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Gladiators at Roman Colchester: Re-Interpreting the Colchester Vase

By GLYNN J.C. DAVIS and JOHN PEARCE,

With contributions by EMILY CARROLL, JOANNA MOORE, GEOFF NOWELL and JANET MONTGOMERY

ABSTRACT

The locally made colour-coated ware vessel known as the Colchester Vase is argued to be a commissioned piece recording a performance in the town. The inscription on the vessel, cut pre-firing, names individual arena performers depicted en barbotine. *One name, Memnon, is argued to be a 'stage name' taken from a protagonist in the Trojan war. The connection of another combatant, Valentinus, to the 30th legion is re-considered as evidence for gladiators linked to the Roman army. The Vase's final use was as a cremation urn. Osteological and isotopic analysis reveals the cremated remains to be those of a non-local male of 40+ years; unlikely to be one of the performers, he may nevertheless have been closely connected to the event.*

Keywords: Roman Colchester; cremation; gladiators; inscription; isotope analysis; *munera*; pottery; souvenir

INTRODUCTION[1]

The Colchester Vase is a large colour-coated ware beaker made *c.* A.D. 160–200 in the kilns to the west of the town, decorated *en barbotine* with arena scenes and inscribed with the names of the protagonists (FIG. 1). The companion paper to this article suggests that it was a product of the workshop to which the named potter Acceptus iii belonged, active in Colchester in *c.* A.D. 160–200.[2] It was used as the cremation urn in a burial group of four vessels found in 1853 in the town's western cemetery area.[3] The burial group's discovery, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interpretations of the scenes and inscription, a detailed description of the scenes and of the vessel's method of manufacture and stylistic

[1] GJCD and JP drafted respectively the contextualising discussion and the analysis of the inscription, then jointly revised and developed both sections. The osteological and isotopic analyses were authored as attributed, their results being drawn on in the discussion.

[2] Bird and Crummy, this volume.

[3] Price 1869, 7–9, pl. 2, figs 1–3; May 1928, 293, Grave 14/13, pl. XCII, 14; Museum accession number COLEM: PC.727–730. The date of discovery is erroneously given in *RIB* I as 1848.

FIG. 1. The Colchester Vase burial group, including mortarium lid, dish and flagon, COLEM:PC.727–730. (*Photo: D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums*)

affinities can be found in the companion paper.[4] Re-examination of the lettering, it will be argued, identifies the inscription as being cut before firing rather than afterwards, as current orthodoxy has it. Setting the inscription and images in the wider body of evidence for games enriches the insights which can be derived from the names and associated information into arena performers in the north-west provinces. Undertaken as part of Colchester Museums' *Decoding the Dead* project, osteological and strontium isotope analysis of the well-preserved cremated bones within the vessel enable them to be identified as the remains of a non-local male of 40+ years. Drawing on our study and its companion paper, the biography of the vessel and its implications for the understanding of the provision and celebration of gladiatorial games in Colchester are explored.

THE INSCRIPTION

The short inscription on the Colchester Vase naming arena performers has attracted attention since its discovery, with early commentators and museum visitors puzzling over its interpretation.[5] Its essentials were set out by Hübner in his 1873 corpus of inscriptions from Britain; the *RIB* edition published in 1993 corrected some misconceptions which had developed in the intervening period.[6] However the following re-evaluation, enabled both by autopsy and by new

[4] Bird and Crummy, this volume.
[5] Bird and Crummy, this volume.
[6] *CIL* VII 1335, 3; *RIB* II 2503.119.

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FIG. 2. The inscription below the rim of the Colchester Vase. (*Photo: D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums*)

higher resolution images of the inscription, challenges current orthodoxy concerning the text's creation. The evidence of lettering is examined first before re-assessing the names of the performers and their associated attributes.[7]

LETTERING

The inscription is incised a little below the rim of the vessel, being placed where the upper frame bounding the decoration is interrupted. It comprises four captions divided into two pairs of names, one pair (SECVNDVS MARIO) placed above the whip-carrying figure and associated with the animal combat, the other (MEMNON SAC VIIII VALENTINV LEGIONIS XXX) labelling the *secutor* and *retiarius* (FIG. 2). It is confidently cut in fine strokes by a stylus or similar finely pointed instrument in letters a few millimetres high, the same hand being responsible for the whole text. Two names, those of Secundus and Mario, are incised close to the rim in smaller letters (mostly 4–6.5 mm high), while the others, those of Memnon and Valentinus, are incised at a greater distance from the rim and in larger letters (mostly 7–8 mm high). Letters are executed in fluid rustic capitals, generally incised in two or more straight or lightly curving strokes. The superimposition of strokes observed under magnification allows their general sequence of execution to be established, illustrated for example by the unbarred A, S, E and I. Typically a short vertical or diagonal stroke is cut first, followed by further horizontal or diagonal strokes, and the letter is finished with serifs.

The writer's confidence is especially expressed in the more mannered lettering in the captions for Memnon and Valentinus, facilitated by greater distance from the potential obstruction posed by the vessel rim. It manifests in flourishes like the lightly curved and tapering serifs on the diagonal and vertical strokes of E, I, N, X and M, or in the curling leftward hooks I in *Valentinus* or L in *legionis* (FIGS 3–4). The flamboyant upward diagonal stroke from the S of *legionis* and the upwards curl of the bottom serif of the R of *Mario*, made without lifting the stylus, also exemplify the writer's élan (FIG. 5). The diagonals of contrasting width which render X illustrate the alternation between broader and narrower strokes of which the writer was capable, achieved perhaps by changing the angle of the stylus tip. Their contrast echoes, for example, the variation of thick and thin strokes in rustic capitals and finer cursive writing at Vindolanda.[8]

[7] The supplementary material provides fuller detail on the lettering and on comparanda and includes some further supporting discussion of the names and attributes of the performers described in the inscription.

[8] cf. Bowman and Thomas 1994, 479, e.g. *Tab. Vindol.* II. 152.

