

# The Dorchester-on-Thames Belt and the Soldier who wore it

by Paul Browne



## 1. The Dorchester-on-Thames Belt

These are the finds from Dorchester-on-Thames, discovered by workmen in 1874. They also threw some ironwork into the river- possibly the remains of his sword.....



### - Why recreate a specific belt/ grave finds?

The advantage of recreating a specific grave find is that it is difficult to go wrong as regards authenticity- you know that these items were worn by one man, in one place, in a defined time period. It also allows you to build a picture of the person who wore them by looking at what the area was like, what was happening and, building on the known facts to try and tell his story. It's the story of one of the very last men who would see themselves as part of the Roman army in Britain. This is my attempt to recreate his story.

### -What was found?

-A grave of a man over six feet tall (described in the original account of the discovery as being "of enormous size")- we'll call him Magnus- buried in a coffin four foot down, oriented SSE-NNW, with knees bent. In his grave was found the fittings of a Late Roman military belt, a round disc of antler or bone, with circle and dot markings, and several pieces of iron-one of which being a knife 5 1/18 inches long. The belt buckle had been damaged and repaired in antiquity and the belt fittings show signs of heavy use.

-A grave of a woman with the classic Late Roman cruciform brooch , together with brooches and belt fittings indicating a north German origin- possibly Frisia. This has been assumed to be his wife.



### **-Where was it found?**

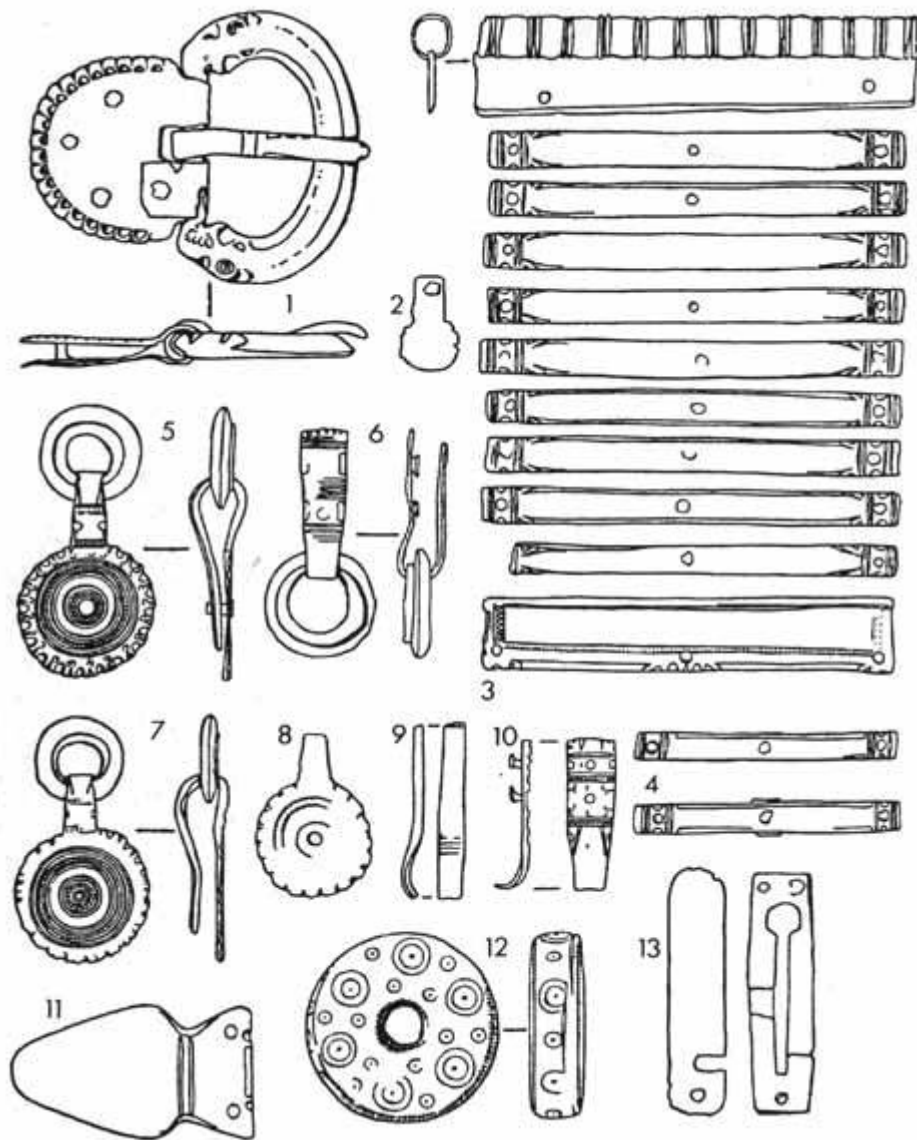
The graves were found on the eastern side of the old British oppidum guarding the bend in the Thames (and protected on its eastern flank by the Thame river) and with a Celtic hillfort opposite- perfect look out locations and strategically well positioned with the ramparts and river forming a continuous defence. These still survive- in deteriorating condition- as the Dyke Hills south of Dorchester. The walled Roman town and fort of Dorchester was north of this.

