

Pompeii of the North: Excavations at Bloomberg London and the return of the Temple of Mithras

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6th October 2014



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News



City's Roman remains 'rival Pompeii'

Experts marvel at treasures found in excavations for new office block

Louise Jury
Chief Arts Correspondent

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL dig in the City has been hailed as "the Pompeii of the north" for the treasures that have revealed new details about life in London during Roman times.

More than 10,000 artefacts and an entire streetscape have been found at the site in Bank, where waterlogging by the long-lost Walbrook river created perfect conditions for their preservation for nearly 2,000 years.

The finds include 100 wax tablets, which are written records and which experts hope will reveal the names of Roman Londoners and the streets they lived on.

The discoveries have been all the more surprising because the site has already been heavily investigated. Archaeologists

Roman import: this ceramic oil lamp depicting a stag was made in central France in the 1st century AD



gists were brought in as part of the planning process for the new European headquarters of Bloomberg, the news organisation, because the site on Queen Victoria Street was already home to the most important excavation in London of the 20th century.

The Roman temple of Mithras – dating from the 3rd century AD – was discovered in 1954 and experts from the Museum of London Archaeology believed that the surviving parts of the temple had already been fully excavated and dismantled, and that no other remains would have survived the extensive building work of the Fifties and Sixties.

However, they were astonished to discover even more of the temple, including walls to the vestry and other finds which will help to put it into context.

"All the 50 archaeologists who are working on site at the moment know they are unlikely to see one like it again," said project manager Sophie Jackson. "Why the site is so incredibly



Old and new: a view of the excavations at Bloomberg Place. Findings include a complete ceramic beaker, below, with applied "ring and dot" decoration

Important is the quality of the preservation of the archaeological finds that are normally lost or decayed on other sites."

Finds include the second Roman door to be discovered in the capital, a complete amber gladiator amulet, the largest ever collection of good luck charms in the shape of phalluses and fists, and a giant decorated piece of leather that is believed to be part of an item of soft furnishing, and which is without parallel in the known Roman world.

Experts will now analyse the relics which were uncovered after the excavation of nearly 3,500 tons of soil. It is the largest collection of small finds recovered in a single excavation in London.

The remains of the temple that were found in 1954 were for many years shown in a poor display near the site. They will now be put back near to where they lay.

By the time the Bloomberg building is completed in 2016, a public exhibition of the latest key finds will be able to explain more of the Roman way of life that existed around the site.

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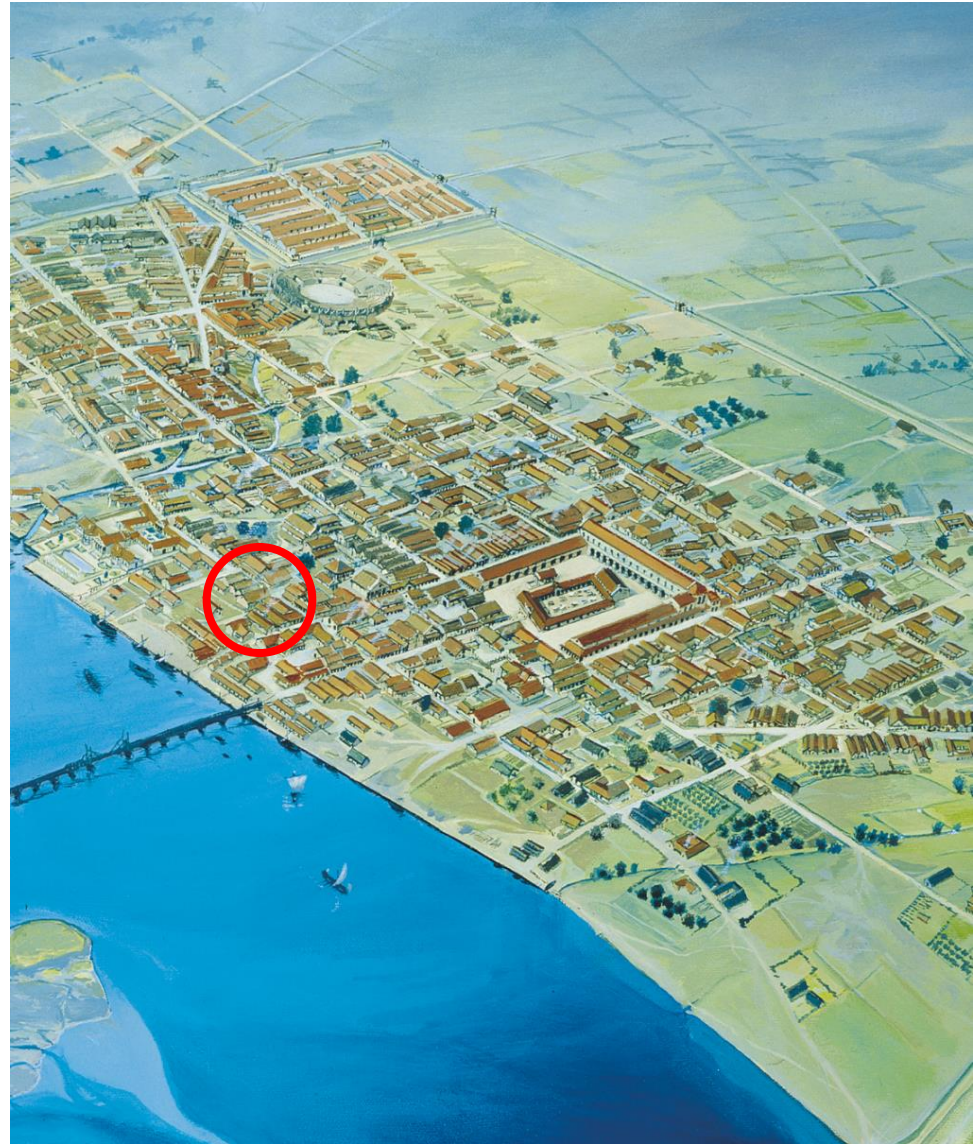










Fig 5 Looking south down Walbrook on the morning of 11 May 1941. St Stephen's, Walbrook, is on the left (Cross and Tibbs Collection: reproduced with the permission of the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police)



THE TIMES

BUILDING ON ROMAN RUIN

WORK DUE TO START TO-DAY

BY OUR ARCHAEOLOGICAL CORRESPONDENT

Roman London of the second century A.D. has come to light in the past few days in an unusual find. The temple which was thought to be on the west side of the buried Walbrook stream has now been fully excavated by the Roman and Medieval London Excavation Council—within the limits of the available site. The digging cannot be carried farther because existing buildings occupy the ground.

