

What was the status of Roman London?

Andrew Selkirk

WHAT WAS the status of Roman London? Recent study of Roman London continues to show that it was a rather an odd town, very different to most towns of Roman Britain with many unique features: it was by far the largest town, with walls extending beyond the built area; there was a huge basilica and forum; there was a palace and a fort (both unique features); there are no villas in the vicinity; and the history of development appears to be out of synchronisation with most other Roman towns.

The peculiarities are usually explained away by saying that London was the 'capital' of Roman Britain. But what do we mean by 'capital'? and how did it fit into the structure of local government in Britain? This paper sets out to examine the question of the status of Roman London and to suggest a status for the town that would, I believe, provide an explanation for many of its peculiarities.

Most of the major towns of Roman Britain are what is described as being 'civitas capitals'. The idea of a civitas capital probably originated in Gaul. The early Roman Empire was based on towns, but when Caesar conquered Gaul he found a country where towns were new-fangled novelties and the social structure was based on tribes. Thus a new form of political structure was organised based on the tribes or the civitates, each with a capital town. This was the system used in Roman Britain and the civitas capitals normally had two names such as *Venta Belgarum* — the marketplace of the Belgae (Winchester) or *Isca Dumnoniorum* (Exeter).

London however was not a civitas capital. In the first place, its name was wrong — it was simply *Londinium*. And secondly, there was no civitas for it to be the capital of. Indeed it was surrounded by other civitates — the *Cantii* in Kent, the *Regni* to the south, the *Atrebatas* based on Silchester, the *Catuvellauni* based on *Verulamium* and finally the *Trinovantes* based presumably on Chelmsford.

Into this system of civitas capitals were inserted the colonies — Colchester, Gloucester and Lincoln. However London was certainly not a colony — the early colonies in Britain were all settlements of ex-

soldiers settled in an abandoned legionary fortress but there is no sign of any legionary fortress underlying Roman London. Indeed we know that London was not a colony because Tacitus said quite specifically that it was "not a colony (*cognomento coloniae non insigne*), but it was very well known (*maxime celebre*) from the numbers of merchants and supplies (*copia negotiatorum et commeatumum*). The only other possibility is that it could have been a *municipium* as was *Verulamium* (St Albans). But we should note that *Verulamium* was also a civitas capital. In any case, had it been a *municipium*, surely Tacitus, in touching on its status, would have said so.

In any case, the street layout of Roman London is sufficient to rule it out as having been founded as a *colonia*. The street layout was irregular in the extreme — this was never a town formally laid out by Roman surveyors — as would have been the case with a *colonia* or *municipium*. Instead the street layout is that of a typical wild-west shanty town growing up more or less at random, as blocks of land are leased out to get-rich-quick speculators.

Ptolemy

There is further evidence for the position of London outside the basic political structure of Roman Britain in the account of Britain given by Ptolemy, the Alexandrian geographer. He listed *Londinium* as the third town of the *Cantii*: among the *Cantii* there are three cities, *Londinium*, *Darvernum*, that is Canterbury, and *Rutupiae*, or Richborough. Most commentators assume that Ptolemy is wrong at this point, and that the attribution to the *Cantii* was "plainly an error". I want to argue that on the contrary, Ptolemy is right and that technically at any rate, London was a city of the *Cantii*.

The other major peculiarity of Roman London as a town is the absence of any Roman villas in the vicinity. Most Roman towns are surrounded by villas, the country houses of the local aristocracy. However there is no known Roman villa within 10 miles of Roman London. Beyond this limit there are villas in profusion. There are a string of fine villas for instance, along the river Darent, in Kent, of which Lullingstone is but the most notable.

Were these in fact the villas of the rich merchants of London, strategically placed half way between London and the seat of local government in Canterbury? It is always dangerous to argue from negative evidence but the absence of villas around London surely suggests that there must be a reason for it, that villas were forbidden, or perhaps that London was under outside control of some body that did not want to lease out the land for the building of villas.

It would not be unusual for a capital city to have a special status in this way. In the modern world the best example is in America, where Washington is situated in the district of Columbia, while in Australia the capital city, Canberra, also has a special status.

What would this special status be in the Roman world? Scholars have often wondered whether those tracts of land where there are no villas might not have been 'imperial domain', that is the property of the emperor. A number of areas have been suggested as being Imperial domains, notably the Iron working areas in the Weald of Kent, while Tim Potter has suggested that parts of the Fenland may have been Imperial domain, notably the remarkable tower building that he excavated at Stonea. There are better examples in other parts of the Roman world. A good example is the small seaside town currently being excavated by the British School of Rome at *Laurentum*. This is described in inscriptions as being a *vicus Augustanus*, and the excavator tells me that similar *vici Augustani* are known from North Africa. Could it be that London was also a *vicus Augustanus*?

