

# An archaeological assessment of the origins of St. Paul's Cathedral

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**“There has been a Cathedral on this site dedicated to St. Paul for almost 1,400 years.”** (2004 *St. Paul's Cathedral Visitor Information pamphlet*)

Although this opinion is shared by many scholars, there is no proof, and no trace of the fabric of the earliest St. Paul's has yet been found.<sup>1</sup> Its location was a reasonable assumption before the discovery of the Mid-Saxon settlement of *Lundenwic*, when archaeologists were still querying the lack of Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement evidence within the Roman City walls. The lack of Anglo-Saxon artefacts within the Roman walls of London, once puzzling, was determined to be due to the fact the Anglo-Saxons built their settlement outside the old Roman town.<sup>2</sup> They lived to the west of the Roman City, along the Thames waterfront, now known as The Strand. Here they created an emporium, or *wic*, possibly using the Roman ghost town for farming – grazing their animals and planting their crops. And they might have, if the general assumptions are true, used it for Christian worship, as well.

But what if, in AD 604, King Ethelbert of Kent and the Roman missionary Mellitus founded a church named for the patron saint of London in the blossoming market settlement of *Lundenwic*, instead? The populace of *Lundenwic* was growing, though it was not yet the “metropolis” described by Bede when he was writing in the 8th century. Pope Gregory sent Mellitus and other missionaries from Rome with explicit instructions to try to found churches on the sites of pagan worship, making conversion easier for the pagans: why would the Anglo-Saxons put a sacred place of worship in a deserted, wasted city where they did not want to live themselves?

Historical records tell us that no more than a dozen years after the founding of St. Paul's, Mellitus was thrown out of the bishop's see by a resurgence of paganism after the deaths

of the newly converted Christian kings, Ethelberht and his nephew Saeberht.<sup>3</sup> So Christianity had an uncertain start in Britain; it was unlikely that mass conversion to Christianity would be instantaneous. If the original St. Paul's was a small stone or timber-framed church in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, it would be impossible to tell if it was torn down in the pagan uprising of c. 617, whether in *Lundenwic* or the City. The church would not have been rebuilt, or re-occupied, until the 650s, when King Sigeberht the Good of Essex restored Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the next historical documentation about St. Paul's after Bede comes from the much later *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, stating that it was razed by fire in 962: over 300 years of history is missing.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this study is to examine the evidence compiled thus far about the origins of St. Paul's Cathedral. By looking at other Anglo-Saxon churches and cathedrals of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, it is possible to get an idea of what the original church might have looked like, and therefore

what archaeologists should be looking for in future excavations. If one cannot find the fabric of the building, one might be able to find the bones of its congregation, as burials are one indication that a church stood nearby. The next task is to examine the burials of *Lundenwic*. By deciphering the burials in their context, one might be able to decide whether they represent a Christian burial ground that may have at one point been the resting-place of the congregation of St. Paul's.

Perhaps the tourist pamphlet was correct about the origins of St. Paul's Cathedral. Or perhaps something has been taken for granted, but unproven, because St. Paul's Cathedral is one of the most recognisable sites of London, and has given the city pride for centuries (Fig. 1).

## St. Paul's within the Walls: a possible model

Perhaps the reason why no one ever questioned St. Paul's location is that there is a good possibility that it has not moved. A few hundred years of Roman



Fig. 1: Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral in 1896

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occupation had left its mark on Britain, and sailing up the Thames, the Anglo-Saxon settlers would have set their eyes on a massive walled city – deserted and in disrepair – but a place that they could have re-inhabited and made their home. Yet they turned a bend in the river, and set up camp. This camp would grow to stretch approximately from present-day Trafalgar Square to Aldwych, and from the waterfront to Short Gardens; the full extent of *Lundenwic* is not yet known. The question remains, however: why did they pass up a relatively easy task of rebuilding a ready-made city? All over England, the same strange thing happened: Roman settlements and grand villas with mosaic floors were ignored by the new arrivals.

