

London's Decline A.D. 150-250

JOHN MORRIS

Harvey Sheldon revives an old chestnut in the summer issue of *The London Archaeologist*. The argument assumes that a shortage of easily dateable objects means a "decline," of population or of economic activity. It rests upon two superannuated beliefs, Haverfield's rash "caution," that dated the end of every site to a few years after the minting of the latest coin there found, and the elephant trap which still tempts the unwary archaeologist, the overconfident notion that what he cannot recognise does not exist.

These simple inferences have in the past chiefly troubled the end of Roman Britain and the early 3rd century. The latest coins no longer disturb. Thirty years ago Hadrian's Wall was evacuated in 388, because no later coin was known; and Wroxeter was abandoned at about the same time on the evidence of an old man who crawled beneath a hypocaust to die, clutching a coin of Gratian. Though careless reports still often speak of "late 4th century" when they mean "late 4th or early 5th," no serious scholar would nowadays close down the Wall or Wroxeter or the thousands of similarly evidenced sites before 400.

The mythology of "late Antonine" dates has proved more robust, though its fallacies have often enough been explained. It survives through uncritical use of negative evidence; for not everything can be demonstrated by known excavations. On archaeological evidence alone, Caesar never came to Britain, and the Romans never reached Elbe, while Claudius' army reached Richborough and Colchester, but never set foot inland in the south east and archaeologically the Welsh ceased to exist for a thousand years after the 6th century.

Negative evidence is valid when dateable objects common elsewhere are absent from comparable sites. But the alleged archaeological desert of the early 3rd century is a phenomenon common to most of Britain, not to London alone; it is only in the last 20 years or so that a few oases have been located. Empirically, it has never been accepted by those who have devoted a lifetime to a large site; the relevant informed comment on the Colchester cemeteries is that if this late Antonine date holds, then the death rate quadrupled under Commodus, and nobody died for the next fifty years; and again if this date holds, the Romans evacuated Chichester at the end of the 2nd century. Evidence of decline is as strong or weak at London.

Empirical doubts are not enough. When evidence seems to pose a problem, we need to ask how it acquired the date that we are taught to give it. The short answer, not always remembered, is that the dating of almost all Roman objects ultimately rests on written evidence, including inscriptions, and is strong when words are plentiful and well informed, weak when they are not. Coins are dated because writers tell us the regnal years of the emperors they portray. Samian ware is dated because it is found with coins, or else on sites dated by texts. Its dates are surest in the 1st century, because informed texts are plentiful, and give dates to forts between the Rhine and Elbe, to Boudicca's rising, to the destruction of Pompeii; the evidence of later dates, destruction in the Danubian lands about 168, and there and in Gaul about 260, has not yet been fully exploited or linked with the

evidence: of Britain. Therefore the later the date, the less sure is the Samian evidence; and the chief evidence for the dating other vessels is their discovery with dateable Samian or, on military sites, in levels dated by inscriptions, which date building or re-building, but not destruction.

From the late 2nd century onward, the chief dating evidence for British sites is a vast quantity of sherds of vessels manufactured in Britain. Late 3rd and 4th century forms are plentifully recognised; but relatively few forms and sherds can yet be confidently assigned to the earlier 3rd century. Instead, there is an enormous amount of pottery, described as "Late Antonine" or "late 2nd century," because it is commonly found with the latest Samian wares, whose import probably ceased not long after A.D. 200, or else with mid or late 2nd century coins. The survival of Samian has been much discussed, and the following article in *The London Archaeologist* argues that one third of the Highgate Wood Samian was over 40 years old when lost. The somewhat circular argumentation is likely to be disputed, but the conclusion is sensible, for we know isolated instances of much longer survival of whole vessels, up to 200 years or more, and Samian sherds were plentiful in pagan English times, 300 or 400 years after their manufacture.

The evidence of coins is more decisive. The exhaustive tables and figures of Richard Reece's analysis support his conclusion (*Britannia* 4 (1973)238) that "large numbers of worn sesterii (bronze) from Domitian to Marcus Aurelius (died 180) were still available in the reign of Postumus (259-268)" and that very little of the silver coinage, then debased, reached Britain in the years 192-259. The coinage of the 180s remained in normal circulation until the 260s. A significant proportion of Samian vessels and Samian sherds remained in use for several decades after 200. The inescapable conclusion is that the great quantity of British made pottery which is commonly found with these coins and Samian sherds is not restricted to the years when they were new, but extends throughout their use, up to the 260s. But because the time span is so long, is it not possible to say whether a collection of these British pots should be dated to the 190s or to the 250s. We do not know. But we need to recognise our ignorance.

The mid-3rd century date is not simply a matter of coins and pots. The years about 260 mark the cataclysmic division between the early and the late Roman Empire. In those years, the whole Empire, except Britain and peninsular Italy, was overrun and wasted. The economy of northern and central Gaul never recovered. Recent discoveries in Britain and France have emphasised that rural Gaul is filled with enormous and luxurious buildings which were abandoned or crumbled about the middle of the century, while the great mansions of Roman Britain, most numerous in and near Cotwolds, on the scale of 18th century country houses, were constructed from the late 3rd century onward, and are matched by prosperous urban commercial evidence in towns small and large. The self-evident explanation is given by the contemporary statements of Ammianus and of the emperor Julian, that Britain replaced devastated Gaul as a main supplier of the armies of the Rhine. That is why, in Southwark

and elsewhere, flimsy timber structures of the early Empire were replaced by substantial stone buildings of the late Empire, often on different sites; for you do not knock down your rickety old home or warehouse until after you have built its successor.

