

A CONTEXT FOR SITOMAGUS: ROMANO-BRITISH SETTLEMENT IN THE SUFFOLK MID-COASTAL AREA

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THE EVIDENCE OF Roman settlement along the Suffolk Coast is conspicuous by its absence of visible remains. Although some sites are generally accepted, such as the undersea location of Walton Castle near Felixstowe, most recorded information relies heavily upon data gained from aerial photography and fieldwalking surveys. Physical evidence is present as surface finds of building material fragments, pottery scatters and isolated artefacts. Intense farming practices, recent afforestation and considerable coastal erosion means that much of the interpretation concerning Roman occupation and activity involves engaging in analysis of an essentially hypothetical nature.

The mid-coastal region between the tributaries and estuaries of the Rivers Alde and Blyth, incorporating the Hundred and Minsmere river courses is of particular interest. Roman sites would seem to be notably sparse here, yet several established Roman roads converge upon the area while appearing to have no ultimate destination (Fig. 54).

The geography of the area presents a comfortable if not prosperous location for settlement, having moderately fertile light soils which are easily workable for agricultural purposes. The coastal estuaries, although vulnerable to sea-borne attack, offer opportunities for trade, fishing and salt distillation while the river valleys provide sources of fresh water for domestic use and irrigation. Abundant supplies of wood and numerous deposits of clay supply the raw materials for local pottery manufacture. Although some evidence of these activities has been found the overall impression is that there is still much to be discovered.¹

An important question regarding this area is the location of a small Roman town called Sitomagus, also referred to as Senomagus. The first element '*sito*' could be British for 'long – wide' although '*seno*' meaning 'old' has become the preferred etymology. The second element '*magus*' (*sic – magos*), has been interpreted as 'market', therefore 'Old Market' (Rivet and Smith 1979, 456). This would seem to imply a trading centre that acted as a focal point for local commercial activity. The identification of such a locus may help to establish a context for settlement within which the rest of the area can be viewed.

The name Senomagus first appears on a segment of the Peutinger Table (*Tabula Peutingeriana*), 'a 13th-century copy' of an original Roman map showing the main imperial road system (Jones and Mattingley 1990, 23). At the time the copy was made much of the British section was missing and the only legible remaining British fragment covers parts of south-east England and East Anglia. The Table was to be used as a route planner and topographical accuracy was not an important consideration. Distances in miles between the towns are given however and Senomagus is shown to be close to the East Coast, twenty miles south-east of a settlement at Caistor by Norwich and fourteen miles to the north-east of Coddendam (*Convetomi*). To avoid confusion all distances quoted have been translated into modern English miles (unless otherwise stated).

Further documentation is to be found in the Antonine Itinerary, a Roman manuscript considered to be of early 3rd-century date which describes 225 imperial roads, places along them and distances between (Jones and Mattingley 1990, 23). Route IX runs from London (*Ludinio*) to Caistor. It is considered that this road was constructed towards the end of the 1st century and would have opened up access to the coastal region (Moore 1948, 170). Along this route the town is listed as Sitomagus and is situated twenty miles from Coddendam and twenty-nine and a half miles from Caistor. The evident discrepancies in

