

The Plautian invasion base

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IN THE MAIN this article is a riposte to Bill Sole's 'Metropolis in Mayfair' in Vol. 7, no. 5, where he attempted to make a case for locating the invasion camp of Aulus Plautius in the area around Park Street, as well as placing an accompanying 'metropolis' in south-western Mayfair. I wish to concentrate on two points: Dio's account of the crossing of the Thames, and the assertion that 'Park Street is ancient' (p. 125).

Dio's Evidence

Referring to Claudius leading his army across a river, Mr Sole states that 'Dio does not actually say that the river was the Thames' (p. 124). Dio's account in fact reads '[Claudius] joined the army waiting for him by the Thames. Taking over command he crossed the river . . .' (Dio LX 21 - not 'IX'). In this context it must surely be disingenuous to imagine that 'the Thames' and 'the river' are two different watercourses. If 'the river' was other than the Thames (Mr Sole opts for the Lea), then one might have expected Dio to have so indicated this necessary fact to his readers.

I have already aired the case for locating the Plautian invasion camp in the Elephant and Castle area of Southwark¹ and suggested that, after the initial action of the forced crossing, only a small ford- or bridge-head need have been maintained on the northern bank, perhaps on Thorney Island (i.e. the area of Westminster Abbey)². In striving to locate the main Plautian camp on the northern bank, Dio's account aside, Mr Sole ignores not only the extra security which a south bank location would offer, but also the sense of occasion which would have appealed to Claudius as the Emperor led his army across the Thames into enemy territory (?echoes of Caesar).

One might add that bases and towns are invariably located alongside rivers for very obvious reasons, rather than a mile and a half away as is the distance between Park Street and the Thames.

The origins of Park Street

Mr Sole's case for a 'Metropolis in Mayfair' largely

1. 'Of castles and elephants' *London Archaeol* 5 (1985) 90-4, 106-8.
2. *Ibid* 91.
3. F. Barker & P. Jackson *The History of London in Maps* (1990) 26/7.
4. *Ibid* 50/1.
5. PRO: MPH 258 — a large western detail of the map occurs in *op cit* fn 3, 48/9.

rests on his perceived antiquity of Park Street, for which he cites its appearance on three early maps (p. 125).

He states that Park Street is 'partially shown as a lane on the parliamentary map of London (1642)'. Here I presume that he is referring to George Vertue's 1738 map of the 1642/3 Civil War Defences, where the only road in the appropriate area leading northwards from what is now Knightsbridge/Piccadilly is at 'Hide Park corner' and is presumably Tiburn Lane (Park Lane)³.

As far as the 'trackway' on Strype's 1720 map is concerned⁴, a comparison of its junction with the 'Road to Exeter' with the same area depicted on J. P. Desmaretz's 1717 map⁵ (Fig. 1) and John Forster's 1738 map⁶ clearly demonstrates that this road is in fact Tiburn Lane again.

Finally, turning to '[Park Street] is shown as built-up, but with the trackway to the north of Green Street' on John Rocque's 1746 map, this large-scale map in fact depicts the northern end of Park Street as terminating at its junction with 'Green Street', some way south of Tiburn Road (Oxford Street); from the northern end of Park Street two tracks or footpaths fan out towards Tiburn Road. Neither is anywhere near the alignment of Park Street, suggesting that this last road is a new construction⁷.

The best spoiler of the notion that 'Park Street is ancient' (and in Mr Sole's eyes, 'of Roman origin') lies in the very detailed maps of Tiswell (1585)⁸ and Desmaretz (Fig. 1) where there is no trace at all of a precursor to Park Street (Fig. 1).

The Roman coins from Southwark

Having dealt with the 'Metropolis in Mayfair', a more positive approach to the question of the location of the Plautian base may be offered, based on archaeological evidence. Although it is widely accepted that *Londinium* was founded c AD 50, as was its southbank suburb⁹, this concept does not seem to hold when the coin evidence is examined. Michael Hammerson in his very detailed analysis

6. P. Glanville *London in Maps* (1972) Pl 25.

7. *Ibid* pl 27.

8. *Op cit* fn 3, 20.

9. E.g. D. Perring *The Archaeology of Roman London* (1991) 6; J. Hall & R. Merrifield *Roman London* (1986) 5.

of the early Roman coins from Southwark made two conclusions of specific interest:

1. He noted that a comparison of histograms of coins from other sites, places Southwark among the 'Claudian period military supply bases' (Fingringhoe, Fishbourne, Richborough and Sea Mills). Of these four sites, the first three are generally agreed to date to the actual invasion year, while Sea Mills seems to have been a supply depot for Scapula's Welsh campaigns in AD 47-51¹⁰.

