The Development of Towns

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Abstract

This chapter examines urban foundation and development in the Roman period and the issues relating to town origins and purpose in Britain. It focuses on the chartered towns and reviews evidence relating to the three main types of urban settlement—the *coloniae*, *municipia* and *civitas*-capitals—and the practice of settlement categorization. The chapter also contextualizes debate on urban development by discussing aspects of the history of approach to the documentation and interpretation of Roman town foundation in Britain. It discusses the practicalities of town construction and then moves on to emphasizing the need for Roman urban studies to embrace archaeological theory in order to avoid normative assumptions in interpreting urban material and town life. In particular it argues for greater recognition of the relationship between the development of urban spaces, the lived experience within towns, and the existing significance attached to places and landscapes in prehistory.

Keywords

Roman urbanism, oppida, colonia, municipium, civitas-capital, town foundation, fortress, urban space, ritual

Introduction

Towns and urban development have formed a major part of the history of studies of Roman Britain, and some of the towns are among the most heavily investigated Roman settlements. For centuries Roman material has been encountered within living cities, and, in some instances, there are Roman remains still standing. The nineteenth century saw the commencement of some large-scale excavation programmes, especially at town sites unoccupied by later settlement, including Silchester, Caerwent, Verulamium, and Wroxeter. The investigation of these green-field sites was instrumental in the formation of models for
urban development, but interpretations were also influenced by the cultural context and social preoccupations of the day (cf. Hingley 2008). The post-war years saw a massive increase in knowledge relating to those towns now lying beneath modern settlements through urban redevelopments and the formation of urban archaeological units. Much of this work was collated for the first time in Wacher’s important narrative (1975) on the Roman towns of Britain. There are now many important studies and syntheses of urban development taking different perspectives (e.g. Millett 1990; Wacher 1995; M. J. Jones 2004; Hingley 2005; Creighton 2006; Mattingly 2006; Rogers 2008), but our knowledge and understanding of town development remains open to constant revision as new discoveries are made and analyses are undertaken.

Especially important in more recent years has been the development of theoretical approaches in Roman archaeology and the potential that this has for studying settlement. Towns were new to Britain in the Roman period, although there were also a range of large settlements and complexes in prehistory. There has, however, tended to be a divide between the approaches taken by prehistorians and Romanists in addressing social themes relating to processes of settlement development, their relationship to human identities and experiences, and other issues. While hillforts were important for much of the Iron Age, in the second and first centuries BC another group of sites appeared—often referred to collectively as oppida and conventionally divided into ‘enclosed’ and ‘territorial’ oppida based on the nature of the earthworks evident (e.g. Haselgrove 1999). Some Roman towns were located in or near oppida, but there is still considerable uncertainty as to their real nature and function and whether we can think of oppida as a clear category of site or whether there was more variety and variation of sites and circumstances than has so far been fully appreciated (cf. Haselgrove and Moore 2007). While it would be unwise to attempt to apply Classical or later urban models to these sites, moreover, including in debating the role of the earthworks, it might be
possible to think of them as taking another form of trajectory in urban development (cf. Sharples 2010: 173); *oppida* may also have had more impact on the urban geographies of Roman Britain than is often acknowledged, and it is important for Roman archaeology to draw on landscape theory. As such it is important for studies of Roman urban development to engage in theoretical debates relating to landscape archaeology as well as theories concerning interconnected issues including identity and experience. The divide between Roman and Iron Age is as much about archaeological perspectives as historical events, and theoretical frameworks can help us to adopt more nuanced approaches to the transition from Iron Age to Roman Britain.

**Categorizing towns: Regionality**

Central to archaeology have been attempts to categorize the past: be it by periods, objects, or settlements. Romano-British studies have created lists of characteristics of what defines certain types of settlements, drawing on knowledge of archaeology, textual sources, and the Roman Empire as a whole. Inevitably, however, these attempts will also have imposed modern perspectives and preoccupations onto the past, and there is always a danger in oversimplifying our understanding of settlements through these definitions. The towns of Roman Britain are usually defined by their planned and organized appearance, their size, the presence of a variety of buildings, a concentration of population, and the administrative and economic roles that they had (e.g. Mann 1996; Burnham et al. 2001). But it is undoubtedly the legal categorizations known through written records that have been most instrumental in defining urbanism and urban development in Roman Britain. It is important to recognize, however, that there may well also have been other forms of urbanism in Britain at this time, alongside the towns included in more conventional studies.

It is known that there was a legal hierarchy of urban settlements, with *coloniae* at the top, *municipia*, and then *civitas*-capitals or centres ([Figure 1](#figure1)). The *colonia* was a chartered
town, by the first century AD generally founded for the settlement of discharged veterans, and it had a constitution that was modelled on Rome and adopted Roman law. In Britain, the three initial colonia were founded at Colchester (Camulodunum), Gloucester (Glevum), and Lincoln (Lindum), on the sites of legionary fortresses that have traditionally formed important parts of the narrative of the conquest and occupation of the province (e.g. Frere 1967; Wacher 1975). Legio XX is conventionally assigned to the fortress at Colchester, founded around AD 43–4 and replaced by the colonia from around AD 49. In the AD 60s Legio IX Hispania was assigned to Lincoln (used later by Legio II Adjutrix) and another, as yet undetermined, legion to Gloucester, although Legio II Augusta is thought to have occupied the fortress at some stage (Wacher 1995: 150). While the dates have been the subject of much debate, the colonia at Lincoln was probably founded in the AD 80s (M. J. Jones 2002) and at Gloucester in the 90s (Copeland 2011). Even this most familiar of narratives of development, however, is not safe from reassessment, not least because so little is actually known about the composition of the army in Britain at any one time or of its movements (Mattingly 2006: 130). At Lincoln, for example, the possibility of an earlier Claudian military base has been raised, which is based on some evidence for an early military cemetery (M. J. Jones 2003a: 38–9), but until more positive structural evidence comes to light this must remain a subject for debate.

