Late Roman Towns as Meaningful Places: Re-conceptualising Decline in the Towns of Late Roman Britain

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Abstract

This paper examines towns and the use of public building space in Britain in late Roman times (around the late third to early fifth centuries A.D.), moving beyond ‘decline’ as one of the central elements in archaeological analysis in this period. ‘Decline’ is an interpretative theory like others within archaeology and as such is influenced by cultural factors within society such as those relating to imperialism and economics. Although many of the towns in Britain did eventually ‘fall’, there is considerable evidence for activity within them in the later Roman period that requires analysis. Towns can in some respect be regarded in terms of symbolic and ritualised places that gathered people in deeply acculturated ways. The public buildings were important foci within the towns. These have traditionally received more excavation than other urban features and so they are a useful for documenting how towns remained meaningful places in the later Roman period. Towns were also part of wider ritualised landscapes with rich histories, often extending back into prehistory. Moving beyond the positivist social science reconstruction of landscape and space, ‘place’ is connected with human experience, feeling and thought, the importance of which is not necessarily governed by a linear concept of time, economic circumstances or schemes of growth and decline. The exploration of the use of public buildings in the later Roman period in this paper includes evidence of the structural state of the buildings at this time and traces of activity within them including timber structures, the remains of metalworking and so-called ‘squatter occupation’. Often perceived as representing the decline of the public buildings, and of the towns more generally, this paper will explore alternative ways in which this evidence can be interpreted, indicating the continued vitality of the towns. Aspects of urban behaviour and civil life continued beyond the maintenance of the physical infrastructure of the towns. Urban activities in the later Roman period were set within and drew upon the long biographies of use of these places and represent an
equally valuable phase for study that requires developments in archaeological theory.

Introduction

The decline of towns still forms a prominent part of studies of the later Roman period in Britain and across the Empire (e.g. Faulkner 2000; Liebeschuetz 2000; Ward-Perkins 2005). Some authors, however, are now emphasising more change and adaptation to towns at this time (e.g. Christie 2006; Heijmans 2004; Leone 2007). Late Roman studies, with its traditional close association with ancient history using surviving historical documents, has meant that research has perhaps been less likely to embrace theoretical debate now more common in other areas of Roman archaeology (e.g. Scott ed. 1993; Forcey et al. eds 1998) and especially in prehistoric archaeology. This paper will discuss how we might bring additional perspectives to interpretations of late Roman urban archaeology. It will concentrate especially on the public buildings of towns in late Roman Britain and examples of activity within them. This period of analysis will fall roughly into the late-third to early-fifth centuries. Although we have a conventional end date of Roman Britain, A.D. 410, this paper will not be concerned so much with this cut off point. This date is itself problematic and has been the subject of much debate (e.g. Bartholomew 1982; Esmonde Cleary 1989; 2004; Jones 1996). Instead, it aims to explore alternative understandings of activity in a broader period which adopt more theoretically and methodologically rigorous procedures. This will be used to discuss how we might view changes in towns as a whole from new angles.

Although all interpretations of the past are subject to cultural influences, moving beyond the emphasis on decline where possible, we can view towns from different perspectives. If towns, as places, can be regarded as being constantly in process rather than static (cf. Ingold 1993), then decline is a less useful interpretative theory. Actions took place in the context of long histories of use, adding additional meanings and influences that require analysis.

Setting the Problem

Towns are often central in narratives of decline; they are key indicators of civilisation now in decay. For some authors such as Liebeschuetz (2000) and Faulkner (2000), ‘decline’ is a value-free concept with which to record changes in
the archaeology. Others, however, are moving away from an interpretative theory now recognised as being subjectively-loaded and one that should be avoided when inappropriate (Cameron 1993a; 1993b; 2001; Lavan 2001). ‘Decline’ is a theoretical term with, amongst others, imperialist and economic connotations which can be unhelpful for interpreting the archaeological evidence (cf. Hingley and Rogers forthcoming; Rogers 2005). Roman archaeology in Britain, for example, developed in the context of British imperialism (Hingley 2000; Todd 2004) where notions such as decline were at the forefront of public thought.

Edward Gibbon’s The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776—1788) was written at the height of British imperial endeavours and remained highly influential in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Hingley and Rogers forthcoming); it even formed part of early satirical works on the decline of the British Empire (Hingley 2000: 31—2; Vance 1997: 234). Early Roman archaeologists such as Francis Haverfield, an immensely influential figure setting the research agenda in Romano-British archaeology, drew heavily upon Gibbon (Hingley 2000; Hingley and Rogers forthcoming). Such work encouraged an emphasis on ‘romanisation’, Roman civilisation and economics (cf. Webster and Cooper eds. 1996; Mattingly ed. 1997). But this provides a narrow understanding of towns, town life and perceptions of the urban space and especially changes to towns in the later Roman period. In a well-known description of fourth century Verulamium published in 1936, Sir Mortimer Wheeler wrote that “nothing constructive belongs of this age, the town has decayed to slum conditions and even to desolation” (Wheeler and Wheeler 1936: 28) and Collingwood (with Myres 1936: 206) wrote that “the greater part of Verulam was uninhabited, a waste of empty houses. Here and there squatters lived among the ruins”. Although there has been valuable work since, little appears to have changed in more general studies of the period in Britain with Faulkner (2000: 130), for example, describing late Roman urbanism in Britain as consisting of “gloomy police towns of an age of blood and iron”.

