

Books

Roman London, by Gustav Milne. *Batsford/English Heritage*, 1995. 128 pp., 80 illus., index. £14.99.

HOW DIFFICULT it was, concluded the French scholar Paul Petit, in his survey of the early Roman Empire, to follow the stages of development of any city. Such studies were necessarily based almost entirely on what he called the “hazards of archaeology”¹. It’s a fair point, and should be borne in mind by any reader before tackling a study such as Gustav Milne’s *Roman London*.

This volume is, in the main, an examination of the historical development of Roman London. It is also an account of the substantial contribution made by the Museum of London’s Department of Urban Archaeology, and a vehicle for discussion of Milne’s important excavations at the basilica and on the waterfront.

Milne begins with a brief trawl through the classical literary references to London. These, although abundant compared with any other town in Britain, are essentially limited. Indeed, they can do little more than confirm the early but continuing importance of London as a central place in matters of communication, administration and decision-making for the Imperial authorities (Chapter 1).

Milne next turns to “rescuing Londinium”, a brief chapter relating the development of archaeology in the City and its environs. This concentrates on the work of the DUA between 1973 and 1991, leading to the current arrangements that were instituted for London archaeology in the latter year. He continues these introductory essays with one on dating (Chapter 3), particularly through the media of coins, pottery and dendrochronology.

Even in these preliminary sections, however useful their intent, certain matters of “fact” and style jar. For example, surely Dio (p. 15) wrote more than 150 rather than 100 years after the invasion, and Tacitus was well enough connected to have had sources other than the youthful Agricola for his account of the Boudican rebellion (p. 18). Perhaps contemporary readers need more precise information about what is meant by “the infamous Temple of Mithras” (p. 23), dug in 1954, even if the apparently “infamous excavation of the Circle Line in 1974” can be quickly passed over!

1. Paul Petit *Pax Romana* (1976) 215.

2. R. Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) 50; W. F. Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968) 51; P. Marsden *Roman London* (1980) 125.

More seriously, after warning us about the “drawbacks” of using coins for dating, he cites the “slightly worn” coin of Commodus found by Grimes “in deposits earlier than the wall”, together with the coins and forger’s moulds from an internal tower as demonstrating that “the city wall was... built after AD 196 and... operative by AD 200”. Maybe, but a little rigour is needed here. The coin of Commodus, “worn” rather than “slightly worn” according to Merrifield, Grimes and Marsden², comes from a deposit considered earlier than the internal thickening of the fort wall, which *might* be contemporary with the landward circuit. Similarly, the question of for how long into the 3rd century Severan coins, even irregular issues, continued to be produced in Britain, might also be relevant during a period which seems to be remarkably starved of contemporary currency.

Milne then begins his historical survey, looking at the origins of London (Chapter 4), and continuing with the development of the town between the Boudican burning and its suggested *floruit* early in the 2nd century (Chapters 5 and 6). He then tackles the final two and a half centuries or so of Roman rule, when the evidence about the character of the town, its standing and appearance, appears to be more ambiguous.

These chapters contain some useful information derived from recent archaeological activities on both sides of the Thames, but they do suffer from being somewhat over-emphatic and over-definite. Two examples will have to suffice.

Firstly, Milne places much weight on the topographical characteristics which many believe made the site of *Londinium* important to Rome’s generals charged with the task of conquering Britain (Chapter 4). Yet even if activities don’t commence here until c AD 50, as may be the case, his conclusion that this “precludes a military origin for London” hardly follows. For who on earth, apart from the military administration, would establish *Londinium*? There is little surprising in the presence of traders, who would be engaged both in supplying this substantial military venture and in the process acquiring the spoils of war for redistribution elsewhere³. Indeed, from what we know about the process of conquest, the establishment of *Londin-*

3. Such traders might have accompanied Caesar on his second expedition to Britain nearly a century before, sailing “privately owned vessels built by individuals for their own use” (Caesar *The Conquest of Gaul* (1960 edn.) 133). For the relation-

ium early in the term of the consolidating third governor Gallus (52-56) might be more understandable than under his campaigning predecessors Plautius and Scapula.