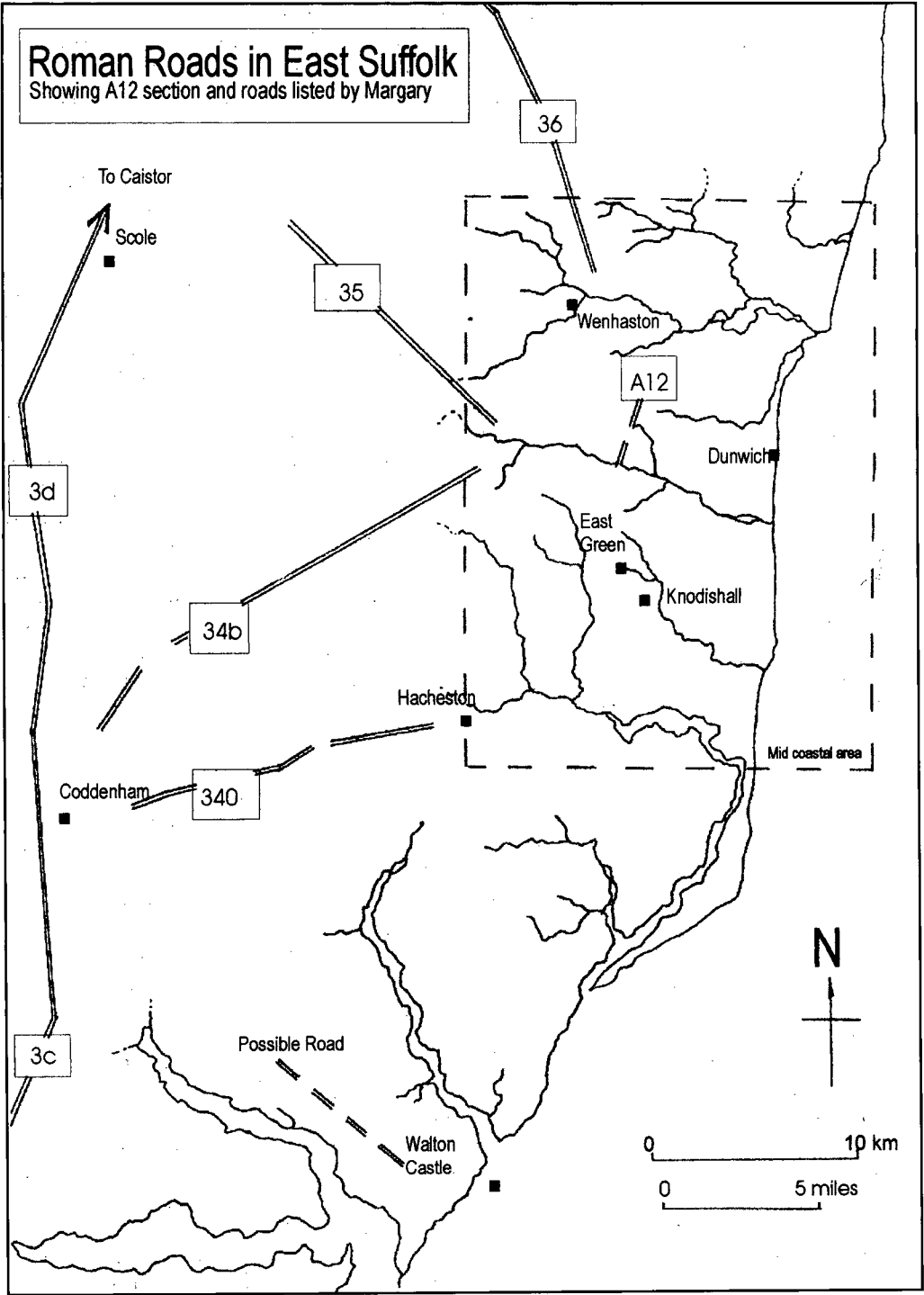


FIG. 54 – Roman roads in East Suffolk.

nomenclature and mileage shown between the two documents are likely to be due to an error of transcription during the Roman or medieval period. Geographically the Antonine Itinerary would seem to be the more accurate of the two sources, the Peutinger Table appearing to be a poor copy of an original manuscript. In the Table Caistor by Norwich is recorded as *Ad Taum*, omitting the first parts of two words which would otherwise read as *Ad Venta Icenorum* (as recorded in the A. I.), thus 'To Venta of the Icen'. If the same error of foreshortening is applied to the Roman numeration of mileage transcribed in the Table then XXII should read XXXII (thirty-two instead of twenty-two Roman miles) and XV becomes XXV (twenty-five instead of fifteen Roman miles) (J. Fairclough, *pers. comm.*). This offers a more sensible interpretation of actual distances and also provides a closer match to the mileage of the Antonine Itinerary. The possibility that recorded distances may have been calculated from the peripheries rather than the centres of settlements permits some margin for adjustment when trying to determine a precise location, consequently several sites have been suggested as providing enough evidence for informed speculation.

