

# Books

**The Roman Forum Site in London: discoveries before 1985**, by Peter Marsden. HMSO, 1987. 180 pp., 111 figs., 20 pl. £14.95 paperback.

IN ROMAN London, the high ground east of the Walbrook, lying between modern Cornhill and Lombard Street, appears to be dominated by a massive public structure long identified as the town's forum and basilica. The evocative reconstruction by Ronald Embleton on the cover of *The Roman Forum Site in London* conveys the imposing scale of what is now known as the second forum and basilica: carts, houses, and humans, even the silhouetted courtyard residences which surround it, are dwarfed by the huge enclosure with its colonnaded ambulatories and towering basilican hall.

In this book Peter Marsden has taken the opportunity, while writing up his own work, to bring together the results of many earlier and largely unpublished investigations. Most of them took place at a time before archaeologists could obtain the resources necessary to investigate urban sites adequately, yet had these records not been made, Marsden claims, "it would not now be possible to understand the story of the area even if all that remained was carefully excavated" (p. 1).

In his brief summary of all this evidence (chapter 2), Marsden argues that two pre-Boudican timber building phases can be recognised under the southern part of what is now regarded as London's first forum. This latter structure, he suggests, together with an integral basilica to the north and a classical-style temple to the west, were erected early in the Flavian period, but were replaced by a much more grandiose complex – about five times the size of its predecessor – in c AD 100.

The two substantial chapters (4 and 5) which form the core of this work are preceded by a useful narrative which chronicles the progress of discovery and interpretation within the forum area (chapter 3). The part played by many who struggled in adverse conditions to record Roman London is acknowledged here: Dunning, Cottrill and Oswald in the inter-war years each contributed to our knowledge of the various structures that lay there. In discussion of the Victorian observations at Leadenhall, full tribute is given to Hodges' drawings, which were far ahead of their time as illustration of a sequential record and crucial in allowing the identification of the building as a basilica. Marsden also suggests that rivalry between the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society and the British Archaeological Association might be detected in the separate recordings that were

carried out at Leadenhall: a nice point, particularly as the founding fathers of LAMAS had already recorded in their *Transactions* that the particular attribute of archaeological enquiry which they wished to avoid was "the antagonistic principle"!

Reports on 20 individual investigations conducted between the late 19th century and 1984 (chapter 5) provide much of the essential evidence allowing Marsden to attempt a "synthesis" which describes the building complexes and reconstructs the historical development of the site during the Roman period (chapter 4). His stated objectives are to plot the building complexes accurately, to establish their sequential relationship and to provide dates for their phases. Weak though some of the information is, it is useful to have it all brought together, and some attempt made to provide order and interpretation overall.

Whatever the nature of the pre- and perhaps immediately post-Boudican usage of the southern part of the site, much of the discussion concerns the subsequent buildings with stone foundations which are now identified as the successive fora and basilicae of Roman London.

A glance at the plan on p. 13 reveals that the evidence for neither complex is particularly complete. The most readily identifiable remains appear to belong to the western and south-eastern ranges of the first forum and basilica, together with an accompanying temple, and to the central portions of the second basilica and the southern wing of its associated forum.

In order to produce a regular and comprehensive plan to demonstrate these complexes in their entirety, the alignment of walls earlier recorded have had to be "rationalised" (see, for example, fig. 17, p. 24 and fig. 18, p. 25 for the first forum and fig. 25, p. 40 and fig. 26, p. 41 for the second forum).

Valuable though this piece of detection work is, it does produce difficulties. With the second complex, for example, relating the basilica in the north to the range of rooms to the south involves joining them through the surprisingly few lengths of wall which have been identified between these structures on the east and west. It is not easy to understand how, in the case of the first forum, the late 1st century wall at All Hallows, Lombard Street, which doesn't appear to fit the conceived pattern, can be logically excluded. It is, after all, on the same alignment as other walls which are accepted as belonging to the first forum, and it appears to be cut through by a wall belonging to its successor (p. 139).