The old oppidum ramparts may well have deteriorated by Roman times, but it would have made sense for these to be re-fortified in Late Roman times (an action paralleled in other towns).

There was another cemetery in use before and after this time to the east of Dorchester- but as at Caistor St Edmunds, there seems to have been a separate cemetery for the Romano-Britons and their Germanic defenders



Dorchester Oppidum, viewed from the North, by kind permission of Dominic Andrews (arrow indicates graves).



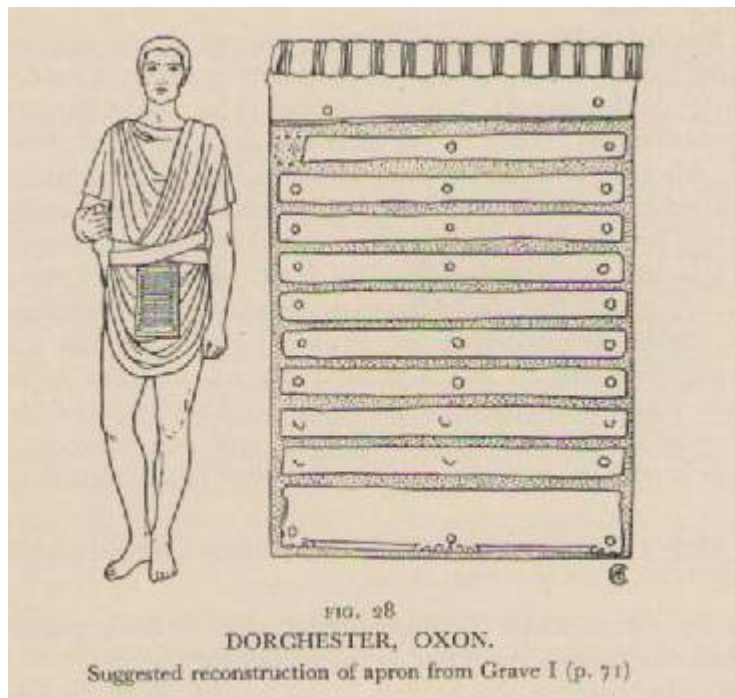
(From Hawkes, after Oxoniensa)

## **2. Putting it all together- the detective work**

These were the bits found- how did they fit together to form a belt and what was the mysterious circular object with dots and circles?

### **And what was missing?**

Similar finds in Batavia – one with the leather still on- showed the basic construction. And we may still get it very, very wrong- for example, this was the first attempted drawing of the reconstruction from very eminent authors in 1952.....



### Another question is what was not buried?

A Batavian burial in Donderberg (see picture below) has a very similar belt buried with a spear, a knife, a pointed shield boss (with a curved flange indicating a curved shield) and a “francisca” throwing axe. Other finds with a similar belt are found in Milton, Kent; Tournai, Furfooz near Naumur, and Vieuxville (all Belgium); Vermand and Monceau-Le-Neuf, Aisne in France; and Mainz-Kastheim, Germany. Apart from the belt fittings, they contain items such as a sword, throwing axe, spear, knife, arrows, cross bow brooch, bone comb, scales, a silver spoon, whetstone, bronze neck ring, tweezers, bead toggle, coins, and pottery, bronze, and glass vessels. These give some idea of the sort of items that could be used to recreate Magnus’ appearance.