The coloniae in Britain have generally been treated as Classical-style settlements with Roman populations; they have been described as ‘bulwarks of loyalty’ (Collingwood and Richmond 1969: 95) and ‘instrument(s) of civilisation’ (Richmond 1963: 55). Many of the inhabitants will have been Roman citizens, but there will also have been other inhabitants, especially local indigenous people, who would not have been citizens, indicating a mix of people and perspectives with social implications. Below the colonia in the hierarchy was the municipium, which was also a chartered town, but far fewer inhabitants automatically
received citizenship, with only the ex-magistrates usually having the right to acquire citizen status. Verulamium was described by Tacitus (Ann. XIV.33) as a municipium, but exactly when, and even if, the town actually acquired this status and the reasons behind it are uncertain; it may well have been an upgrade from civitas-capital made in the AD 70s (Niblett 2001: 66). York (Eboracum) was described by the fourth-century writer Aurelius Victor as a municipium at the time of Septimius Severus’ visit in the early third century (Aur. Vict. Caes. XX; Ottaway 2004: 83). It is not entirely clear how much value can be placed on the terms used in these accounts, since they may simply have been used for convenience or individual preference. However, an inscription on an altar dating to AD 237 (AE 116 [1922]), set up in Bordeaux by Marcus Aurelius Lunaris for the goddess Tutela Boudiga, indicates that by this date at least York had become a colonia. He described himself as a sevir Augustalis (priest of the deified emperor) from the coloniae of both Lincoln and York. It is possible in the case of York that the settlement was later granted the status of colonia by the emperor, perhaps after petitioning for it, as occurred elsewhere (cf. Boatwright 2000), and was not founded in the same sense as the earlier coloniae in Britain.

The largest group in the urban hierarchy was what are usually termed civitas-capitals or civitas centres and regarded as the centres of the civitates: the means by which land and people were divided up for administration. Although lower in status, the constitution, like the other towns, was also ultimately modelled on Rome, with laws, annual magistracies, and a town council. We still know frustratingly little about the nature of town councils or other forms of organization and management within the towns of Roman Britain. It seems likely that the circumstances differed within each town depending on local peoples, histories, and the nature of the urban development. The province was large, and, because of this, the regions, local conditions, and peoples are important factors to consider in the development of towns and the meanings that will have been attached to them as places. It is the recorded
names of the *civitas*-capitals that have conventionally been taken as evidence of processes of negotiation with local people as *civitates* and towns were formed: for example, Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum*); Winchester (*Venta Belgarum*); Caistor-by-Norwich (*Venta Icenorum*); Leicester (*Ratae Corieltauvorum*); Cirencester (*Corinium Dobunnorum*); Dorchester (*Durnovaria*); Exeter (*Isca Dumnoniorum*); Wroxeter (*Viroconium Cornoviorum*). The existing ‘tribal’ organization of Britain prior to the conquest, however, remains a focus of debate, since the main evidence comes from texts written by Roman authors and inscriptions that date to after AD 43. It seems likely that Rome had an influence on the creation of these entities either before or after AD 43, but the nature of this remains uncertain (e.g. Moore 2006, 2011; Sharples 2010). Group identities and allegiances may well have been more fluid in the late Iron Age, perhaps based on individuals’ fluctuating capabilities of encouraging the support of others, and more localized settlement and household identities will also have been important. Ongoing work at the Bagendon/Ditches complex north of Cirencester is certainly indicating that the negotiations for power and the beginnings of urban development at *Corinium* are likely to have been more complex than traditional models of tribal oppidum to town (Moore 2011). In the second century further towns appear to have been founded: Caerwent (*Venta Silurum*), Carmarthen (*Moridunum Demetarum*), and the less-understood settlements of Brough-on-Humber (*Petuaria Parisiorum*) and Aldborough (*Isurium Brigantum*). These remind us of the complex ongoing developments and changes that took place in Roman Britain, although the nature of the processes and negotiations that may have taken place with their foundation remain obscure to us.

Settlement size has also been used to categorize towns and also to comment on the perceived success of Roman urbanism in Britain. The towns of Roman Britain are generally fairly small in size, with many of the main enclosed areas falling to around 40 hectares, including Canterbury, Leicester, Exeter, Silchester, and Lincoln. Larger towns included
Cirencester at around 97 hectares, Verulamium at 80 hectares, and London at 133 hectares; the enclosed area at Gloucester, however, was only around 16.6 hectares. Settlement, however, will also have extended beyond the enclosures (cf. Esmonde Cleary 1987). Another category of settlement in Romano-British archaeology is what is generally referred to as the ‘small town’ (e.g. Burnham and Wacher 1990), although these are not always any smaller than the civitas-capitals or coloniae. Although it seems clear that they did not have the same legal status (at least in terms of that imposed by the Empire) within the province, they may have had a more prominent role within the civitates than has generally been acknowledged (cf. Laurence 2001; Hingley 2005). Mattingly (2006: 281) has suggested that the territories assigned to the civitas-capitals may have been smaller than is conventionally attributed to them, although there remains frustratingly scant evidence to support arguments either way. Since it is likely that all land was attributed to some kind of authority for the purposes of tax-gathering, it would mean that other forms of settlements and landownership with the civitates were also important. These issues remain debateable and highlight the constant need for discussion without taking the evidence for granted. Hingley (1997) has also argued that ‘small towns’ may reflect more local indigenous interpretations and expressions of urbanism, perhaps not unlike how we might be able to interpret some of the oppida. This might help to explain the apparent diverse range of contexts of ‘small-town’ development and function and reminds us of the possibility of different forms of urbanism in the Roman period (see also Pitts and Fincham, this volume). The debate is a reminder of the necessity to avoid the ‘one-model-fits-all’ approach to urban development and instead examine the complex processes and negotiations that must have occurred in the local context of each site.

