

Early days at London and Richborough

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IN AN EARLIER note discussing London's origins I wrote, following the commonly held view: "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."¹ A fresh look at the purpose of the Richborough supply base, and at the road system around London, prompts the thought that a different explanation of events is possible, and perhaps more likely.

It seems to be generally accepted that Richborough was where Aulus Plautius landed in AD 43 and that the site then became a major supply base for the army in the proto-province, from about AD 44.² The purpose of such a supply base is taken for granted, yet this seems to be the only occasion when Romanists do not apply the rule 'whenever possible everything was moved by water in the Roman world.' In fact the campaign forces could have been supplied much more directly by water, using routes which must have been well known to Roman merchants and Roman allies from well before the invasion. The use of Richborough would have meant unnecessarily long journeys by land, both for supplies and for any large bodies of men.

Archaeologists working in London and Southwark are now generally agreed that the earliest settlements there can be dated no earlier than about AD 50.³ Until then the main Roman centres must

have been around Colchester, Chichester, Silchester and Verulamium -- all chosen, in the normal fashion, because they were near the preceding centres of power. (It is worthy of note that in contrast Canterbury apparently did not develop rapidly at first)⁴. Even by AD 44 much of the army must already have been in the areas beyond those centres, and there are signs that, where possible, bases further forward were supplied by sea (e.g. Lake Farm from Hamworthy)⁵.

Of the centres I have mentioned, those at or near Colchester and Chichester were apparently served by supply bases at Fingringhoe and Fishbourne respectively⁶. Silchester is much closer to Chichester than to Richborough and was perhaps supplied through Fishbourne, although shipment up the Thames would seem more logical: perhaps there is a base yet to be found. Ralph Merrifield's argument that 'the long haul overland from the Channel ports' would be avoided where possible, especially for traffic from the mouth of the Rhine, does not demand a base at London itself⁷. If it was possible to use the Thames for transport (and places like Runnymede Bridge imply that it might have been so used as early as the Bronze Age) then the base might have been further up river and could easily have been lost to its shifting course or to gravel extraction⁸. A similar base would be the most logical way to serve Verulamium; it would certainly be very odd to supply it from Richborough. This last point is worth stressing because that could have been the *only* *raison d'être* for the so-called Westminster crossing (a hypothesis that should surely now be abandoned)⁹.

1. D G Bird 'The origins of Roman London' *London Archaeol* 7 (1994) 268.

2. S Frere *Britannia A history of Roman Britain* (3rd ed 1987) 59, 69; B W Cunliffe (ed) *Fifth report on the excavations of the Roman fort at Richborough*, Kent Rep Res Comm Soc Ant London 23 (1968) 234ff.

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

4. J Wachter *The Towns of Roman Britain* (2nd ed 1995) 189. The supposed military occupation is less well attested than Wachter implies. See P Bennett, S S Frere and S Stow *The archaeology of Canterbury vol 1. Excavations at Canterbury Castle* (1982) 21-30 (e.g. "a possible military occupation" [28], not necessarily pre-Boudica [30]).

5. Frere *op cit* fn 2, 58.

6. Frere *op cit* fn 2, 57-8.

7. R Merrifield *Roman London* (1969) 29.

8. For documented cases implying a considerable change in the course of the Thames near Shepperton after the late Roman or early post-Roman period, see R Poulton and E Scott 'The hoarding, deposition and use of pewter in Roman Britain' 126 fig 22, in E Scott (ed) *Theoretical Roman archaeology: first conference proceedings* (1993) 115-132 and D G Bird 'Possible late Roman or early Saxon fish weirs at Ferry Lane, Shepperton' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 86 (forthcoming).

9. Bird *op cit* fn 1, 270; B Sloane, H. Swain and C Thomas 'The Roman road and the river regime; archaeological investigations in Westminster and Lambeth' *London Archaeol* 7 (1995) 359-370.

