

Marsden on Roman London

HARVEY SHELDON

DURING THE LATE 1950s and throughout the following decade Peter Marsden fought vigorously, and at times almost single handedly, in the cause of London's archaeology. Despite pitifully inadequate resources and considerable indifference from authority his dogged persistence and devotion led to many discoveries important for our understanding of Roman London. For this we owe him and his volunteer helpers, as well as his Guildhall Museum colleague and adviser, Ralph Merrifield, an enormous debt. It is undoubtedly fitting that he should now attempt to incorporate his discoveries with those of his predecessors and successors in a narrative which aims to chronicle the development of Roman London.¹

After discussing the Roman invasion camp placed on the Thames in AD 43, which he concludes might have lain well upriver from the future site of Londinium, Marsden examines the origins of the city. He envisages it as a port, founded c AD 50, 'civil' rather than 'military' and peopled largely by foreign merchants and traders. He then describes the destruction of the city during the insurrection of Boudica, and the dramatic expansion that followed in the later 1st century. He suggests that by then London had become a *municipium* and was 'a vigorous town' (41) peopled by 'Roman merchants' (51) who were largely responsible for its government, its layout and its first public buildings.

Marsden sees London as becoming the major town in Britain within the earlier second century. Despite the difficulty of dating the construction of the public buildings he argues that the second forum, the fort, 'Governor's Palace', and the enlargement of the two known public baths might fit into a Hadrianic scheme which made London both a *colonia* and the provincial capital.

The author then turns to the fire of c AD 130 which is thought to have devastated more than 100 acres of Londinium, mainly in the south of the town. Not long after this, he suggests, there was a fundamental change in the character of the place. Its importance as a trading centre diminished and there was a period of considerable decline in the later second century which might even have involved the withdrawal of the provincial administration from

the city. This decline, he believes, had ended by c AD 200 when a major effort was made to revitalise London involving the construction of waterfronts and landwards walls and the building of a number of fine private houses. However this, the restored Roman city, Marsden envisages as being very different from the earlier one. It was 'a comparative shell of its former self' (119) with little 'evidence of substantial population' (132) and a 'surprising absence of trade and industry' (119).

Marsden admits that the evidence for the period after AD 180 is 'frankly confusing' (119) while our understanding of what happened in the late fourth — early fifth century is 'far from clear' (163). Indeed it is, though the literary references to the town in the late third and fourth centuries point to its continued administrative importance while the riverside wall demonstrates the need for improved defences probably late in the fourth century. The author thinks that there was another 'sharp decline in the fortunes of London' after c AD 350 (167), with the dark earth found above Roman building levels on many sites representing late Roman agricultural activity. Within the early fifth century 'the organisation of Roman town life seems to have declined peacefully into a haphazard kind of existence' (182).

This book is perhaps more informative and convincing on the earlier, rather than the later, Roman period, probably because there is much more evidence available. Here there is much in the historical interpretation that is new, in the sense of being incorporated for the first time in a general work on Roman London. The author accepts that it will not receive 'full agreement' (10) so I hope he will not mind if I take issue on a few points.

Firstly, vital though merchants and traders might have been in the early population, it might be premature to argue for a 'civil' rather than 'military' origin for the town. Even if the foundation date is proved to be as late as AD 50, the evidence from Southwark, which is used here, invites comparison with military supply bases not civilian sites.

Secondly, as he suggests, a Hadrianic date for the promotion of London to the role of provincial capital is possible; indeed the author might have used the absence of Legion XIV and IX from the admittedly meagre epigraphic record as evidence of the Governor's staff not being present before c AD

1. Roman London, by Peter Marsden. Thames and Hudson, 1980. 224pp, 160 illus. £8.95.

110. Yet the problem of dating the palace and second forum, the presence of the Procurator not long after AD 60 and the *Iuridicus* just after c 100 AD might suggest a considerable administrative presence earlier.

Thirdly there is the problem of decline and recovery which Marsden envisages as taking place in the period c 150-200 AD. The author chronicles the evidence for dereliction which is by now reasonable at least from the west of the city and Southwark. Yet until fuller analysis is made of finds from the city sites reservations might be expressed about the dates given for the commencement of both the decline and the recovery. Marsden may be correct in placing the riverside wharves and town walls in the context of restoration though I am not convinced. Is there enough clear evidence to place the wharves much later than AD 160 or the town walls later than AD 180 and could they not both belong to the period before decline set in?

The causes of this phenomenon might, as Marsden suggests, be particular to London and relate to its loss of significance as a port and trading centre due to economic growth elsewhere in the province. Yet there is the possibility that the decline was much more widespread in southern Britain involving far more than the fortunes of one town alone.

Roman London is, in the main, clearly written,

well illustrated, and accompanied by useful notes and a comprehensive bibliography. Figure references would however have been welcome and some of the drawings could have been clearer and provided with more comprehensive keys. There are a few historical errors: surely Albinus was one of three, not four, provincial governors competing for the Imperial throne in the 190's (130) while Constantius II, not Constantine II, was emperor when Lupicinus was sent to Britain c AD 360.

Peter Marsden ends his book by surveying the development of archaeology in the city up to the present day. Episodes of this generally shoddy tale have been recounted before and it is not surprising when he concludes that 'the years up to 1972 now seem like a bad dream with missed opportunities and the ruthless destruction of large parts of Roman London'. Now with more than sixty archaeologists working in the City we are far better placed to deal with what the Rev. Thomas Hugo described in 1856² as that 'vandal brutality' and 'utilitarian ignorance' which inevitably led to vital 'information sinking into the abyss of oblivion'. These 'wanton mutilations' were to continue for more than a century and Peter Marsden stands with those few who did much to end them. His place in the study of Roman London is assured and this work is a worthy contribution to our knowledge of it.

2. LAMAS Vol. 1 Part 1 July 1856.

The Gauls

CELTIC ART is the first great contribution of the Barbarians to art in Europe, and France was one of its major centres. This exhibition most marvellously illustrates the art of the Gauls in the 400 years before the Roman Conquest, and includes the cream of the collection from the Musée des Antiquités Nationales in St. Germain-en-Laye, making it the most comprehensive showing of French Celtic art ever to be mounted in Britain. All thanks to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the British Museum.

Also displayed are some of the important pieces alongside comparable British artifacts (over 50), which shows that although Celtic art here was a later but no less spectacular development the similarity is often striking. As a contribution to the study of La Tene artefacts this approach is limited and highly selective, but it takes advantage of a unique opportunity to compare and contrast

objects found on both sides of the English Channel. There is a glorious mass of pots, weaponry, jewellery — five gold neck-rings too — stone Gallic gods and bronze warriors — and, as many of the objects come from graves excavated in Champagne, where it was the custom to bury women bedecked in their best jewellery and warriors with a full complement of weapons, the highlight is a dramatic reconstruction of the famous Somme-Bionne cart-burial of a warrior.

The erudite and lively catalogue¹ was written by Ian Stead, with contributions on the pottery by Valerie Rigby and line drawings by Robert Pengelly. The photographs are all black and white and are not up to the B.M.'s usual high standard.

BETSEY KENTISH

1. *The Gauls, Celtic Antiquities from France*, 80pp, 40pl. Price £4.95. **Special Price** at the Exhibition and at British Museum Shops only £2.95.