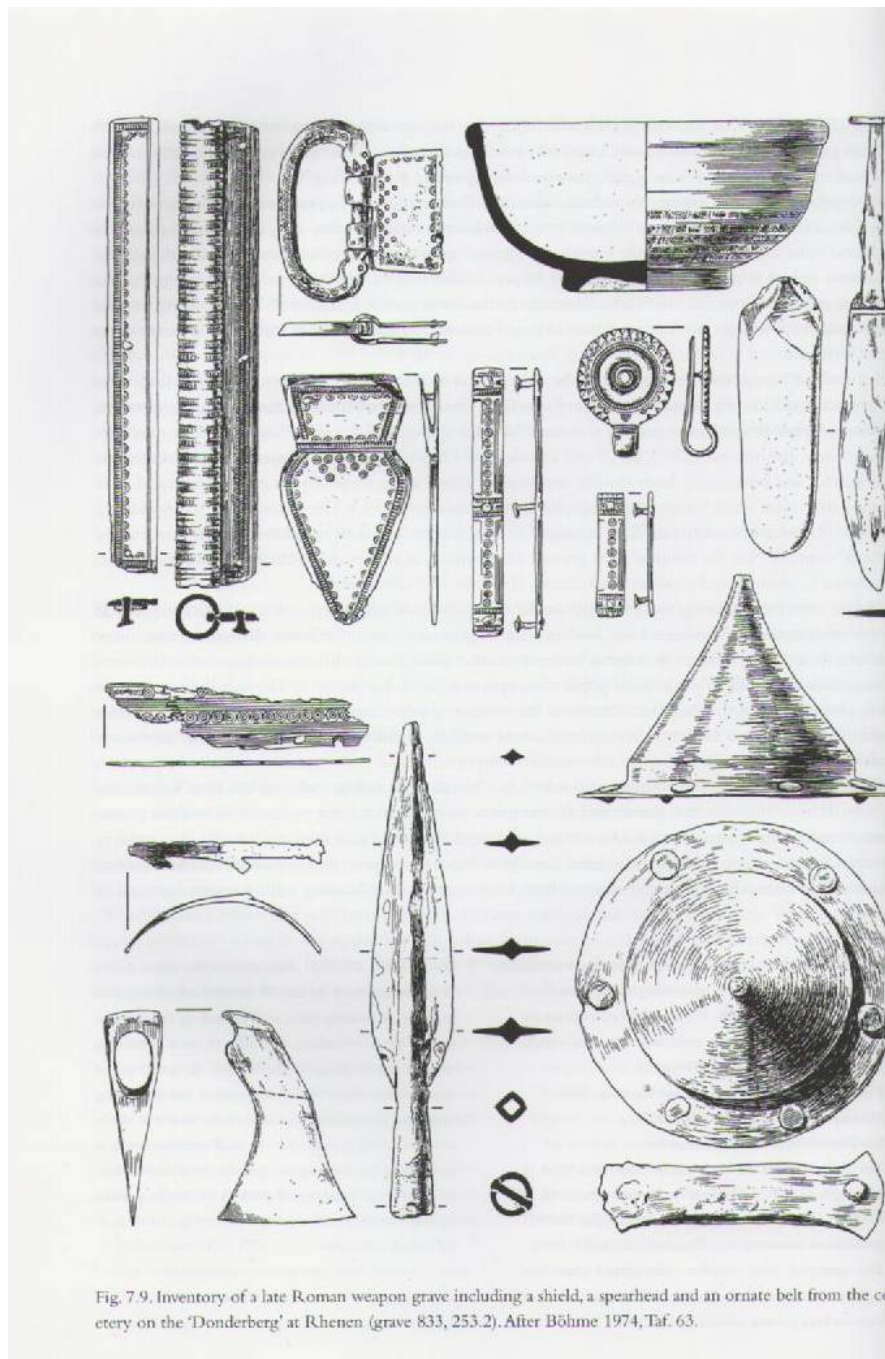


Fig. 7.9. Inventory of a late Roman weapon grave including a shield, a spearhead and an ornate belt from the cemetery on the 'Donderberg' at Rhenen (grave 833, 253.2). After Böhlme 1974, Taf. 63.

(The contents of the Donderberg grave- after Nicolay- Armed Batavians)

Secondly, his cruciform brooch- a “badge of office” – is missing. In fact, no brooch at all was found in the grave. But in his “wife’s” grave, there it is. Let’s conjecture, that just as the wife of an RAF pilot may wear a brooch in the shape of RAF wings, that she kept the brooch as a reminder of him- and his status.

