

A Tale of Two Frontiers?: Hadrian's Wall and the Saxon Shore Forts in the 3rd to 5th centuries A.D.

The unusual architecture, variable dating and unclear function of the Saxon Shore Forts in southeast England have caused them to be seen in the past as anomalies in Roman Britain. Any scholarship discussing the forts tends to ignore or contrast them with more “normal” and well-studied forts on Hadrian's Wall and elsewhere. Constructed at various times in the 3rd c. A.D. on the south and east coasts of England, the Saxon Shore Forts owe their unusual name to a single reference in the enigmatic *Notitia Dignitatum*, a list of Roman sites, officials and garrisons believed to be compiled near the end of the 4th century. The *Notitia* mentions nine of such sites under the command of the *Comes Litoris Saxonici* or ‘Count of the Saxon Shore.’ (Pearson, 2002, 8). Nevertheless, the *Notitia* is notorious for its omission of sites, and thus it is with no great surprise that the current number of coastal forts attested archaeologically in southeast England is eleven with the possibility of a twelfth.

While previous scholarship on the Saxon Shore Forts has concentrated on their architecture and internal structures, relatively little attention is given to their military finds. Indeed, the few works that do acknowledge the military culture of the Saxon Shore forts conclude that the number of discernable military objects from each fort is low compared with other garrisoned fortifications of the late empire. This observation has been interpreted to signify the Saxon Shore forts' reduced operation as military defences in this time period. In contrast, recent research on Hadrian's Wall has focused more strongly on occupation layers dating the 3rd to 5th centuries, the military equipment found in these periods have traditionally been seen to indicate that their military

occupation continued far into the late empire and perhaps even after the traditional end of Roman occupation in Britain in A.D. 407 (Coulston, 2010, 60).

However, through a systematic survey of the military objects at all of the excavated Saxon Shore forts, I will demonstrate that a military occupation and purpose is applicable to nearly all of these forts during the late Empire. I will place specific emphasis on site finds that can be linked to a military occupation and thus elucidate what makes such an object or a site “military” and what objects can best be used as ‘military indicators’. Furthermore, by comparing these finds with those from contemporaneous coastal forts on Hadrian’s Wall and its continuation down the Cumbrian coast, I will suggest that the apparent dearth of military objects at the Saxon Shore Forts is also seen elsewhere in Britain in the later Roman Empire and may be caused by provincial or even empire-wide garrison depopulation or perhaps a shift in expressions of military identity.

Bibliography

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