Some more challenging approaches to Britain and the Continent include Christie (2006), Esmonde Cleary (1989; 2001), Fulford et al. (2006), Lavan and Bowden eds. (2003) and Wickham (2005). Christie’s (2006) analysis of late Roman Italy, for example, emphasised the continuing importance and meaning of the monumental architecture within the towns often beyond their structural upkeep: the “physical parameters” of the public buildings “remained visible and even active” well into the post-Roman period even if “some components were in part robbed out or even razed” (ibid.: 270). Studies of towns in areas such as France and Spain have most often linked the archaeology to historical events and chronological frameworks to explain the evidence (e.g. Beaujard 2006; Cepas Palanca 1997). Late Roman phases of buildings, however, are now being increasingly documented and there has been more analysis of what this evidence
meant within the towns (e.g. Guyard 2003; Heijmans 2004; 2006; Kulikowski 2004). There is especially increasing debate concerning the length of use of the buildings with re-analysis of dating evidence. At the bathhouse of the rue du Languedoc in Toulouse (Tolosa, Gallia Narbonensis), for example, pottery from the site led Baccrebère (2001) to argue that use of the building continued into the fifth, and possibly sixth century, whilst Bouet (2003: 307) continued to claim for a more conventional fourth century abandonment to fit expectations.

As part of the debate on late Roman urbanism, this paper will emphasise that it is helpful to consider other ways in which the archaeological evidence might be approached in order to move beyond some of the connotations associated with decline and fall. Especially important, to be addressed here, is the way in which the towns were experienced as places: how activities occurred in the context of, and added to, the rich biographies of the urban sites. Although it is important to place the evidence for towns in Britain in their wider historical context within the Empire, amidst the political, economic and military events of the time, there is a danger in becoming complacent with the constructed narrative without also examining local reactions, responses and inputs to circumstances.

**Towns and places**

The reaction against positivist social science is encouraging stimulating reinterpretations of our understanding of space and place. That ‘landscape’ is now a difficult term within archaeology and other disciplines has been the subject of much literature (e.g. Johnson 2007; Tilley 1994). The rational and economic view of land derived from cultural changes in post-medieval Western Europe can be problematic when attempting to understand the use and experience of land in earlier periods (Cosgrove 1984; Johnson 2007). Even the development of the word ‘landscape’ in the English language was bound up with these changes in society (Cosgrove 1984: 120; Hirsch 1995: 2). Techniques of studying landscapes, through empirical means, surveying and mapping land, have also influenced the way in which we understand them, putting an emphasis on rationality (Thomas 1993: 25). The term ‘place’, however, puts greater emphasis on the way in which areas of land were constructed and conceptualised, experienced and used over time (Cresswell 2004). Whilst space is a more geographically definable entity, being conceived in terms of its ‘formal essence’ through mathematical spatial analysis (Casey 1996: 19—20), place is connected with human experience, feeling and thought. The importance attached to places need not necessarily be governed by economic circumstances or linear concepts of time and history (Casey 1996: 24—5; Ingold 2000: 149; Taylor 1997: 193).
For Casey (1996: 14), for example, places can be considered in terms of “bodies of collection and recollection” – they gather people, experiences and histories together influencing and interacting with later action. Similarly, Ingold (2000: 149) sees places as being comprised of the vitality that animates their inhabitants; “bodies build places” (Casey 1993: 116). In this way, places are generative and regenerative in their own terms without ageing according to any set scheme of growth or decline (Casey 1996: 24—6). The concept of linear time may not always be the most useful way of understanding aspects of change in places. In Ingold’s (1993: 159) approach towards place, for instance, the ‘present’ gathers both the past and future into itself and is not segregated from them. Archaeological studies, especially of prehistory, are now examining places in these more stimulating terms. They are demonstrating that certain places were the focus of occupation and activity over long periods of time, acquiring meaning and symbolism, with a “repetition at them of ritualised acts” (Gosden and Lock 1998: 6; see also Miles et al. 2003; Rogers 2008). Specific places were laden with meaning through continued activity over time; previous events, actions and meanings influencing what occurred in the future (Thomas 1996: 185).

