

Another Roman Import?

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As Nick Sturt pointed out in his article on Bath Asparagus in the last issue, one of the things that the Romans have done for us, famously, is to introduce numerous species of plants and animals which we were previously lacking. Rabbits, hares and sycamores are among the well-known things which apparently never made it across the North Sea under their own steam before the channel opened up and blocked them; an omission that the Romans are said to have rectified. (And even today there are people who resent this apparent meddling with our natural ecosystem.) Speculating on what else the Romans may have brought with them is a popular pastime, but proving such an allegation is something else entirely.

I was once studying a rare plant called pennyroyal, *Mentha pulegium*, when I noticed that the map of its distribution in Britain bore a marked resemblance to a plan of Roman Roads. Botanists show where plants occur by making maps with little round dots, which can be different sizes depending on the scale of the map. Normally, the dots are arranged in straight lines, as each plant produces a splat on the page about the size of a large town. These are known, for a reason you can probably work out, as 10-kilometre maps. If you zoom in, however, to a 2- or 1-kilometre map, then the dots more usefully begin to trace out the lines of features, such as rivers, geological boundaries or – as in our case – roads. Funnily enough, although you might imagine that this is rather more interesting than the standard map style, it is not often done, and so these patterns are rarely observed.

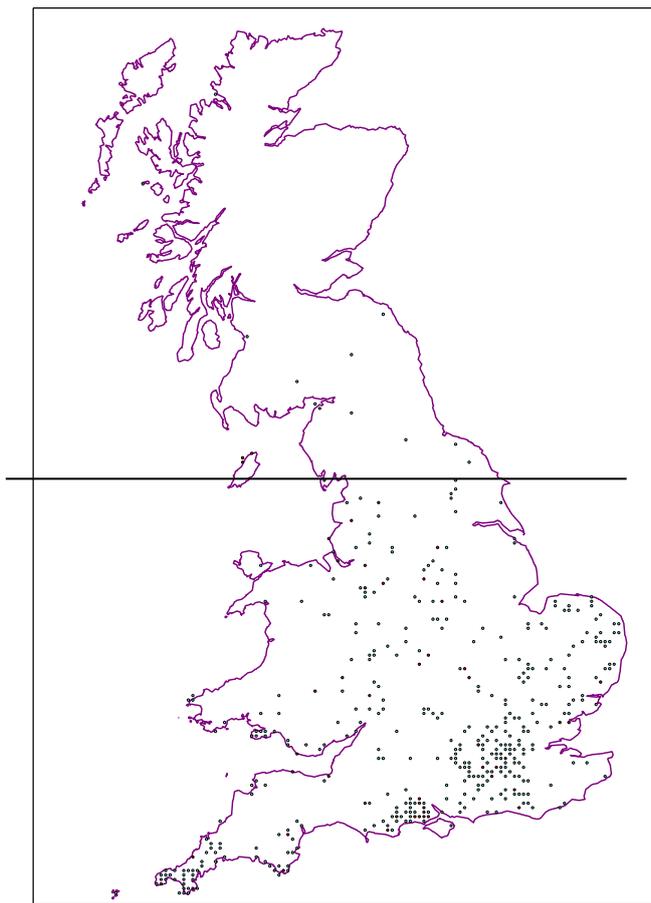
Anyhow, I had a map which looked to me enough like an ancient route planner to warrant further investigation. Delving into the archives, I found some highly suggestive comments. Take this one, for instance, by John Ray in 1640, who found pennyroyal in Cambridge 'at the castle end in a bottome over against the furthest house.' What is a bottome, you might ask? Well, Charles Babington, the professor at Cambridge who compiled this record in 1860, explained that a bottome is a Roman ditch. So far so good.

In 1829 William Skrimshire then gathered it 'in a wet place by the side of the Roman Bank' at Wisbech. Very suggestive. Unfortunately, the direct link to Romans stops there, but it doesn't take much imagination to fill in the gaps. Near where I live in Kent, for example, the only known site for pennyroyal was at Bigbury Camp, which was an Iron Age hillfort. Caesar's army besieged it in 54 BC, and Julius himself wrote notes about how the entrance had been fortified with logs. Unfortunately for us, he made no mention of any herbs the legion's doctors might have brought with them. Nevertheless, we do know for sure that the Romans visited.

Scroll forward to the present day and you'll find the only place in Shropshire where it grows is in a hollow alongside... you guessed it: the old A5 Shrewsbury bypass, conveniently named on its signs (albeit not on the map), Roman Road. This story is repeated dozens of times if you look into the records of where it has been found, but no matter how many coincidences we find, they don't quite add up to proof that the Romans themselves introduced this plant. OK, it grows, by-and-large, only on the sides of Roman Roads. It doesn't set seed very well in Britain and so it has no known native habitat, which suggests that it probably is introduced. But can we point the

finger at the Romans, specifically, doing the introducing? Other people might well have used these fine roads in the years since 400 AD.

One question we can ask is why anyone would introduce a plant like this. Pennyroyal turns out to be a very valuable herb, for those who like herbs. It can be used to preserve food, to drive fleas out of your mattress, and, perhaps most importantly, as an efficacious abortifacient, possibly the only reasonably safe way to effect such a procedure until quite recently (although a quick search of the internet will reveal the tragic story of the lass who mistakenly drank the essential oil rather than a watery infusion, and was killed by it). So, despite the risks, a herb as useful as this would have been grown everywhere, and we can't really point the finger at the Romans specifically.



There are other possible avenues of research. A report from Kew recently showed that populations of pennyroyal in Britain have two genetic origins. The plants collected from older sites form a distinct bunch, while more recent discoveries also cluster, genetically. The authors decided that this allowed them to distinguish native vs. introduced populations, but it could just as easily be ancient vs. recent introductions. Maybe one day somebody will be able to trace precisely when it arrived in Britain, and where it came from. At the moment we just can't say for sure.

From the point of view of Fishbourne Roman Palace, I regret to say that no-one has ever recorded Pennyroyal in the immediate vicinity. I had a moment of excitement when I found a recent record of it not far away at Bognor Regis. There must be a Roman Road there, I thought. But no, the site in question is right by a garden centre,

and I don't think I can convince anyone that pennyroyal has lain undiscovered there for sixteen hundred years. Funnily enough though, the person who found it there was Dr Sturt.

Here is my map of pennyroyal, and you can judge for yourself whether you think this shows the layout of the Roman Roads.