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FIG. 3. The Colchester Vase inscription. Detail of the word VALENTINV. (*Photo: D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums*)

FIG. 4. The Colchester Vase inscription. Detail of the words LEGIONIS XXX. (*Photo: D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums*)

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FIG. 5. The Colchester Vase inscription. Detail of the word MARIO. (*Photo: D. Atfield; © Colchester Museums*)

Some letter forms, for example the S and L of *legionis*, indicate a wider affinity with Old Roman Cursive writing.[9]

The Colchester text is classified by *RIB* with inscriptions incised on vessels after firing, but the calligraphic quality and fluidity of its execution is not otherwise paralleled in this category.[10] Its finesse has in fact largely gone unremarked, despite Hübner's assessment of the evident expertise ('litteris optimis').[11] The identification by Roach Smith of the text's incision as being 'posterior to the fabrication of the urn' has been followed by *RIB*'s editors and has gone unchallenged in other publications, whose authors may not have examined the vessel in person.[12] However, the absence of ragged edges on the letter strokes indicates that they were cut before firing, and the lettering is also reminiscent of other texts cut at the same stage, for example the kiln tallies from La Graufesenque and the cursive and capital texts incised on the leather-hard clay of unfired tiles.[13] The suppleness of the Colchester Vase inscription also recalls similar lettering in other malleable media, for example on some lead curse tablets.[14] The deciding evidence, however, for this being a pre-firing inscription is the superimposition of the strokes which form individual letters (as noted above). This could not conceivably be achieved after firing. The lettering was therefore incised before firing into the plastic medium of the drying clay,

[9] Marichal 1988, 32–3, L8; Bowman and Thomas 1983, 60–7; 1994, 49–52; Tomlin 2016, 19–21; Mullen and Bowman 2021, 44–5.

[10] Dunbabin's characterisation (2016, 223) as 'names scratched on' overlooks this calligraphic quality.

[11] *CIL* VII 1335.

[12] Smith 1857, 84; cf. Wahl 1977, 131; Oenbrink 1999, 784; Raybould 1999, 152; Reuter 2012, 137–8, no. 103; Dunbabin 2016, 223; Dimde 2019, 281–2.

[13] La Graufesenque: Marichal 1988; tiles: Gatta 2018.

[14] e.g. Bath: Tomlin 1988, 86–7, e.g. nos 10–11; Uley: Tomlin 1993, nos. 3 and 43; 2018, 11.3.

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following the application of relief decoration and the colour-coat slip. The text was thus part of the vessel's conceptualisation from the start and relates directly to the scene portrayed, relieving doubts that it might be a later addition to a generic arena representation.[15]

TEXT AND COMMENTARY

SECVNDUS MARIO // MEMNON SAC VIIII // VALENTINV LEGIONIS XXX
Secundus Mario // Memnon s<A=e>c(utor) VIIII (pugnarum) // Valentinu(s) legionis XXX
'Secundus. Mario. Memnon *secutor*, nine fights. Valentinus of the 30th legion, (*tiro*).'

The majority of the text comprises unabbreviated single names, the commonest form of text incised on ceramics in Britain.[16] It is one of only two inscriptions from Britain that name arena combatants,[17] making inscriptions naming performers from other provinces the most appropriate comparanda. Among the latter single names occur much more frequently than names in other formats.[18] These single names in *cognomen* form raise the question as to whether they precisely identify the status of the performers, for example as slaves or *peregrini*,[19] or simply supply the stage names behind which a real status can only be surmised.

The placing of *Secundus* and *Mario* above the head of a single figure is best explained by the restriction of the inscription to spaces on the vessel without an upper framing line (see above). Secundus is a commonplace name, but Mario is much rarer, not a Celtic name (*pace* RIB II) but 'un nom latin rarissime', attested primarily among current and former slaves on inscriptions from the central Mediterranean.[20]

Like most of the (relatively few) captions labelling arena performers working with animals, Secundus and Mario are referenced by name only, without ancillary information. By contrast, the addition of type, combat history and *familia* affiliation for the two gladiators, Memnon and Valentinus, provides more material for discussion. This legend has usually been read as recording two different sorts of information, for Memnon his gladiatorial type and the number of fights and for Valentinus his ownership by the 30th legion, based at Xanten from A.D. 122 onwards. This interpretation is cautiously preferred in the discussion below, but the inconsistency it assumes in the format of the captions linked to the pair of gladiators should be noted.[21] In what follows, therefore, we argue that different kinds of information are provided for the different fighters, though ambiguities remain.

Memnon is attested occasionally as a personal name in Latin inscriptions (mainly in Italy as well as on the Danube) and a little more frequently in Greek inscriptions of late Republican and imperial date from the eastern Mediterranean; its significance is considered further below.[22] The abbreviation *SAC* is usually corrected and expanded to *secutor*, describing his fighting style.[23] Given the image of the *secutor* above which the inscription is incised, this is the most likely expansion, though an alternative reading of an abbreviation for *sca(eva)*, 'left-hander', correcting SAC to SCA, also has some merit. *VIIII* must refer to the number of bouts fought

[15] Wilmott 2008, 170.
[16] *RIB* II.8, 2503 intro., 18 and 24, table III.
[17] cf. *RIB* II.7, 2501, 586.
[18] Rome: *EAOR* I, 138–9; north-west provinces: *EAOR* V, 179.
[19] Frere and Fulford 2002, 171–2.
[20] *ILAM* 197, commentary; Kajanto 1965, 164.
[21] The alternative possibility, i.e. that the text provides the same information in parallel form for both gladiators, i.e. (stage) name, ownership and number of fights, is assessed in the supplementary material.
[22] Kakoschke 2011, 467, no. 880, 19 examples; *LGPN* database (accessed 1 February 2022).
[23] Rome: *CIL* VI, 10196 = *EAOR* I, 95; Ferento: *EAOR* II, no. 53a, f; Pompeii: Coleman 1994.