It was once possible to assume that the Anglo-Saxons were simply too barbaric to live in such a civilised setting, being the inferior culture that drove Britain into the so-called Dark Ages.<sup>6</sup> However, the knowledge that we possess today regarding these people indicates that they had a complex culture with vast skills and imagination. Some scholars believe that the Anglo-Saxons avoided Roman settlements due to their spirituality and connection with the natural environment.<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, writing in AD 98 about the lifestyle of the Germanic people who so fascinated the Romans, wrote in his account called *Germania* of the simple way the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons chose to live: “Separated and scattered, according as spring-water, meadow or grove appeals to each man.”<sup>8</sup> The city

might have seemed an alien, hard environment constructed out of stone. Yet they might not have let *Londinium* go completely to waste.

If St. Paul’s original minster church was always within the City walls, the Anglo-Saxons would have had plenty of building materials to work with. The Romans liked to build in stone, and the first Bishop of the see of London was Roman. There is the possibility that Ethelberht of Kent gave Mellitus free reign to build a church in any location, fashion and fabric that he liked.

Canterbury has been the centre of English Christianity since the arrival of Augustine from Rome, and is the seat of the Archbishopric today. Perhaps it would not have been so had not King Ethelberht married a Frankish Christian wife. She and her chaplain, according to Bede, worshiped in a small stone church built by the Romans, which was located outside the city walls. Augustine and his missionaries also used the church, attributed to St. Martin, before creating their monastic precinct (Fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> St. Martin is the first and most easterly in the 7th-century alignment of extramural churches that might be a parallel to those at St. Paul’s Cathedral.

Needing more space than St. Martin’s church would allow, Augustine’s monks built the monastic church of St. Peter and St. Paul, which was finished in 613. St. Mary’s was built by Ethelberht’s son Eadbald, and it lay a little to the east but on the same axis. A fourth church, the second most easterly in the alignment, was dedicated to St. Pancras.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 2: St. Augustine’s Abbey today, with visible remains of original Saxon churches



Fig. 3: St. Martin Ludgate

Copyright: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\_Martin\_Ludgate

There is a parallel in the City of London. Starting with St. Martin on Ludgate Hill, there is a string of churches with early dedications – possibly Middle Anglo-Saxon. From St. Martin heading east there is St. Gregory, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and then St. Augustine. The medieval churches all burned in the Great Fire of 1666; if they contained any Anglo-Saxon workmanship, perhaps some fabric remains underground.

If St. Paul’s were the earliest of a great strand of Anglo-Saxon churches in the City, much of the remains of the foundations would probably have been destroyed by crypts built beneath both the pre-1666 and baroque cathedrals.<sup>11</sup> Looking for the earliest known origins of the other churches in question may shed some light on the subject. St. Martin Ludgate (Fig. 3) might have Anglo-Saxon foundations. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, not known for his reliability, the Welsh hero Cadwallader founded the church at Ludgate around 600.<sup>12</sup> Recorded history of this church goes back to 1174. Archaeological excavations have discovered that there was a Roman cemetery on the spot, after finding the stones of a tomb.<sup>13</sup>

The history of St. Augustine-by-Paul’s-Gate is more elusive (Fig. 4): recent books on London’s churches make no reference to it at all. Though Stow wrote that it was “built by Nicholas Faringdon about the yere 1361” the actual earliest record of it is



Fig. 4: St. Augustine-by-Paul's-Gate Copyright: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\_Augustine\_Watling\_Street

in the *Taxatio* of 1291.<sup>14</sup> These are medieval references, so perhaps the church was dedicated in the medieval period, and not before.

St. Gregory-by-Paul's, dedicated to the 7th-century pope, has a legend that puts it in the Anglo-Saxon period, that the body of King Edmund of East Anglia was brought there after he was killed by the Danes in 870 for refusing to renounce Christianity.<sup>15</sup> He lay in rest there for three years, until he was reinterred at Bury St. Edmunds.<sup>16</sup> Gregory-by-Paul's was not mentioned in a historical document until 1010,



Fig. 5: St. Martin-in-the-Fields Copyright: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\_Martin-in-the-Fields

and it was not rebuilt after destruction in the Great Fire.

It appears that two of the three churches aligned with St. Paul's Cathedral might have had Anglo-Saxon origins – yet St. Augustine definitely does not, unless no earlier records survive. Perhaps it is just a coincidence that these churches came to be all in a row, because Fleet Street was a main road running through the City, but this is a pattern that keeps turning up. A similar situation occurs along the Strand, outside the City walls.

