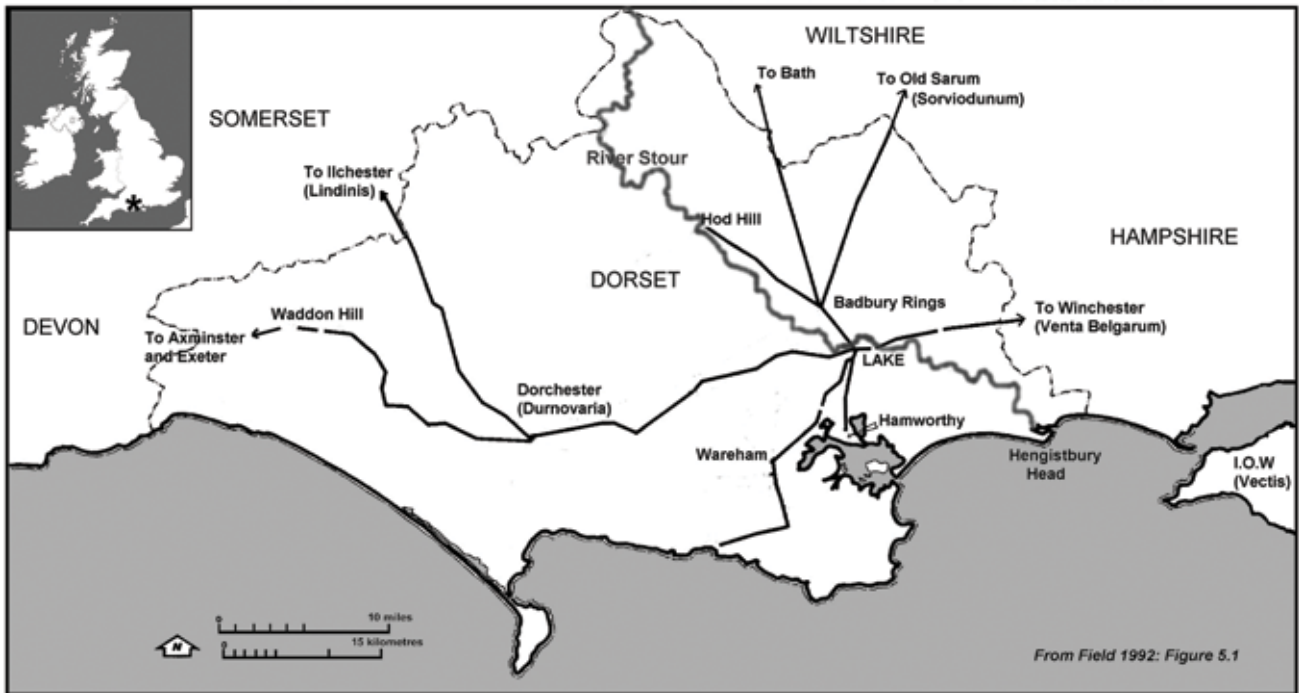


Figure 3 Lake Farm – the location of the fortress in relation to other key Roman sites mentioned in the text.

The presence of a marching camp, tied with what little datable finds were recovered from examination of the ditch sequences (Field 1992, 32–44) suggests that the Legio II Augusta arrived in eastern Dorset sometime in late AD 43 or early 44, a date which also appears to apply to the establishment of a fort inside the ramparts of the Dorset Iron Age hillfort at Hod Hill (Richmond 1968, 119; Manning 2002, 28). The Legion was, up until perhaps as late as AD 47, under the command of Titus Flavius Vespasianus whom, we must assume, had been given orders from the emperor Claudius, via campaign commander Aulus Plautius, to fully “subjugate the remaining districts” of Britain (Dio Cassius LX, 21). The precise operational objectives of this campaign are unclear, although presumably Vespasian was tasked with pacifying the western native tribal groups, in particular the Atrebates, Regini / Regnenses, Belgae, Durotriges and Dobunni.

