

The Origins of Roman London

David Bird

IT STILL seems to be generally accepted that London owes its origins to the Claudian invasion of Britain in AD 43. The commonly held view is that the Roman army invaded, fought its way to a crossing of the Thames at or near London, sat down and waited for Claudius to arrive, and then advanced on Colchester. It is argued that the London crossing was the obvious place for a major supply base and this in turn attracted merchants and led to the development of the city. Unfortunately for this theory, however, even the considerable archaeological work of recent years has failed to find good evidence for London or Southwark being founded before about AD 50-55¹.

Attempts have therefore been made to place the postulated first London somewhere nearby, for example, near the Elephant & Castle or even at Mayfair², but I find them unconvincing and they lack the support of archaeological evidence. Nicholas Fuentes has put forward some arguments against the Mayfair hypothesis, and I will give others below, but he still argues for a major base at Southwark³. He quotes Michael Hammerson's study of the coin evidence in his support, but Hammerson himself concluded that "on numismatic grounds a date of between AD 50 and 55 might be proposed for the beginning of the Southwark settlement"⁴.

It seems to me that the reason we cannot find Roman London before AD 50 is simply because it was not there; nor was there an earlier version nearby. I believe that the argument that we need to postulate a major site in the London area in AD 43

is based on a misunderstanding of Cassius Dio's story of the Roman conquest.

A useful starting point is the pre-Roman geography of the area. All the main Roman places in the south-east have Iron Age predecessors of some sort, except for London. John Kent has proposed an Iron Age centre somewhere to the west of London which did not continue into the conquest period because of the fighting between tribes north and south of the Thames⁵. Rosamond Hanworth postulates late Iron Age 'territories' around London whose centres would be (near) *Verulamium*, perhaps near Upminster, at Rochester and/or Oldbury and near St George's Hill, Weybridge⁶. Both suggestions make a centre at or near the site of London itself unlikely; no evidence for one has been found⁷. It seems, therefore, that the advantages of the site were not apparent before the Roman period⁸.

Roman London owes its foundation to the river crossing. It is abundantly clear that the roads to this crossing from the south required major engineering to enable them to cross the marshes in and around Southwark. There is no sign that this was done before about AD 50, nor has archaeological evidence been found to support the theory of a crossing at Westminster⁹. Why, then, is it assumed that Plautius established a base in the area, and that it was the crossing point for Claudius and his army? The answer lies in Cassius Dio's story of the invasion, and in particular because of the fight near the crossing at the tidal pool on the Thames, and what is said to have followed.

1. D Perring *Roman London* (1991) 6.

2. N Fuentes 'Of Castles and elephants' *London Archaeol* 5 (1985) 90-4, 106-8; B Sole 'Metropolis in Mayfair?' *London Archaeol* 7 (1993) 122-6.

3. N Fuentes 'The Plautian invasion base' *London Archaeol* 7 (1994) 238-9.

4. M Hammerson 'The coins' in J Bird, A H Graham, H Sheldon & P Townend (eds) *Southwark Excavations 1972-74* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint publication 1 (1978), 592; the conclusion is repeated on 593. See also M Hammerson 'The Roman coins from Southwark' in P Hinton (ed) *Excavations in Southwark 1973-76 Lambeth 1973-79* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint publication 3 (1988), especially 419 and 420.

5. J Kent 'The London area in the late Iron Age: an interpretation of the earliest coins' in J Bird, H Chapman and J Clark (eds) *Collectanea Londiniensia. Studies in London archaeology and history presented to Ralph Merrifield* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc special paper 2 (1978) 53-8.

6. R Hanworth 'The Iron Age in Surrey' in J Bird & DG Bird (eds) *The Archaeology of Surrey to 1540* Surrey Archaeol Soc special paper (1987) 162.

7. Perring *op cit* fn 1, 1-3.

8. The probability that the name London is pre-Roman need not present a problem if it refers to a natural feature, as seems likely. The meaning is unresolved (A L F Rivet & C Smith *The place-names of Roman Britain* (1979) 396-8), but it is interesting to consider that if the name did refer to a natural feature, then the most likely meaning would surely be 'tidal lake' or something similar. This phenomenon clearly commanded attention: sufficiently to enter the records of the invasion for instance. Can it be entirely coincidence that there is a British word **lindo-*, meaning 'pool, lake', as in *Lindum* (Rivet & Smith *op cit* 392)? No doubt a change from *Lin-* to *Lon-* would not meet with approval from place-name experts but it is odd that the suggestion seems never to have been considered, even if only to be dismissed.