2. On the basis of the various proportions of grades of the imitative Claudian coins discovered, Southwark and *Camulodunum* are seen to be of a somewhat earlier date than Sea Mills¹¹.

The first comparison places Southwark on a par with the invasion ports and with Sea Mills (AD 47-51), while the second indicates that Southwark and *Camulodunum* are earlier than Sea Mills, thus suggesting that the former's origin may well date to AD 43. Although the value of histograms must be handled with some caution, Michael Rhodes' more recent examination of the coin evidence from Southwark, compared with that from the City and from the Thames along the presumed line of the Roman bridge, not only appears to reinforce these conclusions, but also has more to offer.

Rhodes notes that 'the relatively high loss in Southwark of Claudian coins, which suggests that during the first decade or so of London's existence, the focus of activity was in Southwark, rather than the City'. Along with Haverfield, he also notes that a concentration of early settlement in Southwark might explain the statement of Ptolemy, who relied on earlier sources, that *Londinium* lay within the territory of the *Cantii*, that is south of the Thames¹².

The coin evidence thus not only suggests an earlier date for the founding of the Southwark settlement than that posited for *Londinium*, but also puts it on a par with *Camulodunum* and four Claudian period military supply bases, including Fishbourne — in other words, no other site in Britain appears to predate Southwark, but some early sites (not including *Londinium*) are of the same date.

Conclusion

The map evidence cited by Mr Sole for his hypothetical Park Street location for the Plautian invasion camp may be seen as illusory. If *Londinium* was indeed founded c AD 50, then the coin evidence points to a date of several years earlier for the Southwark settlement, with the obvious implication that the site was the Plautian invasion base which continued in use as a supply depot. One might suspect that the flatness of northern Southwark would have had a much greater appeal as an initial occupation site, than the hillsides of the City.

A subsequent article will deal with the evidence for the Roman place-name of Southwark, which again will reinforce the argument for its early date.

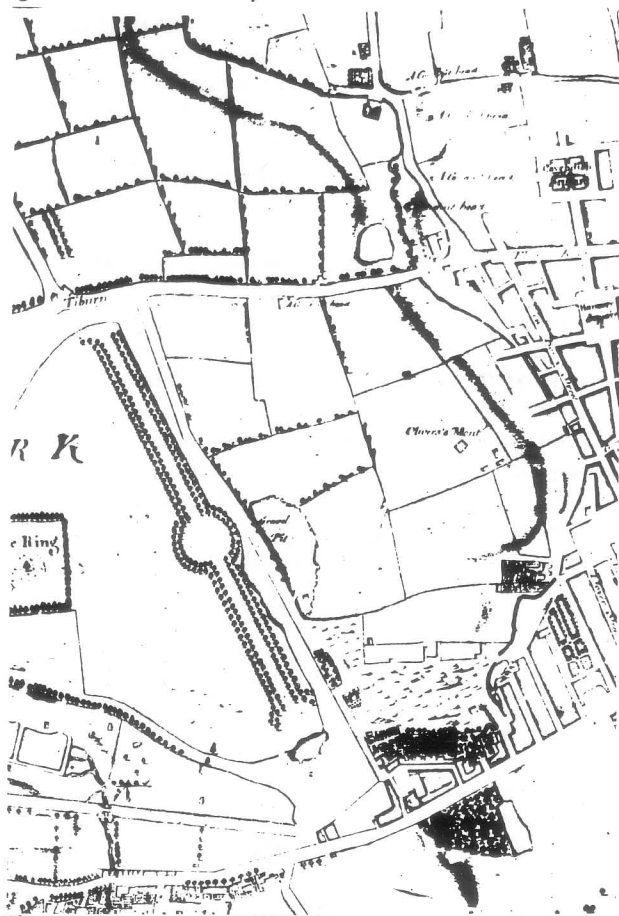


Fig. 1: a detail from the 1862 photographic copy of J. P. Desmaretz's 1717 'Survey of Westminster & Kensington'; the original is lost. Note the absence of a precursor of Park Street east of, and parallel to, Park Lane.

(Photo: Public Record Office)

10. 'The Coins' *Southwark Excavations 1972-1974* (1978) 596.

11. *Ibid* 592.

12. M. Rhodes 'The Roman Coinage from London Bridge and the Development of the City and Southwark' *Britannia* 22 (1991) 187.