Part of the problem in attempting to interpret Rome’s military strategy in Dorset (Fig. 3) is the much-stated belief that the II legion fought a protracted campaign, attacking all the hillforts in the region, one after another (Frere 1974, 89–90; Branigan 1973, 52–4; Bugler and Drew 1973, 58; Harding 1974, 124–5; Alcock 1975, 170; Cunliffe 1978, 279–80, 339 Branigan

1980, 32; Webster 1980, 108–10; Salway 1981, 92–3; Peddie 1987, 146; Field 1992, 26–9; Manning 2002, 32; Mattingly 2006, 98–9; Sparey-Green 2015, 119). In fact, it has often been claimed that the native Durotriges, in particular, having “put up so stout a resistance” to the Roman army, had their territory extensively garrisoned (Frere 1974, 90).

The picture, of continuous conflict, is influenced by a short section in Suetonius’ *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, in which the general Vespasian is noted as having “fought the enemy on thirty occasions” reducing to submission “two powerful tribes, more than twenty towns, and the island of Vectis” (Suetonius *Vespasian* 4). This decidedly vague account concerning the activities of the II Augusta was first provided with a geographical anchor by the archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler who observed that, of the two anonymous tribes mentioned by Suetonius, “it is a good guess to affirm that one was the Durotriges” adding it was “an unthinkable insult to our most famous earthwork to exclude Maiden Castle” from the list of Vespasian’s conquered twenty towns (Wheeler 1956, 104). Excavations conducted by Wheeler inside the area of the east gate of Maiden Castle hillfort in 1937 revealed an Iron Age cemetery, providing him with dramatic confirmation of a battle (Wheeler 1943,



61–2). Later fieldwork conducted by Ian Richmond at Hod Hill between 1951 and 58, added more apparent evidence for Roman action, in this case a short siege terminated with judicious use of artillery (*ballistae*: Richmond 1968, 33).

More recently, a renewed period of archaeological fieldwork across the hillforts of Dorset, coupled with a reanalysis of the primary excavation dataset, has indicated that the evidence for hillfort warfare, so persuasively argued by Wheeler and Richmond, may actually be nothing of the sort (Sharples 1991a 91–101; 1991b, 118–25; Stewart and Russell 2017, 158–62; Russell 2019). None of the individuals found by Wheeler within the East Gate cemetery of Maiden Castle can be shown to have died in defence of the hillfort, only that they were laid to rest from the mid first century BC (to the late first century AD) within a well-established burial ground set within a long-abandoned hilltop enclosure. Likewise, the ‘artillery barrage’ recorded from Hod Hill may more simply indicate the residue of practice fire within a defunct hillfort rather than representing the residue of a siege (Sharples 1991b, 125; Maxfield 1989, 25; Stewart and Russell 2017, 158–62, 166–69).

To date, there is unfortunately no evidence that any of the hillforts of Dorset were militarily active during the first century AD. Within the Durotrigian zone, settlement apparently comprised relatively dispersed communities living in individual, lightly enclosed farmsteads of a kind excavated at Woodcutts (Pitt Rivers 1887), Rotherley (Pitt Rivers 1888), Tollard Royal (Wainwright 1968), Gussage All Saints (Wainwright 1979), Tolpuddle Ball (Hearne and Birbeck 1999) and Winterborne Kingston (Russell *et al.* 2017). The arrival of the Roman army into this landscape undoubtedly disrupted the social order, and there may well have been a prolonged period of armed resistance, but it was probably nothing like the campaign of hillfort-related conflict that has usually been suggested today. Additionally, if the relatively small size of the Lake Farm fortress is considered an indicator of the potentially transient nature of legionary forces in Dorset, this could in turn argue against any sustained degree of native resistance.

Since the completion of archaeological work at Maiden Castle (Wheeler 1943) and Hod Hill (Richmond

1968), the view has been that the II Augusta operated from a base at Chichester in West Sussex, before moving, at some point in the mid-40s AD, to Lake Farm (Branigan 1973, 52, 55 ; Frere 1974, 90). Sauer has, however, recently argued that Alchester, in Oxfordshire, was the primary base of the II Augusta under Vespaian’s command, between AD 43 and c. AD 47, and that Lake Farm was occupied only after AD 50, following the pacification of the Durotriges but prior to the legion’s transfer to Exeter in the mid to late 50s (Sauer 2005, 122–3). Timbers in the gateway to the annexe of the fortress at Alchester have been dendro-dated to having been felled at some point between October AD 44 and March AD 45. Given that the fortress here presumably predated the timber annexe, and assuming the timbers in question had not been reused, Sauer has argued that Alchester must have been constructed at the end of a campaign season, arguably in the autumn of AD 43 (Sauer 2005, 118). If Alchester was the main base of the II Augusta, as Sauer has suggested, then it may conceivably mark the first stage in its western campaign, being established close to the tribal border of the Catuvellauni and Dobunni.