The London evidence concerns the years 180/260. The date 150 relates only to the Walbrook, whose coins end abruptly in 155, perhaps because the stream was boarded over or otherwise covered, though other explanations are possible. The apparent absence of early 3rd century

material is an illusion. What the evidence shouts aloud is London's share in the sharp and sudden affluence of Britain after the devastation of Gaul in the mid-3rd century.

Later there is ample evidence for a drastic change in London's economy, probably partly due to flooding of the north road; but that concerns the later 4th century, not the early 3rd, and the word "decline" would be too simple and too vague to explain the evidence.

Mr. Sheldon writes:

John Morris is, of course, correct in stressing the problems of using both currency and pottery for dating deposits. If I undertake his argument rightly, he claims that I am misinterpreting the 2nd century coin and Samian evidence: that instead of pointing to decline they indicate a relatively stable situation through the late 2nd century and into the first half of the 3rd prior to a British economic "take-off" following the Continental devastations of c. A.D. 260.

It is beyond doubt that only a limited number of coins minted between 180 and 253, compared to those minted earlier or later, are found on Britain's settlements. (see Table 1).¹ That the economy was carrying on normally with the monetary supply coming largely from issues of c. A.D. 80 to 180 is possible but would be difficult to prove without good stratified evidence from the settlements. It is fair to ask John Morris why he thinks this should have happened at this time in Britain, especially as the phenomenon is not noticeable in France, the Rhineland or Italy. It is also fair to ask him whether he thinks a relatively stable economy would be indicated both by an increasingly elderly currency, and where seemingly small payments into Britain were being made from abroad.

If John Morris's hypothesis is right, one might expect to find a higher proportion of period B and C coins relative to those from period A, for they would have been circulating longer and surely more would have been lost. Yet generally this cannot be shown and specifically not in Southwark (see Table 2). Here out of 203 Roman coins only 18 were minted between A.D. 79 and 180.²

Certainly some second century — and earlier — coins survived and found their way into hoards of the first half of the 3rd century. This does not mean that they circulated in numbers great enough to offset the fall in newer issues. What the reduced coinage finds surely

reflect is a decline in the volume of money and perhaps in its velocity of circulation. According to monetary quantity theory this would be balanced by a fall in either the volume of transactions or prices, or both: in fact a deflationary slump.

In discussing the dates assigned to the pottery found in Southwark the evidence provided by stratification must be taken into account. "Late 2nd century" or "late Antonine" groups do occur, for example, at St. Thomas Street in a number of the timber lined pits which underlie the Roman stone building. It is possible that some of these should be placed into the first half of the 3rd century although the amount of East Gaulish (c. A.D. 170-250) Samian is small.

However, on most sites dug recently in Southwark, pottery of demonstrably late Antonine date is found in very limited quantities, if at all. The pottery associated with the end of the early Roman buildings seems, on current dating, to be Hadrianic or early Antonine. Yet when through sequences survive, the strata indicate that the early Roman buildings are overlain by a darker earth which cannot be dated earlier than the 4th century. It may well be that Roman pottery is in general dated too early but it will take some effort to re-date the Southwark sequence so that pottery now thought of as mid-2nd century has to be assigned to the mid-3rd century. If the sequence has to be stretched, much pre-Flavian material will have to become late 1st century and so on.

The archaeology of the rural sites — including the villas — often has additional problems of interpretation imposed by the absence of stratification. Rosamond Hanworth's point about Byfleet is fair (see Letters opposite) but does not mean that the date of the pottery Lowther presented needs altering. I can say little about the Rapsley evidence but if Gillam is right in stressing the relationship between rim diameter, height and date of indented beakers, then the Period III foundation vessel ought to be around A.D. 300 rather than A.D. 200.³

TABLE 1

PERIOD	YEARS	TOTAL COINS		COINS FOUND PER YEAR MINTED
		29,114	%	
A	43-79	5,386	19	207
B	79-138	9,806	34	166
C	138-180	7,254	25	173
D	180-222	1,957	7	47
E	222-253	1,103	4	36
F	253-268	3,600	12	240

TABLE 2

PERIOD	YEARS	TOTAL COINS
A	43-79	79
B	79-138	14
C	138-180	4
D	180-222	1
E	222-253	1
F	253-268	14
G	269-402+	90

1. Coin information supplied by M. J. Hammerson from 49 major sites in Britain yielding statistically useful quantities of 1st and 2nd century coins.

2. From S.A.E.C. sites dug 1970 onwards; the published coins of Dr. Kenyon and Peter Marsden, and other unpublished sources.

3. See J. P. Gillam's paper "Thomas May and Castor Beakers" circulated to the Study Group for Romano-British Pottery.