Dunwich was an early candidate. Since it was an important and large settlement during the medieval period, the likelihood of a similarly significant earlier occupation of the site by the Romans seemed attractive. Coins have been found dated as early as A.D. 81–96 and as late as A.D. 364–78, as well as pottery sherds and various other small artefacts mainly discovered along the seashore.² In 1858 the Revd Greville Chester observed what he considered to be sherds of coarse Roman pottery five feet from the cliff top and fragments of Roman tile and other building material within the remaining fabric of the medieval town. In recent work on Greyfriars Priory, however, no Roman building material has been noted and the 19th-century comments may be the result of mis-identification of medieval brick, which was extensively used in the construction of the main gateway (Stuart Boulter, S.C.C.A.S., *pers. comm.*). Similarly, medieval coarse-ware could also have been mis-identified as Roman.

Place-name analysis has suggested that 'Dunwich' may in part have Celtic origins. The Celtic '*dubno*' is taken to mean 'deep', implying 'port with deep water', the Old English '*wic*' for 'village' or 'harbour' being added later (Ekwall 1960). During the Roman period of occupation the Dunwich coastline would have extended approximately a mile out to sea from its present position and would have presented a strategic promontory flanked by marshland on either side (Moore, Plouviez and West 1988, 81). In a description of the East Coast (Rivet and Smith 1979, 137), the 2nd-century geographer Ptolemy notes a 'promontory' between the mouth of the River Gariennus, almost certainly the Yare, and the river mouth of the Eidumanis, which is considered to be either the present River Blackwater (Rivet and Smith 1979, 358) or the Orwell (J. Fairclough, *pers. comm.*). If the Eidumanis were the Blackwater the promontory may have been an extension of Walton Naze (Fairclough and Plunkett 2000, 448); however, if the Orwell were considered, Dunwich would be the more probable location. The promontory is not named in Ptolemy, which would imply that it was not the site of a listed settlement.

With regard to the documentary evidence the favoured route from Caistor would be *via* Stone Street and Halesworth giving a total distance to Dunwich of twenty-seven miles. From Coddensham the most likely route would be *via* either Hacheston or Peasenhall, both of which would also give a distance of twenty-seven miles. Even allowing for probable inaccuracies in the mileages of the Peutinger Table and the Antonine Itinerary, the distances from both directions indicate a significant discrepancy when compared to either source. The evidence for Roman routes into Dunwich is debatable as established routes shown to radiate out from the area (Fig. 55) are considered to be of Saxon or medieval origin, rather than Roman or earlier (Warner 1996, 52). It is possible that a signal station may have been located at Dunwich some time during the 4th century as part of the Saxon Shore defence system (Moore 1948, 176–77), although coastal erosion renders the