As noted for Verulamium and York, and possibly also London (cf. Tomlin 2006), urban status could change. It has been argued that some ‘small towns’ possibly sought and were granted status as civitas-capitals in the later Roman period, including Water Newton
(Durobrivae) and Ilchester (possibly the Lindinis in the Ravenna Cosmography; or the Civitas Durotrigum Lindinesis on RIB 1672 and 1673 from Cawfields on Hadrian’s Wall) (Leach 1982; Fincham 2004; Putnam 2007; cf. Fulford 2006). These arguments are based principally on settlement size and the buildings they contained, as there is no textual evidence for these changes. The town at Chelmsford in Essex (Caesaromagus) is often included in discussions of civitas-capitals (e.g. Wacher 1995), but in other accounts it is treated as a ‘small town’ (e.g. Mattingly 2006: 259). Wacher (1995: 207) suggested that it may have been a largely unsuccessful civitas-capital, because of his belief that the colonia at Colchester would not have controlled the civitas. It might be that attempting to fit the settlement within the category of either civitas-capital or ‘small town’ is inadequate, especially since there is little consensus as to what we mean by ‘small town’ and how these settlements functioned. In the north the military establishment of Carlisle (Luguvalium Carvetiorum) may have become a civitas-capital in the third century (Burnham and Wacher 1990: 58; M. J. Jones 2004: 174; Mattingly 2006: 261).

**Town development and texts**

One of the earliest forms of text relating to places in Britain are the names incorporated into Iron Age coin designs, which have long been associated with the oppida known in the vicinity of some of the Roman towns (cf. Hingley 2008). Coin distributions have been studied to assess ownership of oppida, and the work of antiquarians has been instrumental in our recognition of Iron Age and Roman sites and the development of concepts of ‘Romanization’ and ‘civilization’. The name Calleva (Silchester) first appears on the coinage of Eppillus dating to the beginning of the first century AD (Creighton 2006: 64), the self-proclaimed son of Commius (who is mentioned in Caesar’s Bellum Gallicum IV.21). The coin distribution then changes to those that refer to Epatticcus, son of Tasciovanus and brother of Cunobelin (Creighton 2006: 64), which is often taken to imply some kind of violent conquest of the area.
or a dynastic union, perhaps through marriage (ibid.). Verulamium is also first named on coinage, with the issues of Tasciovanus inscribed with VER, and Camulodunum on the coinage of Cunobelin as CAMV (Potter 2002: 21; Williams 2005: 33) (see also Walton and Moorhead, this volume, for further discussion on coinage). The names Verlamion and Camulodunon are sometimes suggested for the Iron Age period settlements in order to distinguish them from the Roman towns (Potter 2002: 21). There is no definite evidence for the exact form of these names, but it seems likely that they did differ in the Iron Age. Cassius Dio mentions that Camulodunum was Cunobelin’s capital in his Histories (LX.21), but caution is needed as to whether he would have understood the social context of this place at the time he was writing about (cf. Haselgrove 2004; Haselgrove and Moore 2007; Sharples 2010).

There are few surviving texts that mention the towns of Roman Britain, and there is very little in the way of any descriptions of the towns in the sources that do exist. The narrative of the Boudican revolt of AD 60–1 refers to the towns of Camulodunum, Verulamium, and Londinium (Tac. Ann. XXXI–XXXIII) and, in so doing, provides a brief comment on Camulodunum with its statue of Victory, a curia, a theatre, and a temple where much of the population sought safety during the revolt, but which was ultimately destroyed. Tacitus also recorded that there was no ditch or rampart surrounding the town at this time, which made it easier to attack. As part of the same narrative, he mentions that Londinium was at that time full of merchants and trading vessels (Ann. XXXIII), although he did not see this for himself and was writing at a later date, the Annales probably being written in the early second century AD.

There are also other forms of texts that refer to the towns of Roman Britain but provide little or no information as the nature of the settlements. Ptolemy’s Geographia, probably written in the AD 140s, consists of a list of place names and other geographical
features from across the Empire, which had probably been drawn from a number of sources from different periods. Another collection of place names is the *Ravenna Cosmography* compiled around AD 700 and using a number of maps that are now lost. Despite the sparse details, its late date, and the many mistakes and ambiguities, perhaps through copying errors, it has been a hugely influential text in Romano-British studies, since it lists the *colonia* and assigns tribal names to the *civitas*-capitals. It was used by Haverfield (1912: 60–1) and others to create their reconstructions of Roman urban development in Britain with the *civitas* system and the processes of conquest, tribal domination, and Romanization. There is also the *Antonine Itinerary*, long studied in relation to Britain (Hingley 2008), probably compiled in the early third century. It consists of a collection of itineraries or routes across the provinces, with fifteen relating to Britain and mentioning over 100 place names. Many of these names can be recognized, and have also been identified archaeologically, but there are also a number that remain enigmatic. While these sources are important, as lists they provide no information on the individual circumstances surrounding the creation of each settlement or the lives of the people involved.