There are a number of pieces of further evidence to suggest that London was a most unusual town, and that many of the peculiarities could be explained if it was owned by a powerful absentee landlord, who, when he remembered about this far off property, suddenly ordered some big extravagant building which was then promptly forgotten about and neglected. Thus most of the known major buildings of London are too big, badly built, and short-lived.

Unusual buildings

The best example is the basilica, commonly said to be the largest Roman building north of the Alps. A basilica is normally considered to be the town hall, the centre of civic pride. However, in Rome itself, the numerous basilicas were public meeting places erected by the Emperors largely for prestige purposes, and John Wilkes has suggested in a presidential address to LAMAS that the London

basilica should be compared to the Imperial basilicas of Rome. We should note that the recent excavations suggest that it was rapidly and shoddily built and went out of use surprisingly early.

Then there is the so-called Palace, not surely the governor's palace, but an imperial palace occupied one suspects not by the governor (who would have been a military man living in York or Chester) but by the emperor's agent, the procurator. Interestingly we have no evidence of governors in London until the 3rd century but we do have the splendid tombstone of the procurator Classicianus.

Similarly there are the baths on Huggin Hill, large, elaborate (ring type rather than row type), early, and soon out of use. Many of these buildings contain bricks stamped P. PR BR (with variants): these too appear to have imperial associations, for they are also found in the Weald of Kent, which is often assumed to be imperial domain. Furthermore the PR is often thought to be an abbreviation for the Procurator — and the procurator was the emperor's agent.

The walls of Roman London also present a similar phenomenon. They enclose an area of over three hundred acres, making London by far the largest walled town in Britain; but it appears that much of the area they enclosed was unoccupied and scholars have often wondered who paid for such extensive walls. It would fit the bill very nicely if the answer were the emperor who gave the order to enclose his town at London with a stone wall well before it became fashionable for other towns to acquire a stone wall.

The only major structure that does not fit this pattern is the recently discovered amphitheatre. This does not seem to be excessively big for a town like London, nor is it excessively elaborate. It was begun early in timber, later rebuilt in stone, but continued in use right into the 4th century. Was this perhaps the one structure that was not built directly by the emperor? An amphitheatre is something essential to the well-being of a town, like a football stadium today: could it be therefore that it was erected by the procurator or the commandant of the fort and regarded as being part of the essential running costs of the town rather than as being something exceptional?

The other major problem is the Cripplegate fort. It is not generally recognised how unusual the existence of this fort was. Forts were under direct military control and did not normally exist within the territories of free civitates. Indeed I wonder whether there may not have been a legal prohibition against

the placing of forts within a civitas capital as an extension of the *Lex Julia de vi*. Certainly in Britain the early forts were abandoned when the army moved on and a civilian administration was set up. One could certainly have a legionary fortress and a *colonia* side by side at York but one imagines that there is a clear legal distinction between the *territorium* of the *colonia* and the military fortress on the other side of the river.

The only example I have been able to find of a fort placed on the periphery of a city is at Rome itself where the camp of the praetorian guards was incorporated into the Aurelian walls. There is said to be evidence from inscriptions of the existence of a fort at both Lyons and at Carthage both of which were, like London, capital cities with perhaps a special status. The existence of a fort at London is rather more unusual than has been generally recognised and needs to be explained.

History

If then London has a special status perhaps as a *vicus Augustanus* it is perhaps possible to rewrite its history. It is now fairly generally accepted that there was no Iron Age town as a predecessor to London. Indeed habitation of any kind is conspicuous by its absence in London. Instead there is a considerable amount of rich material that has been dredged out of the Thames, much of which must have been offerings thrown into a sacred river. Would it not be consonant with the known facts if we were to suggest that London was perhaps the centre of this ritual, and that prior to the arrival of the Romans it was a sacred oak grove, where the Druids supervised the casting away of ritual objects into the river?

Following the conquest, London was taken over by the emperor. Was it perhaps part of his spoils when he took over territory that was possibly going to be difficult, because it had been a 'ritual' area? There would also have been advantages, because it may also have been unoccupied: if there were any Druids there, had they all fled to Wales? Certainly the early road system bypassed London and the first crossing of the Thames was at Westminster. The Watling street is the modern Edgware Road which comes in at Marble Arch to join up with the early roads from the south.