The main features of the temple, however, can now be seen. They show an area of approximately 60ft. by 20ft. divided into a central chamber equivalent to a nave, two aisles divided by the bases of classical columns,

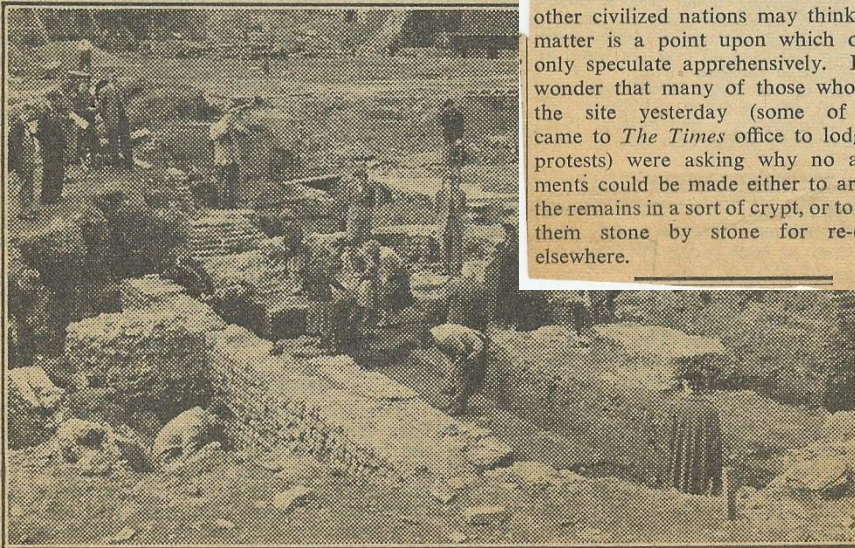
A Temple for Destruction?

Archaeological work ended on Saturday on the remarkable remains of a Roman temple of MITHRAS excavated by the Roman and Medieval London Excavation Council on a site between Cannon Street and Queen Victoria Street, adjoining Walbrook, and within a few yards of Cannon Street station. Some sixty feet in length of this building have been uncovered showing the layout of a triple apse at the west end, and a double line of pillars dividing, as it were, a nave from two aisles. Even on the last day a remarkable carved head of MITHRAS was unearthed. The excavation is still far from complete, and it seems that it never will be completed. Within a matter of hours from the writing of these words the whole structure, with anything else that may be hidden under adjoining parts of the site, is apparently due to be bulldozed out of existence to make way for the foundations of a new (and, no doubt, much-needed) building.

There is something grievously wrong with our planning if an important antiquity of this sort can be destroyed almost before it has been seen. What other civilized nations may think of the matter is a point upon which one can only speculate apprehensively. It is no wonder that many of those who visited the site yesterday (some of whom came to *The Times* office to lodge their protests) were asking why no arrangements could be made either to arch over the remains in a sort of crypt, or to remove them stone by stone for re-erection elsewhere.

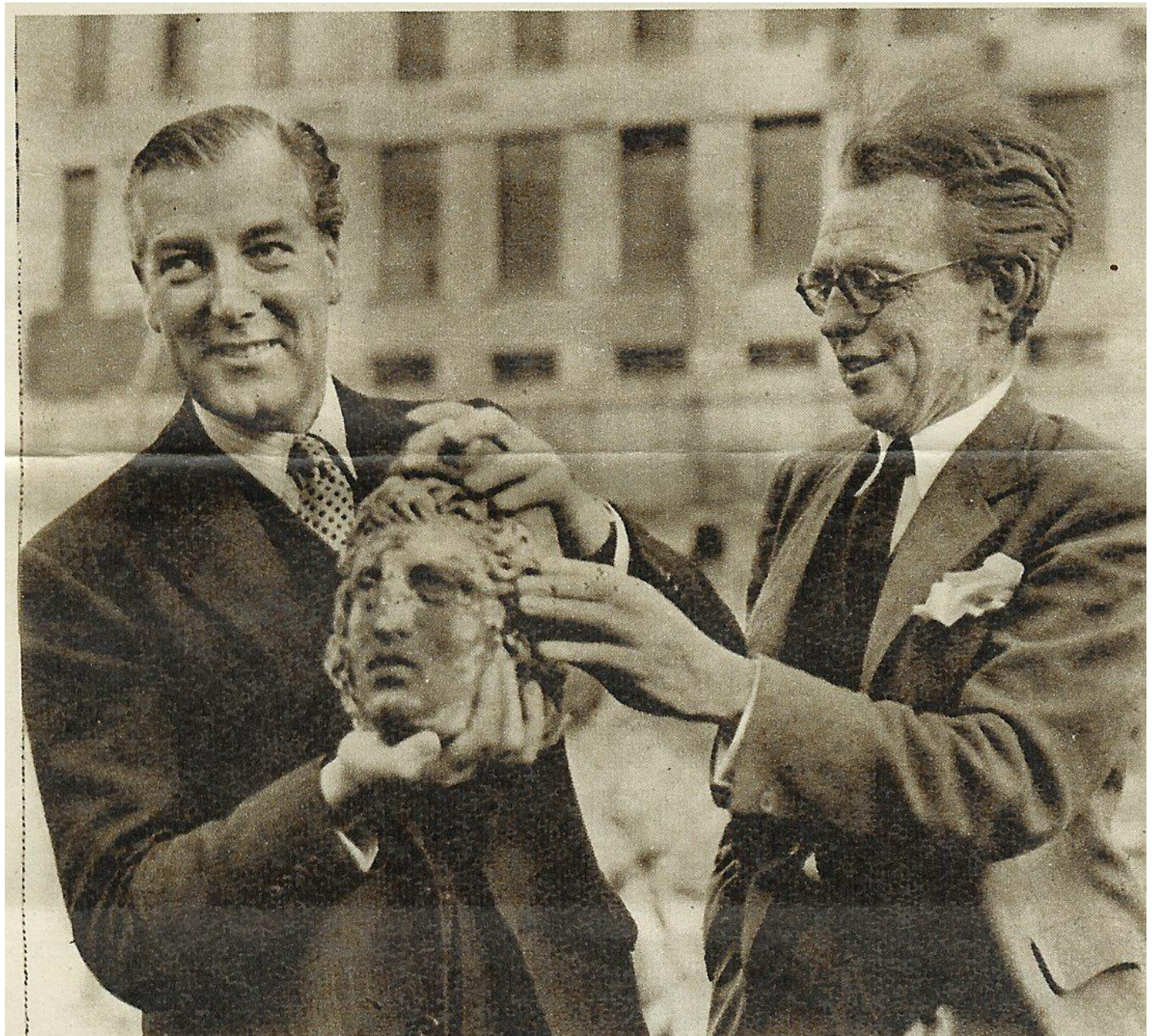
much-needed) building.

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Visitors inspecting the remains of the Roman temple yesterday.