**Debating urbanization and Romanization**

Many antiquarians and scholars have been important in developing our understanding of Roman urban development, but it could be argued that Francis Haverfield was one of the first in the context of modern archaeological scholarship (see also Millett and Swift, this volume). His *The Romanization of Roman Britain* (1912) described the towns of Roman Britain in terms of the ‘five municipalities of the privileged Italian type’ and their dependent territories (Colchester, Verulamium, Lincoln, Gloucester, and York) and what he termed the cantonal system, which was one of the important ‘influences which aided the Romanization of the country’ and ‘permitted the complete remodelling of the native institution by the interpenetration of Italian influences’ (Haverfield 1912: 58). Though he did recognize that
urbanization would have been ‘a subtler and more complex process than mere absorption in Rome’ (Haverfield 1912: 64), with towns containing native as well as Roman elements, his arguments did focus principally in the Roman perspective with an emphasis on Romanization: ‘Britain shared in that expansion of town-life which formed a special achievement of the Roman Empire’ (Haverfield 1912: 64). Frere’s analysis (1967) of towns also drew on the Classical perspective and argued that urbanism was not particularly successful: Britain ‘never produced towns of fully Mediterranean character’. Frere’s analysis, however, considered Roman towns to have been important for the ‘spread of education and Roman civilisation’ (Frere 1987: 192) and the preceding oppida as no more than ‘amorphous collection(s) of roundhouses and unorganised squalor’ (Frere 1987: 192). He also thought of Camulodunum and Verulamium as acting as models for urban development where buildings, town life, and organization could be copied by local peoples in other areas of Britain, and this meant that these two towns received government assistance in their construction.

Wacher’s monumental The Towns of Roman Britain (1975) was keen to place an emphasis on the observed pattern of urban development as the result of a well-planned programme of conquest and expansion. In his book, the towns were divided into a series of chronological chapters entitled ‘The Coloniae’ (Colchester, Lincoln, Gloucester, and York); then ‘The First Civitas Capitals’ (Canterbury, Chelmsford, and Verulamium); ‘From Client Kingdom to Civitas’ (Caistor-by-Norwich, Chichester, Silchester, and Winchester); ‘Flavian Expansion’ (Cirencester, Dorchester, Exeter, Leicester, and Wroxeter); and finally ‘Hadrianic Stimulation’ (Caerwent, Carmarthen, Brough-on-Humber, and Aldborough). This was the predominant model of the time, which placed an emphasis on the foundation of towns when forts were abandoned and the army moved on (e.g. G. Webster 1966). The creation of towns was predominantly the result of military strategy, even though at not every town is there evidence of any preceding military settlement.
Millett’s *The Romanization of Britain* (1990) can be seen as an important work of transition in Roman urban studies that sought to place more significance and distinction between the towns with definite military origins and those with indigenous involvement, emphasizing, in particular, the role of the *oppida* in the development of the *civitas* system. For Millett, the four *coloniae* and London had an essentially anomalous position within the settlement system, with the three early *coloniae* representing deliberate acts of policy by the Roman administration. The *civitas* system, on the other hand, developed with the aid of the local elite of tribal groups. He constructed a detailed argument contrasting military and native origins of urbanism, but, as the title of the book indicates, his work was not a critique of Romanization but rather a reanalysis of the way in which it took place.

More recent studies are suggesting that the distinction between military and indigenous origins, moreover, was probably in fact more blurred (cf. Hingley 2005: 271). Mattingly (2006) has argued against there having been an overall plan in urban development in Britain; instead he sees the current picture of urban development as one that resulted from a variety of negotiations between Rome and the peoples of Britain that contributed to the complex individual histories of each settlement. But he did not deny Rome’s power to make decisions: for Mattingly, the pre-Roman political geography would not necessarily have been of primary importance; instead what was significant was the resultant circumstances, as people may have surrendered, made alliances, or were subdued. The need to create a new communications network may also have been considered a priority, and settlements were able to develop that were close to this network. Placing more emphasis on pre-conquest activity, Creighton’s work (2006) has provided an important reanalysis of the chronological sequence of a number of towns, arguing for the importance of the relationship between Rome and local elites vying for power and the development of some of these places before AD 43. The observed developments at these places, however, were not simply about Romanization, since
the elites were able to draw on Roman elements and adapt them to emphasize their own power and achievements. Our understanding of urban development, then, is clearly influenced by what perspective is taken, and so it would, perhaps, be most productive to acknowledge the actions and viewpoints of the full range of people associated with each town.

Any study of Roman urbanism, then, must tie into debates relating to ‘Romanization’ (Haverfield 1912; Millett 1990; Hingley 2000; Mattingly 2006). Increasingly, alternative terms and ways of understanding the processes of change, continuity, and development that took place in Britain during the Roman period are being sought (e.g. J. Webster 2001; Mattingly 2004, 2006; Hingley 2005) and the historiographical context of the term scrutinized (e.g. Hingley 2000, 2008). Individual negotiations with the presence of Rome indicate that change and continuity were far from uniform processes across Britain, and these non-uniformities must take into account not only elite but also non-elite perspectives. There were peoples who did not wish to engage in the Roman presence, and they may have been either encouraged or forced to live in a town or left more to their own devices in the countryside. There is a tendency in studies of the development of Roman urbanism in Britain to focus on the Roman perspective or that of the indigenous elite, but other perspectives of these monumental processes taking place within the landscape must also be considered.

Town location and place

Most descriptions of Roman town development in Britain include a discussion of the locations of the settlements, including the strategic, economic, and practical benefits of these sites. Drawing on the empiricist traditions of landscape archaeology, these descriptions have tended to emphasize the practical value and rationality of landscapes relating to urban development. At Colchester, for example, the fortress was in a well-chosen location occupying a ridge of land overlooking the Colne Valley and (on a neutral site) within the
oppidum, because it was believed to have been placed away from any existing settlement (e.g. Wacher 1995; Crummy 1997); Roman Gloucester ‘overlooks the lowest point where the Severn could be bridged until the Industrial Revolution’ and was the main route into south Wales so was of ‘key strategic importance’ (Hurst 1988: 48). These practical considerations are important, but they provide an external perspective and give little or no consideration to the social value of these locations as places and their longer-term biographies as foci of human actions, histories, experiences, emotions, and stories. Landscapes were not simply functional, rational, and mundane: ‘natural’ features in the landscape, for example, could have cultural values associated with them and form just as important elements of the settlement record as earthworks and buildings (cf. Rogers 2008). More emphasis can be given to the meanings associated with the locations in which towns were sited through a study of the history of these places and the cultural values that could be given to features in that landscape. Regardless of the political geography created in the Roman period, meanings associated with specific places will also have been drawing on the existing significance associated with them.

