

ROMAN LONDON BRIDGE :

Further Observations on its Site RALPH MERRIFIELD

MR. DAWSON has rendered valuable service to London archaeology by challenging one of its pre-conceived ideas that is really supported by very little evidence. As he remarks, this question "has been bedevilled by a scarcity of information." That is unfortunately still true, although his discovery of a major Roman N - S road, north of Southwark Cathedral and just upstream of the present bridge, may point to an unexpected solution. It *may* do so, but the issue is not yet closed, and the truth may prove to be more complex than the identification of a single site for a single Roman bridge.

It must be pointed out that the demolition of alternative theories is less complete than it might appear. The area in Tooley Street opposite the *eastern* half of Old London Bridge, investigated by Mr. Beeby in 1967, revealed an early gravel surface pierced by three very large post-holes, one of which had at the bottom a piece of Roman tile covering an unidentifiable Roman coin, the size of which suggested a late date. Mr. Beeby's interpretation¹ was that this was a substantial river-side structure such as a wharf. If he was correct, any road in this area would have terminated further south. A small portion of a wharf is archaeologically indistinguishable from a small portion of a bridge, and it remains a possibility that the structure was in fact a Roman bridge, the road to which terminated to the south of the area investigated. It would in any case be necessary for the bridge to begin well south of the river bank, if it were to cross at a reasonable height level with the higher bank on the north side. A change in alignment further south would be normal, and would accord with the usual Roman practice of aligning a road to approach a river at a right angle rather than obliquely.

Similarly, Dr. Kenyon's suggested alignment of Stane Street is not ruled out by the 1962 excavation which failed to find it. I am informed by Mr. Peter Marsden, co-director of this excavation, that the site was so disturbed by medieval and later pits, that all evidence of the existence or non-existence of a Roman road here had been destroyed.

Mr. Dawson postulates a different alignment for the N. end of Stane Street, leading from the junction of Borough High Street and Great Dover Street to the site of his Roman road in Montague Close —

i.e. a course approximately N.N.E. If he is correct, neighbouring Roman buildings should be on this alignment rather than the N.E. - S.W. alignment of Dr. Kenyon's line. Unfortunately there is no precise record of the walls found under the choir of the cathedral. They are said to have run N.E. - S.W., as also did the narrow tessellated pavement in the churchyard.² Such a vague record cannot be used as an argument against Mr. Dawson's alignment, but it does point to another kind of evidence that might throw some light on this problem.

If the Montague Close road did prove to be aligned N.E. - S.W., and parallel to Stane Street, it could indicate a hitherto unsuspected piece of town-planning on the south bank. Mr. Dawson mentions that the Montague Close road is about 136 yards from the gravel surface below the timber structure observed in 1967 (which I have suggested may yet prove to be the bridge), and notes that this is the same as the distance between the two parallel E. - W. streets north of the river. This is a curious coincidence, which becomes more marked if the distance is measured in Roman units. 136 yards equal 420 *pedes* or exactly $3\frac{1}{2}$ *actus*, a measurement which might well be used by Roman surveyors. The point obviously cannot be pressed in our existing state of ignorance, but another intriguing possibility is presented.

Miss Honeybourne has made a strong case for the position of the Late Saxon bridge at the bottom of Pudding Lane,³ but Mr. Dawson is surely correct in claiming that this cannot have been the site of the Roman bridge of the late 1st century. The replanning of the centre of *Londinium* at this time must have been directly related to the position of the bridge, though it is not impossible that the bridge also was rebuilt and resited as part of the same ambitious plan. If the Botolph Lane position, leading to the road east of the forum, must really be ruled out because of adverse conditions at this point on the opposite side of the river, we are left with only two alternatives — a position near the bottom of Miles Lane, leading to the road on the west of the forum, and opposite the Montague Close road; and the Old London Bridge position leading via Fish Street Hill to the main gateway and central axis of the forum. Mr. Dawson argues strongly for the former; the con-

¹ Expressed in a lecture to the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society.