Monday 20th September 1954



Saturday 2nd October 1954

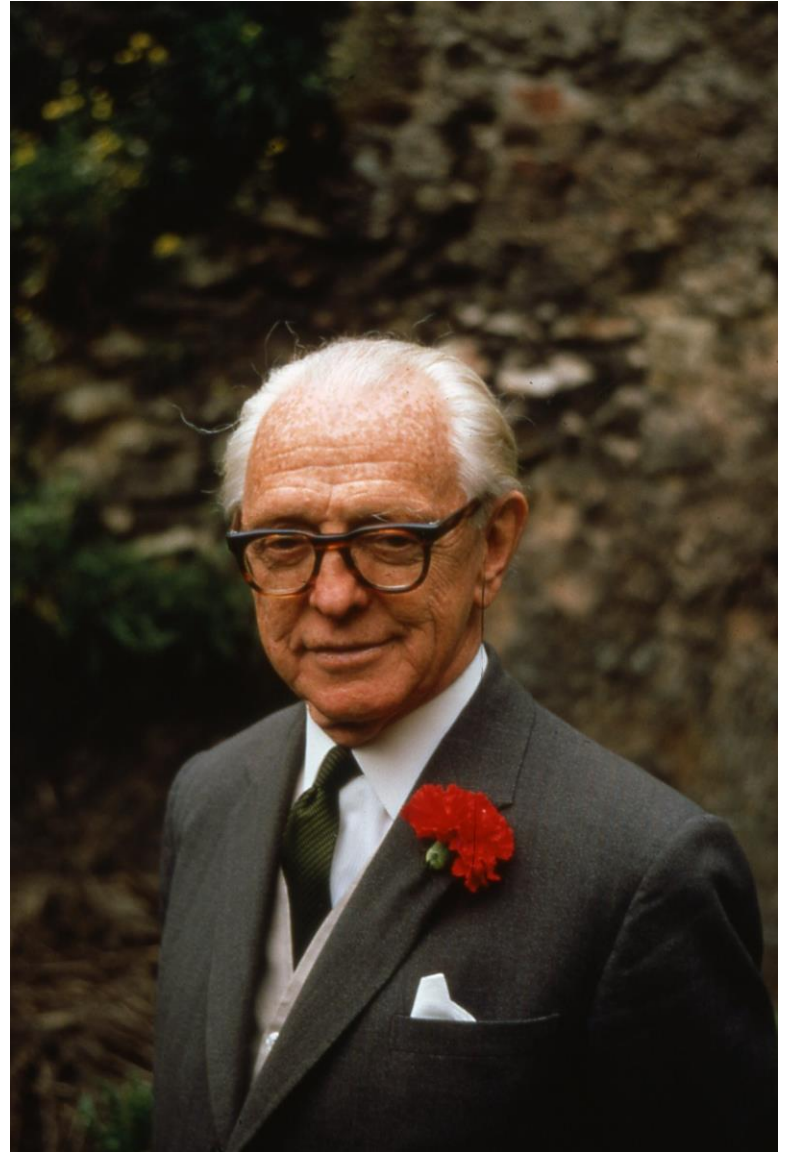
‘the Ministry has made grants to RMLEC totalling £12,300 since 1948 and very little has been given by anyone else’.. (Corp of London contributed £262.50!)





Monday 12th October 1954

‘...my suggestions were completely ignored....The result is virtually meaningless as a reconstruction of a mithraeum.’ Professor W F Grimes 1968





The reconstructed Temple of Mithras which has been completed by the Legal and General Assurance Society in the forecourt of their new head office building in Queen Victoria Street, London. The temple will be open to the public from the beginning of July.



The compromise 1962

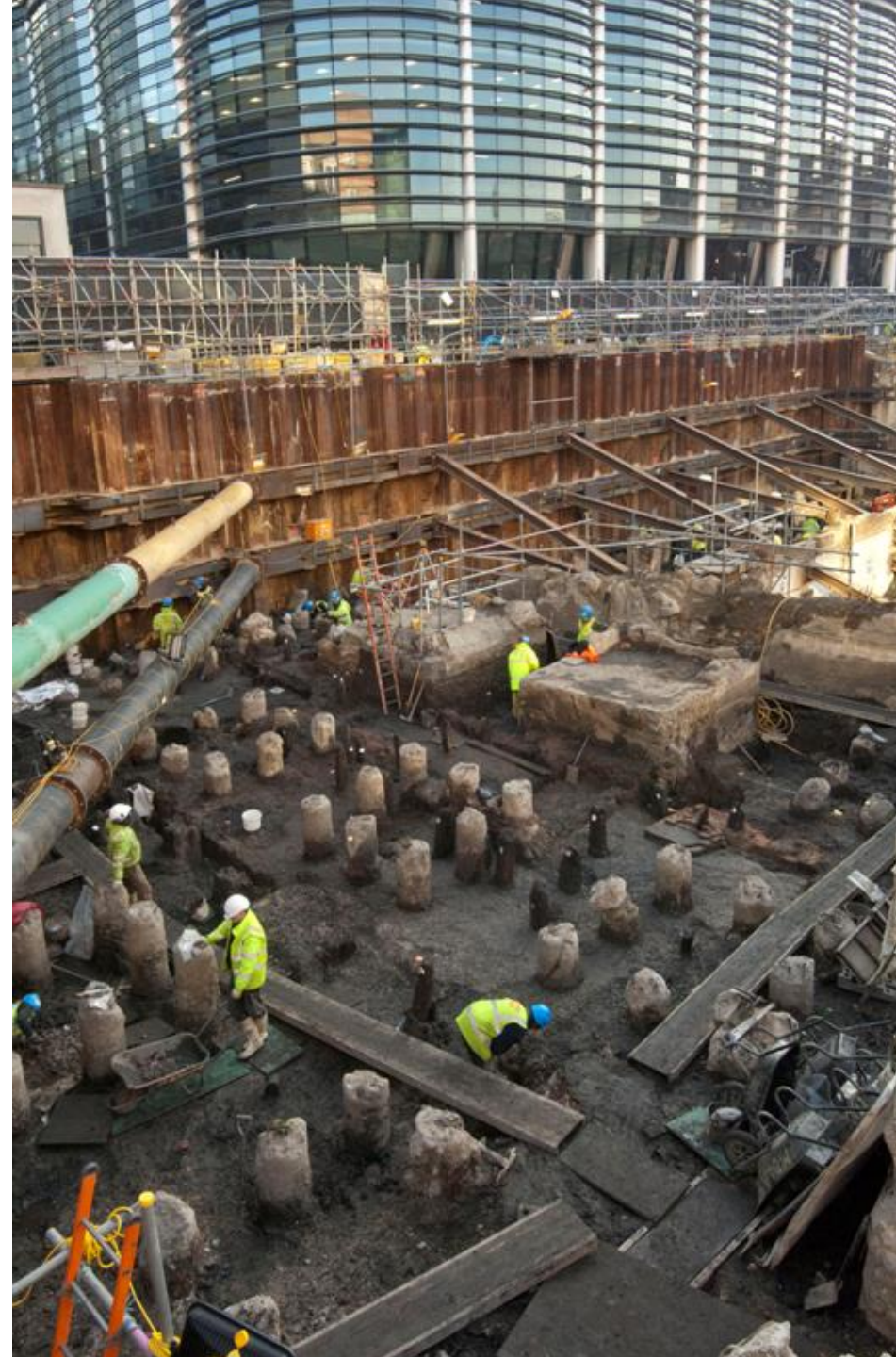
What was left after 1954?