Known place names may be able to provide some initial hints as to the possible existing meanings attached to some of the places where the towns were founded and the way in which this had an impact on the urban experience. The name Calleva (Silchester), for example, has been interpreted as meaning ‘(the settlement in the) woods’ (Rivet and Smith 1979: 291). It is possible that the oppidum developed here through clearing a space in the woodland or there was perhaps even a sacred grove here. The name Durovernum (Canterbury) appears to relate to wet conditions here, with ‘verno-’ meaning alder swamp or marsh, suggesting that this location was also culturally meaningful (Rivet and Smith 1979: 53). The meaning of Corinium (Cirencester), though not entirely clear, may relate to a botanical feature also in a wetland area, while Isca (Exeter) is derived from the river (Rivet
and Smith 1979: 353, 376). These features were not just mundane points of identification but will have been imbued with meanings and cultural values.

Studies of the *coloniae* have tended to focus on the fortress or town itself rather than their wider setting. The *colonia* at Colchester was placed within a ‘territorial’ *oppidum* consisting of a number of dykes, enclosures, and other *foci* (Hawkes and Crummy 1995). Although the town developed on the site of the fortress, there were other *foci* connected with the *oppidum* that continued to be important and formed part of the urban landscape, including what became a temple and theatre complex at Gosbecks, where there was already a number of enclosures, including what is often termed ‘Cunobelin’s farmstead’, and a *foci* of temples at Sheepen (Crummy 1984, 1997; Niblett 1985). The Roman-period urban landscape drew upon and became part of the pre-existing geography. There has also been one tentative suggestion that the Iron Age coins and pottery found on excavations within the town may indicate some earlier form of settlement or activity here, perhaps even a religious sanctuary (Brooks 2006).

The *coloniae* not located near or within obvious *oppida* will also have been placed within landscapes of pre-existing use and meaning. The Roman fortress at Lincoln overlooked the valley where the river Witham met the river Till, and there was a large natural body of water known as the Brayford Pool where the two rivers met. There were a number of causeways across the Witham valley in prehistory, which encouraged ritual activity, including at Fiskerton (Field and Parker Pearson 2003) and at Stamp End (Jones and Stocker 2003), where the famous Iron Age Witham shield and sword were found, having been deposited in the water. There also appears to have been late Iron Age and early Roman activity on what was once an island within the Brayford Pool (Steane 2001; Jones and Stocker 2003), as well as some traces of Iron Age activity beneath the fortress itself (Jones and Stocker 2003: 28–30). To neglect the importance of this landscape before the fortress
was constructed will have an impact on the way in which we understand the town and the urban experience here.

The *civitas*-capitals are often considered according to whether there was a fort (Exeter, Wroxeter, and Cirencester) or *oppidum* (Verulamium, Winchester, Silchester) preceding the development of the town, but, in some cases, the forts are not proven (for example, Cirencester), and in no cases is the Iron Age activity yet fully understood. At Leicester there is also growing evidence being documented of Iron Age activity concentrating near the river Soar beneath the later town, and this may have been some kind of *oppidum* or other settlement, including roundhouses and evidence of coin manufacture (Clay and Mellor 1985; Kipling et al. 2007). It is knowledge of activity preceding towns, and the understanding of these places that it brings, that is most likely to change through archaeological investigation, as ongoing excavation and survey work at and around Silchester, Cirencester, Aldborough, London, and other towns are indicating. Work at Caistor-by-Norwich, for example, has revealed considerable traces of activity beneath the town, including gullies and ring ditches suggestive of roundhouses and other features (Bowden and Bescoby 2008).

Structural or activity remains need not be the only indications of the importance of places in the past. Rivers, lakes, woods, and hills were not mundane but integral parts of the cultural landscape, and they will also have had an impact on the nature of urban development and the urban experience (cf. Rogers 2011a, b, 2013). For example, the location of London at the highest point where the river was still tidal allowed the development of important port facilities (Milne 1985). Apart from economic or strategic factors relating to London’s location and development (cf. Perring 1991; Milne 1995; Wacher 1995), however, it is possible to analyse the landscape setting from additional perspectives, which will also have formed an important part of the urban biography. Although there does not appear to have been much settlement here in the late Iron Age, it does mean that there would not have been
cultural values attached to this place, especially in relation to its watery setting and islands situated across the Thames in the vicinity of Southwark (Cowan et al. 2009). There are some traces of late Iron Age activity on the islands at Southwark, and the rivers and streams here appear to have invoked religious activity, which continued during the Roman period, especially noticeable in the Walbrook, which ran through the centre of the later town and the marshy area of the Upper Walbrook valley (Bradley and Gordon 1988; Merrifield 1995; Butler 2006; Merrifield and Hall 2008). Towns could be disruptive, even built over pre-existing features, but also provide continuities of place by being incorporated into the existing geographies and meanings in the landscape.