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during his career to date (placing him perhaps in mid-career), a single numeral without further qualification having this significance from the late first century A.D. onwards.[24]

The interest of the name of the *secutor*, Memnon, has not been previously recognised. Given its scarcity, the name Memnon seems unlikely to be derived from local naming practice or to be a chance adoption from the Greek name repertoire. The mythical bellicose king of the Ethiopians, with a martial reputation second only to Achilles and slain by the latter at Troy, supplies a much more likely heroic exemplar for a stage name.[25] Stage names for gladiators based on heroes of epic linked to Troy, such as Patroclus, Achilles, Ajax and Idomeneus are well documented in the eastern Mediterranean; their occurrence in the north-west provinces is occasional, for example Hector and Ajax respectively on a tombstone from the Jura and an Augsburg mosaic.[26]

As likely givers of stage names it is reasonable to assume a knowledge of epics of the Trojan cycle on the part of the elite owners or administrators of gladiatorial troupes, for example the equestrian procurators responsible for the emperors' *familiae* in the provinces.[27] As for the specific figure of Memnon, dedications scratched by Egypt's equestrian prefects onto the Colossi associated with the hero at Thebes (among which at least one, Haterius Nepos, had served in Britain), witnessing that they had heard them 'sing', illustrates elite interest in the traditions attached to Priam's nephew.[28] The recently excavated mosaic from Rutland provides a vivid example of the familiarity of Roman elites in Britain with the stories of Troy.[29] A popular resonance of such 'stage' names in Rome's north-west provinces can also be argued. For example, among the mythological scenes depicted on mid-imperial Rhône valley ceramic medallions, one renders the death of Hector at Troy with legends identifying participants.[30]

Famed for his beauty and valour, Memnon's blackness was repeatedly referenced in Roman period literary tradition along with his 'Ethiopian' origins; perhaps the appearance of this performer, especially his skin colour, may have influenced the giving of the stage name.[31] Gladiatorial stage names sometimes drew on a performer's physical attributes, emphasising good looks, for example Callimorphus, as well as specific individual characteristics.[32] For instance, the gladiators Xanthus ('blondie') and Anthrax ('coal-black') – the latter a term sometimes used in Greco-Roman literature as a descriptor of black people's skin – named on Rhône valley ceramic depictions of combat contemporary with the Colchester Vase provide regional instances of this naming principle.[33] The only other documented use of Memnon as a performer's name, for an Egyptian charioteer in late antique Carthage, clearly takes its cue from the skin colour of the rider celebrated in verse.[34] The latter case suggests that the choice of name for the Colchester performer might point only in the most general terms towards 'Memnon's' personal or familial connections to northern Africa, rather than towards any

[24] Ville 1981, 316–17; Wiedemann 1992, 120–1.

[25] Snowden 1970, 20. For Memnon and Trojan epic, in particular his role as a leading character in the *Aithiopis,* see Dowden 2006, 198–9.

[26] For the eastern Mediterranean, Carter 1999, 122; Ducros 2017, 38–41; for the western empire, Ville 1981, 308–9, supplemented by Gregori 2011. See supplementary material for individual references.

[27] For equestrian procurators, *EAOR* VII, 67–9, 214–15; Ville 1981, 270–2. For familiarity of Roman elites with the Homeric and related epics, Farrell 2006; Squire 2011.

[28] Rosenmeyer 2019.

[29] Anon. 2021.

[30] Lavagne 2011.

[31] For Greco-Roman literary traditions associated with Memnon, Snowden 1970, 151–3; 1991, 247–8. For example, Memnon is referenced in verse from the Augustan period (e.g. Verg., *Aen.* I.488–9; Ov., *Pont.* III.3, 95–98) to Late Antiquity (e.g. Claud., *Cons. Stil.* I, 265; Luxorius, Rosenblum no. 7); the most extended treatment comes in an imagining of his death at Troy in one of the ekphrases of Philostratus (Philostr., *Imag.* I.7).

[32] For Callimorphus and other 'beaux garçons', Robert 1940, 301.

[33] *Anthrax*, Snowden 1991, 247–8; for the Rhône valley medallions, *EAOR* V, App. I.

[34] Rosenblum 1961, 114–15, no. 7.

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specific geographical origin, especially given the mutability in the placing of 'Aethiopia' in the Greco-Roman world-view.[35]

Valentinu(s) as a *cognomen* is documented in six cases in Britain and very widely beyond.[36] From the lack of reference to previous fights he can be identified as a *tiro*, as first suggested by Herbert Blakiston, President of Trinity College, Oxford, in the early twentieth century.[37] This need not mean that the odds were stacked hopelessly against him: for example, at Trajan's triumphal games the *tiro* Marcus Antonius Exochus, trained in the imperial *ludus* at Alexandria, defeated an opponent of nine fights standing.[38] The reference to *Legio XXX* may indicate that Valentinus belonged to a *familia* of gladiators in the possession of this legion, which was garrisoned at Xanten from *c.* A.D. 122 into Late Antiquity.[39] This has prompted Jocelyn Toynbee and others subsequently to suggest that legions had their own troupes of gladiators and associated performers.[40] Some other evidence supporting this argument has seemingly been overlooked, the most significant being fragmentary third-century A.D. papyri implying the attachment of gladiators to the legionary garrison at *Babylon*, i.e. Old Cairo.[41] Conjecturally the army might also have had some responsibility for the imperial *familiae* of gladiators for the provinces of Britain, the Germanies and elsewhere, attested on inscriptions which celebrate the careers of their procuratorial overseers.[42] Yet there are reasons for being cautious over claiming a widespread military role in the training and supply of gladiators. Direct evidence remains very rare and gladiators were not a source of military recruits, except as a last resort (e.g. in A.D. 69, Tac., *Hist.* 2).[43] Instead, Valentinus' affiliation to this particular legion might be a consequence of its being garrisoned in a region playing a nodal role in the procurement and supply of animal and human performers for the north-west provinces. The cities and garrisons of the lower Rhine possess famous inscriptions hinting at soldiers' involvement in large-scale animal capture for the arena,[44] while the larger Rhineland cities dominate the limited corpus of epigraphic evidence from north-west Europe for arena performers, trainers and so on (see below).[45]

THE CREMATED REMAINS
by Emily Carroll

THE INDIVIDUAL

The cremated remains from the Colchester Vase were analysed as part of the *Decoding the Dead* project.[46] Overall, the cremation deposit was sufficiently well preserved to enable 51 per cent of

[35] Snowden 1970, 163–8; Thompson 1989, 57–62; Selden 2013. Despite abundant and varied evidence for the presence of black Romans across the empire (including Roman Britain), visual representations of black performers, especially gladiators, are rare and individual examples can be contested (Ako-Adounvo 1999; Bell 2022). A notable example of a black gladiator is the *retiarius* Beryllus, depicted in polychrome mosaic from Aix en Provence, Gaul (*EAOR* V, no. 32; Lavagne 1994, 30, fig. 1).