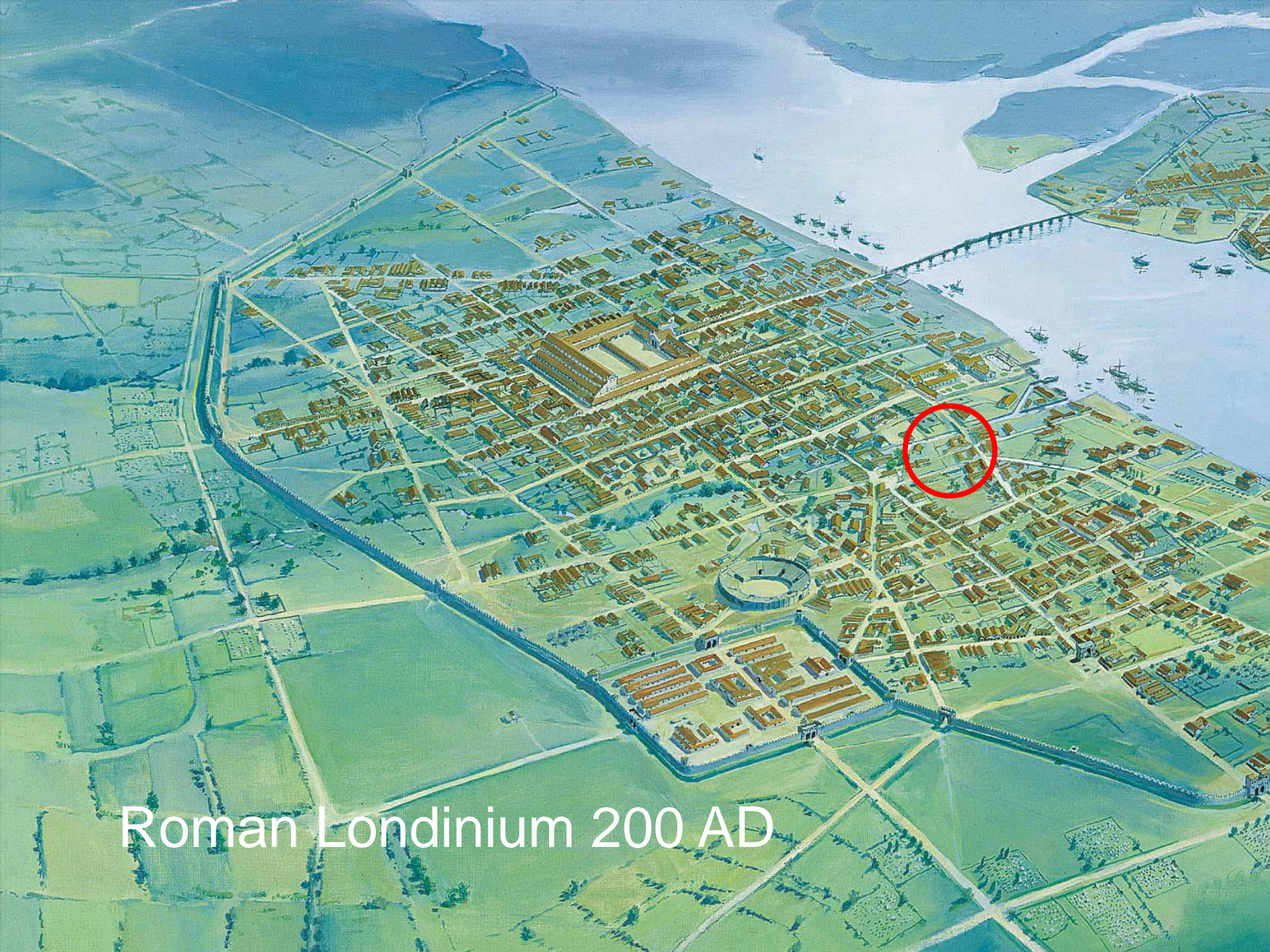




The LUL Box

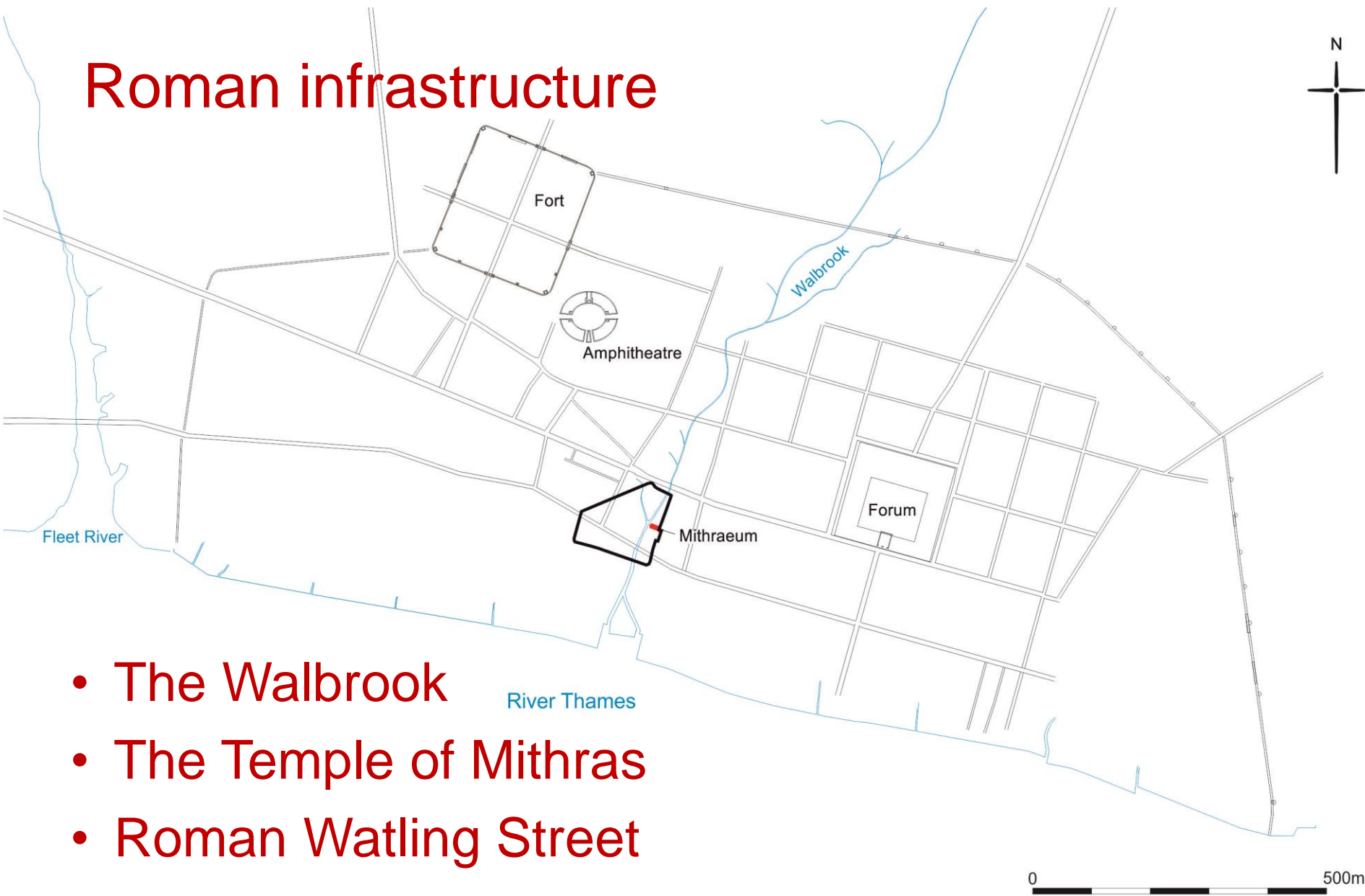
- Deepest archaeological deposits in London (7m)
- 3,500 tonnes of soil excavated by hand
- 80,000 hours
- 14,000 artefacts
- 55,000 sherds of Roman pottery alone