**Town construction processes**

As well as being placed within landscapes of existing meaning, the foundation processes of the towns themselves will not have been mundane. There are likely to have been foundation rituals drawing on both indigenous and Roman traditions. They may not now be easily recognized in the archaeological record, but excavations in the centre of Roman Dorchester have discovered what appear to have been pits and shafts containing unusual collections of objects and animal remains, which have been interpreted as representing ritualized deposits, perhaps even connected with the foundation of the town itself (Woodward and Woodward 2004) ([Figure 2](#)). Certainly within the Roman tradition there were rituals associated with urban foundation including taking the auspices and the construction of an enclosure or *templum* (cf. Rykwert 1976); an interpretative possibility which has also been raised for the evidence of an early enclosure beneath the *forum* at Verulamium (Creighton 2000: 210). Towns were ritualized places through their foundation, creation, definition of space, and the actions of people within and around them. While the exact nature and interpretation of the pits and shafts at Dorchester are still open to speculation, they remind us of the need to recognize activities that we might not necessarily expect or assume in urban development or
urban life in Roman Britain, drawing on both local traditions and those introduced from elsewhere in the Empire. This includes the ritual and religious activities that took place in many different contexts outside temples and shrines. It is also likely that there will also have been origin myths drawing on the histories and stories that were attached to the landscapes and places where towns developed and perhaps in some cases were created in order to provide legitimacy for the towns in the landscape.

Where towns emerged on the sites of fortresses at Colchester, Lincoln, and Gloucester, there is now good archaeological evidence of the physical processes involved in the conversions of these settlements, including the demolition of fortress structures, the construction of new buildings, and also the reuse of others. Excavations within Gloucester in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially at 13–17 Berkeley Street, have uncovered remains relating to the reuse of fortress buildings as well as the construction of new half-timbered and clay-walled structures (Hurst 1988, 1999a, b). In some cases it appears that the barrack blocks were demolished but no new buildings were constructed in their place for some time. The main area of the town remained small, moreover, since it continued to lie within the original confines of the fortress, although there are remains of settlement known beyond it (Heighway 1983; Heighway and Bryant 1999). Excavations within Colchester have revealed a similar process of conversion, although here the town did expand beyond the original area of the fortress in a more planned way. Excavations at Lion Walk demonstrated that some of the barrack blocks were converted to other uses, while further buildings or parts of structures were demolished and the land put to other uses, including cultivation (Crummy 1984, 1988, 1992) (Figure 3). These towns were clearly not grand and monumental in the Classical style from the outset.
The first public buildings at Colchester were constructed in the area of the fortress annexe outside the main fortress, probably because the fortress was too crowded, and this may be the reason why the defences were levelled. This conversion and construction process, however, was not speedy and may have taken a number of years, since excavations indicated that the fortress ditch had been neglected for some time before it was levelled (Crummy 1988: 42); the Temple of Claudius, moreover, may well not have been begun until Claudius’ death in AD 54, although this need not necessarily have been the case (Drury 1984). Like Gloucester, the defences of the fortress were maintained at Lincoln, and there was probably a fairly similar process of conversion (M. J. Jones 1988, 2002, 2003b; Steane 2006). What differs here, however, is that there is more evidence known regarding the settlement that developed outside the walls (often referred to as the ‘Lower City’), and it appears to have been more formalized, eventually itself being walled, running down the hill from the fortress to the river Witham (M. J. Jones 2002). The development of the *colonia* at York was an exception in that the fortress appears to have remained in use throughout the Roman period, and a civilian settlement, or *canabae*, developed beside it. Across the river Ouse a much larger settlement developed, which was eventually promoted to the status of *colonia* (Ottaway 1999, 2004). Nothing is yet known about the *forum/basilica* complex within the town; one suggestion is that the fortress *principia* may have had this role, but it may still await discovery, since there have not been many opportunities for excavation in the central area of the town.

Some of the *civitas*-capitals appear to have had a fairly similar process of development to that of the *coloniae*. At both Exeter and Wroxeter the towns were founded on the sites of fortresses, and they adapted and expanded the street grids (Bidwell 1979; Henderson 1988; White and Barker 1998). Cirencester differed in there only having been a possible small fort (Leaholme) and little is known about its interior, if it did exist (Wacher
and McWhirr 1982; McWhirr 1988; Holbrook 1998). The processes that sparked the developments at Canterbury, Leicester, Caerwent, Caistor-by-Norwich, Dorchester, Carmarthen, Aldborough, and Brough-on-Humber are less well understood. While there is likely to have been a military presence at Carmarthen and Brough-on-Humber, more archaeological investigation is needed at these towns (Wacher 1969; James 2003). The possibility of a military base at the other towns is often raised, although there is, so far, no conclusive proof; significant pre-Roman activity, however, is known at Canterbury, Leicester, and Caistor-by-Norwich, which will have formed a significant element of these urban biographies.