A key element in the argument that Alchester was originally the campaign headquarters of the II Augusta was the discovery of a military tombstone, set up to one Lucius Valerius Geminus. Geminus was a veteran of the Legio II Augusta, originally from North-West Italy, who retired from active service at some point in the late AD 40s or early 50s and died close to his 50th year (Sauer 2005, 108–10). The importance of the stone found re-used in the foundations of the town wall of Alchester (Sauer 2005, 105), apart from being one of the earliest named Roman burials in Britain, is that it potentially provides unit affiliation for the fortress. Sauer has observed that “all tombstones of legionary veterans found in Britain derive from the site or immediate vicinity of a legionary fortress or a colony” there being no known examples, found close to a fort or town “where there had been no legionary base during the lifetime of the soldier” (Sauer 2005, 113). By itself, therefore, the tombstone of Geminus provides indirect, albeit perhaps rather compelling, evidence that Alchester was the main fortress of the II Augusta in the early years of the Roman campaign in Britain.

An additional tombstone from Dorset, first identified in 2016, however, casts some doubt on this hypothesis. This stone grave-marker, found reused as a house step from a property in High East Street, Dorchester (Mike Trevarthen pers comm 2016), commemorated Lucius Didius Bassus, a veteran of the II Augusta, originally from Macedonia who died around the age of 55, having been discharged a decade or so earlier (Tomlin 2018, 427–8). The Bassus monument, as far as can be determined, appears to predate that of Gemminus from Alchester, an observation which Roger Tomlin believes helps to confirm that Dorchester was in fact “the legions early (if not only) base” (Tomlin 2018, 427). The absence of a fortress identified to date from beneath, or within the immediate vicinity of, the town of Dorchester, however, is problematic, as indeed is the relative proximity (37 km) of Lake Farm to this later urban centre.

Three interpretational possibilities present themselves with regard to understanding the nature and significance of the Bassus tombstone. First, it is possible a Roman fortress lies somewhere close to, or underneath, Dorchester, despite the town being only a relatively short distance from the confirmed fortress of Lake Farm. Second, it could be that the stone found in High East Street was not originally from Dorchester, having been brought to the town from a site originally much closer to Lake Farm or Wimborne Minster. Third, it is possible that Bassus originally served in the fortress at Lake Farm, but chose after his retirement to live at, or close to, the new town of Dorchester, and was later buried there. Given that the new geophysical survey of Lake Farm confirms that the fortress was of sufficient size to house an entire legion, the excavation dataset suggesting abandonment and demolition in the early AD 50s, the site never being reoccupied, it would perhaps seem strange that Bassus would have been buried there. More likely, perhaps, his heirs chose to lay the veteran to rest in the nearest large civilian centre to the abandoned legionary fortress. If the findspot, at the eastern margins of Dorchester reflects the original location of Bassus’ grave, then he would at least have been laid to rest in a cemetery set on the line of the road that ran from town towards the site of his former base.

Whether Lake Farm was, as suggested here, the main base of the II Augusta as it campaigned westwards, being contemporary with, or occupied at a different time to, Alchester, is something that is ultimately unprovable until the post-excavation analysis of the Lake Farm archive has been completed and a full constructional sequence developed. Certainly, the finds evidence recovered does seem to indicate a degree of military activity on site from late AD 43 or early 44, possibly related to the establishment of a primary phase marching camp, but the nature of this must at present remain unclear. Any interpretation of Roman military strategy in the years immediately following the invasion is not helped by the realisation that the accepted view of a full-scale assault upon the hillforts of Dorset (Wheeler 1943; Richmond 1968) is, as noted above, unsustainable (Stewart and Russell 2017, 169–70; Russell 2019). Other, alternative strategic centres of native Durotrigian power may well have been targeted by the legion, or more simply won over through economic or political means, but, with the hillforts out of the equation, it is clear that the nature of Roman conquest in the South-West needs to be rethought.