[36] Kakoschke 2011, 622, no. 1402.

[37] Teyssier 2011, 83; Blakiston's comment is preserved in the archives of Colchester Museum: Bird and Crummy, this volume, Appendix 1.

[38] *ILS* 5088 = *EAOR* I, no. 92.

[39] Reuter 2012. A centurial stone from Corbridge (*RIB* 1166) may refer to a detachment of the legion in Britain, but doubt has been expressed concerning the antiquity of the added X which turned an apparent reference to the 20th legion into a record of the 30th.

[40] Toynbee 1962, 190; Wahl 1977, 55; Wiedemann 1992, 45; Epplett 2001a, 186; Reuter 2012, 137–8.

[41] For Old Cairo, Kayser 2000, Dimde 2019, 265–80; see also *CIL* XIII, 8831, the base of a statue dedicated to Mars Victor by the gladiators of the *classis Germanica*, provenance unknown *apud Batavos*, omitted from *EAOR* V.

[42] e.g. *ILS* 1396; Birley 2005, 326–8; see also Millar 1992, 194 n. 31 and Wiedemann 1992, 170–1.

[43] Wilmott 2008, 170–1.

[44] Epplett 2001b.

[45] Lazzaro 1993, 311–25, appendix II nos 373–93, 439–46; *EAOR* V.

[46] Eckardt *et al.* forthcoming.

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the recovered burned bone to be identified to skeletal site (439.8 g of the 856.8 g in total). One individual was identified in the deposit. Demographic assessment suggested that their osteological sex is male and that they were aged over 40 years at time of death. The entire skeleton was well represented with the majority of identified bone (45 per cent, 199.2 g) derived from the skull. Full details are given in the Supplementary Material.

The individual had several vertebrae demonstrating extra bone growth or lipping around the vertebral body. These are referred to as osteophytes that usually form around joints affected by osteoarthritis, a condition predominantly associated with older individuals.[47] With regard to pathology, active periostitis was identified on the proximal femur, suggesting active inflammation of the bone's periosteum at the time of death. This lesion is demonstrative of non-specific infection, strain or trauma. In addition, six parietal fragments from the skull showed signs of porosity and pitting, associated with porotic hyperostosis which may be indicative of a nutritional deficiency.

THE CREMATION PROCESS

An interesting characteristic of the cremated bone recovered from the Colchester Vase is the level of fragmentation observed. Overall, the fragments were large, over half measuring more than 10 mm in size. A considerable proportion of the material thus has identifiable features preserved, which enabled sex and age assessment. Thompson and colleagues observed during their examinations of Romano-British cremation burials that a high level of bone fragmentation indicates that the burned bone was repeatedly stirred or mixed within the pyre.[48] The lesser fragmentation of the cremated bone from the Colchester Vase suggests that the pyre in this case was not well maintained and was left to burn down with minimal intervention. This is typical of urban cremations in Roman Britain, which may indicate that the practice of cremation became 'industrialised' as a result of the introduction of *ustores* (professional cremators), where pyres were not as well maintained when compared to rural practices.[49]

Bone undergoes a progression of colour change when subject to extreme heat as a result of the combustion of bones' organic and inorganic components.[50] While this progression varies slightly depending on temperature, time, and oxidisation, the sequence is always consistent.[51] The majority of bone recovered from the Colchester Vase was predominantly white, with blue and grey pigments throughout the assemblage. This indicates high burning intensity but inconsistent firing conditions. McKinley has stated that this level of variation in burned bone colour is 'normal' and is a reflection of issues concerning oxygen supply, duration and the temperature of the fire.[52] Coupled with the general lack of fragmentation and the relatively high status of the burial, this information suggests the potential use of professional cremators.

THE STRONTIUM ISOTOPE ANALYSIS
by Joanna Moore, Geoff Nowell and Janet Montgomery

METHOD

Strontium isotope analysis of the cremated remains from the Colchester Vase was also undertaken as part of the *Decoding the Dead* project. Powdered bone samples were collected from the otic

[47] Jurmain and Kilgore 1995.
[48] Thompson *et al.* 2016.
[49] McKinley 2015; Carroll 2019, 237.
[50] Thompson *et al.* 2013.
[51] Ellingham *et al.* 2015.
[52] McKinley 1997, 66.

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capsule and leached in 0.1M acetic acid following the standard protocol.[53] Strontium purification was achieved using column chemistry methods[54] at the Arthur Holmes Isotope Geology Laboratory (AHIGL), Durham University. Strontium isotope ratios were determined by Multi-Collector Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry (MS-ICP-MS) using a ThermoFisher Neptune MC-ICP-MS; the samples were introduced into this using an ESI PFA50 nebuliser and a micro-cyclonic spray-chamber. Reproducibility of international isotope reference material NBS987 was 0.710258 ± 0.000018 (2sd, n=10), and all data was normalised to an accepted value for NBS987 of 0.71024.[55]

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The sample obtained from the petrous bone of the Colchester Vase cremation (sample ID COL_18) has a strontium isotope ratio of 0.710842 ± 0.000011 (2 SE) and strontium concentration of 121.9 ppm, which are within the ranges expected for Britain.[56] Colchester is situated on the geology of the London Clay Group, a region of varied lithology comprised of sands, gravels and clays. These types of rocks are expected to produce strontium isotope ratios ranging between 0.709 and 0.7105 in the plants growing in these geological regions.[57] In the absence of a more detailed local strontium biosphere map, this range can be considered representative of the local environment. It is expected that people who source most of their food and drink from within this region would have strontium isotope ratios close to this range. As can be seen in FIG. 6, the majority of the Colchester individuals analysed for the *Decoding the Dead* project plot within this range and closely match other Romano-British populations from regions with similar geology.[58] COL_18 exhibits a higher strontium isotope ratio than expected for local origins in Colchester; such values indicate possible origins in regions of Britain with older geology such as the south-west coast of England, parts of Wales, Cumbria and Scotland.