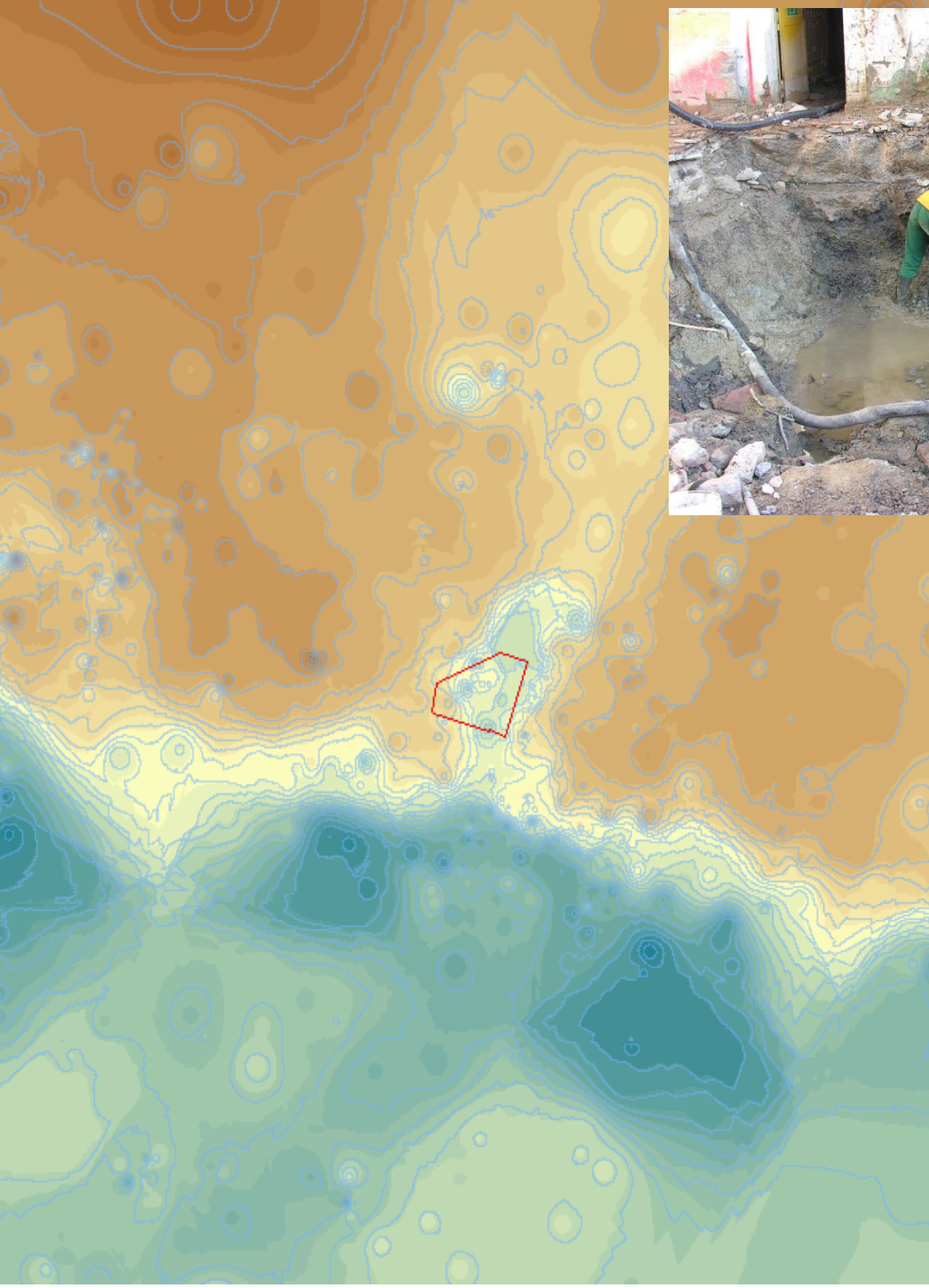
Roman Londinium 200 AD

Roman infrastructure

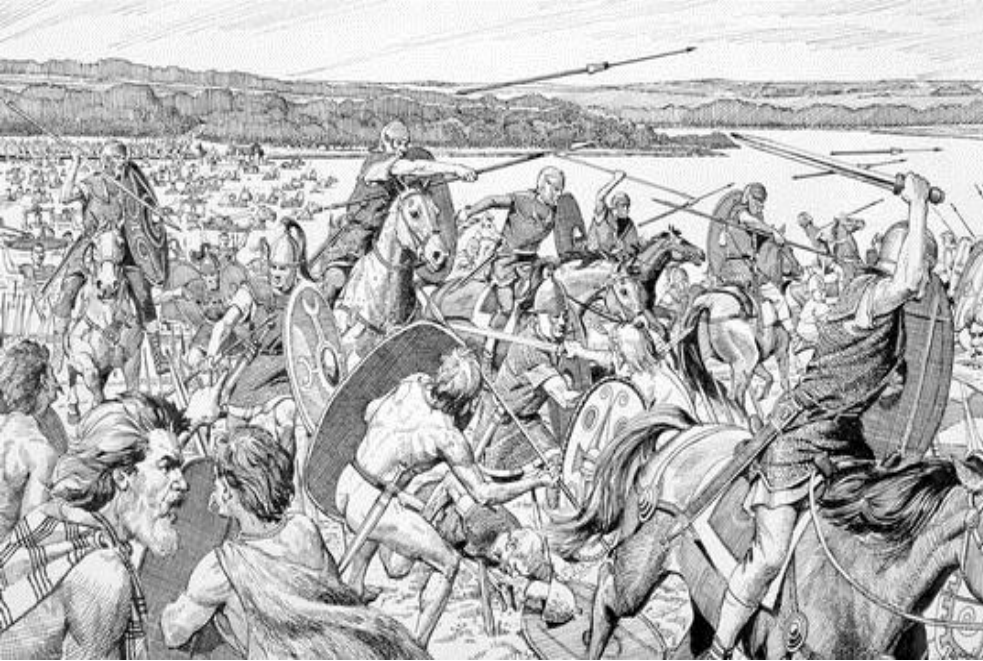


- The Walbrook
- The Temple of Mithras
- Roman Watling Street