**St. Paul's in The Strand**

There is a line of churches thought to have early dedications along the Strand, outside the City, that is paralleled with the Fleet Street line of churches that leads to present-day St. Paul's Cathedral. This is relevant because the churches, if contemporaneous with the Mid-Saxon *Lundenwic* settlement, would have been either in or on the outskirts of the settlement. Therefore, it might be possible that one of the churches *was* the original St. Paul's, and later changed its dedication. Or, if the Canterbury model is appropriate, any one of the churches could have been in line with the original St. Paul's.

St. Andrew's Holborn was described in King Edgar's charter in 951 as "an old wooden church."<sup>17</sup> A stone Norman church, which grew into the medieval church that escaped the Great Fire, replaced the timber church. If it were old in 951, then it most certainly was built in the Middle Anglo-Saxon period.

St. Martin-in-the-Fields (Fig. 5) will be discussed in archaeological detail later. Historically, the first record of that church dates from the 13th century,<sup>18</sup> while another record states that Henry VIII had it built. In this particular case, the church goes back farther than its earliest historical record. The probable Middle Anglo-Saxon burials found beneath the church reveal that something sacred was going on at that location much earlier than recorded history shows.

St. Mary-le-Strand (Fig. 6) would have been the most central church in *Lundenwic*. Its earliest mention is 1147, and it once had a very famous rector in Thomas a' Becket.<sup>19</sup> The

church itself once stood where Somerset House now stands, but was demolished in the year 1549.<sup>20</sup> The church that sits in the middle of the Strand today was consecrated in 1723.

St. Clement Danes was built before the Conquest, and has many attributing legends. By 874, only the kingdom of Wessex remained independent of the Danes. London was at the time under the jurisdiction of the Wessex king Alfred the Great, who successfully repelled the raids after moving the settlement into the City. In the 990s, the Danes launched a successful attack on England that resulted in a short dynasty of Danish kings.<sup>21</sup> Legend tells of the royal burial of Harold Harefoot, who ruled as regent for his half-brother, until Harthacanute came of age. It claims he was buried at Westminster Abbey, then disinterred by Harthacanute. His body was thrown into the Thames, and found by a fisherman. He was later interred at



Fig. 6: St. Mary-le-Strand Copyright: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\_Mary-le-Strand

St. Clement Danes.<sup>22</sup> The old timber-framed church was replaced by a stone building in 1022, which lasted until Wren reconstructed it after 1666.<sup>23</sup>

St. Dunstan in the West is the final church in question. Its 10th-century dedication is a definite indication that it has Saxon origins, as the first Norman Archbishop of Canterbury forbade any new churches to be dedicated to Saxon saints.<sup>24</sup> St. Dunstan, a 9th-century Abbot of Glastonbury, later became the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>25</sup> No trace of a Saxon church remains, however, and the first mention of a church on the

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site occurs in the 12th century. Due to the date of Dunstan's life, and the fact that he would have been canonized after his death, it seems that St. Dunstan in the West is too late to be contemporaneous with St. Paul's.

### The status of burials

At the time of the Roman withdrawal, Christianity was a growing minority in the Romano-British populace. For archaeologists studying that period, evidence for Christianity in a widely pagan society is very difficult to discern.<sup>26</sup> The church in Rome was trying to promote the new religion – Emperor Theodosius banned pagan cults and temples in 391. By the late 4th century, around the time of the ban, offerings were still being made to purely Celtic deities.<sup>27</sup> Yet the new religion was catching on, as three Romano-Celtic Christian martyrs – Alban, Aaron, and Julius – appear in historical works.<sup>28</sup> So Christianity was known and practised in Britain when the presumed mass arrivals of Anglo-Saxons occurred.

To the antiquarian, working at a time when the discipline of proper archaeology was not yet established, Christian burials would have been of little interest, due to the lack of grave goods.<sup>29</sup> Even today, a lack of grave goods makes the dating of a burial more

difficult than the one containing coins, pottery or brooches. We know that there is a close continuity from the pagan period to the Christian, and Christian churches often borrowed features from pagan temples, such as the use of altars.<sup>30</sup> More confusingly, there is the issue of continuation of location: Christians were in the habit of re-using pagan sites.