It is difficult to narrow down possible places of origin using a single isotope system, especially in Roman cities where populations are considered to have been highly cosmopolitan with high levels of mobility.[59] Colchester had been a major Iron Age centre, a legionary fortress and then the first provincial capital of Britain, and it would have been home to many different people and populations originating from across the Empire.[60] The town had early links with *Legio XX*, which recruited from Italy as well as other Mediterranean provinces.[61] As such it is important to note that strontium isotope ratios consistent with Essex can also be found in other regions of the Roman Empire and on their own may not be entirely indicative of local origins. As well as a potential origin elsewhere in Britain, the higher strontium isotope ratios seen in individual COL_18 from the Colchester Vase could also suggest childhood origins outside Britain in other regions of the Roman Empire, such as northern Italy, northern Greece, Pannonia and Bavaria.[62]

[53] Snoeck *et al*. 2015; Veselka *et al*. 2021.
[54] Font *et al.* 2008.
[55] For a full methodology and discussion, see Eckardt *et al*. forthcoming.
[56] Evans *et al.* 2010; 2012.
[57] Evans *et al.* 2018.
[58] Shaw *et al.* 2016.
[59] Cool 2002; 2010; Chenery *et al.* 2011; Eckardt *et al*. 2010; 2014.
[60] Crummy 1997; Mattingly 2007; Eckardt *et al*. forthcoming.
[61] Mann 1983, 23; Crummy 1997, 39–50; Manning 2000; *RIB* I, 200 (COLEM:PC.129); *RIB* I, 203 (COLEM:2014.75).
[62] Schweissing and Grupe 2003; Hakenbeck *et al.* 2017; Crowder *et al.* 2020; Fiorin *et al.* 2021.

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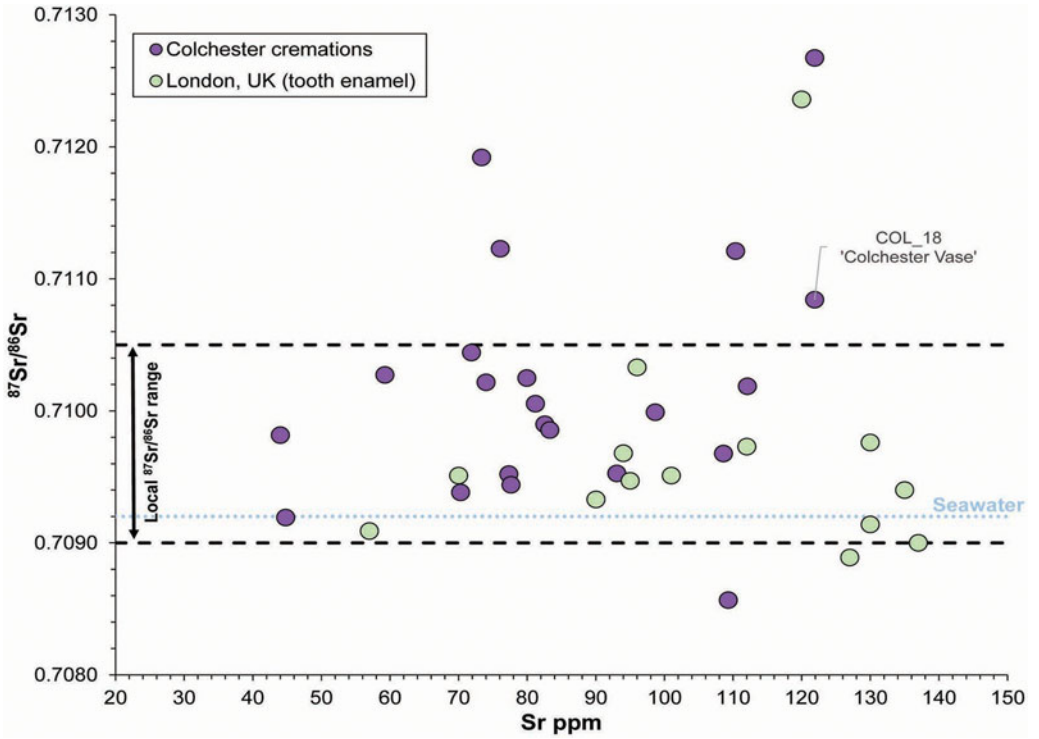

FIG. 6. Colchester cremation strontium isotope data alongside regional comparative data (Shaw *et al*. 2016). The horizontal dashed lines represent the bioavailable strontium isotope range for Essex (Evans *et al*. 2010). The analytical error for $^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$ is within the symbol.

DISCUSSION

As well as being the site of the only known Roman circus in Britain, Colchester has produced many items referencing spectacle entertainment, some mass-produced memorabilia, others locally made: glass sports cups, lamps, relief-decorated pottery and moulds, including a mould-punch for a gladiator figure, a terracotta plaque, a wall painting showing a defeated *hoplomachus*(?) and a knife handle in the form of a victorious *murmillo*.[63] This diversity of visual evidence, supplemented by the evidence of investment in buildings which could accommodate games – one theatre is documented within the town, another in its environs at the Gosbecks sanctuary as well as the circus – speaks to the affinity of the *Victricenses* with Roman spectacle culture. It also speaks to their ability to understand the significance of the texts and actions represented on the Vase.[64]

Reassessment of the Colchester Vase has major implications for interpreting the biography of the object and for informing the broader discussion of Roman spectacles taking place at

[63] Glass: Harden 1947, 299–300, pl. 86.1; Cool and Price 1995, 47–9. Lamps: May 1928, 182, 277–8, pl. 72, 22 and pl. 86; Pooley *et al.* 2011, 292. Pottery, moulds and punch: Hull 1963, 47–74, 91–9; Bird 1999, 15, *passim*; Symonds and Wade 1999, 243, 267. Plaque: Hull 1958, 170, pl. 30a. Wall painting: Ling 1974, 147, 149, figs 141–2; Knife handle: Junkelmann 2000, 69, fig. 73.

[64] Popkin 2022, 214–20.