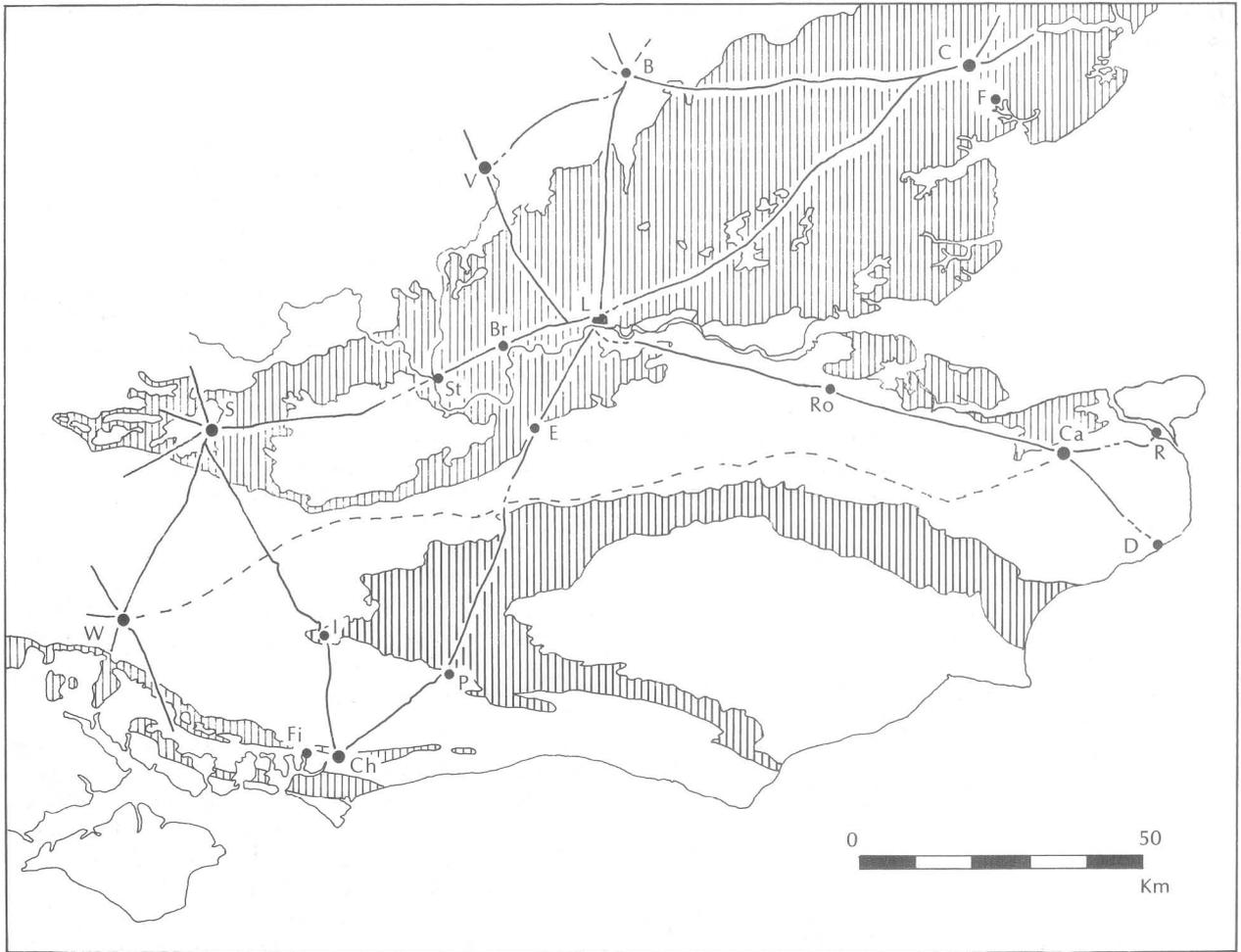


Fig. 1: South-east England showing places mentioned in the text and some others to aid in location. V = Verulamium; B = Braughing; C = Colchester; F = Fingringhoe; S = Silchester; St = Staines; Br = Brentford; L = London; E = Ewell; Ro = Rochester; Ca = Canterbury; R = Richborough; D = Dover; W = Winchester; I = Iping; P = Pulborough; Fi = Fishbourne; Ch = Chichester. The approximate line of the channel of the Wantsum is marked, with Richborough on its edge. The area of the London Clay is marked by vertical lines and the Weald Clay by slightly darker lines. Superficial deposits are not shown, but they are particularly important for the sands and gravels along the Thames and its major tributaries and in ameliorating the worst effects of the London Clay east of London. The line of the Thames is marked, and the Colne between Staines and Verulamium. The main Roman roads are shown; the 'A25' (and A31) line is marked by the dashed line between Winchester and Canterbury (see text).

What roads or routes were needed at first within the proto-province? Kent and Surrey were probably something of a backwater (there is very little evidence for military occupation, and again note that Canterbury was slow to start); they could be served by a route along the Greensand (i.e. approximately the A25; always more likely to have been the main route rather than the Downs¹⁰). This would provide a spine route north of the Weald. A Colchester-Chichester link would be essential: in the early years this is surely likely to have gone *via* Iping, with a Thames crossing somewhere around

Staines. Such a route would avoid the Weald Clay altogether and involve only a short crossing of the London Clay; it no doubt had an Iron Age predecessor. In the general area around Staines it is likely that the Thames could have been forded in a number of places. A crossing hereabouts would also give access to a logical route to Verulamium (i.e. up the Colne valley).

The Roman road from Verulamium to Colchester has a rather wandering line, perhaps suggesting a pre-Roman origin, as would be expected¹¹. A Sil-

10. DG Bird 'The Romano-British period in Surrey' in J Bird and D G Bird (eds) *The archaeology of Surrey to 1540* (1987) 168.