When Mellitus arrived from Rome on the second mission in 601, he brought with him a letter from Pope Gregory with instructions on how to deal with the Anglo-Saxon heathens. Temples were not to be destroyed; the buildings were to be "purified and altered to make them fit for the service of God."<sup>31</sup> Gregory had the idea of using passivity – persuading pagans that Christianity was not going to be forced upon them, and by using their old temples and sacred places, trying to preserve the tradition of sanctity while gently easing them into a new faith. This was most certainly the case in London, and it makes determining whether graves are pagan or Christian even more difficult. The record shows scattered burials, none of which has been dated to later than AD 675, and many of which contain grave goods. The ultimate assumption should be that they are pagan.

### Lundenwic's burials

After discussing the evidence, or lack thereof, of the fabric of the original St. Paul's and the possibilities concerning its location, one must consider the hard evidence. If it is not possible to locate the church, then it may be possible to gain knowledge concerning its whereabouts by looking at cemeteries, or rather, burials around the *Lundenwic* area. The burials in *Lundenwic* have been much disturbed throughout the centuries, and it is therefore difficult to make a definite assessment.

If the conclusion is made that the burials at *Lundenwic* are not random, but represent a much-disturbed early Christian cemetery, then it is possible that they could have surrounded a small, timber-framed church. This timber-framed church would most likely have been the original St. Paul's, consecrated in AD 604. The idea that St. Paul's was originally timber-framed, as opposed to being made of stone, is enhanced by the fact that three out of four of the recently published Anglo-Saxon church excavations from Essex have located early timber foundations.<sup>32</sup> For all of the shifting boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, London, at the time, was