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Colchester, as it is best interpreted as commemorating a real event in the town. That it was a local product of the Colchester kilns, that the inscription was cut pre-firing and that the combatants are depicted in distinctive detail together suggest that the Vase was a commissioned piece and that the named individuals were real performers.[65] Precise observation of their arms and armour suggests a sufficient familiarity with Roman spectacle to notice and document the idiosyncrasies of the garb, arms and identity of participants, including the left-handedness of the *secutor* Memnon, as well as the distinctive dress of the animal fighters.[66] The exceptional quality of the barbotine decoration as well as the finesse of the writing is, moreover, indicative of a potter/potters meeting a commissioned brief as opposed to operating from a limited design repertoire.[67] It is conceivable that the individual/s who made the Vase were among the audience.

The staging of such spectacles in Colchester was likely enabled by its privileged position on long-distance communication routes. From his home at Xanten, the journey of Valentinus by land and by river and sea vessel to Colchester would have taken less than seven days under optimal conditions, eased by long-established trade networks linking his destination, a few miles inland on the Colne, with the Rhine and its tributaries.[68] These cross-channel links in the movement of goods and people between south-east Britain and the Rhineland are epitomised in the merchants' dedications at the Rhine mouth shrines to the goddess Nehalennia.[69] Many of those traders originate in the riverside cities on the Rhine and Moselle which possess visual evidence in the towns proper and their hinterlands for *munera* and *venationes*.[70] This transmarine connection might have brought arena performers of all kinds to Colchester. The human mobility hinted at in the onomastic evidence discussed above, especially for Mario and Memnon, is not surprising in the context of the general mobility of gladiators attested in epigraphic and occasionally visual sources, now supplemented by isotopic evidence from human skeletal material.[71] The pairings might even illustrate the orchestration of the diversity of performers for stage effect noted by Valerie Hope: 'Perhaps pitting men of different nationalities and towns against each other added to the tensions of the arena's combats'.[72] The same cross-channel connections might also have supplied animals for arena spectacle, above all the bears embodied in the creature abused by Secundus and Mario, as the likely most spectacular *bestiae* / *ferae* to appear in the British arena. Inscriptions indicate both the scale of wild animal procurement in the lower Rhine and military involvement in animal capture. Epigraphic testimony includes a second-century A.D. dedication to Diana recording the taking of 50 bears by one centurion, the *vivarium* or animal enclosure established by another in the late first or early second century A.D. (the only example documented outside Rome) and a later dedication to Silvanus by the bear catcher (*ursarius*) of the 30th legion at Xanten.[73] This

[65] Bird and Crummy, this volume.
[66] Bird and Crummy, this volume; Wilmott 2007.
[67] Bird and Crummy, this volume; Darling 1989, 31–2.
[68] Calculated using the Orbis tool: https://orbis.stanford.edu/ (accessed 10 December 2021).
[69] Stuart and Bogaers 2001.
[70] For mosaics, Dunbabin 2016, 195–7, but with additional major examples including the destroyed pavements from Reims (Stern 1957, 33–5, no. 38, 'mosaïque des promenades') and Augsburg (Parlasca 1959, 101–4. Taf. 95). The fresco record is also rich, notably exceptional scenes from the Maasbracht villa (Dutch Limburg) which show gladiators, animal hunters and (likely) portraits of the villa owners, possible sponsors of *spectacula* at Xanten, and multiple spectacles represented in the Domviertel and Appellhofplatze sites in Cologne (Swinkels 2019; also Papini 2004).
[71] Inscriptions e.g. *EAOR* V, 179; Robert 1940: 295–6; images e.g. mosaics from Aix en Provence, see Lavagne 1994, and Wadi Lebda, near Leptis Magna (Dunbabin 2016, 193–4); a statuette and knife handle respectively from Egypt and Avenches (Ako-Adounvo 1999, 167–9); stable isotope analyses of human skeletal remains from Ephesus (Lösch *et al.* 2014) and York (Müldner *et al.* 2011).
[72] Hope 2000: 102.
[73] Bear capture, *EAOR* V, no. 48 = *ILS* 9241; *vivarium*, *EAOR* V, no. 49 = *ILS* 3265; *ursarius* = *EAOR* V, no. 50. Dimde (2019, 235–49) prefers to relate this evidence to military acquisition of animals for imperial spectacles (i.e. in Rome) but this overstates a distinction between military/imperial and municipal games.

regional specialisation may explain the zooarchaeological testimony for bears abused in *venationes* in Rome's northern arenas.[74]

Adding name captions to arena and other spectacle representations has a long pedigree in Roman art.[75] Mosaics and paintings thus annotated survive occasionally in northern and western Europe.[76] Captioned portable objects from the same regions are more numerous, above all in serial productions like glass sports cups and more occasionally samian vessels.[77] These are, however, likely to be generic representations of spectacles: the Colchester Vase instead belongs among the small corpus of inscribed objects made to mark specific arena events. For example, thin-walled cups from the atelier of Gaius Valerius Verdullus in the middle Ebro valley celebrated gladiatorial and other *spectacula* at *Calagurris* (Calahorra), naming gladiators, their types, *familia* and fight outcome, as well as the *editor* (and vessel maker) for a specific occasion.[78] Representations of combats on the second- to third-century medallions for vessels in the Rhône valley give similar detail as well as combatants' fight histories.[79] Other one-off mementoes include barbotine-decorated vessels from the fort at Langenhain, near Wiesbaden, and the Hees cemetery at Nijmegen, the former labelling gladiators and musicians, the latter a pair of combatants, some of these performers also with likely stage names.[80]

Despite its affiliation with this captioning tradition, the Colchester Vase differs somewhat from other examples, especially in the anticipated interaction between viewer and object.[81] The colour contrast between the slip and the fabric as well as the larger size of lettering on the Colchester Vase facilitated reading at a distance – other vessels noted above would have needed closer scrutiny to read the text, given their small lettering.[82] Some would also have required rotation to appraise scenes and captions fully, whereas the scenes on the Vase with captions were (just) visible in their entirety in a single field of view. These characteristics potentially gave a more monumental impact to the Colchester vessel, enabling possible legibility from a few metres away, albeit dependent on lighting.

