Of Castles and elephants

NICHOLAS FUENTES

IN AD 43 THE ROMAN invasion army under Aulus Plautius forced a crossing of the Thames at a point which seems to have been just above the head of the tide. Some German auxiliaries swam across, while other troops (perhaps cavalry) crossed over by a bridge a little way upstream. After dispersing the enemy, Plautius decided to advance no further and sent to Rome for Claudius 1.

The aim of this article is to seek a possible location for the base camp of Plautius while he awaited Claudius, and to look at some related matters. The base camp was undoubtedly established for some six weeks until the Emperor and his reinforcements arrived. Much equipment, including elephants, had already been assembled (presumably on the Gaulish coast) ready to reinforce the expedition if required 2. It seems likely that some or most of these supplies would have been transferred to the expedition's base camp before Claudius' arrival so as not to delay him.

The Westminster Crossing

The contention, based on the layout of the Roman roads around London, that the invasion army established a crossing of the Thames at a posited ford at Westminster, has been widely accepted 3. Watling Street, which links the crossing to the invasion supply depot at Richborough, bypasses Londinium and meets, at Westminster, the road leading from Verulamium. The 19km (12 mile) long straight stretch of Watling Street between Greenwich and Springhead is aligned on the point of the Lambeth bank of the Thames opposite Westminster Abbey and Thorney Island, a little upstream from Westminster Bridge. Between Greenwich and Lambeth the Roman road appears to have swung south to avoid Deptford Creek – the route seems to consist of three straight sections: Greenwich–New Cross, New Cross–somewhere (along the line of, or parallel to, the Old Kent Road) near the Elephant and Castle, and from that point to the Thames 4.

1. Dio Histories 60.20.5 - 21.2.
2. ibid 60.21.2.
4. For a similar view see I. D. Margary Roman Roads in Britain (1967) 55 fig. 2.
6. Dio op cit 60.20.5.
7. A. Vince 'New light on Saxon pottery from the London area' London Archaeol 4 (1984) 434, Fig. 2.
9. O. Manning and W. Bray The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey 3 (1814) 478.
10. Dio op cit 60.20.5.
... Intertidal marsh
...... Extent of ryots and banks at low tide
....
dos do. high tide
0 1 2 3 km
0 1 2 miles

Fig. 1: The topography of northern Lambeth and Southwark in the 1st century AD. The roads are based on an anonymous map of c. 1740-50 in the British Museum\footnote{Glanville \emph{op cit} pl. 29.}, with some modern roads and bridges added to make it easier to find places; marsh after \textit{fn} 5, 7, 12, 38, \textit{op cit} fn 3, p. 11; eastern course of Neckinger after a variety of maps.

bank where not only would the Thames act as a barrier against surprise attacks from the north, but also the opportunity could be taken of the protection offered by the River Neckinger. According to a map of c. 1740-50 this river formed a rough ‘Y’ shape with the long arm running east-west\footnote{P. D. Nunn \textit{The Development of the River Thames in Central London during the Flandrian} \textit{Trans Inst British Geography} N.S. 8 (1983) 187-213.}. A study of the Thames during the Flandrian indicates that the course of the Neckinger was probably the same in the Roman period\footnote{Glanville \emph{op cit} pl. 29.}. More importantly, it is recorded that on arrival in Britain Claudius first joined the army and then crossed the Thames\footnote{P. D. Nunn \textit{The Development of the River Thames in Central London during the Flandrian} \textit{Trans Inst British Geography} N.S. 8 (1983) 187-213.}; a camp on the south bank would not preclude the retention of a ford/bridgehead on the north bank, perhaps on Thorney Island.

Further support for locating the base camp east of the Westminster crossing may come from the meeting here at a right angle of the extended mean lines of Stane Street and the Old Kent Road (between Albany Street and Billington Road, a distance of 2.4km/1\frac{1}{2} miles). During the wait for Claudius, it is reasonable to expect that Plautius’ troops would not only be engaged in consolidating the Roman gains with forts\footnote{Ibid 60.21.4.}, but also in construct-

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11. Glanville \textit{op cit} pl. 29.
ing a road towards Richborough to speed the passage of the “many and varied supplies including elephants which had been prepared ready to reinforce the expedition”15 (Fig. 2).