9. Perring *op cit* fn 1, 6; for the Westminster crossing theory see further below.

Cassius Dio tells us that “the Britons retreated to the River Thames in the area where it empties into the Ocean and at flood-tide forms a lake. They crossed it without difficulty, as they had accurate knowledge of the firm ground and the places where movement was possible. But the Romans in attempting to follow them went astray in the area. However, the Germans [Batavians] again swam across, and another group crossed some way upstream by a bridge. Then they attacked the barbarians from several sides at once and cut down many of them. But they pursued the rest somewhat incautiously and fell into marshes from which it was difficult to extricate themselves and they lost a large number of men.

“Togodumnus had died about this time, but the Britons, far from yielding, joined together all the more firmly to avenge his death. Because of this, and because of the losses encountered at the Thames, Plautius took alarm and advanced no further. Instead he proceeded to guard what had already been won and sent for Claudius; this is what he had had been ordered to do, if there was any particularly stubborn resistance.” On receipt of the message, Claudius set off from Rome and in due course “joined the troops who were awaiting him by the Thames”¹⁰.

This passage is usually taken to mean that the Roman army crossed at the tidal pool, established a base and waited there for Claudius, but this is intrinsically unlikely and may readily be challenged. The London area crossing was carried out in close pursuit of a beaten and fleeing enemy. The crossing place was chosen by the *Britons*, not the Romans, and they obviously chose it in the hope of shaking off the pursuit, because it was a difficult crossing and led into marshes. It was evidently not the crossing place of a normal route and it proved to be difficult and dangerous for the Roman army. There is no good reason to assume that the Romans would then *choose* to cross at such a place for the advance on Colchester. They will instead have made use of pre-existing major routes, partly to cow the natives and also to obtain supplies; there is no reason to suppose that there was such a route using the London crossing¹¹.

10. Quoted from the most recent translation by JGF Hind “The invasion of Britain in AD 43 — an alternative strategy for Aulus Plautius” *Britannia* 20 (1989) 7. I find Hind’s theory that the bridge was as far upstream as Staines hard to accept.

11. The recent discoveries of evidence for prehistoric trackways in the marshes both north-east and south of London illuminate Dio’s story but they seem unlikely to represent major routes. See J Rackham ‘Prehistory ‘in’ the Lower Thames Floodplain’ *London Archaeol* 7 (1994) 191–6, *passim*. A prehistoric crossing point at Putney was suggested by W F Grimes:

Few people would accept that Plautius stopped because he had met serious resistance. He had, after all, already beaten Caratacus and Togodumnus and the latter was dead; he had won at least three battles. The story given by Cassius Dio must stem from the official version of events, designed to bolster the part played by Claudius. We can be sure that the latter’s motives in coming to Britain were to gain prestige and set the seal on the victory. Apparently he spent only 16 days in Britain¹²; it is unlikely that he will have wished to spend much longer the wrong side of the Channel. Surely, therefore, the emperor’s visit was stage-managed, including the capture of Colchester and the arrangements for the embassies he received when he held court there. Plautius will have had a great deal to do before Claudius arrived: he had to consolidate his hold on southern England south of the Thames and use diplomacy and probably military dispositions to prepare the ground to the north, including such matters as arrangements to ensure the safety of the western flank of the army in its drive to Colchester and missions to various tribes seeking alliances and inviting them to meet the emperor. It is highly unlikely that he and his army will have sat down and done nothing while waiting for Claudius.

I can see no reason therefore to assume that Plautius set up a major base where his army had crossed the Thames, and in fact Cassius Dio does not say this. We are told merely that Plautius guarded what had been won, and that in due course Claudius joined his army by the Thames. We do not know where Plautius’ bases were, but there is no reason to suppose that any of them were at London; they are most likely to have been at or next to pre-existing centres. He did not need to defend a bridgehead across the Thames¹³; the main enemy had already been soundly defeated, as events once Claudius arrived demonstrate. When Plautius received news that the emperor’s arrival was imminent he could order his army up to the crossing place of his choice.

Those who argue for the established story and therefore seek a major Plautian camp near London seem to forget that this version of events requires that the camp led to an inevitable development of a busy proto-town and port which in due course

The excavation of Roman and mediaeval London (1968) 44 & 46.