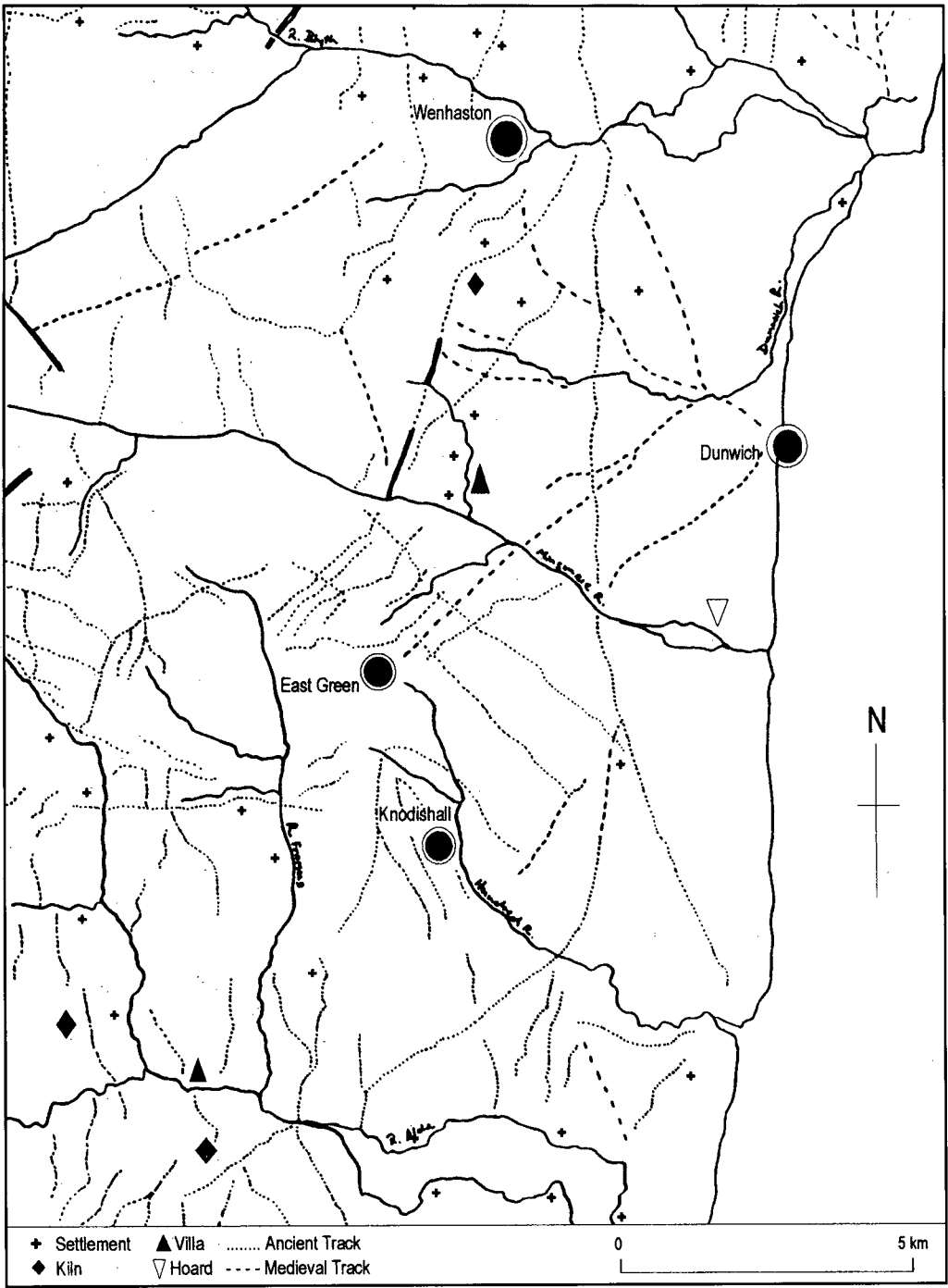


FIG. 55 - The Suffolk mid-coastal area, showing Romano-British settlement and a co-axial network of ancient tracks and boundaries (after Warner 1996).

establishment of the true nature of any Roman settlement within the vicinity unlikely.

In 1972 a surface scatter of Roman material was reported from a site at **Knodishall**.³ A follow-up survey by William Filmer Sankey recorded a wide-ranging surface spread of building material debris, pottery sherds and a fragment of puddingstone quern (S.M.R., KND 004). An isolated find of a bronze head stud brooch estimated to be of 2nd-century date was made close to the site in 1973.⁴ The Knodishall site has since come under serious consideration as a potential alternative location for Sitomagus, a connection referred to in various articles and publications.

When judged in relation to the Antonine Itinerary the case for Knodishall seems positive. The distance from Caistor to Knodishall *via* Margary's route 36 is thirty-one miles, while Knodishall to Coddendam *via* route 340 shows a distance of twenty and a half miles, an acceptable discrepancy of two miles.

Ivan D. Margary (Margary 1973) put forward a theory that an established Roman road running from Pulham in Norfolk to Peasenhall would, if extended in a southeasterly direction, provide a direct link to Knodishall. Significant gaps in the road network have already been noted and the difficulty in substantiating this theory owes much to the local geology. The general lack of available building stone in Suffolk resulted in few Roman roads having a paved surface, and most recorded roads show the remains of gravel construction in areas of poorly-drained soils (Scarfe 1987, 63–68). Densely packed gravel surfaces would also have been the norm across the lighter soils. Regular traffic would keep the main routes clear of vegetation, but evidence of such routes would only be apparent where use remained constant. When disused these routes would quickly be reclaimed by the landscape and once the gravel surfaces were ploughed into the sandy soil little trace would be left of their existence. Sections may exist within the proposed network of ancient co-axial trackways, two of which run close to the Knodishall site. A definite continuous route is currently undetectable.