Secondly, in his examination of the post-Boudican development of London, Milne illustrates and discusses two phases of buildings from his Leadenhall Court site which predate the grand Basilica (Chapter 6). These, he suggests, represent farms or small-holdings, succeeded by closely-spaced "lower class" and "middle class" townhouses (Figs. 24, 26, 27). Yet what is most striking about this group of rectangular buildings, however fragmentary the plans recovered, is their similarity to structures found in the forts of the 1st and 2nd century AD.

Compare for example the ten-roomed strip building 12 (Fig. 26) with building 4 in the fort at Penllynstyn⁴. Also, building 9 (Fig. 24), with its larger end room, is by no means dissimilar to barrack rooms such as those found at Hod Hill and The Lunt. Even the grander and squarer building 6, sandwiched between its more rectangular fellows, might not be out of place in such a setting. The area available to Milne, however extensive, might be but a small part of a much larger and perhaps more official Flavian complex standing on Cornhill.

Roman London contains some useful material, particularly new information resulting from comparatively recent work, but these nuggets have to be picked out.

Sometimes the text is careless, as though written hastily: headings such as "Fast Birth, Quick Death" (p. 42) and phrases like "known in the trade" (p. 30) or "the paint was hardly dry . . . when the builders moved in again" are simplistic or simply grate.

The colour photographs and reconstructions are attractive and informative, in stark contrast to the murky tones of many of the black and white plates (e.g. Figs. 13 and 23).

A number of factual errors have crept in. For example, "the Guildhall Museum and the London Museum were amalgamated to form the new Museum of London" in 1975, not 1976, which was when the new institution opened. The committee that organised archaeology in Southwark and Lambeth was formed a decade or so earlier than 1971 (p. 25). The inhabitants of Old Ford would be surprised to learn that they live in London E8 (p. 137)

ship between ancient warfare and booty see M. I. Finley *Aspects of Antiquity* (1977), particularly the essay on Aulos Kaprelios Timotheos, p. 159.

rather than in London E3. Perhaps more fundamentally, the monumental inscription from the building complex beneath Winchester Palace, Southwark, is most unlikely to be from a tombstone (p. 115).

Some of the general propositions are arguable: what for example is the evidence that *Camulodunum* was "the first capital of the Roman Province of Britannia" (p. 42)? Also, is it enough to describe the conqueror of the late-3rd-century usurper Allectus simply as an anonymous "rival claimant" (p. 76)? He was after all Constantius, junior Emperor in the West, engaged in the reincorporation of Britain on behalf of Diocletian and Maximian. Indeed, there is a time when one wonders if the "model" of London in the later Roman period, when apparently the notables decamp to their country estates (p. 88) has much basis in reality.

Consequently, however broad-based this attempt to examine Roman London may be, some care and caution is required when using it.

One issue that Gustav Milne deftly sidesteps concerns the legal status of *Londinium*, which he suggests is best left to classical historians to decide (p. 94). No such reservations trouble Andrew Selkirk, as many readers of this magazine will be aware⁵. He postulates that it lay outside of the local system of administration, based originally on Roman and non-Roman communities, and was essentially the property of the Emperor.

Part of his case rests on the lack of evidence for *Londinium* serving as a *civitas* capital. Our inability to tie the place in with a specific tribal group, and thus a native elite, either in the late pre-Roman Iron Age or afterwards, is marked. Selkirk is on less strong ground when he argues that it was not a chartered Roman community. Clearly it wasn't at the time of the Boudican uprising, but this doesn't preclude it from becoming a *municipium* or a *colonia* thereafter.

Neither is he too convincing about the early topography, or the light that it may throw on the question of status. Can we really say that *Londinium* resembled "wild west shanty towns growing more or less at random as blocks of land were leased out to get-rich-quick speculators"?

His brief survey of some of the public buildings, attributing (after John Wilkes) the Basilica to the

4. These and other examples can be found in R. Wilson *Roman forts* (1980).

5. A. Selkirk 'What was the status of Roman London?' *London Archaeol* 7 no. 12 (1995) 328-331.

Emperor and the "palace" to the procurator, serves to remind us how little we really know about the purpose and history of these and other extensive building complexes.