12. Hind *op cit* fn 10, 8.

13. I do not argue against the possibility that reasonable forces were placed to monitor and isolate the enemy and perhaps prepare the Thames crossing, but I can see no reason why we need to assume that this was at or close to the later site of London. Fuentes suggests that “the flatness of northern Southwark would have had a much greater appeal as an initial occupation site” but this area was marshy and prone to flooding as he has himself pointed out (*op cit* fn 3, 239 and *op*

became London. It is all very well to argue that the proto-town was replaced on a different and better site as an act of deliberate planning in the period AD 50-55; this demands that at the very least the proto-London will have been in existence for seven years. Such a site will have generated plentiful building remains and rubbish. It is straining the bounds of credibility to argue that we have failed to spot any trace of this. We might also consider that, if the theory of a Plautian camp at or near London is right, then it is reasonable to expect the development of a supply base and the associated mercantile activity; would it really take seven (at least) years to sort out where the best place was?

It has long been acknowledged that the Romans intended to use Colchester as the administrative centre of the new province. It could be served by sea, as it must have been throughout its period of supremacy in late Iron Age Britain. Other bases such as Chichester were similarly served. This would follow the Iron Age pattern, when there had apparently been no need for London. Soon, however, in the new Roman province, a route must have been used from the short sea crossing to the Kent ports, meeting another coming from Chichester, and inevitably the need for a crossing at London will have been established. As the advantages of this position became clear the logic of a major mercantile centre at London will have become inescapable. It may have been a deliberate imperial act: there seems to be evidence for a planned layout from the start, the forum complex is apparently the earliest in the province, and the Procurator seems to have been based there even before AD 60¹⁴. The dating of AD 50-55 suggests that it is most likely that the foundation will have been in the governorship of Didius Gallus (AD 52-57), who "had (it seems) accompanied Claudius to Britain as general of cavalry"¹⁵. The previous governor, Ostorius Scapula, was involved in fighting all the time, and Didius Gallus was sent to settle things down: no doubt he came with instructions from Claudius whose general approach to the "civilising" of the provinces is well known¹⁶.

cit fn 2, 92), and many better places were available.

14. Perring *op cit fn 1, 1, 6, 23*.

15. S Frere *Britannia. A history of Roman Britain* (3rd ed 1987) 66.

16. See eg H H Scullard *From the Gracchi to Nero. A history of Rome from 133 BC to AD 68* (2nd ed 1963) 308-9.

17. See eg Perring *op cit fn 1, 5*.

18. H Sheldon & L Schaaf 'A survey of Roman sites in Greater London' in J Bird, H Chapman and J Clark (eds) *Collectanea Londiniensia. Studies in London archaeology and history presented to Ralph Merrifield* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc

It seems to me that it is also time to abandon the theory of the Westminster crossing. In essence this is based on the behaviour of Watling Street both north and south of the Thames, the routes of each near London being projected so that they join near Westminster¹⁷. Yet the line taken by the southern route is clearly dictated by the need to avoid the marshes near Southwark; indeed if the logic of the argument about the northern route is followed we should be arguing for a *Greenwich* crossing, because that is where the main alignment of the road is heading. The course of the northern route itself seems to have been chosen primarily to avoid the need to go up and down hills, and perhaps to avoid marshy river valleys near the city. This route is unlikely to have been primary: it crosses the heavy London Clay where there is little sign of Iron Age or Roman period settlement¹⁸ and it will have required considerable effort to lay out and construct. I understand from Rosalind Niblett that there is in fact no need to date Watling Street in Verulamium before AD 55. The primary route must surely have been up the natural communication corridor of the Lea Valley (and also up the valley of the Colne).

Crossing at Westminster can have been no easier to engineer than at London¹⁹; no evidence has been found to prove the supposed projections of Watling Street on either bank. The road postulated to the Westminster crossing from the Southwark bridgehead would be largely pointless as such; it is in fact only known for a short distance in Southwark itself and is only about half the width of the main road (at least in early phases)²⁰; there is no reason to suppose that it is anything other than a subsidiary road in the town, serving major properties such as the building at the Winchester Palace site.

I submit, therefore, that the pattern of the early Roman province matched the preceding Iron Age geography; only as the system became more settled was thought given to the establishment of a new pattern and only at that point could Roman London come into existence. There is no archaeological evidence for a major Plautian base at London or nearby and no good reason to postulate one.

special paper 2 (1978) 60 and fig 1.

19. *Contra* Fuentes *op cit fn 2, 90*; see H L Sheldon 'The 1972-74 excavations: their contribution to Southwark's history' in J Bird, A H Graham, H Sheldon & P Townend (eds) *Southwark excavations 1972-74* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint publication 1 (1978) 16, fig 2.

20. A H Graham & P Hinton 'The Roman roads in Southwark' in P Hinton (ed) *Excavations in Southwark 1973-76 Lambeth 1973-79* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint publication 3 (1988) 19-24.