A further fieldwalking survey was made in the spring of 2000 (Steerwood 2000). This reconfirmed the previous surface scatters of tile and tesserae and also revealed fragments of box-tile in two locations. Over 130 pottery sherds were collected, most of which were coarse grey ware but also included some small fragments of Gallic Samian pottery and three body sherds from handmade pots with a burnt flint temper, which are probably of Iron Age manufacture. A grit-stone rotary quern of indeterminate date was found in the vicinity and evidence of Neolithic/Bronze Age activity and medieval settlement was also recorded.

The recent survey indicated that the site contained the remains of at least two Roman buildings (Fig. 56), both of which appeared to have hypocaust heating systems. Tegulae, tegulae tesserae and a fragment of painted plaster have been found on the west of the site, indicating a habitation. On the east large tile fragments are apparent, which may represent flooring material or the remains of hypocaust stacks, suggesting a further habitation or perhaps a bathhouse. While these structures may have been quite substantial the evidence so far would suggest the presence of a villa complex rather than a small town.

Another area currently under consideration lies at a fork between the river Blyth and one of its tributaries, close to the village of **Wenhaston**. The Sites and Monuments Record (S.M.R.) indicates that the site was first noted in 1974 following the discovery of pottery scatters and fragments of roofing tile.⁵ Subsequent aerial photography revealed the existence of crop-marks, and from 1988 onwards a series of metal-detecting finds were recorded. The finds mainly consisted of numerous small domestic and ornamental items, a significant quantity of these being brooches of various designs. Suspected bronze-working debris was also noted which could serve to indicate possible metalworking activity having taken place. Coin finds covered the periods from Nero to Valentinian (S.M.R., WMH 004–005).

Apart from the fragments of roofing tile no other building material debris was recorded. This may imply that most of the housing was fairly rudimentary, probably being timber framed with walls of wattle and daub in-fill and floors of beaten earth. A significant number of the houses would have had thatched roofs, thus leaving little physical evidence of their existence.

In keeping with several other settlements of a similar nature, such as those at Hacheston and Long Melford, the precise size of the Wenhaston site is difficult to define, encompassing a large area and appearing to expand and contract at different periods of its history.

Unlike comparable settlements though, the site at Wenhaston does not appear to be directly located on an established main road, although several known major routes run close and may have provided a communication link to the area, notably 'Stone Street', and the A12, much of which is now generally regarded as following the course of a Roman road (Scarfe 1986, 143). The river Blyth itself would have been navigable during the Roman period, making the Wenhaston settlement easily accessible from the sea and probably enabling flat-bottomed boats to travel up-river for a considerable distance.

This relatively scattered settlement has been considered to be semi-urban in character, appearing to lack any formally planned layout of streets and municipal centres.⁶ This follows the general pattern of similar town-like settlements in Roman East Anglia, most of which would have had a relatively untidy appearance.⁷ Warner (1982, 54) suggests a loose, linear village based around four or five prosperous farms, which were possibly located along a former road or lane. The riverine location and coastal access could also suggest that as well as agricultural production the site had some function as a port, with secondary industrial activities.

Coin evidence and late pottery indicate that the site prospered during the 3rd century, at a time when the smaller and more isolated settlements established during the 1st and 2nd centuries were undergoing a process of abandonment. This later expansion reflects the economic and political chaos of the time, when vulnerability to raiding parties would have encouraged a clustering of settlement for purposes of increased security. During the 4th century no further expansion is evident.⁸

The size of the Wenhaston site and the nature of the finds have led to its becoming a credible *Sitomagus* possibility. However when distances to Wenhaston are taken into consideration the site is shown to be twenty-seven miles from Coddham and only twenty-three miles from Caistor (distances calculated using Roman routes where possible), significant deviations from the Antonine Itinerary in both directions.

It is worth noting that the southern section of the mid-coastal area between the rivers Minsmere/Yox and Alde appears to have been particularly productive during the medieval period⁹ and a similar level of productivity in Roman times is a possibility. If so, the influence of regional centres at Wenhaston and Hacheston with regard to trade, administration and religious practice may have been limited and a more local focus might have operated here. The nature of communication routes towards the area would suggest a specific destination and the Itinerary distances imply that this could be a more probable locale for *Sitomagus*, either at Knodishall or elsewhere within this area.