Another road which may have been started at the same time is Stane Street, as an overland link with the landing at Fishbourne/Chichester, thought by some to have been simultaneous with the Richborough landing16.

The tentative identification of the Roman base camp’s location at the Elephant and Castle depends heavily on two factors – that the Old Kent Road lies above the Roman road leading to the Westminster crossing, and that the ground was firm enough for a camp to be established. Although it has been suggested that the line of the Roman road lies some 150m (500ft) to the south of the Old Kent Road17, it is acknowledged that the evidence is “unsatisfactory” and “conflicting”18; the actual Roman road to Westminster may yet be found to coincide with the Old Kent Road.

Secondly, it has been argued that the presence of a large area of peat and alluvium (some 19m/62ft deep, centred on Rockingham Road) precludes the establishment of a camp there19. However, since the invasion appears to have taken place in high summer20 the peat was probably dry enough to camp on – today, peat bogs in Ireland of a similar depth can provide firm dry surfaces in summer21. Even if the peat, or part of it, was too wet to camp on, it may well have been included within the area of the Roman camp – the size of the Crackenthorpe marching camp, which was planned across a broad gulley where tents could not be expected to be pitched, appears to have been especially increased, as compared with its fellow camp at Reyecross, to allow for this feature22.

A more serious objection to the camp being located here is that its southern corner would overlie a length of the Neckinger, assuming that the course of the river has not changed and that the camp was of a large size. The size of the camp has been taken as 1620 R feet × 2320 R feet, which is that quoted for a force of three legions with a very wide range of support troops, perhaps totalling some 40,000 men23.

An alternative would be to move the postulated position to the north-west, still using the Old Kent Road as its axis, until the south-east side coincides with Newington Causeway. This location has a number of attractive features:

1. the camp would lie completely within an arm of the Neckinger while still being well protected to the north by the intertidal marshes.
2. the site lies off the area of peat and alluvium.
3. the diversion from the general alignment of Stane Street at this point may be interpreted as the line of a later track using the camp’s south-east agger as a causeway across boggy ground, hence the name Newington Causeway.

The location of the camp here would not prejudice the idea of a road being built back to Richborough while Claudius’ arrival was awaited, but it might indicate that Stane Street was built later. The right angle formed by the two roads may be coincidental or may have been made by a surveyor because the line went roughly in the intended direction.

It is worth noting a similar location for the camp, which was arrived at independently. Dr. John Morris observed that Stane Street “took two unexplained kinks, about the junction of Borough High Street with Long Lane, and near the Elephant and Castle” and suggested that the kinks may have been the corners of the base camp, which the road tried to avoid; the sides would be about 650m (2100ft) × 915m (3000ft). This suggestion was edited out of the main text of his posthumous book and consigned to the notes at the back because of the later awareness of the presence of the area of peat and alluvium mentioned above. Against it, one could argue that, as the camp presumably came first, it would be most unlikely that a surveyor would align a new road so that it had a double kink; further, the area of Morris’ postulated camp appears to be over-large when compared, for example, with that described by Hyginus.

It is not possible to estimate for how long the Plautian camp remained in existence, but it would seem reasonable to assume that as the legions marched on, some form of stores base of reduced size would have been retained, perhaps even on Thorney Island.

A possible settlement at Westminster

A map of Roman finds around Londinium shows a number of concentrations which may be interpreted as settlement areas, including one at Westminster with, inter alia, two buildings24; subsequent excavation on the west side of Westminster Hall has produced fragments of Roman brick from two areas, 19. J. Morris Londinium: London in the Roman Empire (1982) 355, note 1.
20. Dio op cit 60.19.3.
one from a gully\textsuperscript{25}. Because the concentration lies on the generally accepted early route to Verulamium, the spot may well have been the earliest Roman settlement in the London area and was probably established close to, or on, the site of the postulated ford/bridgehead. It may also be possible to suggest the Roman name for this settlement.