Within urban geography, some studies have been approaching urbanism as the “lived bodily experience of city life” (Edensor 2000: 121). Edensor’s investigation ‘Moving through the city’ (2000), for example, explored the way in which people act upon the city, inscribing their presence through movement in a process of continual remaking and, in this way, the city is continually regenerated and does not decline beyond modern economic understanding. The city and its architecture can be considered in terms of a space or stage that is physically and symbolically bounded and in which movement and interaction takes place. For Edensor (2000: 123), these moving ‘performativie’ processes ceaselessly reconstitute the symbolic values of the sites. In a similar way, Simonsen (2003) writes of what she terms ‘walking in the city’, an act which ‘spatialises’ the city and turns it into a collection of narratives and stories of meaningful individuals. Cities, then, are constituted by people practising in place (Simonsen 1997: 161). They are “collections of stories” (Massey 2005: 130) which build up over time and contrast with notions of decline based on economic values; as integrations of space and time, they are spatio-temporal events (ibid.). Cities have biographies, being shaped by diverse sets of processes over long periods of time and consequently no two cities are identical (Hall 2006: 5). The scientifically dominated approaches to urban space in the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary with archaeological processualism, were dominant at the same time as the modernisation of many town centres in Britain. This in turn led to urban excavations and the discovery of Roman period phases of settlement (cf. Todd 2004).

Like towns, the public buildings within them were spaces with biographies and long sequences of use (Revell 1999); they acquired meaning over time. Tilley
(1994: 17) has defined architectural space as the “deliberate attempt to create and
bound space, create an inside, an outside, a way round, a channel for movement”. Phenomenological approaches to monuments and landscapes have been popular within prehistoric studies (e.g. Bender 1992; Thomas 1993; Tilley 1994). From the phenomenological perspective, space in itself has no essence but only has a relational significance created through “the connections between people and
places” (Tilley 1994: 11). Within Classical Archaeology, there have been some useful attempts to approach public architecture from phenomenologically-inspired
perspectives. Boman’s (2003) study of Classical Greek architecture, for example,
examined the monumental buildings and the ways in which they were used and
perceived in symbolic ways. Favro’s (1996) study of Augustan Rome demonstrated
how visitors to the Forum Romanum would have “experienced a carefully
choreographed environment” (1996: 198) which will have had an impact on actions
within the building and city centre. Both Favro (1996) and Boman (2003) have
argued that the space that was enclosed by the walls and roofs was as important as
the architecture itself. As highly visible and enduring methods of enclosing space,
the public buildings of Romano-British towns (cf. Revell 1999) will have contained
places with highly-charged meanings, the significance of which will have
continued to survive, evolve and change into the later Roman period.

The significance and impact of architecture can continue to apply as much to
“ruins” as it does to well-maintained structures, as Edensor’s (2005) study of
modern-day industrial ruins has demonstrated. Edensor argues that the continued
importance of buildings as ruins has generally been ignored because of the
predominant capitalist notion within society of the economic value of space: “ruins
and other forms of wasteland are tarnished by their association with economic
decline” (ibid.: 7, 166). Ruined space is often considered as somewhere where
nothing happens, or there is nothing, but Edensor highlights the many varied uses
of the buildings and the ways in which the space is comprehended. Ruins are also
“haunted by a horde of absent presences, a series of signs of the past that cannot be
categorised but intuitively grasped” (ibid.: 152). In Roman towns, public buildings
continued to frame space and create place in the later Roman period.

Missing data

Before discussing some case studies of public buildings within Romano-British
towns in the later Roman period it is useful to address some issues affecting the
evidence that is available. In a paper, focusing on Verulamium, Faulkner (1996)
laid down an argument for the minimal loss of evidence within towns affecting
analysis of late Roman urbanism. This, unfortunately, was probably too optimistic.
He argued that medieval disturbance or destruction of mortared floors and masonry walls will have been minimal. Although he did accept that timber structures would have been more at risk (ibid.) he placed more importance on the image of the Classical city. Less importance was attached to the timber structures and nor did he consider the disturbance caused to floor surfaces and finds assemblages as being very significant for the loss of evidence of late activity. The robbing of stone walls and floors will also have contributed to the loss of later layers above them.

A more recent study of Verulamium (Niblett et al. 2006: 101—3) has identified considerable damage to late occupational evidence due to agricultural processes, with the likelihood that there would have many across the town at this time. Excavations at Leicester have found some tantalising clues as to the level of destruction of Roman structural layers within the town. Work at Causeway Lane revealed widespread destruction of stone metalled areas and walls as a result of later medieval ploughing. A large piece of Roman street metalling and wall was discovered in isolation after having fallen into a pit (Cooper and Buckley 2003). At Blue Boar Lane and St. Nicholas Circle there was also the rare survival of mud brick which had been used in late Roman structures (ibid.).

