

City of the Romans

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THIS¹ IS RALPH MERRIFIELD'S third book solely devoted to the subject of which he is a past master (*The Roman City of London*, 1965; *Roman London*, 1969). It is also, unfortunately, the third volume on the subject to appear within three years (Peter Marsden, *Roman London*, 1980; John Morris, *Londinium: London in the Roman Empire*, 1982). I say unfortunately, because this is the best of the three in content and presentation, and its author deserves a wider circulation than he might obtain given the virtual exhaustion of his market.

In presentation the book is the sort of attractive volume which one has come to expect of Batsford's rapidly growing archaeological series. It includes a large number of aptly chosen plates and drawings combining familiar with new material. Even in illustrating old discoveries the author has successfully attempted to use unfamiliar plates. It is also something of a relief to note that even well known drawings have been largely redrawn to a uniform standard, and the author and his illustrator, Chris Unwin, are to be congratulated on the result.

In his preface Merrifield stresses the hypothetical nature of his analysis and points out that several hypotheses can often be drawn from the same data. He also warns against the adoption of hypotheses as truths. His even treatment of alternative interpretations is an admirable feature of the book, and springs from a thorough and concise exposition of the evidence at all points.

The author begins with a summary of the area in the pre-Roman period. This begins logically with the Late Bronze Age, during which the European contacts so crucial to the Roman period can first be recognised to any extent. This section is necessarily short, and one might wish for a little more detail, with some reference to Ehrenberg's work on the Thames metalwork. Of interest is the weight given to Kent's suggestion of a trade/political centre in the Greater London area in the earlier 1st century, though Merrifield rightly stresses the lack of evidence for a pre-Roman settlement of any importance.

Merrifield alters his earlier contention that Plautius built the first London Bridge in A.D. 43, in favour of a conquest crossing at Westminster and a

date c A.D. 50 for London Bridge. Unlike Marsden, Merrifield has not yet wholly abandoned the idea of a military element in London's genesis. He invokes Grimes' ditch at St. Bride's, Fleet Street, and the military ditch at Aldgate in connection with this. The role of the latter feature, and its implications, are explained more clearly than in any synthesis hitherto, and a convincing argument for its relationship with the bridgehead is suggested, particularly in view of the need during the establishment of London for skills not easily found outside the ranks.

The author sees Londinium as a *vicus* until the Flavian period, viewing evidence for early planning as a function of the Procurator's office. This office is thought to have been based in London from the first, and it is interesting to see how Merrifield uses Tacitus, and the symbiotic relationship between Procurator and *negotiatores* in support of this idea. It is on the subject of the status of the City and the relevance of the two *fora* to this question that Merrifield most noticeably diverges from the arguments of Marsden. Merrifield finds it inconceivable that the earlier *forum* reflects London's elevation to the status of *municipium*, because of an unfavourable comparison between the pretension of the *forum* of London and that of the other *municipium* at Verulamium. Merrifield suggests that the first *forum* was built in response to local pressure pending an imperial decision on the advancement of the town from *vicus* to *colonia*. The later *forum* would then have been constructed on receipt of colonial status before the close of the 1st century. This seems a very bold explanation for the closeness in date between the *fora*, and deserves consideration, though a little too much emphasis seems to be given to the possible role of Agricola. The chapter on the heyday of the Roman city is a nice synthesis of familiar and more recent material. The latter includes much consideration of the information derived from recent waterfront excavations.

It is a pleasure to see a chapter devoted to the hinterland of Londinium, a subject conspicuous by its absence in other syntheses. This is based on very sketchy evidence, though it is a laudable attempt to draw together evidence for Roman occupation in the Greater London area and in the City; areas too often treated in isolation. Particularly important is a preliminary attempt to contrast activities attested inside and outside the *territorium* of Londinium, and indeed, the first assessment of the limits of the

1. *London, City of the Romans*, by Ralph Merrifield. Batsford, 1983. 288pp., 60 pl., 40 figs., bibliog., index, £14.95.