A string of four unidentified place names (nos. 22, 23, 24, 25) in the Ravenna Cosmography, which follow on a line from Rutupis (Richborough) via Burobrabis (Rochester)\textsuperscript{26}, may belong to the lower Thames valley, with Landini, the first of the four, being a corrupt form of Londinium\textsuperscript{27}. Because the sequence runs thus: Durobrabis, Landini, Tamese, Brinavis and Alauna, it is possible to place Tamese to the west of Londinium. Tamese (‘on the Thames’) is an appropriate name for an early Roman


settlement on the bank of the river. It is tempting to identify Brinavis, ‘the place on the brown stream’\textsuperscript{28}, with the Roman settlement of Brentford, the next known settlement along the route to the west.

However, some commentators contend that Tamese refers to the river Thames, rather than to a settlement on it\textsuperscript{29}. This view can be countered because the name appears to be in the locative case (of Tamesis), while in the specific list of rivers elsewhere in the Ravenna Cosmography, which admittedly does not contain the Thames, all the names appear to be in the nominative case\textsuperscript{30}; the only exception is Durolavi (in the locative) which seems to be a mis-listing of Durolevum\textsuperscript{31}.

If the Westminster settlement was indeed Tamese, then it might explain why the uninhabited later\textsuperscript{32} site of the future provincial capital was given by its founders the obscure and unexplained\textsuperscript{33} name of Londinium rather than a name from the river on whose banks it was established.

32. c AD 50-55 – see SLAEC \textit{op cit} 593.

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**Excavations & Post-Excavation Work**


Croydon \& District. Processing and cataloging of excavated and museum collection 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. Hon. Curator, Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society Ltd., Museum Building, Croydon Biology Centre, Chipstead Valley Road, Coulsdon, Surrey. (01-660 3841 or 22 43727).

Hammersmith \& Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Sandford Manor and Fulham High Street. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop’s Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, S.W.6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, S.W.6. (01-731 0338).

Inner and North London Boroughs, by the Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (Inner/North London). Several rescue sites in various areas. (01-242 6620).


Southwark and Lambeth, by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (Southwark and Lambeth). Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Derek Seeley, Port Medical Centre, England Gardens, Morgan’s Lane, SE1 2HT. (01-407 1989).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey. (01-546 1050 x3665).

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, S.E.17 (01-703 3324).


The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of field work. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £5.50 post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 112 Kennington Road, S.E.11. (01-582 0494).
(continued from p. 94)

Professor Grimes has postulated that the line of a pre-Roman trackway, Old Street, ran from Old Ford on the River Lea to Putney on the Thames\(^\text{38}\), which might therefore seem a possible candidate for the site of Dio's bridge; the distance from Putney to Westminster crossing is 7.5km (4½ miles). At Putney (non-tidal in the Roman period) the distance between the two low water tide levels at the likely crossing place by Spring Passage\(^\text{39}\) is about 115m (380ft)\(^\text{40}\).

The hillfort defences, chariots, ploughs and timber buildings mentioned in ancient sources and found by archaeology clearly indicate that the late Iron Age Britons were skilled in woodworking. Therefore there seems to be no technical reason why the Britons should not have been able to emulate their cousins in the La Tène area (north-west Switzerland) who in the 2nd century BC built two wooden bridges across the River Zihl; one has been dated by dendrochronology to between 120 and 116 BC. This bridge at Cornaux, 3km (1.9 miles) downstream from La Tène itself, was 115m (380ft) long (by coincidence, the same distance as the hypothetical Putney/Fulham crossing) and 3.5m (11.5ft) wide\(^\text{41}\).

Elephants

Although the reference by Dio to elephants being among the equipment held ready to reinforce Plautius does not necessarily imply that the animals were actually transported to Britain, they may well have been.

There is an interesting reference to elephants being in Britain by Polyaenus, a 2nd century Macedonian rhetorician, who compiled eight books of Stratagems and dedicated them to the Emperors Marcus and Verus in AD 162. The collections covered a wide variety of periods and peoples, but the veracity of the individual items is variable. Among a number of stratagems attributed to ‘Caesar’, Polyaenus mentions that he had one big elephant which was used to force a crossing of a large river (presumably the Thames) in face of opposition from “Casivellaunus (‘Cassivellaunus), King of the Britons” who had assembled a large army of cavalry and chariots. The elephant, which was protected by iron plates, had on its back a tower containing archers and slingers. As the elephant entered the river, the Britons fled without fighting, their horses apparently terrified by the sight of the animal\(^\text{42}\).