Whether deliberately or not, the Colchester vessel also differs in its presentation of narrative. On the Langenhain and Nijmegen beakers, for example, fights are in progress, neither inscription nor image supplying the outcome; on the Rhône and Ebro vessels, the texts report the outcome of the battle which continues in the associated scenes. On the Colchester vessel, the *ad digitum* gesture by Valentinus signals the end of combat, but the decision to spare or slaughter him, and thus his fate as victim or survivor of his first combat, is unreported. At the banquets whose *voluptas* it enhanced or at the funeral in which it was eventually interred, the Colchester Vase invited those who encountered it to relive the 'collective effervescence' of the spectators and the drama of the fight's dénouement.[83] The recall of Memnon might have prompted other reflections, given the likely sensitivity of some viewers to the literary pedigree

[74] For zooarchaeological evidence for the arena in Britain, Wilmott 2008, 163; Allen 2018: 107. A possible bear bone was recovered at the site of the London amphitheatre (Bateman *et al.* 2008, 128–9). At Colchester remains of bears have been found in Roman contexts from several sites (Luff 1985, 148; 1993, 98, 134; Curl 2004, 143). Bear bones have also been recovered in association with amphitheatres in Gaul and beyond, with notable recent discoveries from Reims and *Viminacium* (Poupon 2022, sections 14, 26; Vukovic 2011).

[75] Dunbabin 2016.

[76] Mosaics: e.g. Rudston (Ling 2007); Metz (*EAOR* V, no. 71); Cologne (*EAOR* V, no. 72); Augsburg (*EAOR* IX, no.17). Wall-painting: e.g. Liégeaud (*EAOR* V, no.69; Swinkels 2019).

[77] Glass: Foy and Fontaine 2010; Samian: Weber-Hiden 2005.

[78] *EAOR* VII, nos 39–35, appendix; Baratta 2020, 192; Popkin 2022, 209–11.

[79] *EAOR* V, App.no. 11; Teyssier 2011.

[80] Simon 1975; Swinkels 2010. For similar inscriptions on bronze vessels, Dunbabin 2017.

[81] cf. Cassibry 2018.

[82] For example, *c.* 3–4 mm for the Cavillargues medallion: *EAOR* V, App. 1; *c.* 3 mm for the Verdullus vessels: Giulia Baratta, pers. comm. 2021; cf. Vindolanda writing tablets, *c.* 3 mm for single-stroke letters.

[83] Papini (2004) on engagement with such images in the context of hospitality; Fagan (2012, 203) borrows Durkheim's phrase to describe the euphoria of watching the high-stakes spectacle unfold.

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of his name and to the resonance of a hero linked with one coast of Ocean winning in combat on its opposite shore.[84]

As a commemorative piece of sports memorabilia, the original use of the Vase before its interment as a cremation vessel raises interesting questions, especially given its size, limited evidence for its handling and its findspot. Although *munera* originated in funeral contexts, it is unlikely, considering the late date of the vessel, that it was commissioned solely as a funerary urn depicting a *munus* that had publicly honoured the deceased.[85] Furthermore, the Vase also depicts an animal hunt (*venatio*), an activity that is not otherwise documented as an element of funerary ritual.[86] Vessels of this type are also only rarely documented in grave furnishing. There are only a very few graves from which barbotine vessels have been recovered from burials at Colchester and all were ancillary grave goods.[87] Indeed, the only other comparable decorated barbotine vessel from Britain, used as a cremation vessel, is a hunt-cup from Bedford Purlieus in the Nene Valley.[88] If not therefore commissioned as a cremation vessel, the Vase may instead have been destined for display, testament to the commissioner-owner's status.

The Colchester Vase displays little original use-wear, if any, and, as observed by Margaret Darling, it is questionable whether such exceptionally large beakers would have been of practical use in a convivial context. Empty it weighs over 1 kg; filled with a liquid it would be extremely heavy, cumbersome to pass around and difficult to drink from.[89] This lack of use adds weight to the Vase being a souvenir with which contact was limited to viewing and occasional turning, perhaps displayed in a setting of hospitality by its owner, prompting memory of the events depicted and perhaps discussion of the owner's connection with them. This mnemonic potential of the Vase within a hospitality setting may also have been to the fore in its final display and deposition within the grave at the funeral ceremony. While its furnishing does not strongly distinguish this grave from contemporary burials in the same cemetery, the Vase's very specific biography and its direct allusions to past events may have prompted memories among funeral participants of this individual's status.[90] As noted above, only in one other case from Britain is such a vessel used as a burial container, the slightly larger beaker from Bedford Purlieus showing *venatores* fighting a bear and a stag. In this case, evidence survives for the vessel's association with a monumental tomb – suggesting an occupant of high status.[91]

The Vase was undoubtedly an expensive product, produced by a 'master potter', and it is plausible that it was commissioned by a person who had some special relationship to the events depicted.[92] Was this the 40+-year-old male whose cremated remains were buried in the Vase? The bones show no definitive evidence for the sharp or blunt force trauma which might be the legacy of an arena career, although due to the severity of taphonomic alteration caused by

[84] On the resonances of Ocean, Hingley 2022; Rutland mosaic, Anon. 2021.
[85] See e.g. Wiedemann 1992, 5–7; Potter 1999, 305–7.
[86] Potter 1999, 309.
[87] For example, Crummy *et al.* 1993; Crossan 2001; Orr 2010; Pooley *et al.* 2011; Pooley 2018.
[88] Now in Toronto: Easson 1973; Perring 1977, 262, fig.10.6 b–c; Darling 1989, 31.
[89] Darling 1989, 31; as noted by Symonds (1992, 70) and Cool (2006, 147–51), large beakers may have been used as communal vessels, as suggested specifically for the Colchester Vase by Oenbrink (1999, 784), or mixing bowls, but the exceptional size of the Colchester Vase would seem to preclude this function as well.
[90] Bird and Crummy, this volume; Pearce 2016, 351–2.
[91] Easson 1973; Huskinson 1994, 18, pl.16 35a & 35b; The style of tunics and short whips of the two sculpted figures from Bedford Purlieus are similar to sculptural depictions of horse trainers (Amanda Claridge, pers. comm. 2020). It is notable that both the decoration of the cremation vessel and the associated funeral monuments depict individuals of related occupations.
[92] Bird and Crummy, this volume, discuss the exceptional quality of the Vase, suggesting it may have come from a workshop to which the potter Acceptus iii belonged. It is notable that specialist potters at Colchester, such as Acceptus iii, Minuso ii and Miccio vii, emigrated from the Rhineland, a further indicator of the mobility between south-east Britain and the Rhineland argued above to have enabled the provision of gladiators at Colchester.

