

# New Troy to Lake Village - the legend of prehistoric London

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IN 1928 MORTIMER WHEELER concluded, in the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments' volume *Roman London*, that 'there is at present no valid reason for supposing that London existed prior to AD 43'. Over 50 years of archaeological investigation since have provided no reason to dispute that view. Yet such purely negative evidence is hardly conclusive; the possibility of some small pre-Roman settlement remains. Indeed the purely archaeological evidence for Saxon settlement in London in AD 604, when St. Paul's cathedral was founded, is hardly any greater than the evidence for such pre-Roman settlement.

Popular writers on London's past, rather more than archaeologists, have been reluctant to dismiss the idea of a pre-Roman town. It is a vision that has haunted London's historians from the beginning. To 19th-century archaeologists it was a 'lake-village': writers in the Middle Ages envisaged instead the fine palaces and lofty towers of 'New Troy'.

One of the earliest printed maps of London, the so-called 'Agas' map, first published in the 1560s, carried a poem in praise of the city:

'New Troy my name: when first my fame begun  
By Traion Brute: who then me placed here:  
On fruitful soyle, where pleasant Thames doth  
run.

Sith Lud my Lord, my King and Lover dear,  
Encreast my bounds: and London (for that rings  
Through Regions large) he called then my name'.

A later map, that of William Faithorne, was decorated with a genealogical table showing the descent, from the gods Uranus and Saturn, of 'Brutus, founder of the City of London'. By the time of Faithorne's map, in 1658, few took the story of Brutus seriously, though it was still possible to buy in 1680 a booklet of *A hundred notable things for a penny*, one of the 'notable things' being that 'London was built 356 years before Rome in the time of Eli the High Priest'.

The source of this story, in origin no more than a piece of fantastic historical speculation which was accepted as fact by serious historians until the late 16th century, and in popular tradition rather later, lay in the works of the 12th-century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey was born, or brought up, in the small town of Monmouth on the English-Welsh borders. His family may have come from

Brittany; this, together with the closeness of Wales, seems to have given him an interest in the traditions and history of the Britons, the Celtic ancestors of the peoples of Wales and Brittany, who had occupied the whole of the isle of Britain before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons. Other historians had commented that the Britons had no written history. Geoffrey provided one. Claiming as his source a (regrettably fictitious) ancient book, he wrote in the 1130s a *History of the Kings of Britain*, from the first settlement of Britain to the days of the legendary King Arthur and the Anglo-Saxon conquest. Though he derived inspiration from the speculations of earlier historians and from Welsh traditional tales, Geoffrey's history was largely imaginary. He wrote how, after Aeneas, according to Roman legend, had led Trojan exiles to find refuge in Italy, following the destruction of Troy by the Greeks, his great-grandson, called Brutus, led another group of Trojans to seek a new home. They found 'Towards the sunset, beyond the realms of Gaul, An island in the Ocean . . .', which they called 'Britain' after their leader. On the banks of the River Thames Brutus founded his first city, calling it in Latin *Troia Nova* ('new Troy'); in the course of time the name became altered to *Trinovantum*. A later British king, according to Geoffrey, named King Lud, rebuilt and fortified the city, and it was re-named 'Lud's town' in his honour, a name which developed into 'Lundene' or London.

Trinovantum — Lud's Town, with its walls, its innumerable towers, its palaces more beautiful than any city in distant kingdoms contained, had very shaky foundations. The eponymous founder of Britain, Brutus, and his Trojan ancestry, had been invented in the 8th or 9th century by Welsh writers, on the pattern of Roman tales of their founder Romulus and his own descent from the Trojan Aeneas; like similar stories current among the Franks, it provided the Britons with a fictitious pedigree as noble as that of Rome itself, and a claim to kinship with the Romans. To the basic story Geoffrey of Monmouth added a great deal of circumstantial detail.