Then around AD 50 some bright procurator, surely the greatest property developer in the history of mankind, spotted the possibilities of the two hills on the northern bank of the Thames and laid out a trading settlement as a speculative venture. As a speculation it had everything going for it: there

were no previous inhabitants, the owner was the Emperor and it was a free trade zone. Speculators poured in to get rich-quick and initial development was very rapid. Then in AD 60, or was it AD 61, disaster struck. Boudica rebelled and already in the short space of ten years London had become so successful that it was one of the major objects to attack, being the centre and symbolism of the commercialism that Boudica so hated: the flimsy wooden Roman town was burned to the ground.

Up to this time the capital had been at Colchester. The concept of a capital had been invented like so much else by Augustus when he established the capital of the Three Gauls at *Lugdunum*, where the centre point was an altar for the worship of Rome. A similar altar for the Germanies was established at Cologne and another temple to Rome was established at Colchester where the foundations still survive under the Norman castle. Significantly it lay outside the legionary fortress that formed the original *colonia* even if subsequently it was to be incorporated within the town. Already the principle had been established that the central point of the capital lay outside the colony.

Following the destruction of both Colchester and London, the capital was moved to London. We have no record of when or how this happened. However the Flavians were practical administrators, and Augustus' idealism was no longer needed: London had many advantages: it lay at the hub of communications; it was conveniently placed outside the control of a civitas; there was no town council to have ideas of its own; and it was hugely profitable. It was the ideal place to set up a post-box for the imperial administration.

Over the centuries various emperors adorned their property with a basilica, with baths, and with fine walls. A mint was established. A tricky point came in the late 3rd century when the rebel emperors Carausius and Allectus broke away from Rome, and London found itself separated from its rightful owner. When the rightful owner returned and Constantine regained control of the province, the Arras medallion shows London as a humble maiden welcoming back its rightful lord and master.

New name

Further changes took place in the 4th century, which provide further evidence for the imperial status of London. According to Ammianus Marcellinus the 4th-century historian, London changed its name and was renamed *Augusta*. Many towns were named after Augustus in the 1st century but it would be interesting to know how many towns were renamed in this way in the 4th century. If

however London had always been considered to be a *vicus Augustanus*, then the new name would be more a change of emphasis than something entirely new.

Further evidence for the status of late Roman London can be found in the document known as the *Notitia Dignitatum* or list of dignitaries. The list of the officials in Britain are named in book six towards the end of the document and London is not among the names. Instead London is named right at the beginning of the document in book two which names the *comes sacrarum largitionum*, the counts of the sacred expenditures among whom in Britain is the *praepositus thesaurorum Augustensium*, the person in charge of the treasury at London. Once again London lies outside the main structure of Roman Britain as the seat of the treasury. Indeed it has even been suggested that the buildings excavated at the Tower of London could have been the stronghold of the imperial treasury.

One other item should also be briefly recorded, is that mysterious earthwork known as Grim's Dyke which runs round north-west London from Pinner to Brockley Hill, delimiting the area between villa country and non-villa country. Was this a delimitation of the extent of the imperial domain?

I would suggest therefore that Roman London from beginning to end was imperial domain, owned by the Emperors as their private property. It was founded as a piece of property speculation which was hugely successful and remained hugely profitable. Indeed as a result of this it would have been difficult for any emperor to regularise the situation because London was a source of money, and every emperor needed money — particularly when it came from a private and hidden source.

What I now need to know is the situation in other Roman provinces: how far are other capital cities special and different from normal cities? Already a cursory glance suggests that in some capitals there may be a special part of the town devoted to imperial matters: at Trier for instance, the imperial baths appear to be in the diametrically opposite quarter to the civic centre. Similarly at Merida in Spain there appears to be a separate area for the imperial functions. One day soon, I will abandon my work and take off for six months, and travel round Europe visiting the capitals of all the provinces to try to see how they worked. In the meantime, I would be glad to hear from any readers of the *London Archaeologist* who can help me over this!

Excavations and post-excavation work

City of London. Enquiries to Museum of London Archaeology Service, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (0171-972 9111).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (0181-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (0171-972 9111).

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, London SE18 1JT (0181-855 3240).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (0171-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (0181-546 5386).

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Newham Museum Service, Archaeology and Local History Centre, 31 Stock Street, E13 0BX (0181-472 4785).

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Old Library Headquarters, 25 West Street, Dorking, RH4 1DE (01306-886 466).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (0171-703 3324).

Individual membership of the Council for British Archaeology includes 10 issues a year of British Archaeological News, as well as the supplement CBA Briefing, which gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The subscription of £18 p.a. includes postage, and should be sent to C.B.A., Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 2UA (01904 671417).