Military activity



Cavalry gear

1st C AD
harness
pendants

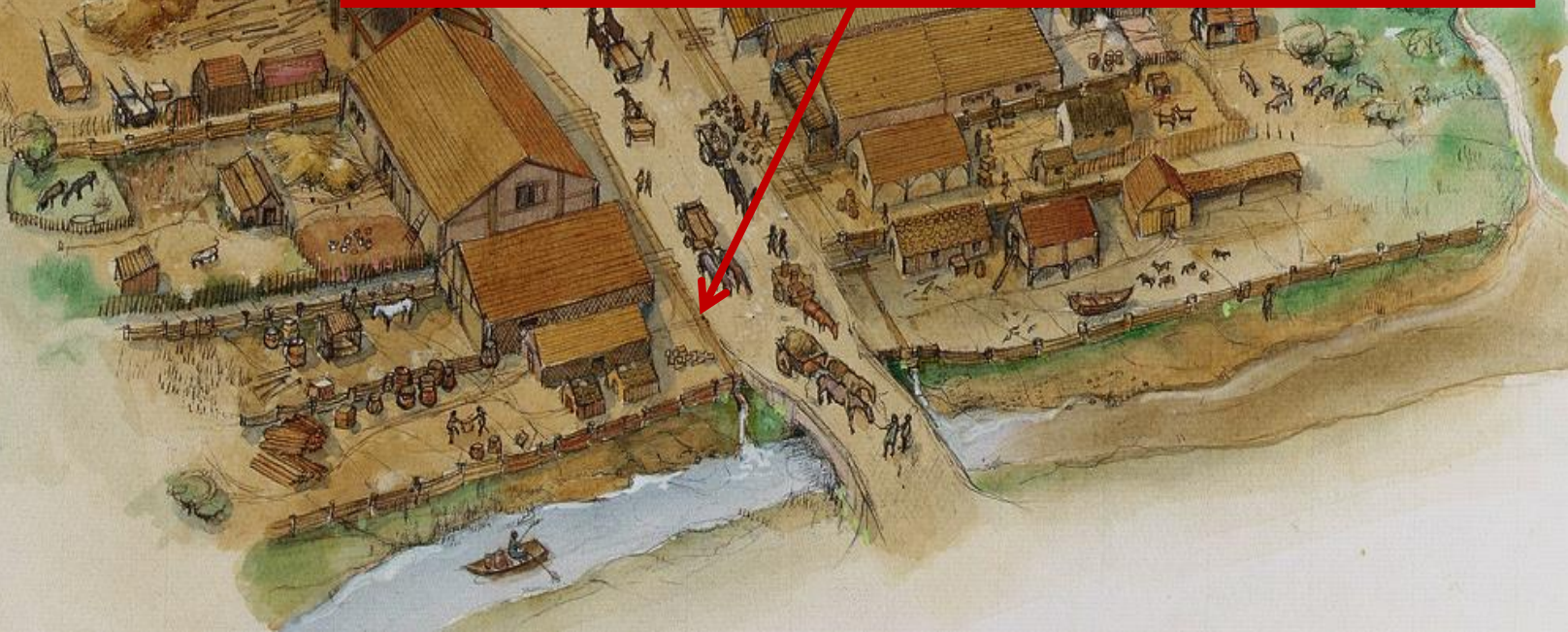




The heart of the City

1st century AD

Timber drainage





Timber walkways



Timber buildings...