Work on ‘dark earth’ deposits on public building sites has also produced important results. ‘Dark earth’ is still an enigmatic feature on excavations and there have been a number of interpretations of its origins including flood silts (Kenyon 1959), market gardening (Sheldon 1978: 40) or the dumping of rubbish (Kenyon 1935: 239—40). Apart from studies by Macphail (1981; 1983), constraints on time and money, and biases towards earlier stratigraphic layers, have meant that the ‘dark earth’ has not often been carefully studied. Work on the ‘dark earth’ from the Winchester Palace site in Southwark, London, however, where there are the remains of monumental buildings, has demonstrated fairly convincingly that here at least the dark layer represents the remains of reworked late Roman strata (Yule 2005: 78—9). The material contained late coins, pottery and traces of activities, including bone pin manufacture, that may have taken place within the buildings in the late-fourth to early-fifth centuries (ibid.). If this is indeed the case, it clearly has implications for studying late Roman towns and highlights the need for caution when examining evidence of the latest phases of use of public buildings. As Christie (2006: 262) has emphasised, the presence of ‘dark earth’ can indicate activity – people using space – rather than decay.

The public buildings

The first stage of analysis of public buildings and their use in the later Roman period is to examine the available evidence for the structural condition of the
buildings at this time. In accounts of late Roman urbanism in Britain it is usually assumed that many of the public buildings were deserted as they had no value or were completely demolished during the fourth century (e.g. Faulkner 2000). This, however, is often based on some small scale excavations revealing evidence for the apparent lack of structural maintenance, for some demolition and for the robbing of building material. Detailed analysis of what can actually be discerned from the evidence, however, indicates that, in fact, in only a small number of cases can it be certain that the buildings were completely demolished and it is unlikely that any building that remained standing was totally abandoned. From a dataset of eighty-nine public buildings within the towns of Roman Britain, it could be established that only six had probably been demolished in their entirety by the later fourth century although a further thirty-one buildings had insufficient evidence for any meaningful analysis to be undertaken. Of the fifty-two buildings remaining, analysis of the available material indicated that at least part of each structure continued to stand to the end of the fourth century and often into the fifth. Here, a few examples will be examined, mainly taking buildings from London, Silchester and Wroxeter, demonstrating what can be achieved through detailed re-evaluation of the structural evidence and activity within the buildings.

Of the *forum-basilica* complexes, thirteen out of seventeen known buildings had at least some structural parts still standing to at least the late-fourth century. The *forum-basilica* complex at London, for example, has seen a number of small-scale excavations with the largest being the Leadenhall market site across the east end of the *basilica* (Fig.1; Milne 1992). Other excavations were conducted over the south and east wings of the *forum* at 168 Fenchurch Street (Dunwoodie 2004), in the area of the east portico at Whittington Avenue (Milne 1992), the west portico in Lombard Street (Marsden 1987: 140—7) and an area of the *forum* at the junction between Gracechurch Street and Fenchurch Street (Philp 1977). The Leadenhall excavations identified that this part of the *basilica* at the east end was probably demolished in the late-third or early-fourth century and that the stone was cleared away (Milne 1992: 29—33). Here the surviving bases of the walls were at least at the same level as the early-fourth century occupation layer in the area and the final floors were covered with silt. Greater clarity regarding the sequence of demolition/destruction here, however, is difficult because of truncation caused by later activity on the site (Brigham 1990: 77). Excavations between 1995 and 2000 in the south-western corner of the *forum*, at 168 Fenchurch Street (Diagram 77), seem to support the evidence for demolition around the early-fourth century (Dunwoodie 2004: 34). The results from excavations on the site of the eastern portico at Whittington Avenue (Unpublished Museum of London Archaeological Service archive XIV88) and 20-21 Lime Street (Unpublished Museum of London Archaeological Service archive LIE90) indicate that the portico was probably demolished before the main building, perhaps in the late-third century.
There are indications, however, that not all parts of the *forum-basilica* were demolished at this time (Bateman 1998: 51) demonstrating a greater complexity in
the late and post-Roman use of the structure and its survival. At the extreme eastern end of the basilica, the survival of walls and tiled and tessellated floors of the eastern antechamber, the apse, indicate that this part continued to stand to a later date than the Leadenhall area, possibly even remaining above ground into the fifteenth century when the Leadenhall building was then constructed (Brigham 1990: 77; Milne 1992: 29-33). Observations of the area in the early 1880s, during the construction work of the present market building, identified surviving Roman architecture “showing the great extent of Roman building, and the thickness of walling” (Brock 1881: 90; see also Lambert 1916: 225—6) which contrasts with the evidence from the later excavations. Other areas where walls survived include parts of the south wall of the Nave and some rooms off the Nave (Brigham 1990: 77). These indicate survival to a post-Roman date, but too little is known to comment on the extent of this survival. It is likely that parts of the complex survived, including the area of the apse, and remained in use beyond the fourth century, whilst other parts were demolished. Only further excavation is likely to reveal more details on the extent of surviving activity here. 