The city of 'Trinovantum' had a more complex origin. Julius Caesar, when he led his Roman legions in his two abortive invasions of Britain in 55 and 54 BC, had, according to his own

**Howe Brute buylded London/ & cal-  
led thislonde Bzytayne/and Scotlonz  
de Albyne/and Walys Camber.**



**London.**

**B**Rute & his men wente forthe and  
sawe about in dyuers places/ whe-  
re that they myght fynde a good place &  
couenable/ that they myght make a cyte  
for hym & for his folke. And so at the  
laste they came by a fayre Ryuer þe is cal-  
led Tamys/ & there Brute began to buy-  
ldē a fayre Cyte/ and lette calle it newe  
Troy/ in mynde & remembzaunce of the

Fig. 1: The 'Cronycle of Englonde' printed by Richard Pynson in 1510 describes how Brutus, with his Trojan followers, 'began to buyldē a fayre Cyte, and lette calle it newe Troy'.

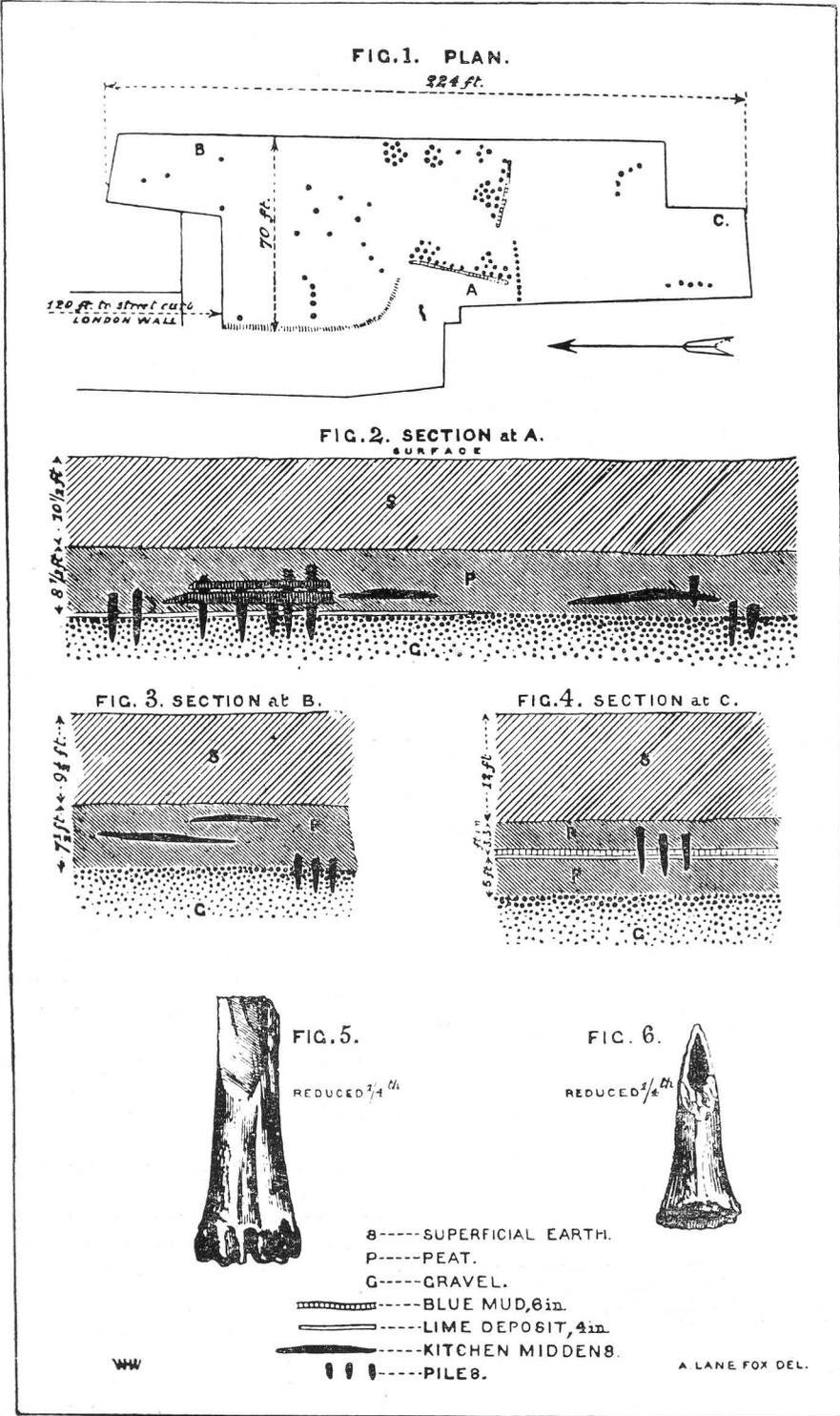
account, encountered, near the River Thames, a British tribe, 'almost the strongest of that region', called the Trinovantes. He described them as a *civitas*, a 'state' or 'nation'. Unfortunately the Latin word *civitas* later came to mean a 'city', so that