His emphasis on the role in London of the Emperor's agent, the equestrian procurator, at the expense of the senatorial governor, is unconvincing. For example, he asserts (p. 329) that "we have no evidence of governors in London until the third century". Yet surely the *Vindolanda* writing tablets refer to the presence here of soldiers on gubernatorial duties, including a groom, by c AD 100⁶. Similarly, the extensive Cripplegate fort, which Selkirk describes as in need of explanation, may, as Mark Hassall argued convincingly more than two decades ago, be the London quarters for the governor's staff and guard⁷.

Yet Selkirk, in denying a local government role for London, either for a citizen or peregrin community, does focus attention on a city as a central element in the wielding of Imperial power in Britain.

Our foremost authority on Roman London, Ralph Merrifield, has suggested that the erection of the second forum and basilica might have been associated with the recorded visit to Britain of Hadrian in the early 120s.

Selkirk views the role of the emperors in general as that of powerful absentee landlords who when they "remembered this far off property, suddenly ordered some big extravagant building which was then promptly forgotten about and neglected". Well, that perhaps unworldly view does raise some interesting possibilities: after all Hadrian, if he decided to construct a vernacular copy of his Tivoli Palace here, could have filled about half of London's three hundred acres in one go!

Another view of imperial power and prestige might see building projects accompanying important expeditions such as that of Septimius Severus between 208 and 211. Could the presence of the Emperor and his family, including his quarreling sons, help account for what Milne describes as the "spectacular range of buildings of real quality (with which) early third century London had been blessed" (p. 75)?

But if the likely presence in London of legitimate emperors might lead to building campaigns, what about the presence of illegitimate ones who made the town their imperial headquarters? A striking example of this may well come from the recently discovered complex of public buildings in the

south-west of the City at St. Peter's Hill (Milne, p. 75). Dendrochronology suggest that this was in the process of erection in AD 293-4, presumably by the usurper Allectus. Was this intended to be a palace gracing the capital of an independent Britannia, which could rival such contemporary constructions as Diocletian's waterside palace at Split?

Selkirk's paper, which he was kind enough to show me before publication, reveals how little we still know about the status of *Londinium*. We are likely to remain ignorant until some epigraphic discovery comes our way through the "hazards of archaeology".
Harvey Sheldon

The Medieval Horse and its Equipment, (ed.) J Clarke. HMSO, 1995. 185 pp., 132 figs., bibliog. £27.95

THIS PUBLICATION is the fifth in a series entitled *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London*, and centres on some thirty sites excavated during the 1970s and early 1980s in the City of London, which together have yielded extensive evidence of equestrian equipment, as well as horse remains, from c 1150 to c 1450. The book places the archaeological evidence, in the form of harness fittings, horseshoes, spurs and spur fittings and curry combs, into its historical context of horses and horsemen in medieval London.

The introduction sets the scene by summarising the corpus of material and the possible circumstances of its incorporation into the archaeological record, most of the material coming from the waterfront sites between Blackfriars and the Custom House, where soil conditions have allowed favourable preservation of both metalwork and organic materials such as spur leathers. The horse's role in London life is set in an historical framework which is well-researched and makes stimulating reading. The wealth of extant documentary evidence from this period is remarkable and allows one a glimpse into the lives of the people who were so much a part of London life in the 13th to 15th centuries. The historical evidence underlines the importance of the draught horse and it would seem that, although a large number of horses were kept for hire, private ownership of riding horses was not common. Unfortunately, neither the artefacts nor the limited skeletal evidence allowed firm conclusions to be drawn regarding the proportion of riding to draught horses.

The second section is a brief summary of the location of the sites and the finds which they produced, many coming from the fills which were

6. See, for example, the letter from Chruaitius to Veldeius in A. K. Bowman *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier* (1994) 132.

7. M. Hassall 'Roman soldiers in Roman London' in D. E. Strong *Essays in Theory and Practise* (1973) 231-7.

deposited during land reclamation on the Thames during the period. From coin evidence and dendrochronology it has been possible to establish ceramic phases, on which the dating of the artefacts could be based. This is followed by a section devoted to harness fittings: bits, bridle bosses, buckles, hasps, strap hooks, pendants, mounts and stirrups. Their function is clearly explained and the section is well illustrated.