Another useful example is the forum-basilica complex at Silchester. Here, excavations have concentrated on the basilica and less is known about the forum (Fulford and Timby 2000). The main basilica hall was excavated between 1980 and 1986 but also in the Victorian period (Fox and St. John Hope 1893) which destroyed a lot of the stratigraphy within the building (Fulford and Timby 2000: 80). From the 1980s excavations it seems that there was an early phase of demolition in the later-fourth century when some of the interior walls and the colonnade of the building were removed to ground level. A coin of A.D. 360—8 was found within a pit cut into the foundations of the colonnade at the north end where a stylobate block had been removed, but the foundation left. It provided a terminus post quem for the robbing of this wall (ibid.: 79—80). The main walls of the basilica, however, were robbed to their foundations at a later date, in the sixth or seventh century or possibly even later (ibid.), indicating that the main frame of the building remained standing and in use.

The Huggin Hill public bathhouse in London appears to have had an equally complex structural history as the forum-basilica. Excavations in Upper Thames Street in the 1960s uncovered evidence that in this excavated area at least, the building had probably been demolished by as early as the mid-second century (Marsden 1976: 20; Rowsome 1999: 269—70). Despite this, there are indications that other parts of the building remained standing to a much later date and even into the early-medieval period. A land grant document of the ninth century mentions a large ancient masonry structure referred to as the ‘Hwaetmundes stan’ in the area of the baths (Dyson 1978: 209). It has been suggested that these walls may have been remains of the bathhouse (ibid.) and, if so, it would indicate that parts of the building survived to the end of the Roman period and beyond, although
their function is not clear. There are indications of some later stone buildings on some areas of the baths although it is uncertain what these represent (Bateman 1998; Rowsome 1999). The excavations carried out by Marsden (1976) in the 1960s, and the later excavation in the 1980s (Unpublished Museum of London Archaeological Service archive DMT88), were not extensive enough to preclude the possibility of the continued existence of some walls to a late date.

In excavated parts of the Canterbury St. Margaret’s Street bathhouse, as another example, there were structural alterations in the early fourth century with the in-filling of the piscina and the construction of a laconicum over the site (Blockley et al. 1995: 171, 188). By around A.D. 350, however, this too was being put to a different use indicating that at least this part of the building was no longer being used as a bathhouse. But the building was not demolished and much of it appears to have continued standing into the fifth century, it probably being put to a different use (ibid.). The closing of bathhouses has often been linked to their association with pagan rituals and amoral activities in an increasingly Christianised Empire as suggested by the Theodosian Code (e.g. Yegül 1992: 315). Although important, it is uncertain the extent to which this affected Britain and it is also important to recognise the continued use and importance of the buildings themselves despite changes to their function; they need not have been abandoned, even if they were no longer being used for their original purpose.

The Theodosian Code is a compilation of over 2500 edited constitutions completed in A.D. 437 under Theodosius II (Harris 1993: 1; Matthews 1993: 19). Although it was compiled at this date, it contained laws from as early as A.D. 313 (Matthews 2000: 11) and has been drawn on to understand the Empire in the early-fourth century. The laws cover a wide range of aspects of political, social, economic, cultural and religious life. They include demands for the closure of temples and the end of pagan rituals and ceremonies (e.g. 16.10.4 and 16.10.7; Sirmond and Pharr 1969) and are often used to date when temples in Britain were closed, were destroyed or put to different uses (Smith 2008). The Code emphasises the Christianisation of the Empire but the extent to which this was reality on the peripheries is uncertain (Hunt 1993: 143; Petts 2003; Potter and Johns 1992: 205). It is more likely that in a number of cases the temples remained in use to a later date than is reflected by documentary sources. Excavations of the Hayling Island temple in Hampshire, for example, revealed that the building had fallen into structural decay by the late-third or early-fourth century but later coins on the site indicated continued use of, or visits to, the building perhaps because of its continuing sanctity (Downey et al. 1979).

Within towns in Britain, there is very little actual evidence for the demolition of temple structures and many appear to have remained standing to later dates. At Colchester, for example, the Balkerne Lane temple indicated selected robbing rather than complete destruction, suggesting that the building was still being
preserved and continuing in use (Crummy 1984: 125). The ambulatory of the temple was completely robbed, including its foundations, but the foundations of the cella survived to the height of the latest Roman layers suggesting that it was only after a later abandonment of the building that the walls on a now revised structural form were demolished or had collapsed (ibid.). In the case of amphitheatres and theatres, only the theatre at Gosbecks outside Colchester (Dunnett 1971) appears to have been deliberately demolished in the third century. The majority continued to stand well into the post-Roman period, impacting upon the townscape and surroundings, and in some cases remaining as earthworks that are still visible today, including Silchester (Fulford 1989), Dorchester (Bradley 1975) and Cirencester (Holbrook 1998: 166).