C. E. Stevens has noted that “the standard histories of Britain and of Rome do not trouble even to dismiss this story ..., surely because there is not a word about an elephant in Caesar’s own Commentaries”. However, his own attempt to sustain the evidence is far from convincing\(^\text{43}\).

A more realistic approach might be to assume that there has been confusion or conflation and that the ‘Caesar’ concerned was Claudius. The presence of Cassivellaunus could then be seen as an erroneous embellishment by Polyaenus in trying to identify the ‘King of the Britons’ – Dio, who last mentions Caratacus at the battle of the Medway, states that Claudius crossed the Thames and defeated in pitched battle the tribesmen who had gathered to confront him\(^\text{44}\). It is possible to consolidate the evidence by envisaging that Polyaenus’ elephant led the Roman army under Claudius across the Thames from Lambeth against the British skirmish lines of cavalry and chariots who then fell back upon their main body of infantry.

Many commentators, ancient and modern, do not think that Claudius actually fought a battle\(^\text{45}\). But the apparently senseless six-week or so wait of the victorious Roman army on the south bank of the Thames must surely have given the Britons fresh heart and an opportunity to regroup. For the battle of the Medway to have lasted two days gives some measure of the quality of the resistance encountered by Plautius, and the later apparent timidity of the Romans at the Thames may well have been interpreted by the Britons as the result of a Pyrrhic victory at the Medway.

While it is impossible to locate the battle described by Dio, if it took place in central London, rather than, say, east of the river Lea on the way to Camulodunum, then the Trafalgar Square area might be as suitable a place as any.

Some questions remain: how many elephants were (apparently) brought to Britain? if the Polyaenian anecdote can be attributed to the Claudian invasion, why did only one elephant cross the Thames? how many men did this elephant carry?

The Romans had formerly used elephants in small numbers (15 to 30) with success in Greece and Asia

38. W. F. Grimes The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London (1968) 45-6 and Fig. 8.
40. O.S. maps.
42. Polyaenus Stratagems 8.23.5.
44. Dio op cit 60.21.4.
45. E.g. Suetonius Claudius 17.
Minor⁴⁶. There are also references to their use in western Europe: in 153 BC Q. Fabius Noblior's army before Numantia (northern Spain) included ten elephants whose appearance at a pitched battle caused the Celtiberian army to flee; the Celtiberians later recovered and killed three of the elephants⁴⁷. At the final siege of Numantia in 134-33 BC twelve African elephants were used (“together with the archers and slingers usually brigaded with them”)⁴⁸. In 121 BC the Allobroges were defeated at Vindalium (Rhone Valley) by Gn. Domitius Ahenobarbus whose army included some elephants⁴⁹. However, in the early 2nd century AD it was noted that the Romans had long since ceased to use corps of elephants in battle⁵⁰.

It therefore seems likely that Claudius' elephants were few, and probably drawn from the animals used in ceremonial processions in Rome⁵¹ rather than actually on the establishment of the army. If, as suggested above, they arrived before the Emperor and were temporarily accommodated in the Plautian base camp in Lambeth, then it is possible that some may have died and been buried there, while others may have been lost en route. Although none of Hannibal's 37 elephants is recorded as being lost in his crossing of the Alps, all except one were soon killed, either in the battle of the River Trebia or through exposure to rain, snow and cold⁵². A similar fate for one or more of Claudius' elephants would seem quite credible.

On the number of men carried, Indian elephants appear to have been capable of carrying a crew of three or four archers or spearmen and a mahout⁵³. If the Claudian elephants were the smaller African forest animals, then presumably fewer men would have been carried. Polyaenus seems to be wrong when he mentions slingers being carried in the tower because they would not have had the room to cast their shots; perhaps the slingers were part of a 'guard group' assigned to the animal as at Numantia⁵⁴.

