GUERNSEY’S ROMAN SHIP: SMALL ISLAND, BIG PROBLEM

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Abstract

A third century Roman ship was found in St Peter Port harbour mouth and was raised by a remarkably effective Maritime Trust between 1984 and 1987. Conservation of the aft 18 metres of the ship at the Mary Rose Trust is approaching completion, but there is no obvious solution on offer to where the ship can be housed or how an island such as Guernsey can afford to display a world-class museum object of this size. The paper poses the question – should we hand over the island’s most unique ancient object to a museum elsewhere in the interest of preserving it and allowing people to see it? Or will such course of action be a source of future regret?

Keywords

Guernsey, Shipwreck, Roman

About 300 metres from the venue of the 2010 ISIC Conference at Castle Cornet, a third century Roman ship was found on the seabed on Christmas Day 1982 (Fig 1). Its timbers were spotted more-or-less halfway between the pier heads by local diver Richard Keen, who fortunately had a strong interest in underwater archaeology. The timbers were being exposed by the prop wash from new, more powerful, car ferries passing just a couple of metres clear of the site.

Following an offhand comment by a schoolboy, the ship was nicknamed “Asterix”, a name which is still used colloquially and at one point was even officially licensed. The ship was raised and recorded between 1984-87 by the Guernsey Maritime Trust when it faced imminent destruction from propeller action and dredging. The project was led by Dr Margaret Rule of Mary Rose fame, with the author of the present paper serving as research assistant. By coincidence, a Roman urban site was found at La Plaiderie in St Peter Port and excavated during the same period. Until this double find, there had been very little to indicate a Roman presence in Guernsey.

Strictly speaking, this is a “Gallo-Roman” or “Romano-Celtic” ship. Despite the BBC2 documentary Operation Asterix (1985) and a comprehensive publication (Rule and Monaghan, 1991), the profile of the ship in British archaeology has remained surprisingly low. A project to establish conservation facilities in Guernsey did not come to fruition, so in 1999, the States of Guernsey sent the ship timbers to the Mary Rose Trust in Portsmouth to be soaked in water-soluble wax (PEG – Fig 2) then freeze-dried. The conservation process came to an end in late 2010, and the timbers are ready to return to Guernsey.

Some 18m of the bottom of the ship survives, of an original 22m+ (Fig 3). It has a maximum beam of 6m, and the remains stand around a metre high from the keel. It was constructed in a Gallic or Celtic manner using heavy oak timbers fastened by massive iron nails as thick as
a thumb and as long as an arm. The timbers were butted together without jointing and were assembled frame first, unlike many Mediterranean ships of the time, which were built shell first.

Gallic vessels which sound remarkably similar were described by Julius Caesar almost four centuries earlier when he was fighting the Veneti off the coast of Brittany (Caesar, 1982: 98-99). The ship was clearly designed for waters such as those in which it was found, which have a high tidal range and strong currents. In the Roman era, there were probably few developed harbours in the region, and ships would have had to beach to unload cargoes or shelter from the weather.

This is the largest and most intact example of the three known examples of this class of vessel, the others being Blackfriars I found in London (Marsden 1967) in the 1960s and the more recent Barlands Farm boat (Nayling & McGrail, 2004). As it was found off an island at the edge of the Atlantic, the Guernsey ship was undoubtedly a sea-going vessel, whereas the smaller examples may have been limited to river or estuarine work.

The ship caught fire and sank around AD 280, which was a turbulent time in this corner of the Empire. It was carrying a cargo of pitch in its aft hold, which must have made a merry blaze. A ship engulfed in smoke and flame, drifting around the harbour mouth would have been a major incident in third-century Guernsey, and we can only imagine the crowds on shore watching the spectacle.

Fortunately for the archaeologists, the pitch melted then set hard when the ship sank and helped to keep the ship together and preserve its detail. So good is the preservation that we can still see the marks of tools, including the scratches made on the keel when the shipwright was first laying out the ship. Trapped within the pitch were many objects including tile from what appeared to be its galley, plus pottery and coins. Food remains were found deep in the bilge. Objects recovered come from as far away as Algeria and Germany, suggesting this ship may have been a coaster, engaged in what the French call cabotage, carrying cargoes of opportunity from port to port. The identifiable pottery and the blocks of pitch suggest that the final journey began in southwest France.

Two intriguing finds were a pair of cast bronze bearings, thought to have been from the bilge pump. Similar bearings are known from Roman shipwrecks in the Mediterranean (Foerster 1984). Their presence demonstrates the hybrid nature of this vessel – a thoroughly Roman piece of engineering fitted into a Celtic-style craft. Much the same can be said for the use of standard Roman roof tiles for the galley roof.

The ship is the island’s largest and most significant ancient object. We already have evidence that Guernsey played a part in the Iron Age Atlantic wine trade (Galliou 1986), and we know that as far back as the Neolithic, objects from France were coming here by boat (Sebire 2005, 56). The Roman ship fills another gap in the story, demonstrating that St Peter Port played a role in the trade networks of the Roman Empire 1600 years ago. It is part of Guernsey’s long history as a waystation, entrepot, and harbour of refuge.