when in the 5th century AD the writer Orosius summarized Caesar's account he assumed that the Trinovantes had a *city*. Orosius added to the confusion by using the phrase *Trinovantum civitas*—'the city of the Trinovantes'; his Latin is ambiguous and could equally well mean 'the city of Trinovantum'. Later historians, who relied on Orosius rather than the writings of Caesar himself, accepted that there had indeed been a city called Trinovantum, 'about the strongest of that region'. Geoffrey of Monmouth was apparently the first to identify this city with London, which was by his own time by far the largest and wealthiest city in England and rapidly acquiring the status of capital of the kingdom.

By an extremely neat piece of word-play he linked *Trinovantum* also with the story of the Trojan settlers; he invented many false etymologies for place-names—that of '*Trinovantum*' from '*Troia Nova*' is by far the cleverest. Yet he left himself one problem: to explain the change of name from '*Trinovantum*' to '*London*'. In Welsh folk-tales he found a mysterious King Lud—probably originally a Celtic god—whose name was not too distant from that of London. One of the gates of medieval London was, Geoffrey knew, called Ludgate—perhaps it was, he argued, named after its builder, and if so, perhaps that same builder had erected the city's walls and towers and magnificent buildings—and renamed the town. An elegant hypothesis—particularly since the name '*Ludgate*' is indeed of uncertain origin!

In Geoffrey's own day, London was surrounded by a Roman city wall and towers; the remains of fine Roman buildings of stone and brick could perhaps still be seen, or at least remembered—even if they provided only a quarry for building materials and an obstacle to new building works. London was clearly of great antiquity, but its inhabitants had no knowledge of its true age or origin. Londoners, conscious of their growing wealth and status, found in Geoffrey's speculations about New Troy, a city older than Rome itself, just the pedigree they needed; like the *nouveau riche* purchaser of an aristocratic mansion claiming as his own the ancestral portraits on its walls they saw in the glory of New Troy the justification for London's primacy over other towns of England, and even traced the city's law-codes back to those of Troy itself.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History* was immensely influential. It was translated, copied, quoted and improved on by numerous succeeding historians. For over four centuries it was accepted, almost without question, as factual history. Only in the 16th century did a reaction set in. Elizabethan scholars like William Camden and John Stow



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Fig. 2: Pile-structures in the Walbrook valley recorded by Colonel Lane Fox (Pitt Rivers) in 1866.

noted its absurdities, and turned back to the original classical authorities, pointing out for example that Julius Caesar not only did not mention any city called Trinovantum, but had stated that the Britons had no proper cities! They hesitated, however, to dismiss outright so strong a tradition. During the 17th century the supporters of the traditional 'British history' fought a losing battle, until it was left to poets to find inspiration in its tales of King Arthur.

The more 'rational' historians of the 17th and 18th centuries had a very different conception of early London. Their vision of the 'Ancient Britons' was inspired by the descriptions of Julius Caesar: blue-painted savages, naked or clad in skins, hardy in battle, living in huts, with a mysterious religion whose arch-priests were the equally mysterious Druids. Growing knowledge of the American Indians suggested how such primitive races might have lived—according to one estimate, that of John Aubrey, the ancient Britons 'were two or three degrees, I suppose, less savage than the Americans'.