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cremation such trauma cannot be conclusively ruled out. On present evidence it is therefore unlikely that the deceased was one of the performers immortalised on the Vase, but he may have been more than a keen follower of local spectacles, perhaps a *lanista* (trainer of performers) or an *editor* (sponsor) of *munera*.[93]

If the Vase is interpreted as celebrating a local *munus*, perhaps the obvious question is, where would this have taken place? Although there is no conclusive evidence for the site of an amphitheatre at Colchester, gladiatorial spectacles were not solely produced within such a venue and could plausibly have taken place in the town's circus or one of its theatres.[94] There are several known amphitheatres in Britain, but as *munera* may have been held far less frequently in the provinces, this may in some places have precluded the building of an expensive permanent structure specifically to house gladiatorial games, especially where there were alternatives.[95] Temporary structures might also have accommodated these spectacles, depending on their scale.[96] One of Colchester's theatres, in particular, may have been appropriate to housing gladiatorial combat. Its proximity to the Temple of Claudius and its *temenos* may indicate the sacred relationship between them.[97] Its role as the first provincial capital meant that Colchester also likely hosted major ceremonies related to the imperial cult – grounds for inferring that gladiatorial *munera* would have been offered as priestly obligations.[98] The famous imperial edict of A.D. 176–77, contemporary with the Colchester Vase and intended to mitigate the expenditure games of this kind incurred, speaks to the likely cost of *munera* in Britain, especially where the provision of performers potentially demanded long and costly journeys.[99] Colchester's foundation as a veteran colony, a context with which gladiatorial games were especially associated on an imperial level, as well as its potential role within the province, may have instituted a spectacle culture of greater intensity than some other Romano-British cities. The town's favourable location on long-distance communication routes also lent it more privileged access to arena performers, human and animal. This context may help explain the investment in the artistry commissioned to create lasting mementoes of performance such as the Vase.

CONCLUSION

Figured scenes on barbotine-decorated pottery are often referred to as circus or arena scenes and presumed to be generic,[100] but close examination of the figures and inscription on the Colchester

[93] cf. Wiedemann 1992, 59–62 for discussion of the wealth of *editores*.

[94] Dunnett 1971; Crummy 1982; 2005; 2008. See Dodge (2014) for discussion of the multifunctionality, and adaptability, of sporting venues. At Rome, for example, *munera* were held in the Forum and *Saepta*, from the time of Augustus, as well as theatres: Jory 1986; Köhne 2000, 18–19. At Ostia as yet no amphitheatre is documented, despite extensive investigation, though Meiggs (1973, 426–7) advocates 'retaining an open mind' *vis-à-vis* its apparent absence. Philip Crummy (pers. comm. 2022) believes an amphitheatre could have been located to the north-west of the Temple of Claudius at Colchester, within the town walls. However, no modern archaeological intervention has yet been undertaken to support this theory.

[95] Mattingly 2007, 282; Wilmott 2008; for discussion of the frequency of *munera*, see Hopkins 1983, 6–7; Wiedemann 1992, 12, 47, 56; Kyle 2001, 77; Fagan 2011, 151, n. 73; Wilmott 2008, 20.

[96] For temporary amphitheatre/entertainment structures, see e.g. Coleman 2003, 65–9; Welch 2007, 55–71; Dodge 2011, 226. For the costly and labour-intensive construction of amphitheatres, note Wilmott (2008, 51–2). Welch (2007, 55–7) believes a temporary wooden *cavea* could have been constructed relatively quickly but uses the *Forum Romanun* as an example where the cost of (presumably highly skilled and abundant) carpenters is not considered.

[97] Mattingly 2007, 283; Wilmott 2008, 48, 179; note Jory's (1986) argument for the use of theatres in displaying *munera*.

[98] Crummy 2005, 267; Mattingly 2007, 283; Wilmott 2008, 17–18, 48. The priests of the imperial cult were of one of the main providers of games in the provinces: Wiedemann 1992, 44; Futrell 1997, 79–93.

[99] *EAOR* VII, 3; Carter 2003.

[100] e.g. Toynbee 1962; Darling 1989.

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Vase points to it having been commissioned from a local pottery workshop to commemorate a record of a specific occasion that took place in the town.[101] That it was then used as a cremation urn for a non-local adult male invites further interpretation that he was the commissioner-owner, probably with a closer connection to the event than spectator only. Although the identity of this man remains enigmatic, and although no amphitheatre has been found at Colchester, a holistic reassessment of the Vase has introduced the reality of arena spectacles in the town, ranging alongside or even among the events that would have been held at its circus and in its theatres. The biographical fragments inferred from the inscriptions show how these spectacles drew on Colchester's integration into inter-provincial networks enabling performer mobility and underpinning arena logistics.

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Colchester + Ipswich Museums, Colchester (G.J.C.D.)
glynn.davis@colchester.gov.uk

King's College London (J.P.)
john.pearce@kcl.ac.uk

Stantec, Leeds (E.L.C.)
e.l.carroll@hotmail.co.uk

Durham University (J.M., J.M., G.N.)
janet.montgomery@durham.ac.uk
j.f.moore@durham.ac.uk
g.m.nowell@durham.ac.uk

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

For supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0068113X24000187.

[101] Bird and Crummy, this volume.

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EAOR Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente Romano, Rome.
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ILAM Inscriptions Latines des Alpes Maritimes, S. Morabito 2010, Nice.
ILS Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae II.1, H. Dessau 1892, Berlin.
LGPN Lexicon of Greek Personal Names. https://www.lgpn.ox.ac.uk/
RIB The Roman Inscriptions of Britain.
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