The importance of the ship to the island is therefore clear, but what of its wider significance? It is one of the oldest European sea-going ships found outside the Mediterranean and probably the largest surviving object from Roman Britain. It is a rare piece of practical evidence for how trade was conducted during the Roman Empire. Much discussed at a theoretical level, Roman trade patterns are most commonly inferred from the distribution of pottery and other objects. Actual evidence for shipping and harbours around Britain and the Channel is very thin and subject to chance finds. Guernsey’s ship therefore does not just
have parochial interest but is an integral part of the history of maritime Europe and of the Western Roman Empire.

Figure 1 – Location of Roman Wreck Site, St Peter Port, Guernsey

A flurry of media interest around the date of the ISIC Conference in 2010 culminated in a short update on the project’s progress on BBC2’s *Digging for Britain* in August 2010. This was fuelled by the fact that with two-thirds of the timbers dry and the remaining third going into the freeze drier, the conservation process could be completed in 2010 (Fig 4).

In an ideal world, the imminent return of the ship will again fire interest in the island and in the wider community, so we can see it return to Guernsey and be suitably displayed. One way to display and also protect the vessel is to use a large glass showcase, where humidity and temperature can be controlled. This showcase would need to be around 19 metres by six metres, or roughly twice the size of the one which shows off the Dover Bronze Age boat to such good effect (Clark 2004). Another option would be to maintain a whole gallery with suitable environmental controls, such as is proposed for the Mary Rose.

A curatorial problem that must be faced is that eighteen metres of black wood is not intrinsically exciting. People are interested in people, and unlike the Mary Rose, we have no names and no bodies, making the human story harder to tell. Quality display, interpretation, and interaction are required to allow the public to understand and appreciate the object. Best of all would be to see the ship as the centrepiece of a new maritime heritage centre that could put Guernsey “on the map” for those interested in Roman or maritime history.

Here we come to the big problem. Guernsey is an island of only 24 square miles, with a population of 65,000. Despite being a prosperous place, it is going to face a significant challenge in putting the ship on public display. There are no existing museum galleries large enough to house it, and the museums service budget is already fully stretched dealing with its existing portfolio of museums, collections, and historic sites. Dover’s project to display and
house their boat in a glass case within a converted building cost £1.6 million in 1999. Inflation aside, property and construction costs are significantly higher in Guernsey than in Dover. There is thus a significant financial challenge.

Figure 2 - Frame Timbers in Conservation Tank (Mary Rose Trust)

Guernsey is a Crown Dependency, outside the UK and the EU and so is ineligible for funding from most of the usual sources. The Maritime Trust raised in the region of £100,000 in 1985 to fund the initial work, but the Trust members are for the most part long retired and in some cases sadly no longer with us. It would not be possible to raise the seven figure sum now needed within the island, so any revived Maritime Trust would need significant off-island partners. Guernsey lacks the volume of tourists possible to an English city such as York, so the commercial viability of any private/voluntary sector initiative such as that which led to the Jorvik Viking Centre is limited. Jersey Heritage’s painful financial difficulties in 2009-10 provide a sobering lesson for those enthusiastic about reforming the Trust.

Around two dozen sites on the island have been investigated as possible homes for the ship and either rejected or put on a long list of less-than-perfect possibilities. Back in 1986, it was suggested that the ship be housed in the old Slaughterhouse, which is at the end of the Castle Breakwater. Paper plans have been sketched out, but little real progress made in 25 years, and we are no closer now than in 1986. It has been suggested that we should just put the ship into storage for a few more years, which would be much cheaper than constructing a display. This would still require a controlled environment and a significant amount of space, and the expenditure would reap little public benefit as the ship could not be viewed by the casual visitor. There is also a danger that putting the ship into store would put it “out of sight, out of mind”, making it difficult to raise any private or public sector enthusiasm to find a long-term solution.
In the final analysis, a price tag of £2 to £5 million may be too rich for the States of Guernsey with its competing priorities and simply too big a target for a maritime trust to reach. We must also ask whether this artefact is too important to be the responsibility of one small island.

Gallic in origin, both the ship’s sinking and its survival in Guernsey’s harbour are twists of fate. It only sank in St Peter Port through happenchance, and a few days later it would presumably have made harbour in Britannia or Gaul. One could argue that a vessel of this significance is not truly “Guernsey’s Roman Ship” at all. Hence, is it truly Guernsey’s problem to solve, alone? There is an argument that if the island is unable to give the artefact the care it needs to ensure its long-term survival, then it should be found a new home. It may be better displayed in a location where it could be seen by a greater number of people than manage to visit our island. Perhaps, if the Guernsey ship ended up on display in the UK, France, or even the USA, it would act as an ambassador for the island, and we could be proud to have given something significant to the wider world. If this course is ultimately chosen on purely pragmatic grounds, however, it could prove to be a source of regret. Will future generations of islanders regard “Asterix” as our Elgin Marbles and ask ‘Why did we let such a key piece of our heritage go?’

Bibliography