Perhaps the interpretation of *Sitomagus* as 'Old Market' needs to be considered in a broad context. The term could be applied to a general market concerned with local commerce, or to a more specialised centre trading in a specific commodity such as horses or other livestock and possibly serving a larger area. Also the reference to a market which is 'old' may imply an Iron Age market established before the period of Roman occupation. The sites considered are well placed to serve a wide hinterland and have good coastal access, thus providing adequate centres of barter for local produce as well as goods for import and export. Limited Iron Age finds have been recorded at Knodishall and

Wenhaston, although further material will need to be unearthed to support this hypothesis.

A return to the nomenclature suggests that the 'magus' or 'market' element had an earlier interpretation as a 'field or plain', which subsequently came to mean a market (Rivet and Smith 1986, 456). This may imply an informal trading centre of an occasional nature that took place in an open field, rather than a more formal arrangement operating within the confines of a town. As such Sitomagus may not necessarily mean the location of a market town but could be a settlement that was, or came to be, situated within the vicinity of an established trading site.

The question remains, 'what does lie at a precise location as indicated by the Antonine Itinerary?' A site close to East Green in Kelsale cum Carlton parish, a mile to the north of

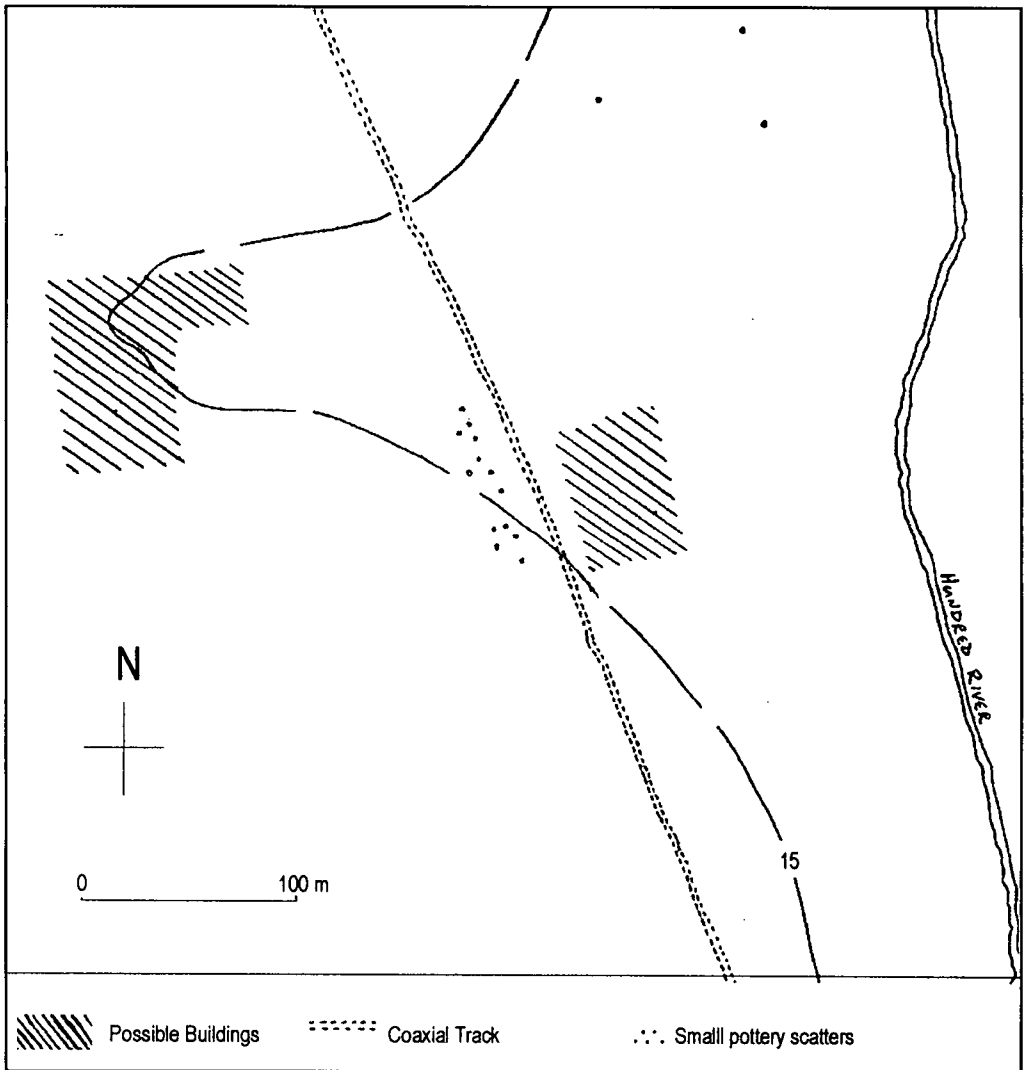


FIG. 56 – Settlement pattern at Knodishall.

the Knodishall site is located twenty miles from Coddendam and thirty miles from Caistor, a near exact match to the Itinerary distances. A scatter of Roman pottery has been previously recorded¹⁰ and a recent survey has, to date, revealed three further scatters within the vicinity indicating probable sites of habitation (Steerwood 2002). One particular sherd has been identified as an unusual import, possibly Spanish (J. Plouviez, *pers. comm.*) and of an early date. A direct route from a confluence of Roman roads near Yoxford is possible. Scarfe (1986, 142–43) speculates that Yoxford may have been a fording point and junction for the A12 and Margary's routes 34b and 35 (*Iter IX*), the latter proceeding on to Sitomagus towards the south. A network of proposed coaxial trackways is particularly intense in this area, making several connections to East Green. Possible crop marks are detectable at several locations;¹¹ whether these relate to Roman settlement remains to be discovered.

More physical evidence will cause East Green to merit serious consideration, and while it is unusual for medieval greens to have Roman origins the early topography of East Green (a long, wide field), is worthy of note.