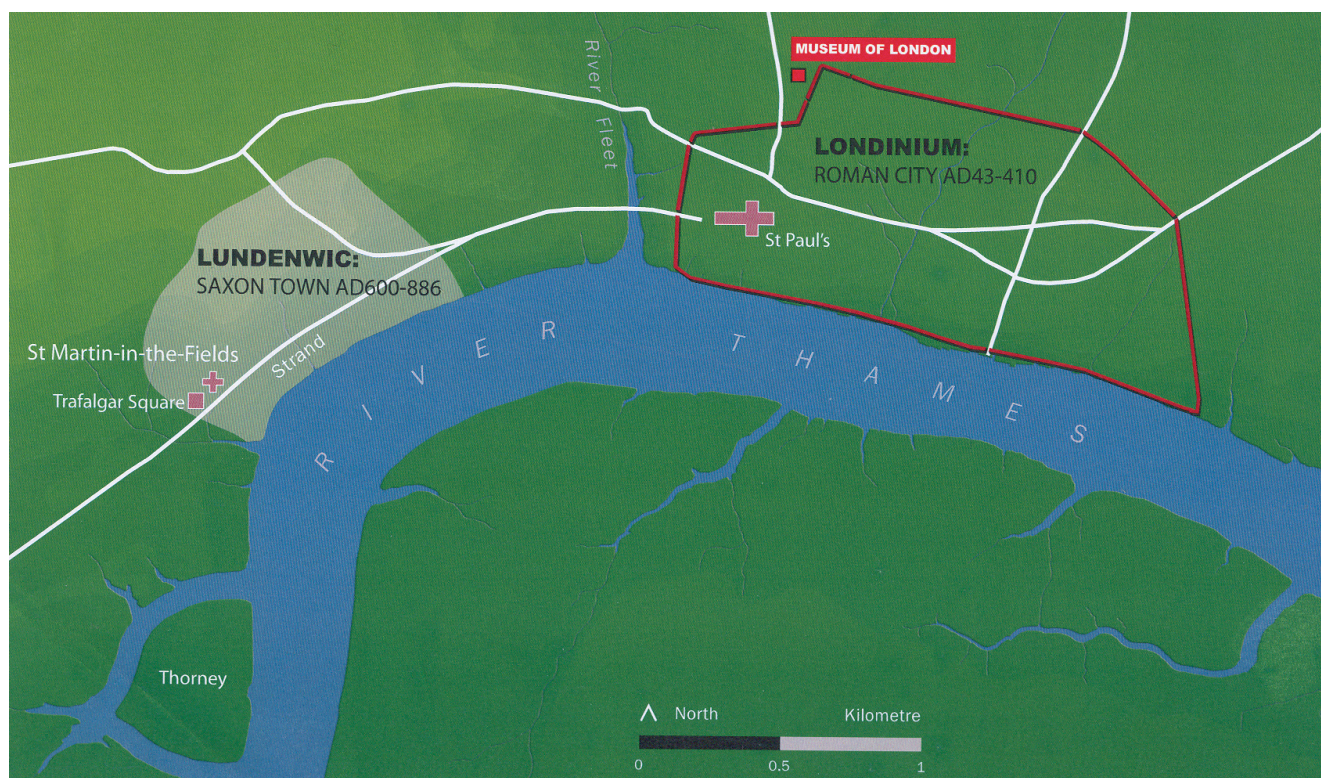


Fig. 7: map of *Lundenwic*. Copyright: Museum of London

located on the southern border of the Kingdom of Essex.<sup>33</sup>

Scholars and archaeologists believe that there might be two separate cemeteries in the *Lundenwic* area – one at Covent Garden, and the other at St. Martin-in-the-Fields by Trafalgar Square.<sup>34</sup> Since the burials at St. Martin-in-the-Fields were discovered in the 1720s and were not properly recorded, they will be considered as non-primary. Similarly, several burials discovered in the 19th century at King Street in Covent Garden were poorly recorded, so they too are considered disturbed burials.

So far, there are twelve recorded primary burials in the Covent Garden area: six were discovered during the refurbishment of the Royal Opera House, by far the largest-scale excavation in *Lundenwic* to date. These findings have been referred to as “the first Saxon cemetery found in Central London.”<sup>35</sup> It lay on top of the natural gravel, yet was covered with later deposits. Of interest are the Period Three burials, from AD 600–675; the Royal Opera House area encroached upon an area that was used for burials during the 7th century.<sup>36</sup> When the portico of St. Martin-in-the-Fields was being built in 1722, several stone coffins, aligned north-south, were discovered. Two glass palm cups were discovered in one coffin, while the other contained an iron spearhead. The palm cups were recorded to have contained some “ashes.”<sup>37</sup> The burials are thought to be of late 6th- or early 7th-century date; it is known that, in the late 13th century, a riot began in this area due to the rumour of buried treasure.<sup>38</sup> It is assumed that the burials were Early or Middle Anglo-Saxon; whether they are pagan or Christian is difficult to discern due to their alignment, for we know that the custom of burying personal items with the deceased did survive into the Christian period. A large number of cattle skulls were found with the coffins and grave goods; this might reflect Pope Gregory’s decree that churches be placed over pagan shrines.<sup>39</sup>

At the Royal Opera House site, three possible truncated graves were discovered, with no human remains found. One was definitely aligned east-west, while the alignment of the others

could not be identified. At Drury Lane, a human mandible was found, with no accompanying bones.<sup>40</sup>

Unless an object is found directly with a burial, it is not definite that it carries any funerary significance. But when one finds intentionally placed spearheads, or complete vessels such as urns and palm cups in their own context, it becomes apparent that these items were placed specifically to accompany the dead to the after-life. Several items have been found in the Covent Garden area that could have come from a burial context and been disturbed. In Britain throughout the 7th and 8th centuries, the use of grave goods, or “furnished inhumations” gradually petered out.<sup>41</sup>

There have even been two definite items, possibly more, which appear to hold Christian symbolism. A tall palm cup was recovered at the Royal Opera House; it featured a cross on the base and a silver mount decorated with an Anglian cross on the front.<sup>42</sup> It is believed that the glass palm cup fragments might have come from burials, and because complete glass palm cups have been recovered from the stone coffins at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, this is a possibility.<sup>43</sup> Also recovered from Garrick Street, north of Covent Garden, was a finger ring with plaited gold wires in a design that has been interpreted as a cross. A complete chaff-tempered pot dating to the 7th century is thought to have come from a burial context – perhaps associated with the human mandible discovered just 40 feet away.<sup>44</sup>