Household furnishings



Pouring spout
from 1st C AD wine
mixing
bowl



1st C AD
Ceramic
oil lamp
from Lyon



Bone handled
knife



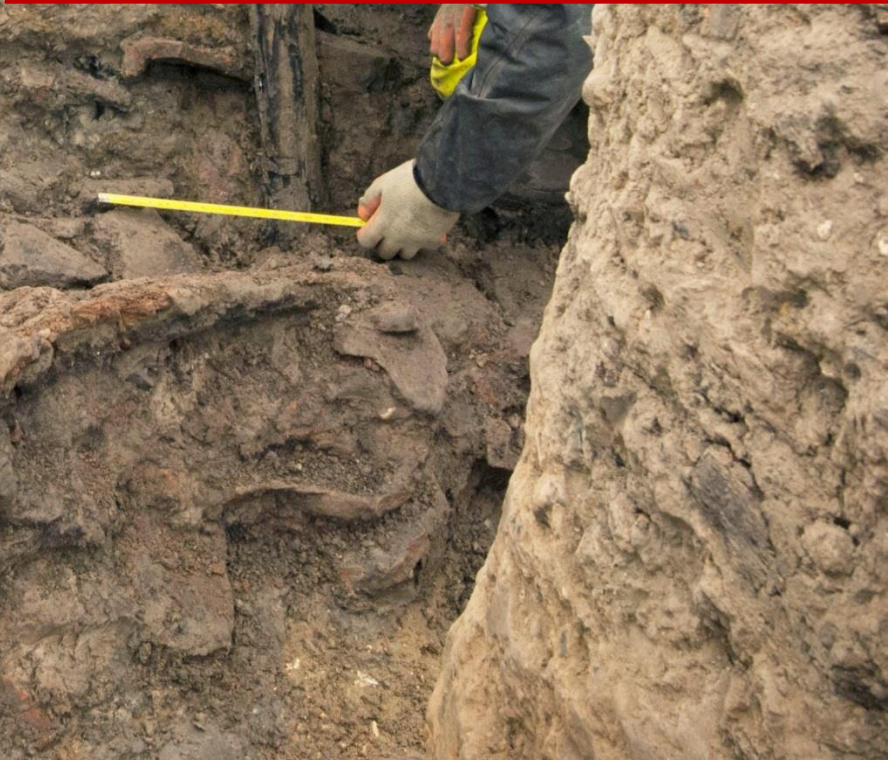
Box Stud early 2nd C AD

Decorated shale tray
1st – 2nd C AD
from Dorset



The bakery



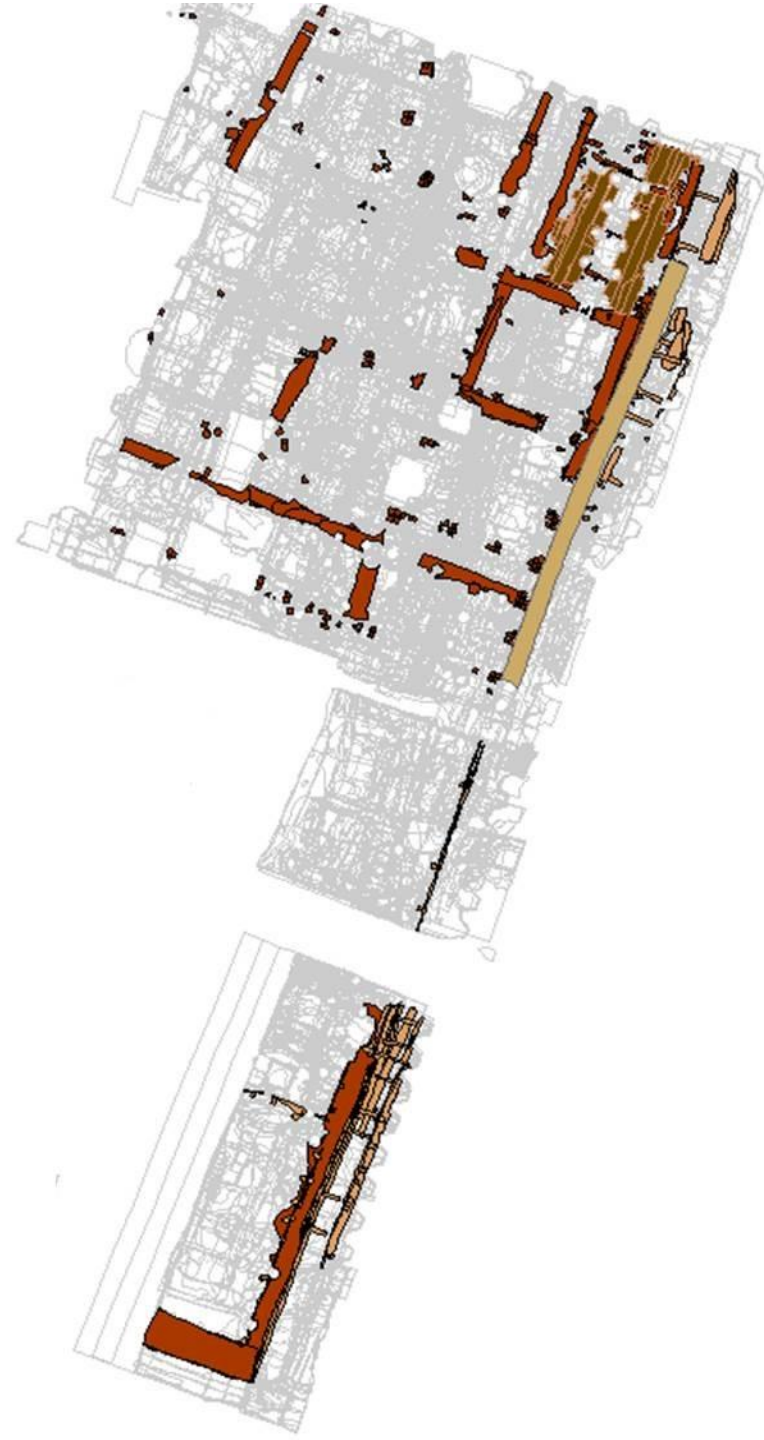
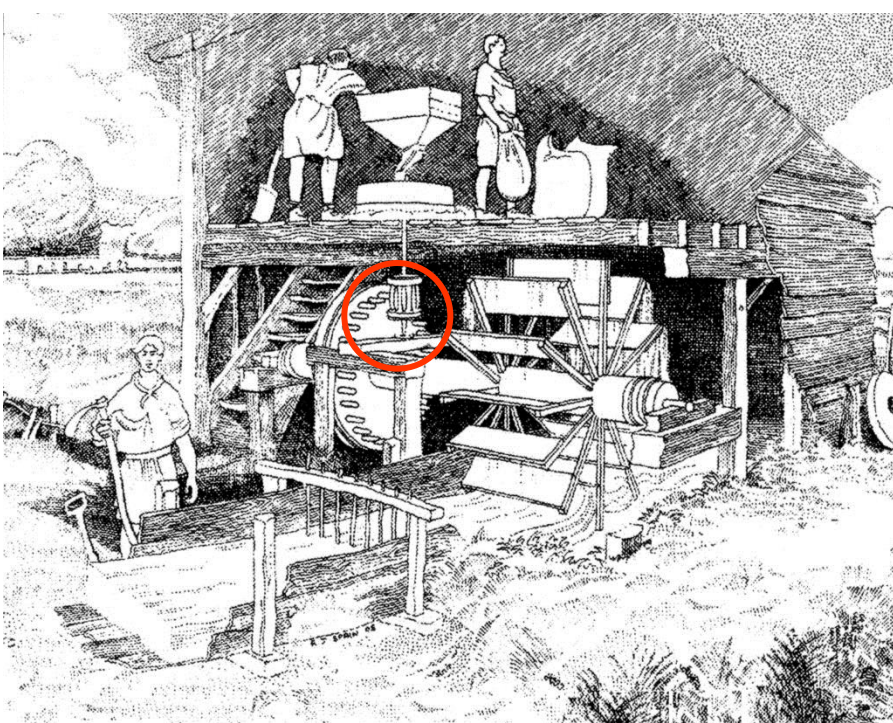




Water-mill on the Walbrook?