Books

The Buildings of England. London 2: South, by Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner. *Penguin*, 1983. 813pp., £11.95.

REVISION OF the *Buildings of England* is a task on a par with the painting of the Forth Railway Bridge; no sooner is the work completed than it has to start again. South London is the second in a projected series of four volumes covering the whole of the Greater London area; Volume 1, *The Cities of London and Westminster*, has been available for some time, while 3 and 4 will describe North West, and North and East London, respectively.

This switch to the post-1963 borough boundaries reflects the massive changes that have taken place over the last thirty years in the architecture and planning of London; changes which, as Bridget Cherry points out in her introduction, have been

territorium to be included in a synthesis of Roman London.

Due to a relative lack of evidence, the period from the Antonines to the fourth century is presented in less detail than that of the 1st-2nd centuries. Restatement of old ideas here illustrate how the bulk of recent work in the City has focussed on the earlier phases of Londinium. This has not been so in Southwark, however, and here as throughout the book, evidence from Southwark is integrated thoroughly with that from the City. In addressing the problem of the Antonine decline and the accumulation of 'dark earth', Merrifield clearly favours plague as the basic reason for depopulation. He recognises the recovery attested by stone-built houses of some pretension in the Walbrook valley and Southwark, and the major public works: the building of the late quay, the City wall, and monumental structures to the west of the City (surely the D.U.A. took a better photo of the quay at New Fresh Wharf than plate 31?). A slightly excessive amount of credit for these works seems to be given to the Severan court and Julia Domna. Merrifield sees the City of the third century as filled with bureaucrats rather than merchants, possibly due to a general recession in foreign trade. This would not so affect the *civitas* capitals and small towns, which functioned as local market centres, and this is a reasonable explanation for the difference between London and other Romano-British towns of the third century. Under these circumstances the authors's comparison of Londinium with a planned capital like Brasilia is not inappropriate! Discussion of the fourth century is almost entirely limited to the evidence for the addition of bastions to the landward wall and the

particularly significant in South London where growth in the outer suburbs and decay in the inner areas have destroyed many of the characteristic Victorian housing and industrial buildings. It is one of the strengths of this series that it discusses with equal enthusiasm all types and ages of buildings, not just the great palaces, churches and houses of special interest to the historian or architect, but also the myriad of smaller, less obvious buildings, particularly the often-neglected later churches and secular buildings which form such an important part of the London townscape.

Thus, the description of Carshalton covers not only the well known 17th and 18th century buildings in the village centre, but also such interesting outliers as Little Holland House, a fascinating Arts

continued on p.444

construction of the riverside wall. Though this is a particularly fine piece of synthesis, there is a little too much anxiety to attribute construction with known historical events.

Apart from that on the hinterland, one of the outstanding chapters is that entitled 'From Londinium to London', an excellent update on the evidence for the fifth to seventh centuries (such as it is). New to many will be the discussion on the numbers and significance of the late silver ingots found at the Tower and their identification as parts of imperial donatives. A contraction in the City, favouring its eastern half, is stressed, and combined with the data recovered from the Billingsgate bathhouse. The sections on what Merrifield terms 'the Gap' and on the hinterland of London in the fifth and sixth centuries are good examples of the type of understated speculation, soundly based in the limited evidence, which is the only valid way of tackling this period.

All in all this a book with few demerits. As I have suggested, there is the occasional over-emphasis on historical personalities, but the use of historical background to make sense of the archaeology is one of Merrifield's stated objectives. There are perhaps more avoidable printing errors than one might expect, and we seem to be running out of snappy titles for books on Roman London, but these are minor quibbles. The book is written in a lively, scholarly style which will maintain the interest of both the informed reader and the layman. It is scrupulous in the extreme, and evades nothing, meeting every difficult issue head-on. It deserves to become as enduring a classic as its 1965 forerunner.