Finally, the off-white bone/ antler/ ivory circlet with dot and circle markings. Initially, this was thought to be a spindle whorl, but contemporary notes place it in Magnus’ grave as a toggle or early scabbard amulet. It has been re-created as a scabbard amulet, similar in shape to other examples from continental Europe. There is talk in some of the sagas and stories of these amulets being used to prevent wounds caused by the sword from getting infected, and as a “peace binding” to prevent sudden drawing of the sword.



**What else does this tell us about the person who wore the belt?**

Dragon head buckles and related belt fittings are found either in Continental Europe or in south-east/Eastern England. Some of these may well represent the presence of foreign troops in the east coast Saxon Shore defences. The dragon buckles' location also have strong parallels with the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlements. It has also been suggested that these are imported buckles rather than locally manufactured. So, the implication is that this person either originated from or had strong connections to the continent, and may have been connected to the Roman army prior to the large scale Anglo-Saxon migration.

The belt stiffeners are seen as late 4th or 5th century- again helping date the individual. The strap end is of a 5th century type often associated with fixed plate dragon buckles. And the brooches found in the woman's grave originate from Germany- perhaps Frisia.

## 2. Recreating the belt



I used the excellent reproductions made in bronze by Nodge Nolan for Adrian Wink/ Peronis at Armamentaria ([http://www.armamentaria.com/store/index.php?main\\_page=index&cPath=13\\_37](http://www.armamentaria.com/store/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=13_37) ). I also benefitted from Adrian's advice and help throughout- many thanks. Cheaper versions of the stiffeners are available from Raymonds Quiet Press, but they neither have the weight and the accuracy. Nodge's bronze work simply feels right....

These were riveted on to vegetable tanned leather 95mm wide. It is a very wide belt. The leather was dyed black by soaking it in vinegar with rusty nails in it- the chemical reaction with the open air and daylight turns it quite black. For best results, leave in the vinegar and rust solution for a couple of days. And given the smell, for best marital relations, do this by the shed at the end of the garden, well away from the house....

The Asmolean Museum, Oxford recreated the belt with a quasi Sam Browne belt baldric, as per the Osprey illustration below. Given a separate baldric to take the weight of the sword, I have gone for the rosettes and suspension rings being a series of holding points- rather like a modern day police belt. I've also avoided the unsheathed knife in the Osprey illustration below, which has always struck me as a little too close for comfort....







For comparison, here is a late 5<sup>th</sup> century Germanic sword found at Blucina recreated by Patrick Barta.



Some things remain a puzzle. The item marked 13 was clearly used to attach securely something that needed to be detached for use. One writer suggests a whistle. It could be a pouch, or a firesteel. Or something else. This remains to be made.

Also, are 9 and 10 damaged attachment points? And what is 2?



### 3. Magnus, and Late Roman Dorchester

-His life

Of Germanic origin - possibly Batavia, based on the other almost identical belt finds- and over six foot tall. It is safe to assume that he was originally part of the Roman army. He then appears to have settled at Dorchester (his belt is 4<sup>th</sup> century, but well worn and mended on burial)- so the assumption I am making is that he stayed to be part of and possibly organise a local Dorchester based militia, having married another Germanic women, possibly from Frisia.

He was not buried in the Roman cemetery, but in the ramparts of the old oppidum. The original notes from 1874 mention other burials, so there may well be more to find- in fact the 1952 article by Kirk and Leeds recommends "a mine detector run over the tops of the banks might well reveal more burials". Present day archaeologists and English Heritage might disagree.....

So why was he buried there? Possibly, he was not a Christian- or an "acceptable" Christian. The Arian heresy was strong in the Germanic peoples, for example. However, despite the strong state sponsorship of Christianity, there are no Christian symbols in the burial. More likely is that there was simply racial segregation in death between Romans and Germans as in other towns. This may reflect a general distaste shown by the Romans towards the "barbarian" Germans- for example Sidonius Appolinaris in fifth century Gaul, showing his disgust for the invading Germanic barbarians as "quarrelsome, drunken and disgusting creatures"- describing one as a seven foot high long haired eater of onions, who smeared his locks with rancid butter.