The identification of at least three major bases of the II Augusta, all apparently dating to the mid to late 40s AD, at Chichester, West Sussex (Down 1981, 119–28; 1988, 14), Alchester, Oxfordshire (Sauer 2005) and Cirencester in Gloucestershire (McWhirr 1988, 74–80), certainly does not help matters, suggesting that the legion was operating, presumably with considerable auxiliary support, on multiple fronts during this period. On a basic level, it can be said with some confidence that Chichester and quite possibly Alchester predate the main fortress phase at Lake Farm, which appears to have been constructed close to the river Stour, within the southern half of an earlier marching camp, sometime around AD 45, the fortress itself being deserted by the early AD 50s, as the legion moved west. The small fort at Hod Hill also appears to have been abandoned at this time after an extensive fire, attributed by Richmond to a cook-house accident (Richmond 1968, 121; Bugler and Drew 1973, 58), but more likely resulting from an act of slighting. The date for the establishment of Exeter is unresolved, although the evidence, such as it is, suggests that construction was underway at least by the mid-50s

(Bidwell 1979, 13; Henderson 1988, 91; Manning 2002, 35). Dating evidence for the fort at Waddon Hill, in western Dorset, seems to broadly correspond with this, the site being built sometime after AD 50 and lasting at least until the early 60s (Webster 1979, 55). The fort set within the ramparts of Hembury hillfort, in North-West Devon appears to have been occupied from around AD 55 to the late 60s (Todd 2007, 117).

## THE PROBLEM OF NOMENCLATURE

If, as now seems likely, Lake Farm was a major facility of the Legio II Augusta in its campaigns across South-Western Britain, why does its name not feature in surviving records? As long ago as 1968, Norman Field suggested that the fortress could plausibly be identified with *Isca*, a site named in a number of Roman sources (Field 1968b, 309). In Ptolemy's *Geography*, of the second century AD, *Isca Legio II Augusta* is named as a polis of the Dumnonii, together with *Voliba*, *Uxella* and *Tamara* (*Geography* II.3.13). Association of *Isca*, as Exeter, with the II Legion, is, by the mid-second century (when Ptolemy was writing), anachronistic however, unless remembrance of the unit was particularly strong, for the legion had by then been established at Caerleon in South-East Wales for some time. The third century *Antonine Itinerary* records the more complete, and presumably more accurate, name-form for the civitas at Exeter as *Isca Dumnoniorum* (*Antonine Itinerary* XV). If this was the real name for the town of Exeter, Ptolemy's mix-up may have derived from the fact that the legionary fortress at Caerleon also appears to have been called *Isca* (*Isca Legio II Augusta*: *Antonine Itinerary* XII). If, as seems likely, this name-form itself derived from a British term for water (Rivet and Smith 1979, 376), being the origin for river names Exe (Exeter) and Usk (at Caerleon) as well as Esk and Axe, then confusion could have come from both the obvious duplication and evident association with the II Augusta. Presumably the indigenous river-name established within the land of the Dumnonii was transferred, first to the army base at Exeter and eventually to the tribal centre that followed. A similar process later occurred at Caerleon, the fortress here being established on the tidal reach of the river Usk.

Ptolemy placed *Isca Legio II Augusta* in the territory of the Dumnonii, its nearest neighbour to the east