It has often been the conventional argument in discussing urban development that there was direct involvement from Rome in urban planning and construction, including through the utilization of the military. One of the difficulties is that there are very few inscriptions surviving from towns in Roman Britain to provide information as to who funded and built the urban infrastructure. Frere (1967) emphasized the role of the military and drew on his own excavations at Verulamium, where he identified an early (c. AD 49) rectangular timber-built row of shops in insula XIV (Frere 1972, 1983). He argued that they were similar in plan and appearance to military barrack blocks, and so they must have been designed by military architects, built by craftsmen lent by the government, and military stockpiles would have been used in their construction. Millett (1990: 70–1), however, argued that the comparison with barrack blocks is only superficial and that there was no evidence that the row was planned and roofed as a single unit. He also emphasized the fact that there will have been sophisticated technology already available in Britain, along with established sources of timber supplies, which would have made such construction possible. This evidence, therefore, cannot be used to support the emphasis on official involvement and assistance in town construction.
Creighton’s work (2006) has refocused attention to the evidence and role of phases of activity that pre-dated AD 43. At Silchester, for example, there is evidence of early elite activity but which was probably influenced by Rome or the near Continent. Excavations on the site of the basilica have revealed a number of phases of activity that pre-date the foundation of the town. The earliest evidence related to traces of at least three roundhouses, dating to around 15 BC–AD 25, which were then replaced by rectangular structures and metalled streets and apparently surrounded by a timber palisade (Fulford and Timby 2000: 8, 20–4). What might be regarded as fairly high-status material came from this area, including coins, copper-alloy brooches, and toilet instruments. Pottery included terra nigra and terra rubra wares and some early samian ware dating to around AD 30 onwards. There were also large numbers of pig bones and oyster shells (Fulford and Timby 2000: 20-4), perhaps indicating special feasting activities. Upon reaching the early levels in the excavations within insula IX of the town, there appears to have been a fairly dense occupation with Iron Age timber rectangular buildings and streets (Fulford 2011). The elites here may well have had contact with Rome, but their use of the material need not necessarily mean that they considered themselves to have been Romanized. While there are earthworks at Silchester conventionally associated with the oppidum, there remains general uncertainty about their nature and purpose and their relationship with the settlement evidence at the site. It would probably be a mistake to make too many assumptions about their nature and function without further evidence, including dateable material; our understanding of these sites and sequences of development can still clearly be advanced through further work. It could be said that the ‘Inner Earthwork’ enclosed an area of around 32 hectares and partly underlies the Roman town, while the ‘Outer Earthwork’ is more discontinuous and later in date, perhaps representing the continuation of Iron Age forms of monumentalization and special
organization in the Roman period; it may also have been part of further dyke systems to the north-west of the town (Fulford 1984: 79–83) (Figure 4).

At Camulodunum a small fort has been identified at Gosbecks (Hawkes and Crummy 1995), which has been interpreted as having been part of the AD 43 invasion pre-dating the fortress here or, perhaps, built after the fortress had been converted into a *colonia* around AD 49 or following the Boudican revolt (Hawkes and Crummy 1995: 101). The interpretation remains difficult, because the fort has not been excavated, but its early plan and position led Creighton (2006: 61–4) to suggest instead that it may even have been pre-AD 43 in date and influenced by the Roman army. The local leader may have been organizing his/her own forces in the Roman style. Alternatively, the fort may have been garrisoned with Roman auxiliaries before Roman annexation. Either way, it is clear that there remain many ambiguities in our understanding of urban origins and construction than conventional narratives have allowed for.

It appears that London’s early and large-scale development may have been largely an exception among the towns. Here it appears that there may have been some military involvement in the development of the site, with the construction of a monumental street system and timber port facilities (Milne 1985; Millett 1994; Brigham 1998). The large size of London compared with other towns and the number of early public buildings also indicates its importance. In much of the literature on Roman Britain, London is known as the provincial capital, but, although there is evidence of Roman officials living here, such as the *procurator*, there is no direct evidence that it was also the home of the provincial governor; a permanent fort incorporated as part of the town (identified at Cripplegate) dating to the late first or early second century AD, however, might support this claim (Perring 1991; Milne 1995; Shepherd 2012; cf. Millett 1998).
Development was slow in most towns, and it is likely that there was little monetary input from Rome; official funding was limited even for the development of the *colonia*. With even less imperial money going to the *civitas*-capitals, it seems most likely that local elites would have been involved in funding the projects. An inscription (*RIB* 3123) from Verulamium dating the completion of the *forum/basilica* to the end of AD 79 may have been an exception among towns in terms of its early date. Documents and inscriptions from other parts of the Empire indicate that slaves, prisoners, and the military could all be used for construction projects. Surviving sections of the statute from the town of Urso (modern Osuna) in Spain (the *Lex Coloniae Genetivae Juliae*), moreover, stipulates that the citizens of the town had to be engaged in five days of construction work a year (Hardy 1912: 7; González and Crawford 1986; Duncan-Jones 1990: 174), but it is unclear to what extent this applied to other areas, though it was apparently also the case in Egypt (Duncan-Jones 1990: 174). If the military was present in a number of towns for the creation of road networks and other tasks, there is little direct evidence for their involvement, and it is unlikely that they will have remained in towns for long (unless retired).

The client ruler Togidubnus has formed a part of the narratives of urban construction of Chichester and also, to a lesser extent, Silchester and Winchester. He is mentioned by Tacitus (*Agr. XIV*): ‘quaedam civitates Cogidumno regi donatae (is ad nostrum usque memoriam fidissimus mansit) [some of the estates were given to King Cogidubnus, who lived down to our day a most faithful ally]’. The difficulty here is that the discrepancy in the name may in fact indicate different people or that an error may have got into the text; confusingly, also, the inscription of the name is also damaged, with the first letter missing. He appears to have been awarded land, but nothing else is known about his life or career (Todd 2004: 47); there were clearly disruptions in landownership here, though. The dedication slab was found at Chichester in the eighteenth century with what appears to be his name (*RIB* 91), but there
is no evidence that he was also involved in Winchester or Silchester, these suggestions being based mainly on the similar dates in which the towns developed and a number of datable fragments of architectural stonework from Chichester. As well as *RIB* 91, which is a pre-Flavian dedication of a temple to Neptune and Minerva in honour of the imperial house built on behalf of Togidubnus and the guild of town craftworkers, there was another inscription (*RIB* 92) dedicated to Nero, perhaps from a major building or statue, and a dedication to the *Matres Domesticae*, which may have been another early temple (Fulford 2006: 97).

Unfortunately, very little is really known about the early development of the town, and the street grid does not appear to have been laid down until the AD 70s. There may, instead, have been some kind of early monumental complex here (cf. Fulford 2006; Mattingly 2006: 269).