Castles

During the English Civil War of 1642-6 London protected itself by a ring of forts linked by a bank and ditch. Fort No. 12 lay at the western end of St. Georges Street (Fig. 2) in what is now the grounds of the Imperial War Museum; the location of Fort No. 13, although unknown, is thought to have been near the Elephant and Castle area⁵⁵.

The line of the defences between Forts 12 and 13 is also unknown, but it appears to lie close to the south-west side of the posited camp of Plautius. It is therefore tempting to suggest that the remains of its defences were still distinctive enough to be incorporated, after refurbishment, in the 17th century work.

'The Elephant and Castle'

The origin of this name is uncertain despite several appealing suggestions: for example, that the name derives from the Infanta di Castello. Elsewhere in Britain depictions of elephants are known from an early date, for example the 1345 charter of incorporation of the City of Coventry features an elephant with a tower on its back⁵⁶.

The earliest references to the name in Southwark appear to be in Shakespeare "In the South Suburbs, at the Elephant is best to lodge"⁵⁷, a mention of the Oliphant inn in the vestry proceedings of the Parish of St. Saviour's, Southwark in 1598⁵⁸, and the grant of land known as 'Elephant Island' to the poor of Newington in 1657⁵⁹. The intriguing fact is that the full name, Elephant and Castle, only seems to have been used after time of the English Civil War of 1642-6 when, as mentioned above, Fort No. 13 was built in the area of the Elephant and Castle. This suggests that the addition of 'and Castle' may stem from the presence of the nearby fort. A similar incident occurred in Putney where the Castle public house on the corner of Putney Bridge Road and Brewhouse Lane was not listed by that name in a survey of the manor of Wimbledon made in 1617, when it was simply called the Brewhouse; six other inns in Putney are however given specific names⁶⁰. The Castle appears to have acquired its name from the fort thrown up to guard the bridge of boats built by the Earl of Essex to link Putney and Fulham in

57. W. Shakespeare Twelfth Night Act 3, Sc. 3.
58. W. Rendle and P. Norman The Inns of Old Southwark and their Associations (1888) 327.
November 1642\textsuperscript{61}; the Putney fort was demolished c. 1845\textsuperscript{62}.

That an inn standing on or near the (posited) site of Plautius' camp, through which Claudius and possibly his elephants passed, should be called the Elephant in the 16th and 17th centuries is a remarkable coincidence. As already suggested, it is credible that the reinforcing elephants arrived before Claudius, that one (or more) may have died there because of the bad weather, and that the beast was buried nearby. If this hypothetical carcass should have been exhumed in medieval or later times, then it should not be surprising to find a local hostelry named after it.

An alternative theory would be to see the inn named after the Indian elephant given to Elizabeth I by Henry IV of France\textsuperscript{63}. The reference of 1598 to the Oliphant inn (above) also states that it was "formerly known as the Red Hart". This change of name could arise as much from the arrival in London of the Tudor elephant as from the discovery of the bones of the hypothetical Roman beast around that time. Shakespeare's reference to the Elephant inn in the south suburbs can then be understood as a topical allusion in his play which is nominally set in the 'Kingdom of Illyria'.

It is perhaps worth noting that the identification of the elephant found by John Conyers near Batterbridge, Kings Cross c. 1690 as a mammoth\textsuperscript{64} is not proven. The question as to whether this animal could have been part of the Claudian army, could have taken part in the battle which took place after the crossing of the Thames and could have been killed by the natives, as were the three elephants at Numantia (above), must remain a matter of conjecture.

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Appendix

Polyaeenus Stratagems VIII, 23, 5
A New Translation by Tim Price

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Letters

COMPUTER GRAPHICS

IN THEIR ARTICLE 'Hard Copy Graphics for Archaeologists' (London Archaeol, 4, no. 2, Spring 1985), Alvey and Moffett state that A4 plotters are available for less than £1000. In fact, rapid developments in this area mean that the situation is far better. Among equipment now available are the following: (prices exclude VAT, and are based on the latest information that I have).

(a) Penman. 3 pens, size at least A3. Cost £270-£300, depending on computer. (Made by Penman Products Ltd., tel. 0903 209081, telex 946240).

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