² *Archaeologia* 24 198

³ M. B. Honeybourne, "The Pre-Norman Bridge of London", *Studies in London History*. (A. E. J. Hollaender and W. Kellaway ed.) (1969) 17-39.

ventional view, based on 19th century observations and apparently supported by Dr. Kenyon's evidence on Stane Street, has favoured the latter.

In support of Mr. Dawson's theory, it may be pointed out that there is apparent discontinuity between the wooden revetments of the Roman terracing on the east and west sides of Miles Lane.⁴ If this is not due to faulty plotting — an ever present possibility in the conditions under which these observations were made — it might indicate a feature earlier than the terracing on the line of Miles Lane, which is about where the hypothetical westerly bridgehead ought to be on the City side, if it led to the street on the west side of the forum.

In support of the conventional view, which need not be abandoned on the evidence so far presented, we have the general argument of topographical continuity. London Bridge is the basic feature of London's topography, and the principal reason for the city's development. As such, its position is likely to have remained unchanged from a very early date until rebuilding became necessary. The new bridge would then probably be built close beside the old in order to minimise the disturbance. We know that this is what happened in the case of the last two bridges — the last three, if Miss Honeybourne's identification of the site of the Saxo-Norman bridge is correct. Each time the new bridge has been placed within about 50 yards of its predecessor.

The suggested westerly position of the Roman bridge fits the late 1st century street plan, but is difficult to explain in relation to the earlier phases of *Londinium*, as Mr. Dawson admits. Recent work has shown that the basilica/forum insula was laid out round a pre-existing public building, which was sub-

4. R.C.H.M. *Roman London* (1928) 133, fig. 50; R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London* (1965) *Gaz.* 304 and 306.

sequently demolished.⁵ This building was narrower than the forum, but was also centred on the Fish Street Hill - Gracechurch Street axis. A bridge near the bottom of Fish Street Hill would therefore have had precisely the same relationship to the earlier town centre as the later. If the centre of Roman London from an early date remained constantly on the Fish Street Hill axis, there is a strong suspicion that the bridge lay at its southern end.

A subsequent move 50 yards downstream to Pudding Lane would be of the same order as the known moves of later times. The only surprise is that it should be downstream rather than up, but this may reflect a temporary reversal in Anglo-Saxon times of the steady rise in the tidal level. It would be much more difficult to account for a leap downstream of 150 yards or so, which would represent a change in the topographical pattern without parallel in later times. That such an innovation could have taken place for no apparent reason either in late Roman or Anglo-Saxon times is hard to believe.

The question therefore remains open, and arguments can be advanced for and against both hypotheses. The final answer can be given only when we are able to collate many more facts. It is unlikely that these will be produced by any one site, though many sites on both sides of the river might produce evidence with a bearing on the problem. In this connection, negative evidence is as important as positive. The danger is that because no firm conclusions can be drawn, excavators may be reluctant to publish the apparently insignificant facts. It is strongly urged that all who have information about riverside and other relevant sites in the City or Southwark shall not delay the publication at least of interim reports with their plans and sections, however unglamorous these may appear to be.

5. B. J. Philp in *Current Archaeol* 2 8 (March 1970) 220.

Current Excavations

Brentford, by West London Archaeological Group. Site at Brentford High Street between St. Paul's Road and the County Court access in St. Paul's Road. It is hoped to establish the line of the Roman road through Brentford. Excavation takes place on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, 9.30-5.30. Further details from Roy Canham, London Museum, W.8.

Clapham, Gaskarth Road, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Roman Stane Street cuts through this site. Excavations on Saturdays and Sundays, 12-27 September. Entrance through prefabs on north side of Gaskarth Road. Further details from Donald Imber, c/o Cuming Museum, Walworth Road, S.E.17.

Southwark. Two excavations, one revealing 2 delft-ware kilns, near London Bridge are nearing conclusion. A further dig near Tower Bridge on the Mark Brown Wharf site (see Mosaic), is expected to start up again shortly. Inquiries to Cuming Museum, Walworth Road, S.E.17. (Tel. 01 703 3324).

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