2nd Century AD







Late Roman well and closure deposit



Hoard of pewter vessels



4th C AD coins



Late Roman belt set



Lead tank and pipe fragments



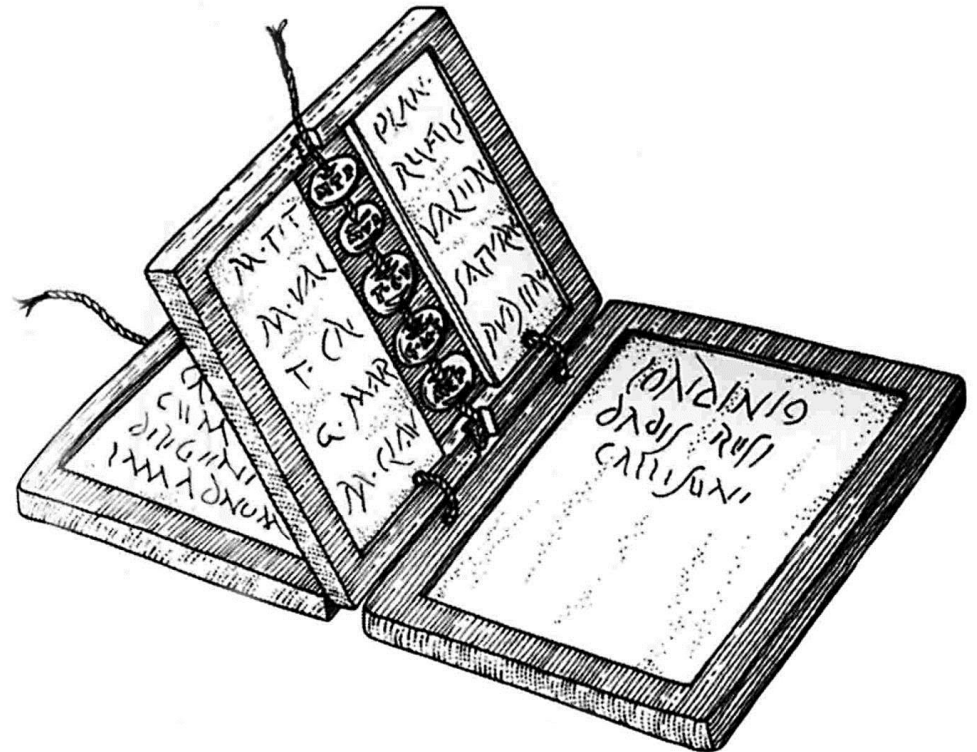


Writing tablets, styli and wax spatulas

Ink on wood – pen tablet



Wax on wood – stylus tablet



Wax on wood - label

The Walbrook Lady



Heirloom or magical objects



Neolithic axe head



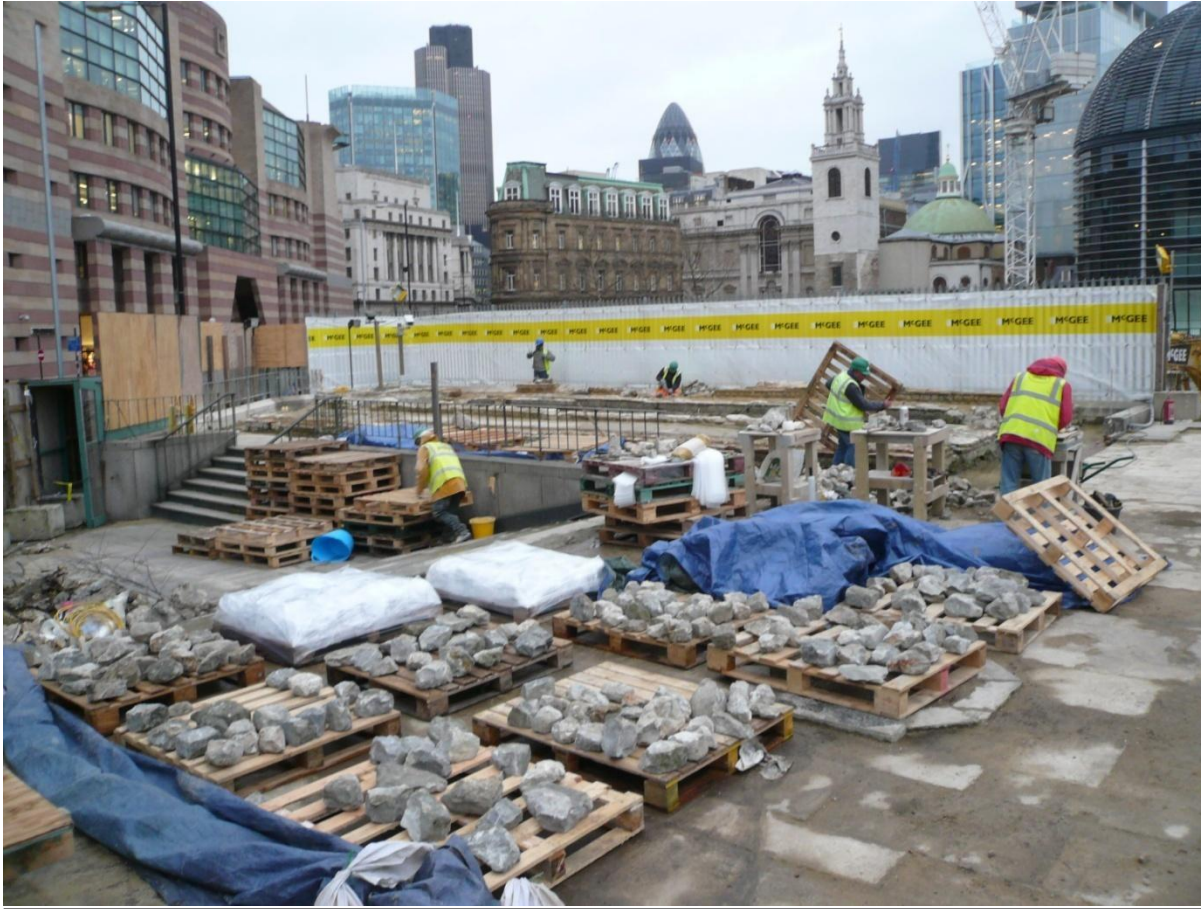
Pierced Late Iron Age coin



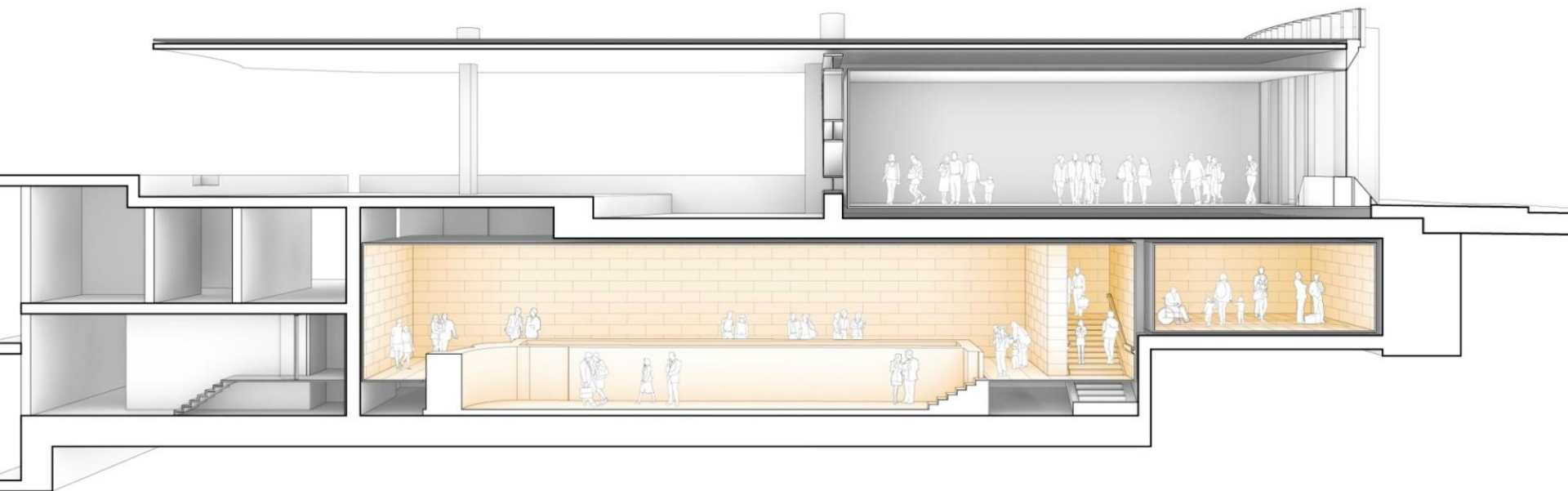
2011 Dismantling the
(Grade II Listed) reconstruction

Recording the threshold stone(s)





118 pallets recovered, containing 4767 stones, 679 tiles and 36 bags of small core



Did you visit the Temple of Mithras excavation in 1954?

We want to hear your memories

Please contact us!

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