**-What was 4<sup>th</sup>/ 5<sup>th</sup> century Dorchester like?**



The walled Roman city of Dorchester (by kind permission of Dominic Andrews)



Firstly, it was small- based on the cemetery size, some have estimated only about 600 population. Assuming a normal demographic spread, this would leave a maximum of 150-200 of males who could bear arms. A fulltime militia was likely to be small- perhaps only a few individuals- calling on local civilians to take up arms when needed. Despite this, it seems to have become a localised power centre.

It was a vicus rather than a civitas-type capital of about 14 acres.

It was walled- built in the second/ third century. The state of repair of these by the late fourth century is unknown.

It was also strategically important, controlling the Thames where it entered the old Catuvellaunian territory and the Thames crossing on the Icknield Way going north to the Chilterns. To quote Laycock “a perfect spot for the Catuvellauni to defend with some extra muscle hired from abroad”.

However, it was remarkably successful in retaining its Roman heritage – two storey timber buildings on stone foundations were still being built in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century (unlike elsewhere) , the lime kilns were still operating, and the Roman cemetery was still being used until at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century (based on radio carbon dating). Hoards of late Romans coinage (e.g. from Theodosius) have been found to a far greater degree than other areas. However, some decay and abandoned buildings in the town are seen from AD 450 onwards- though the cemetery continues to be used. So slow decline, perhaps, rather than sudden, violent fall.



Dorchester Late Roman cemetery, east of the town (by kind permission of Dominic Andrews)

And when a Catholic bishop was sent to convert the pagans in 634 AD, St Birinus was given Dorchester as a bishopric- on the face of it an odd choice, unless there were a remaining and ready made congregation for him?

And the place names such as Wallingford to the south (the ford of the Wealh/ Welsh= Britons) indicate that British presence continued to exist. This is backed up by the Anglo-Saxon chronicle for 571 AD which has nearby Benson and Eynsham still in (Romano-) British hands and finally falling to the Saxons.

“571 Her Cupwulf feaht wip Bretwalas æt Bedcan forda. tunas genom, Lygeanburg. ægelesburg. Benningtun Egonesham. þy ilcan geare he gefor.

A.D. 571. This year Cuthulf fought with the Britons at Bedford, and took four towns, Lenbury, Aylesbury, Benson, and Eynsham. And this same year he died.”

Elsewhere and also in the sixth century, Gildas describes the destruction in other towns. “So that all the columns were levelled with the ground by the frequent strokes of the battering-ram, all the husbandmen routed, together with their bishops, priests, and people, whilst the sword gleamed, and the flames crackled around them on every side. Lamentable to behold, in the midst of the streets lay the tops of lofty towers, tumbled to the ground, stones of high walls, holy altars, fragments of human bodies, covered with livid clots of coagulated blood, looking as if they had been squeezed together in a press; and with no chance of being buried, save in the ruins of the houses, or in the ravening bellies of wild beasts and birds”.

So why did Dorchester keep going when other places fell? We will never know the answer, but my bet would be that firstly, it was strategically positioned. If the old oppidum was given to the Germanic guards and family (in classic foederati fashion), led by Magnus, then any Thames borne Saxons would either have to fight a fort defended on all sides, with early warning given from a watcher on the hillfort, or sail on to easier targets. The oppidum could even serve as a bolt hole if the main town were seriously under threat. The strategic positioning of Dorchester covering the Thames crossing for the Icknield way also made it important and worth re-inforcing.

Secondly, Dorchester Roman town was set back from the water on the old Roman road, away from river borne attack.

And thirdly, it is just possible that the leadership and organisation of Dorchester and its defences was simply better done. People and leaders make a difference.

## Time line

I have combined fact here with conjecture on Magnus- hopefully bringing him and Late Roman Dorchester to life.

Date	Dorchester	Britannia & Roman Empire
374 AD	Born in Germania	
394 AD	Joins Roman army Aged 20 : now over six foot tall, is given name of Magnus. Brings with him a bone sword amulet for luck.	
399 AD	Posted to Britannia with field army led by General appointed by Stilicho to restore order. Aged 25	
401 A.D		
402 A.D		
404 A.D		
405 AD	Irish raiding activity in the south (attributed to Niall of the Nine Hostages)	
406 A.D	Soldiers' revolt in Britain, raising Marcus to the purple.	
		<p>The young emperor Flavius Honorius orders the closing of all remaining gladiatorial schools ; the Telemachus incident will lead to their permanent banning in five years.</p> <p>Visigoths penetrate the northern defenses of Italy and begin to ravage the countryside</p> <p>The Battle of Pollentia April 6 ends in victory for the Roman legions of Stilicho who frustrate Alaric's Visigoths in their efforts to move south. An infuriated Roman mob tears the Christian monk Telemachus to pieces for trying to stop a gladiators' fight in the public arena on January 1</p> <p>Barbarian forces led into Italy by Radagaisus meet defeat at Florence August 23 as Roman legions under the command of Stilicho break up the invading army.</p> <p>Hordes of Vandals cross the frozen Rhine on December 31<sup>st</sup> under their new king Gunderic, who will reign until 428. Allied with the Alans and the Sciri, they follow the Moselle and the Aisne and proceed to sack Reims, Amiens, Arras, and Tournai before turning south into Aquitaine.</p>