Another form of indigenous elite involvement in the physical creation of the town has been argued by Creighton (2006) in his analysis of the relationship between urban spaces and monumental burial chambers. At Camulodumum there was the Lexden tumulus dating to the late first century BC and a larger burial complex at Stanway, just west of Gosbecks, and dating from the late first century BC to around AD 60 (Crummy 1997: 22–4; Crummy et al. 2007). At Verulamium there was a rich burial chamber, which lay uphill across the river Ver and dated to around the AD 40s–50s (Niblett 1999), and there were Iron Age burial mounds outside Cirencester in the Tarbarrow Field, in an area that also appears to have been used for Roman period burials and religious activity (O’Neil and Grinsell 1960; Holbrook 2008; Biddulph and Welsh 2011). The recent survey work at Silchester has also produced traces of what may have been elite burials associated with the *oppidum*, although as yet no excavation has taken place here, and more work is needed to confirm this. The burials that have been excavated demonstrate knowledge of, and contact with, the Roman Empire, as indicated by the items within the burials; but it must be recognized that they may have been as much about using Roman goods and settlement forms for expressing their own identity as of adopting
Roman ways. Creighton (2006) has suggested that perhaps even the urban planning and establishment of street grids acted as a form of commemoration associated with the elites that succeeded in achieving power.

Within a number of towns, including the *colonia*, many of the earliest public buildings were in fact constructed in timber rather than stone. At Lincoln, for example, excavations on the site of the fortress *principia* have demonstrated that, once that it was demolished, the stone *forum/basilica* complex did not appear until the second century, following the construction of an earlier timber building (Steane 2006). An early timber *forum/basilica* complex has also been identified at Silchester (Fulford and Timby 2000), as well as a theatre at Canterbury (Bennett 1988) and amphitheatres at Cirencester (Holbrook 1998) and London (Bateman et al. 2008). There were also many timber domestic structures in the early phases of towns, often in the form of ‘strip’ buildings, as at London (e.g. Hill and Rowsome 2011). At London, however, a number of sites in the western area of the town have also provided evidence of roundhouses, perhaps indicating the continuation of local building traditions as people moved into the town from the surrounding area (Hill and Rowsome 2011; Perring and Roskams 1991; Perring 2011). The occupants of these early roundhouses may even have come into the town in order to work as labourers during its construction. It would be overly simplistic to interpret these structures as inferior, or of lower status, to rectangular buildings and necessarily representing the houses of poor labourers or slaves. These roundhouses formed part of a long tradition of construction, which was fully integrated into human expressions of being and identity; the structures and spaces within them formed a microcosm of the way in which their world was organized, experienced, and understood (cf. Harding 2009; Sharples 2010). It was, of course, not just monumental buildings that formed these towns, moreover, but the people using and interacting in these spaces.
These early phases of town development formed significant parts of the biography of these places and the creation of space. It is important not to apply modern expectations and perceived Roman values to our treatment of these sites, many of which draw on Iron Age traditions. That it could be argued that towns never reached a high level of monumentality in Roman Britain may also relate to a continuation of pre-existing ways of expressing wealth and using space. Local traditions in building and organizing labour and the significance behind using and manipulating different materials may well also have continued to be important, even if they were now building different styles of structures. Sharples (2010: 116–24), for example, has argued that the construction of Iron Age oppida, hillforts, and other monuments would have been important cultural events, with people encouraged to come together and contribute through motives relating to social interaction, feastings, and rituals. Construction processes and methods themselves could also be highly symbolic, often involving the deliberate choice of the use of specific materials, sometimes brought from long distances, to incorporate into the structures, as seen at hillforts and other prehistoric monuments (Miles et al. 2003; Sharples 2010: 116–24). Building construction had more than simply practical and economic meaning, since it involved the act of creation of both physical structures and new spaces and could reflect the identities and expressions of those carrying out the work (cf. Gardner 2007; Revell 2009). The construction processes would have formed an important part of the biography of the building and just as significant a part of its meaning as the finished structure itself (cf. McFadyen 2006). Towns can be seen as major construction events, and they also transformed the land through moving earth, rock, and water in terracing, land drainage, reclamation, and other activities—as identified through excavation at London (e.g. Hill and Rowsome 2011; Leary and Butler 2012), Winchester (e.g. Ford and Teague 2011), and other towns (Rogers 2012). These actions altered places and formed an important
part of the urban reality with an impact on the way in which these landscapes were used and experienced.

Conclusion

It is becoming increasingly difficult to write about the development of towns in Roman Britain, because no single narrative is possible. Though there were clearly processes involved relating to the expansion of Roman control and military strategy, emphasis also needs to be placed on the importance of each individual urban biography starting before the Roman Conquest and the different people involved in and experiencing each town development, from local people to incomers and the military. More nuanced accounts of each town are required, drawing on changing understandings of late Iron Age and Roman period activity at both local and regional levels. It is this that makes urban development such a challenging and important subject for understanding Roman Britain.

Abbreviations


References

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


Figure 1. Map of southern Britain with the main settlements mentioned in the chapter

*Source*: © A. C. Rogers.

Figure 2. Plan of pits, shafts, and timber-fenced enclosures excavated within the centre of Roman Dorchester (*Durnovaria*) at the site Greyhound Yard site, 1981–4

*Source*: adapted from Woodward and Woodward (2004: fig. 1). © A. C. Rogers.

Figure 3. Plan of the relationship between the fortress and later colonia at Colchester; the walls around the town were constructed in the early second century AD; the theatre and temple were constructed within the fortress annexe

*Source*: adapted from Crummy (1993: fig. 2.9). © A. C. Rogers.

Figure 4. Plan of the relationship between the town wall circuit and enigmatic earthworks at Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum*) possibly associated with the earlier *oppidum* here

*Source*: adapted from Fulford (1984: fig. 85).