The large numbers and diversity of horseshoes found in the city is covered in the fourth section. The typologies, chronologies, statistics and cataloguing may appear to be somewhat esoteric to all but the specialist. However, the introduction imparts fascinating facts and figures concerning horseshoes, using evidence from historical sources and information on shoeing practice and terminology. The study involved some 360 horseshoes and fragments, half of which could be firmly dated. It was thus possible to establish a chronological sequence for their typology.

(continued from p. 435)

of crumbs of fired/burnt clay may have been a sherd, a fired clay object or a piece of daub.

The prehistoric pottery is generally undiagnostic, being of sandy fabrics or, in two cases, flint-tempered. In the article it is described as 'flint-tempered and sand-tempered' and later 'flint- and shell-tempered' (p. 401). I deliberately used the term sandy fabric because the sand/quartz element is relatively fine and, therefore, probably a natural inclusion already present in the local brickearths and clay⁷. With regard to the 'shell-temper', there were some very rare angular voids that may have been shell in two sherds from the same vessel. The fabric itself is not a shelly fabric. Such fabrics may not have had shell added deliberately as it is found in clays from the Woolwich Beds and in alluvial clay⁸. Shelly fabrics of such an early period have not yet been reported in this area, though they do occur from the late Bronze Age and especially in the early Iron Age in the Southend area⁹ and probably also from the late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age in the Upminster area¹⁰.

Unfortunately, the only two sherds of any size and form are from plain, open bowls, a type that is

7. For example H. Hamerow *Excavations at Mucking Volume 2: the Anglo-Saxon settlement* (1993) 28-31, and S. Hamilton 'Fabric analysis of selected first millennium pottery types' in T. Wilkinson *Archaeology and Environment in South Essex East Anglian Archaeol* 42 (1988) 75-86.

8. See, for example, S. Hamilton *op cit* fn 7, 76.

9. N. Brown 'Later Bronze Age and Early to Middle Iron Age Pottery' in J. Wymer and N. Brown *North Shoebury: Settlement*

The next section, spurs and spur fittings, is excellently illuminated by the historical evidence, especially the work of the spurmakers. Apparently many of them wandered about all day, and only started work when they were "drunk and frantic", making them unpopular with the neighbours! The book concludes with a small section on curry combs and the skeletal remains of horses from London sites.

The horse, whether for riding or as a beast of burden, was a major factor in London's life and economy right up to the last century and must have touched upon the lives of all medieval folk. It is good to see a publication which specialises in equestrian equipment, instead of just a passing mention. The book brings together much information, not only from the excavations but from documentary and pictorial sources too. It is extremely well illustrated and referenced, with an extensive bibliography. It should appeal to horse-lovers and archaeologists alike. Denise Schreve

found in the early Neolithic, the Bronze Age and into the Iron Age, thus not being a great help in the dating. To sum up, the dating was based on the nature of the pottery fabrics and their sandiness, but with the caveat that their quantity was so small¹¹, the sherds so scrappy and the forms so undiagnostic that dating was not secure.

Some of the worked flint — a serrated flake and an edge-trimmed flake — might be older, perhaps Neolithic or Bronze Age. Worked flint on its own in two of the contexts may not be residual/redeposited, *pace* Truckle *et al.*, (p. 401). Again the quantity of worked flint from the three trenches is not large — 11 items including 3 scrapers — and of poor quality and limited range. There is the possibility of this being a multi-period site. Four waste flakes without further working are hardly good evidence of 'tool-manufacture *in situ*' (p. 401). There is an absence of cores and other debitage.

Full dating of the few prehistoric finds should wait until a larger area of the Playing Fields Site is excavated and a sufficiently large and diagnostic assemblage is recovered. The dating in the article in the last issue of the *London Archaeologist* is perhaps over-optimistic in its precision.

and Economy in South-East Essex 1500 BCAD 1500 East Anglian Archaeol 75 (1995) 77-83.

10. P. Greenwood, Hunts Hill Farm, Upminster finds archive in preparation.

11. See the guidelines on the quantity of pottery required for reliable dating in Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group *The Study of Later Prehistoric Pottery: Guidelines for Analysis and Publication* Occ Paper 2 (1992) 5.