407 A.D	<p>British soldiers kill Marcus and appointed Gratian as their leader. He is described by Orosius as "municeps", some sort of civic official, perhaps a town councilor and member of the aristocracy. He is assassinated four months later.</p> <p>The usurper Constantine III takes the last Roman troops (c. 6,000) from Britain in 407 but many Roman soldiers remain, having married local women. Their central pay is cut off.</p> <p>Age 33, now married to a local woman of German, Magnus is offered the role of being part of the Dorcic (Dorchester) defence force, nominally part of the Roman army, and settles in Dorcic, a small walled Roman town on the Thames of about 600 people. The Germanic soldiers are given land in the old oppidum by the river.</p>	
408 A.D	<p>Constantine III takes power in Britannia, Gaul and Spain. Saxon and Pict invasions in Britain. Zosimus writes: "the barbarians from beyond the Rhine overran everything at will and reduced the inhabitants of the British Island and some of the peoples in Gaul to the necessity of rebelling from the Roman Empire and of living by themselves, no longer obeying the Romans' laws. The Britons, therefore, taking up arms and fighting on their own behalf, freed the cities from the barbarians who were pressing upon them; and the whole of Armorica and other provinces of Gaul, imitating the Britons, freed themselves in the same way, expelling the Roman officials and establishing a sovereign constitution on their</p>	<p>The eastern emperor Arcadius dies in his palace at Constantinople May 1 at age 31 after a weak 13-year reign in which his eunuch general Eutropius has not only been unable to thwart barbarian invasions but has had honest rich men accused of treason so he could seize their money and estates, sold high offices and provincial governorships to the highest bidders, and harnessed royal mules to his own carriage. Arcadius is succeeded by his 7-year-old son, who will reign until his death in 450 as Theodosius II under the domination of his devout Christian sister Pulcheria, now 9, who takes a vow of chastity to keep from being forced into marriage and will remain a virgin until her death in 453 (see 414 A.D.). Visigoths march into the Roman heartland under the command of their chieftain Alaric, growing in strength as freed slaves join their ranks, and lay siege to Rome; Stilicho is beheaded August 22 on orders from the emperor Flavius Honorius, who has the families of his barbarian mercenaries massacred. The mercenaries desert to join Alaric's forces.</p>



	own authority. And the rebellion of Britain and of the peoples in Gaul took place during the time of Constantine's usurpation."	
410 A.D.:	<p><b>Message received from Rome:</b> Emperor Honorius tells the cities ("civitates") of Britain to attend to their own affairs. Zosmirus reports Roman officials expelled and native governments establish "independence".</p> <p>Aged 36, Magnus now is a senior local figure organising the defences of Dorcic / Dorchester and a local mercenary militia of Germanic troops formerly in the Roman army. He continues to draw pay locally from the Dorchester authorities.</p>	<p>Alaric's Visigoths sack Rome August 24 after a third siege. It is the first time in 800 years that the city has fallen to a non-Roman conqueror, and although Alaric remains for only 3 days his followers carry off Aelia Galla Placidia, 40, a sister of the emperor Flavius Honorius. Alaric dies of fever soon afterward in southern Italy at age 40 (approximate) and his body is buried along with his treasure in the bed of the Busento River, whose course has temporarily been diverted, and the slaves who dug his grave are killed to keep the location secret. He has given the Goths the beginning of a homeland. He is succeeded as chieftain by his brother-in-law Atawulf (or Ataulf), who will marry Aelia Galla Placidia in 414.</p> <p>Invading Huns ravage the Roman Empire and extort tribute.</p>
411 A.D.	<p>Oppidum defences re-made to provide safe stronghold if the Roman town is attacked. Unlike elsewhere, stone houses continue to be built in Dorcic /Dorchester, and lime kilns continue to function.</p>	<p>The self-proclaimed emperor Constantine III (Flavius Claudius Constantinus) is defeated near Arles by the Roman general Constantius in the service of the emperor Honorius. Constantine is taken prisoner and put to death at Ravenna</p>
412 A.D.	<p>Magnus' belt buckle, given to him when he joined the army is damaged in a skirmish. As it can't be replaced and is a symbol of his authority and Romanitas, he has it repaired locally.</p>	<p>Visigoth forces move from Italy into southern Gaul under the leadership of Atawulf (Ataulf), brother-in-law of the late Alaric</p>