What can be said of the date of the successive complexes? No material evidence which might help is included in this report, and unfortunately some pottery that was found earlier and might be crucial in interpretation has since been lost. Marsden suggests that the first forum was built c AD 80 and that its successor was erected above and beyond its demolished remains some 20 years later. Such a short life for the former may be the case, but direct relationships between the walls of the two complexes seem to be scarce. Care needs to be taken, particularly if another important wall at All Hallows Church, apparently the northern wall of the second forum's south-wing inner portico, really is later 2nd century (p. 41, fig. 26; p. 136, fig. 100 and p. 141 fig. 105).

Detailed knowledge of fora and basilicae in Roman Britain is not particularly advanced. Necessary though this book is, we need to learn a lot more about the historical development of these London complexes if we are to obtain, for example, the sort of information that has recently been forthcoming from Silchester. Whether the depredations of the 'dark earth' have affected the later Roman and sub-Roman levels to the extent that they are uninterpretable remains to be established. Important sites in the area of the second basilica have recently been dug by the DUA, and no doubt all archaeological opportunities provided by redevelopment further south will be taken.

This book will be welcomed by students of Roman London. Evolving interpretation of the public buildings in this area of Cornhill has now reached the point where two successive complexes can be postulated. It will be intriguing to see how well this interpretation stands the test of future investigations. Perhaps they will allow a convincing explanation of why Norman House and All Hallows Church, structures described as early medieval (fig. 57, p. 64) appear to be aligned on the walls of the first forum, apparently knocked down at the end of the 1st century, rather than those of its successor.

HARVEY SHELDON

**Pottery in Roman Britain**, by Vivien G. Swan. *Shire Archaeology*, 1988 (4th edition). 80 pp., 18 figs., 28 pl., bibliog., index. £2.50.

THIS IS A completely revised edition of an old favourite, first reviewed in the *London Archaeologist* in 1977<sup>1</sup>. The text has been re-written to take account of research since the 1st edition was published in 1975, and also apparently of some of the criticisms in Chris Green's review (see p. 7). It has been expanded to 32 pages, partly to take account of 'new' wares, and partly to expand the treatment of others. I was particularly pleased to see Alice Holt/Farnham promoted from a local ware to a regional industry (p.

35) – perhaps I've worked in Surrey for too long. The line drawings too contain much new material – up from 14 to 18 pages – and now comprise 151 vessels. As additions have been made throughout the type-series, the entire series has been re-numbered from 101 to avoid confusion with the previous system. The plates are mostly the same as in earlier editions.

Some readers may regret the omission of samian (except for a brief mention and three plates), but there is now a *Shire Archaeology* (no. 55) on this subject, and duplication seems unnecessary given the size and price of books in this series.

Anyone with any involvement at all with Roman pottery should possess a copy of this book. If you've got an earlier edition, replace it with this one. If you haven't, all the more reason to buy it now.

CLIVE ORTON

1. 'Two views of Roman pottery', by Chris Green *London Archaeol* 3, no. 3 (1977) 80.

**The Origins of Civilisation**, by Bernice Cohen. *Codek Publications*, 1988. 408 pp., illus., bibliog., index. £19.95 (hardback), £10.95 (paperback).

**Global Perspectives**, as above but 308 pp.

THESE ARE volumes II and III of a series, of which volume I (*The Seamless Web*) was reviewed in *LA* 5, no. 15 (Summer 1988) 417-8. This review is only of volume II, as III is outside the scope of this magazine, dealing with the present and future, but a reference to it is included here for the sake of completeness.

Volume II looks at the development of man's culture and civilisation within the framework of Systems Theory. The theory predicts certain patterns in the history of a culture or civilisation, which by and large are found to have actually occurred. One interesting aspect is the Systems Theory explanation of change: the author suggests we are wasting our time looking for causes (e.g. for the origins of urbanism) because "introducing the system-based explanation of cultural change does not preclude causation; it is the causation!" (p. 313).

I remain unconvinced. Systems Theory clearly has great descriptive power, and is able to point out similarities in the face of apparent differences, but the author has failed to convince me that it has explanatory power. It may be, as she claims, that Systems Theory is inherent in culture, indeed in life itself, but I still see it as a framework imposed by those studying it. Nevertheless, this book is a considerable achievement, and a brave effort to put forward a point of view which, if it failed to convince me, is at least coherent and makes many interesting points.

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