being *Dunium*, a polis of the Durotriges (Ptolemy *Geography* II.3.13). Identification of *Dunium* has proved problematic, especially as it is both a name unrecorded in any other source for the area, but also as it evidently does not relate to the tribal civitas of *Durnovaria* (Dorchester), as established in the *Antonine Itinerary* (*Antonine Itinerary* XV). Rivet and Smith suggested that *Dunum* was a more likely name than *Dunium*, the 'i' being intrusive (Rivet and Smith 1979, 344), the name-form ultimately deriving perhaps from *dunos* or *dunon* meaning a hill or hillfort (hence *dinas* in Welsh or *dun* in Irish: Rivet and Smith 1979, 274). Thought to refer to a fortified place of the Late Iron Age, *Dunum* or *Dunium* (hereafter simply referred to as *Dunium*) being "one of the most important aspects of Celto-Latin toponymy" with at least sixteen Romano British placenames having derived from it (Rivet and Smith 1979, 274), the Durotrigian *Dunium* has traditionally been identified as Maiden Castle, something that Wheeler thought was borne out by both the impressive size of the hillfort together with the later establishment of the civitas *Durnovaria* (Dorchester) nearby (Wheeler 1943, 61; 1956, 104). The possible presence of early Roman timber buildings within the ramparts of Iron Age Maiden Castle has also been alluded to (Todd 1984; Manning 2002, 32), something which, if true, could further strengthen the hillfort's credentials as *Dunium*. It is worth pointing out, however, that no definite evidence for Roman military structures, least of all barrack blocks, was identified during the most recent geophysical survey of the site (Stewart and Russell 2017, 106–13).

Rivet and Smith noted that the distance from *Londinium* to *Dunium*, as recorded by Ptolemy, appeared to better suit Hod Hill, rather than Maiden Castle, where the establishment of a Roman fort within the north-western circuit of the Iron Age hillfort could conveniently explain the origins of the name (Rivet and Smith 1979, 145). Unfortunately, with regard to the theory that *Dunium* was Hod Hill, or even Maiden Castle for that matter, archaeological examination has shown that no Dorset hillfort was politically or economically active at the time of the Roman invasion and it is likely that another, less archaeologically obvious (and perhaps as yet undiscovered) settlement focus may originally have served as the Durotrigian polis (Papworth 2008, 86–91; Stewart and Russell 2017, 169–70).

A third possibility presents itself: that *Dunium* was actually the port of Hengistbury Head. As a key harbour with extensive cross-channel connections, Hengistbury was an important prehistoric trade hub on the confluence of the rivers Avon and Stour which, unlike the hillforts of Dorset, Hampshire and Southern Wiltshire, appears to have broadly remained in use into the second century AD (Cunliffe 1987, 67 and 141). Ptolemy, of course, does not state unequivocally that *Dunium* was the political centre of the Durotriges, merely that it was a polis or town within their territory. It should be noted that the distance from *Londinium* to *Dunium*, as recorded by Ptolemy, appears to accord well with *Dunium* being Hengistbury Head whilst the distance from Hengistbury to the fortress of Lake Farm (19km) is, as Norman Field noted “very close indeed to where *Isca Legio II Augusta* was placed by Ptolemy’s figures” (Field 1968b, 309). In fact, Ptolemy’s identification of *Isca Legio II Augusta* as a polis of the Dumnonii (presumably Exeter), does not fit the landscape of the *Geography* at all well, being “far more displaced from its putative Roman equivalent than any other town shown” (Field 1968b, 309).

Neither do the distances quoted in the Antonine Itinerary (XV) accord with the distances from *Durnovaria* (Dorchester) to *Isca* (assumed to be Exeter) even with the inclusion of the unknown intermediary location of *Muriduno*. Since *murus* is the Latin word city wall or rampart, the placename *Muriduno* could simply be translated as ‘the Walls of *Dunium*’, the distance from Dorchester to the cross-dykes of Hengistbury, 36 Roman miles (53km) being a close match with the distance from Hengistbury to *Isca*, 15 Roman miles (22km), also fits the suggestion that *Isca* was Lake Farm. If the II Augusta legion were somewhat conservative in fortress nomenclature, it is perfectly possible that *Isca* was the designation that they gave not only to Exeter and Caerleon, but also to Lake Farm before. Certainly, a military base sited perilously close to the lower reaches of the river Stour (with Stour like *Isca* possibly meaning ‘lower water’ as in the Welsh term *is dŵr*: Rowland Jones 1764), where it could directly be accessed from Hengistbury Head and the sea, at the very fringes of the river’s floodplain, would perhaps more than justify the designation *Isca*, supporting Norman Field’s theory and helping to significantly re-write the Roman geography of Southern Britain.

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