Many of the public buildings, then, remained standing, at least in part, into the later Roman period and beyond. In many cases, they will have continued to have had a visual impact on the surrounding area despite some parts having been demolished. The deliberate demolition of parts of structures may even have been aimed at the preservation of other sections; these actions continuing the vitality of the towns and can be viewed even as an act of regeneration in the urban centres. The changes were meaningful stages in the biographies of the buildings: as Revell (1999) has argued, to view the buildings in static terms in their newly constructed forms misses the long sequences of use, alterations and additions that constituted the life of the buildings. The continued use of the space within the buildings is especially important, even if there were no longer sufficient funds or resources to fully maintain them. As Casey (1996: 121) puts it: “there are no places without the bodies that sustain them…(and) there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse”. This continued use will have contributed to the meaning of these places.

Activity within the buildings

This section will discuss some examples of activities within the public buildings that have often been used to support arguments for the decline of towns and demonstrate that analysis can be approached from alternative perspectives. The first is the presence of timber structures within public buildings. For Ward-Perkins (2005: 94—5), for example, building in timber is a definite marker of “the disappearance of comfort” and the end of civilisation. His excavations of an area of the forum at Luni, in northern Italy, uncovered traces of two timber buildings cutting into the robbed forum floor and became a well-known type-site in support of his argument for decline in towns (1978; 1981) despite excavating only a small area. Faulkner (1996: 94) has described similar evidence in terms of a “degenerate” situation of “shanty towns of huts and shelters”. Earlier writers also envisaged
“slum conditions” in the centre of towns (Wheeler and Wheeler 1936: 30) and squatters amongst the ruins (Collingwood and Myres 1936: 206). Cameron (1993a: 198), however, has argued that we often apply “inappropriate classical norms” to this type of evidence which should be considered in its own terms. Excavation strategies of the public buildings in Britain are revealing more traces of late timber structures within them than was once the case. In some buildings they will have changed or renewed the way in which space and movement within them were organised, dividing up space in a new way, but they also indicate that the buildings were still being put to considerable use. It is likely that many of the public buildings continued to be used for their original purposes alongside the timber structures and that there may even have been an intensification of use of the buildings rather than their decline.

In the Wroxeter baths-basilica, for example, meticulous excavation and recording revealed traces of a number of timber structures, mainly now consisting of post-holes and stake-holes, within the Annexe and the basilica dating to the late-fourth and fifth centuries (Barker et al. 1997: 81—2, 99). The evidence seems mostly to indicate open-fronted lean-to structures. These will have influenced the way in which movement would have been conducted around the basilica. An examination of the finds assemblage from the building indicates a marked increase in coins and small finds, including personal ornaments, from the late-fourth century compared with earlier phases. Whilst this may indicate that the building was no longer being cleaned in the same thorough way, it possibly also reflects a change in the types of activities taking place within the building and that there were perhaps large gatherings of people within the building. The baths-basilica remained a valued building in the town centre probably now being put to a variety of uses.

Another example of the type of evidence that has often been interpreted in terms of decline is traces of metalworking and other industrial activities within the public buildings in the later Roman period (Rogers 2005). The evidence usually takes the form of hearths, spreads of waste metal and slag or, in some cases, debris from bone-working or glass-working and is useful because it can inform us about the significance of the spaces in which it takes place. Some have considered it to represent squatter occupation in otherwise unused buildings (e.g. Frere 1975) or in terms of the practicable benefits of using deserted stone architecture for industry (e.g. Stirling 2001: 69). Others have placed the activity within an historical context where it represents state fabricae for the manufacture of military equipment (e.g. Fulford and Timby 2000; Faulkner 2000). Such factories are mentioned in the Notitia Dignitatum but, unfortunately, Britain is not included in the list of fabricae which either indicates that the list is not complete or that Britain did not have such factories (James 1988: 323). In fact, no fabrica mentioned in the Notitia has yet been identified with certainty in the archaeological record.
Industrial activity has also been identified within public buildings in the later Roman period in other provinces. A shield and sword factory is mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Seeck ed. 1876) at Amiens (Samarobriva; Gallia Belgica) and metalworking has indeed been identified on a levelled area of the *forum-basilica* in the late fourth century (Bayard and Massy 1983: 239, 252; Bayard and Piton 1979: 162). But again, however, there is no direct evidence to link this to the historical source. Also in France, the ‘small town’ of Argentomagus (Saint-Marcel, Indre, *Gallia Aquitania*) has late evidence for metalworking in the theatre consisting of hearths and debris concentrating within two corridors (Dumasy 2000: 218—23). In Spain there is evidence for light industry within the *forum-basilica* at Tarragona (Tarraco; Tarraconensis) in the fifth century (Arce 2002: 54) and within the theatre at Italica (Baetica) evidence for activity includes an oven, hearths and an olive mill (Rodríguez Gutiérrez 2004). Leone (2003; 2007) has drawn attention to a number of olive presses that appear within public buildings in Roman North Africa in the later Roman period. Pottery kilns are also found as at Leptiminus (Tunisia) where a kiln was installed into one area of a bathhouse whilst the baths remained in use (Stirling 2001). More documentation and analysis of late industrial activity within towns is needed across the Empire. It clearly indicates continued vitality within these spaces rather than decline but general interpretations tend to focus on economic and technological arguments without considering other meanings and its possible wider social context and implications.
‘Industry’, with its connotations of technological understanding and progress is a modern concept derived from changes in society and manufacture. In Western society, technology now exists in a category distinct from religion and
ritual, ideology and magic as a result of centuries of social change from the Middle Ages onwards, including the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and modernism (Bergstøl 2002: 78). Modernist thinking denies the human component of technology and industry and its symbolic and social role within society, important in pre-industrial and contemporary non-Western societies (Barndon 2004: 21; Reid and MacLean 1995: 145). Evidence for metalworking processes has now been reanalysed in these terms in some prehistoric studies (e.g. Aldhouse-Green 2002; Budd and Taylor 1995; Hingley 1997) but it need not be restricted to prehistory and may be helpful for reconsidering the meaning and significance of the metalworking in the public buildings. It is a good example of how we might start to examine the public buildings in the later Roman period in different ways. It was an important part of activities within the buildings at this time and was not divorced from other continuing functions of the structures.