The glorious origins of London were clearly not to be found among such savages. It was Roman remains and Roman antiquities which interested the new breed of antiquarians and archaeologists. The structures and objects revealed during the major rebuilding of London that took place after the Great Fire of 1666 were recognized for what they were, relics of the Roman city of *Londinium*. It was assumed that the Roman city had not grown from nothing, that there had been a British settlement of some sort; but Julius Caesar's comment that the British had no towns, merely fortified refuges amid swamps or woods in time of war, offered little encouragement to the searcher for British London.

Yet the name of Roman *Londinium*, clearly not in origin a Latin word, remained a problem. 'King Lud' had been dismissed from history. The growing interest in and knowledge of the Welsh language and its Celtic origins suggested a number of attractive etymologies; an early favourite was *Llong-dinas*, 'ship-city'. In 1790 Thomas Pennant, noting the still marshy land to the south of the Thames, recorded a suggestion that the river had once spread out in a wide shallow lake, and that the settlement on its shore had been *Llyn-din*, 'lake-city'. The identification was repeated by others, but it was not until the 1860s that archaeology could provide what seemed to be evidence to confirm the existence of the 'city on the lake'.

Early archaeologists had little except a knowledge of contemporary primitive peoples on which to base their reconstructions of the buildings and

the lives of prehistoric races like the 'Ancient Britons'. Then in 1854 the world of archaeology was shaken by news from Switzerland of finds from the shores of Lake Zurich—forests of wooden piles driven into the lake bed, with among them fragments of pottery, bone and wooden utensils, and tools of flint and bronze; quickly identified as prehistoric 'pile-dwellings', built on stilts above the waters or marshy edges of the lake, they were compared with the villages of New Guinea and Borneo. 'Lake-village fever' infected European archaeologists; similar sites were recognized elsewhere in Switzerland, in Germany, Austria and northern Italy. At first Britain had little to contribute. But in 1866 discoveries made during building work in London came to the notice of Colonel Augustus Henry Lane Fox, a collector of weapons and amateur anthropologist who was later, under the family name Pitt Rivers, to excavate many important prehistoric sites and invent new scientific methods of excavation. Deep in the waterlogged silts that marked the former course of the Walbrook stream workmen had uncovered areas of close-set wooden stakes and piles. The similarity to the Swiss lake-villages was obvious; Lane Fox suggested that these were the foundations of a pre-Roman British town, built for defence among the muddy waters of the Walbrook. The Swiss lake-villages belonged to what were already recognized as the 'Stone Age' and the 'Bronze Age'; though Lane Fox admitted that all the pottery and coins found among the Walbrook timbers were Roman—evidence for their dating he would later probably have accepted as conclusive—he considered the construction too crude to be Roman—it must be prehistoric!

'It appears not unlikely' concluded Lane Fox 'these piles may be the remains of the British capital of Cassibelaunus' (the king mentioned by Julius Caesar), 'situated in the marshes, and of necessity built on piles'. The lake-village became for a while an accepted stage in the city's history. Sir Laurence Gomme, influential London historian of the early 20th century, by an odd misreading of Lane Fox's description, set the pile-dwellings not in the waters of the Walbrook, but those of the much larger River Fleet; with their habit of uncritical copying, other writers followed suit, and the Fleet valley lake-village survived long in popular histories.

In 1928 Wheeler concluded that the Walbrook timbers were of Roman date, and probably represented successive revetments of the stream banks and the foundations of quite substantial Roman buildings. More recently the few pieces of imported Roman pottery found in London that

date before AD 43, which had been taken as evidence for the existence of a trading settlement before the Roman conquest, have been dismissed as foreign material brought in by 19th-century antique dealers and passed off as genuine London finds to enhance their value.

The insubstantial foundations of London's Celtic lake-village belong with the dreaming towers of New Troy in a past that never was. The true origins of London early in the Roman period remain a subject for discussion; it is a discussion to which such legendary prehistory is irrelevant.

### Bibliography

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