#### City burials

Four definite Middle Anglo-Saxon inhumations have been found in the City so far.<sup>45</sup> None of them are typical, and they do not seem like graves in a continuing cemetery. However, in 1997 a cemetery for the parishioners of St. Paul’s was found, with 31 bodies in total. They contained no “grave goods,” and radiocarbon analysis from five samples of bone has placed the date of the inhumations between the 8th and the 10th centuries.<sup>46</sup> This is a Christian cemetery with no pagan attributes whatsoever. Perhaps they were the parishioners of the St. Paul’s of Alfredian London. The last historic documentation of *Lundenwic* appears

in AD 857, so it is safe to assume that the City was being reborn as a defensive, commercial, and theological centre around the time that Alfred officially moved back in.<sup>47</sup>

#### The Final Phase burials: an indication of the first St. Paul’s

E.T. Leeds coined the term “Final Phase” in 1936; it is used to describe the period when Anglo-Saxon paganism was on the decline, and Christian conversion was on the rise. Final Phase cemeteries were actually Christian burials that included pagan elements like grave goods, and this often made the interpretation of the religious orientation of those interred practically impossible. *Lundenwic*’s burials often fall into this category – making it quite possible that they are from, in fact, a disturbed Christian cemetery rather than a pagan one. The criteria are as follows:

1. A new set of cemeteries is established under Christian influence.
2. They are close to the settlements, whereas their pagan predecessors tended to be further afield, often on boundaries.
3. The burials are exclusively inhumations.
4. Orientation is consistent and west-east.
5. Some graves are in, or under, barrows.
6. The proportion of graves without artefacts is high.
7. Artefacts relate predominantly to utilitarian clothing or small personal tokens- weapons are rare.
8. Some objects, notably cross forms, have Christian significance.<sup>48</sup>

With the knowledge that we have thus far, many of the criteria do, or could, apply to the *Lundenwic* burials. The closest thing to a cremation comes from the unreliable 17th-century record of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, where a glass palm cup was said to contain “ashes.” At both the Royal Opera House and Jubilee Hall excavations, curving gullies were found that were interpreted as possible ring-ditches, which might have outlined barrow mounds. More graves were found without artefacts than with, and aside from the occasional spearhead and seax, weapons were rare. Most of the grave goods were accessories to clothing. The only swords that were found were not from a



**Fig. 8: Folded cross found in recent Middle Saxon Staffordshire Hoard**

Photo: Daniel Buxton, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

burial context, and therefore might not have been funerary objects at all. Finally, two objects of almost definite Christian significance were discovered during the Royal Opera House excavation. Exceptionally, one of the James Street burials was said to be aligned north-south, much like the coffins found beneath St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Judging from these parallels, and though not a perfect match, the Covent Garden cemetery fits enough of the

criteria to be considered a Final Phase, Christian cemetery. So there must have been a church.

**Conclusion**

At Prittlewell in Essex, archaeologists have discovered the burial of another Anglo-Saxon king – thought to be Saeberht, King of Essex and nephew of Ethelberht. Saeberht was the second Christian King of England, and his death (c. 617) caused a resurgence of paganism that forced Bishop Mellitus out of London. He was discovered in a burial chamber filled with grave goods that would enable him to live very well in his next life.<sup>49</sup> Like the famous grave at Sutton Hoo, Saeberht was buried with Christian artefacts, namely two gold foil crosses (compare the one from the Staffordshire hoard, see Fig.8), a Byzantine flagon, and a gold reliquary that may have contained a relic. Yet, for a champion of Christianity, his manner of burial is entirely pagan.

The facts about St. Paul's and its relation to *Lundenwic* are as follows: St. Paul's was founded in AD 604. Its whereabouts are unknown. Around 617, the Bishop was expelled from London and paganism ensued until the 650s, when Christianity was reintroduced. In *Lundenwic*, a possible Final Phase-type cemetery has been discovered in bits and pieces (which is understandable considering the amount

of development that London has seen), with no burial dates beyond c. 675. The next mention of St. Paul's Cathedral is in the 10th century, when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that it had been razed by fire. At this point Alfred had moved the settlement into the City (*Lundenburgh*), and so the church that burned was most definitely on or near the site of the present-day St. Paul's Cathedral. In AD 604, there is a strong possibility that it was not. Only further investigation will tell.

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