Excavations of the basilica building at Silchester, for example, produced 42kg of forging slag from iron smithing from features that concentrated towards both ends of the hall with less activity in the centre (Fig. 2; Fulford and Timby 2000: 74). Twelve of the features containing iron slag have produced coins dating to the fourth century, between the A.D. 320s and 370s, with one small pit or post-hole (F58) containing a coin of Theodosius (A.D. 383—8). Pits containing scrap from bronze-working appeared to be earlier in date, perhaps late-third century (ibid.: 72). Apparently contemporary with the phase of iron-working was a tiled area laid down within the hall, now represented only by a few remaining tiles and traces of slots where timber walls had stood around it (ibid.: 74-5). There was markedly less iron slag and other iron-working debris in the vicinity of this area, which would suggest that it was deliberately kept clear. There were also many late-third and early-fourth century coins around this tiled area and two oak leaves cut from sheet lead (ibid.: 72—5; 578). Near the area was also a pit, F18, which produced a large number of bird bones. In the nearby north range, the Well F127 and pit F107 also contained a large quantity of bird and fish bones as well as sheep bones, the remains of two neo-natal pigs and iron slag (ibid.: 69—71; Grant 2000: 470). Fulford and Timby (2000: 577—8) have argued that this probably relates to feasting and sacrifices taking place within the basilica rather than domestic activity.

These unusual finds point to a religious, rather than domestic, function for the tiled area. It may have been a shrine in use at the same time as (and even associated with) the metalworking activities, the religious and ritualised activities taking place within the building being intertwined with the industrial processes. The metalworking was certainly an integral part of activity within the building at this time and its religious associations does not support the notion of decline. It was also taking place at a broadly contemporary period in which a new hypocaust was installed in at least one room of the West Wing of the complex (ibid.: 75),
suggesting that some of the rooms were still being put to official uses. The hearths or forges in the hall, together with the symbolic power of metalworking, could well have provided an important focus where people gathered and interacted, carried out rituals, ceremonies and official business. The evidence for feasting would certainly seem to imply gatherings of people here. The metalworking here, then, indicates the continued vitality of use of the public space rather than its decline.

The Wroxeter baths-basilica also has evidence for metalworking (Figure 3). Within the two rooms of the Annexe of the basilica, there were at least two phases of bronze-working belonging to the late-fourth century (Barker et al. 1997: 72—9). The evidence consisted of hearths, casting pits and bronze-working waste but unfortunately there is no indication as to the items that were produced. From the early-fifth century there is evidence for activity within the baths-basilica itself, consisting of hearths, bronze and lead waste, casting moulds and a lime pit which had later been adapted for lead-working (ibid.: 91—5). What might be an indication of other activities within the Annexe, perhaps associated with the metalworking, were four bodies of foetuses or newly born babies, one of which was placed directly within a casting pit and another next to a post-hole of a structure associated with the metalworking (ibid.: 81—6). The metalworking activities continued after the baby burials had been placed here with new hearths constructed within the room (ibid.: 83—4). A further burial was found near the exit from the northern half of the Annexe to the southern half while the fourth was discovered by Kenyon in the excavations of the northwest corner of the north room of the basilica in the 1930s (Kenyon 1938: 188).