11. O Rackham *The history of the countryside* (1986) 253-6.

chester-Colchester link would have presumably used the Thames valley route along a line similar to that of the known Roman road (but perhaps using the Old Street line by-passing the site of London and thus explaining why the later road does not make straight for London from Brentford, but heads for the crossing at Old Ford)¹². In this respect it is interesting that the first laid road at Brentford was only 6m wide and was 'apparently quickly sealed' by another road, this time 12m in width, i.e. about as wide as the other London area main roads¹³. Was this first road pre-London?

So what was the role of Richborough? Might it have been to supply whatever garrison there was in Kent? Although there is very little evidence, presumably some forces must have been based there, but is this sufficient to explain the ranks of granaries?¹⁴ Granaries are intended to store grain. If it had been brought in from the continent, why was it not immediately taken to where it was needed? Richborough cannot be seen as a campaign base for more than a few months at the most. Yet the granaries *succeed* the first phase at the site, the invasion-period ditches.

An alternative idea might be considered. North-east Kent is likely to have had rich cornfields based on the Thanet Beds, which would have been easily worked from before the Roman period¹⁵. In the Middle Ages grain outputs from this area were among the highest in Europe and most of it was exported to the continent¹⁶. Were the Richborough granaries intended to hold locally-produced grain so that it could be shipped out for army use elsewhere? A port at Richborough could also have served as a first landing for vessels crossing the Channel before coasting along to other ports; the Wantsum would make a very convenient protected course towards Colchester. The port would also be useful as a refuge in uncertain weather

conditions, and to serve a short sea crossing for couriers, etc.

These suggestions would help to make sense of the fact that London did not develop until c AD 50. There was no need for a crossing there in the early period; it has gained a spurious credibility because of the idea that the campaign of AD 43 consisted of a landing at Richborough followed by fighting gradually through Kent, resting at a base at London and then going on to take Colchester. This picture seems increasingly unlikely¹⁷. Instead, the way is now free to see that it may well be the case that London did not grow up because that is where the roads cross; the opposite is likely to be true. It required a considerable feat of engineering to get across the Thames at London and it is most unlikely that any major routes crossed there before the Roman period. It is now generally accepted that London was a deliberately created foundation with a planned grid from the start, and was so successful that it grew with phenomenal speed¹⁸. Presumably we should see it in the same light as the early Greek coastal cities of the Mediterranean, founded as trading centres.

The new trading centre was situated at the best place for an inland port, but it would have needed good land communications as well. What evidence we have suggests that construction of the main roads to London may be dated to around AD 50¹⁹, i.e. at about the same time as the establishment of the settlement. Some of the roads depend on the bridge, for which there is now related evidence perhaps suggesting construction in about AD 52²⁰. The roads with the most carefully engineered lines are precisely the roads whose existence only makes sense in terms of London, that is Stane Street and the two Watling Streets. Such roads are likely to be later than the immediate post-conquest period, and both Stane Street and Watling Street North

12. Merrifield *op cit* fn 7, 52; W F Grimes *The excavation of Roman and medieval London* (1968) 44-6.
 13. A Parnum and J Cotton 'Recent work in Brentford: excavations and observations 1974-1982' *London Archaeol* 4 (1983) 320, 325.
 14. Cunliffe *op cit* fn 2.
 15. A D Hall and E J Russell *A report on the agriculture and soils of Kent, Surrey and Sussex* (1911) 89-90.
 16. B M S Campbell, J A Galloway, D Keene and M Murphy *A medieval capital and its grain supply: agrarian production and distribution in the London region c 1300* *Hist Geog Res Ser* 30 (1993) 179-181; Strabo's reference to British corn export in the Iron Age is of course often quoted (e.g. Frere *op cit* fn 2, 32).
 17. Bird *op cit* fn 1; J G F Hind 'The invasion of Britain in AD 43 - an alternative strategy for Aulus Plautius' *Britannia* 20 (1989) 1-21.

18. e.g. P Rowsome 'The development of the town plan of early Roman London' in B Watson (ed) *Roman London. Recent archaeological work, including papers given at a seminar held at the Museum of London on 16 November 1996*. *J Rom Archaeol Suppl Ser* 24 (1998) 35-46.
 19. P A Tyers 'Late Iron Age and early Roman pottery traditions of the London region' in J Bird, M Hassall and H Sheldon (eds) *Interpreting Roman London. Papers in memory of Hugh Chapman* Oxbow Monograph 58 (1996) 142-3.
 20. T Brigham, B Watson and I Tyers, with R Bartkowiak 'Current archaeological work at Regis House in the City of London (part 1)' *London Archaeol* 8 (1996) 33. I can see no reason why it need be supposed that the reused timbers 'should take the earliest activity several years closer to the Roman conquest'. As archaeologists we are sometimes too ready to forget how long a year is for those actually living it.

are also likely to be later because of the way they cross wide areas of heavy clay²¹.