414 A.D.		<p>The Visigoth chieftain Atawulf (Ataulf) is married January 1 at Narbonne to Aelia Galla Placidia, sister of the Roman emperor Honorius, who was captured at Rome in 410.</p> <p>The weak-minded eastern emperor Theodosius II yields power to his sister Pulcheria, now 15, who reigns as regent and has herself proclaimed empress. She has Theodosius remove all pagans from the civil service. He and his pagan wife, Aelia Eudocia, will become devout Christians through her influence, and she will soon persuade him to exile Constantinople's Jews and destroy their synagogues</p>
415 A.D.		<p>Visigoths invade the Iberian Peninsula early in the year and begin to conquer territory taken previously by the Vandals; the Visigoths have been driven out of Gaul, and their chieftain Atawulf (Ataulf) is assassinated at Barcelona.</p>
429 AD	<p>After receiving reports of the corruption of the British churches by the Pelagian bishop Agricola, Pope Celestine sends Germanus, bishop of Auxerre, as his representative, and having rejected the heretics, "directs the British to the catholic faith". Bishop Germanus combines Romano-British forces and wins the "Alleluia" victory against a combined army of Saxons and Picts.</p>	
435 AD	<p>Aged 60, Magnus dies in Dorcic /Dorchester. He is buried by the ramparts of the oppidum he has defended together with the scabbard amulet that he originally brought from Batavia and wearing his military belt-symbol of his authority.</p>	<p>Anglo Saxon Chronicle entry for 435 AD: "... never since have the Romans reigned in Britain. This was about eleven hundred and ten winters after it was built. They reigned altogether in Britain four hundred and seventy winters since Gaius Julius first sought that land."</p>
438 AD	<p>Magnus' wife dies: she has taken to wearing his old cruciform brooch and it is buried with her as she is laid to rest near Magnus in what becomes the Saxon's cemetery.</p>	

446 AD	<p>The "Groans of the Britons" is sent as a last-ditch plea for assistance to Aëtius, military leader of the Western Roman Empire who spent most of the 440s fighting insurgents in Gaul and Hispania.</p> <p>The plea, recorded by Gildas reads: "To Agitius, thrice consul, the groans of the Britons... the barbarians drive us to the sea, the sea drives us to the barbarians, between these two means of death we are either killed or drowned." <i>"Agitio ter consuli gemitus Britannorum,,.repellunt barbari ad mare, repellit mare ad barbaros; inter haec duo genera funerum aut iugulamur aut mergimur".</i></p>	No help is sent.
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## Conclusion

It would be fair to call Magnus- or whatever his real name was- one of the very last Roman soldiers defending Britannia. He joined the Roman army when the Empire must have seemed eternal. He died in a very different world. But he, his fellow soldiers, and the Dorchester town leaders seem to have made a difference and created the basis for Dorchester to survive when other towns were put to the sword and the flame.

### Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries (XXXVI)

These, in the day when heaven was falling  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling,  
And took their wages, and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

A.E. Housman

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Britannia: The Failed State by Stuart Laycock

[www.digdorchester.net](http://www.digdorchester.net) : excellent archeological site

<http://www.archaeoart.co.uk/> Dominic Andrews, Archaeological artist

[http://www.laycockinfo.co.uk/rombuckles/pages/dragon\\_buckles.htm](http://www.laycockinfo.co.uk/rombuckles/pages/dragon_buckles.htm) Late Roman Buckles in England- Stuart Laycock and Chris Marshall

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Postscript: Dorchester in 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD: a Saxon town within the Roman walls

(By kind permission of Dominic Andrews)