Infant burials are known to have been kept away from the main extramural cemeteries in Roman burial practices (Struck 1993), but in Britain few infants have so far been found in urban contexts suggesting that the concentration within the baths-basilica was significant. In London, for example, only one infant burial is known from within the town (Barber and Bowsher 2000: 312—3) whilst at Silchester four infants, apparently not complete skeletons, were found in insula IX in pits together with other material, perhaps indicating the ritual use of infants here (Snelling 2006: 200—5). Scott’s (1991) study of Roman period infant burials in Britain highlighted their association with agricultural buildings on rural sites and suggested that this may have been drawing on pre-Roman beliefs and practices with the burials having symbolic and ritual associations with regeneration and vitality. It is possible that metalworking was also associated with ideas of procreation, regeneration and rebirth (Aldhouse-Green 2002; Herbert 1993; Hingley 1997) and, in the same way as agricultural buildings, would provide a context for baby burials. The burials may also suggest that ceremonies and rituals took place within the buildings accompanying the metalworking. Far from representing the decline of the building, the metalworking would have been an
integral part of activities within it at this time, as well as representing the continued vitality of the town more generally.

In Britain and on the Continent, then, the industrial activity has tended to be interpreted in terms of squatter occupation, opportunistic commercial ventures or governmental control (Bayard and Massy 1983; Mattingly 2006: 336—7; Perring 1991: 103; Rodríguez Gutiérrez 2004). Though these have been useful discussions, the activity may have had additional meanings. The association between industrial evidence and religious activity need not be applicable only to Britain and more work is needed in other parts of the Empire to identify the late activities and their contexts. Leone (2003), for example, has argued that the Church played a part in the industrial activities within towns in North Africa since the olive presses and pottery kilns were often found near churches. Such an association suggests well-regulated and organised activities rather than urban decay (ibid.) but it might also hint at some kind of traditional religious association, perhaps even drawing on periods before Christianity. Clearly more work can be done with this kind of evidence to gain a far more rigorous understanding of towns in the later Roman period and activities within them.
Figure 3: Plan of the Annexe of the Wroxeter Baths-Basilica in Phase W1 dating to the late-fourth century showing timber structures, hearths and casting pits for bronze-working and the location of baby burials that seem to have been associated with the industrial activity. Drawn by Adam Rogers based on Barker et al. (1997) plan A61.
There are also other traces of evidence for activity within public buildings in the later Roman period which require further documentation and analysis. This is usually less recognisable in the archaeological record than the metalworking evidence but equally important for assessing the use of the public buildings at this time. Such evidence includes assemblages of animal bones or spreads of late coins and pottery. There is, for example, an assemblage of late grey ware pottery from the Lincoln forum excavations where subtle differences in the pottery are beginning to suggest a longer chronology in its use than has been suspected in the past and may be able to indicate use of the forum to a later date (J. Mann pers. comm.; Steane 2006). Whyman’s (2001) study of late Roman grey ware in the north of England also identified chronologies that continued later than has traditionally been supposed. Likewise, Southeast Dorset Black Burnished ware is generally assumed to have gone out of use by the late-fourth century (Tyers 1996), but recent work on sites in Dorset are beginning to demonstrate that production probably continued into the early-fifth century and that the pots continued in use later still (J. Magilton pers. comm.). This kind of material has a huge potential in revealing the late biography of buildings and the meaning of the places.

Conclusions

This paper has outlined examples, through case studies of specific buildings and types of material evidence, of the way in which we can attempt to move beyond traditional narratives of the decline of towns in the later Roman period. There are alternative theoretical approaches that can be taken alongside detailed analyses of the surviving archaeological evidence. We can also experiment to use the available evidence in more stimulating ways. There were many changes to towns and their public buildings at this time but they continued to be important and viable places and centres of people, action and interaction. Although parts of the public buildings were sometimes demolished or structurally altered, they continued to be used intensely in a variety of ways. In some cases this use altered the organisation of the internal space, moving away from what might be considered to have been Classical norms, but not from the value of the buildings. It is even possible that more indigenous forms of space organisation and conceptualisation were becoming important, perhaps explaining why metalworking became a central part of activities within some of the buildings and contemporary with other functions. Activities in the later Roman period could also have had symbolic connotations representing the continued regeneration and vitality of the towns. As places, towns witnessed a process of recurring and simultaneous continuity and change with late activity being equally meaningful to earlier periods.
Roman towns were highly ritualised places (cf. Perring 1991; Rykwert 1976) and activity in the late Roman period would have continued to draw on the significance of the places from earlier periods. Memories and myths of histories and experiences that the places contained will have been an important part of their continued importance, with an impact on activities in the present (cf. Alcock 2002; Lock et al. 2005; Olick and Robbins 1998). Through analysing this activity we can construct a detailed biography of how towns functioned over time without making assumptions of decline and fall.

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