The implication is that the laying out of London at the best point for a port, the building of a bridge aimed at the very centre of the planned area and the construction of the main roads engineered to go direct to it must all have been designed at the same time, presumably as part of a major exercise to make the most of the opportunities provided by the new province. Perhaps there was dredging too, to make a proper channel for sea-going vessels: the story of the Britons fording the Thames near the tidal pool following the battle on the river implies that such work would have been necessary. Martin Millett sees the start of London in terms of foundation as an entrepot, but prefers 'private' initiative²². It seems to me that there must have been some sort of 'official' input because of the clear evidence for overall control and action across a wide area (the road grid for the settlement, its new bridge, and the roads laid out to serve it).

It has been suggested that "we know from Dio that the British notables received credits from the emperor Claudius, also from Seneca, and the premature foreclosure on these debts was one of the causes of the revolt of Boudica. The inference is

that Roman capitalists during the first years of the conquest were investing in British development, and as the main urban colonisation was still to come, this must have meant chiefly agriculture"²³. Perhaps an alternative suggestion would be investment in the building of London (and Verulamium)²⁴. I have previously proposed the governorship of Didius Gallus (AD 52-57) as the most appropriate time for the foundation of London (given the date suggested by the archaeological evidence), because he was probably sent to settle things down after a period of heavy fighting under Ostorius Scapula²⁵.

I would suggest therefore that there is a need to rethink the traditional view of the role of Richborough. Indeed, it is always dangerous to argue from negative evidence, but if there was no London until about AD 50, then this rather strengthens Hind's suggestion²⁶ that the traditional invasion idea is wrong. Landing at the very edge of the country so as to walk all the way through Kent and then all the way back to Colchester would have tended to highlight the potential importance of the London crossing from the word go. Coming from the Chichester/Silchester direction makes the failure to develop the London site in any way until c AD 50 more understandable²⁷.

21. Magilton's suggestion that Stane Street was originally laid out to the Pulborough area strengthens rather than weakens this proposal (J Magilton 'Roman roads in the Manhood Peninsula' in *Southern Archaeology for Chichester District Council The Archaeology of Chichester and District 1995* (1996) 31-4). I owe this reference to John Mills.
22. M Millett 'Characterising Roman London' in Bird *et al op cit* fn 19, 34.
23. S H Applebaum 'Roman Britain' in H P R Finberg (ed) *The agrarian history of England and Wales 1.2 AD 43-1042* (1972) 223.
24. It might be worth adding that the land on which London was built may well have been Trinovantian, so adding to the sense of injury. Millett suggests that it could have belonged

to the Cantiaci (*op cit* fn 22, 36), but the Thames must have counted for something in this area, especially as the Trinovantes/Catuvellauni seem to have dominated Kent in the late Iron Age.

25. Bird *op cit* fn 1, 270.

26. Hind *op cit* fn 17.

27. The Richborough monumental arch is often said to be a commemoration of the point at which Britain was first invaded, but there is no evidence that this was the case. Donald Strong concluded that "there is little doubt that its chief purpose was to symbolise the *accessus Britanniae*" (i.e. to mark the entrance to (or exit from) the province (D E Strong 'The monument' in Cunliffe *op cit* fn 2, 72)).

Letters

Excavations in Field 410, Brockley Hill, 1972

I READ WITH great interest the article by Paul Tyers on 'Amphoras and the origins of the Brockley Hill Roman pottery industry' (vol. 8, no. 11, Winter 1998). It is gratifying to note that Paul has gleaned further useful information from the assemblage of mid-1st century pottery recovered from a pit, Trench 2, Site B, Field 410, on the east side of modern Watling Street in 1972.

These were trial excavations, carried out to determine the damage caused by ploughing in January 1972, and it must be stressed that Trench 2 was merely a section through part of the post-medieval field ditch, and indeed through only a part of the pit. Lack of time and a shortage of labour prevented the more

complete excavation of this pit, and we had to transfer our efforts to site C, where 2nd-century pottery kilns were located. This was most frustrating for our small team of excavators, for we realised only too well the significance of this assemblage of locally produced early Roman pottery! However, there seemed at the time to be every likelihood of our returning to the pit to do it justice. Yet equally pleasing was the decision in 1973, by the then Department of the Environment, to schedule the western half of Field 410 and the Hilltop Cafe site. This may help to explain the selective nature of the Site B pottery report in 1972. The Site B pit pottery assemblage is therefore best described as part of a group, and I would urge caution when comparing it with the group of pottery from the more adequately excavated Bricket Wood kiln site. Again, in view of the limited nature of the 1972 excavations, it may also follow that we are looking at the products of more than one potter.