In summary, further work is required regarding the definition of small Roman settlements in the rural landscape, particularly what constitutes a town and the nature of administrative and trading centres in general. The current position is not clear-cut and all of the places mentioned still merit consideration. The case for Dunwich is problematic, principally relying on isolated finds made along the foreshore. Any accumulation of finds bears little reference to a settlement pattern and is more indicative of the intensive search activity that has taken place there over a long period of time. Knodishall appears to be the site of a villa or substantial farm complex, possibly operating as a local administrative centre with some occasional trading or market function. Wenhaston undoubtedly functioned as a small town probably with a market, but its geographical position does not match the documented mileage given for Sitomagus. Finally, East Green is geographically well placed and evidence of Roman settlement is present. Continued fieldwalking will help to clarify the situation.

More archaeological fieldwork is required generally within the mid-coastal area. Much can be learnt from the interpretation of surface scatters recovered through systematic fieldwalking and finds revealed by responsible metal detector activity. Physical evidence from all the sites will offer a clearer indication of the nature of Roman settlement and ease the current weight of reliance upon the documentary sources when attempts are made to determine the present enigmatic location of Sitomagus.

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NOTES

- 1 A comparison of the finds distribution map (Plouviez 1999, 43), with the intensive Deben Valley Survey (Newman 1999, 29–31) indicates a possible density of occupation in the mid-coastal area.
- 2 Dunwich Museum Collection; Fox 1911, 1, 304.
- 3 Surface finds were first reported in 1972 by Mrs A. Harrison.
- 4 S.M.R., KND Misc., reported by Mrs C. Moore.
- 5 Fieldwalking by Ms J. Tacon identified the site as an area of wide-ranging settlement in 1975. Further fieldwalking by Ms Tacon and Mrs M. Meek extended the survey.

- 6 Few sites in the East Anglian region would qualify for full urban status. In Ptolemy's Geography only Colchester and Caistor are considered as towns significant enough to merit recording (Rivet and Smith 1979, 143).
- 7 A lack of formal town planning is evident in the excavation reports from Hacheston and Pakenham (Plouviez 1995, 72-73).
- 8 A significant drop in coin loss has been identified during the latter half of the 4th century (Plouviez 1995, 74).
- 9 Dymond and Northeast (1995, 46) note a density of medieval markets for this area.
- 10 S.M.R., RCC 006, reported by C. Cairnes.
- 11 getmapping.com 'Millennium Map' aerial photographic survey (2000), NGR ref. TM 403656.

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