

POWER AND TOWNS IN LATE ROMAN BRITAIN AND EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND*

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*There were bright city buildings,
many bathhouses, a wealth of lofty gables, much clamour of
the multitude, many a mead-hall filled with human revelry -
until mighty Fate changed that.*

Introduction

In a letter of June 598 to the patriarch of Alexandria boasting of the early successes of the Christian mission he had despatched to Britain, Pope Gregory wrote of the journey of Augustine and his companions 'to the end of the world'.² To a degree, this is a conventional geographical description, but it is also true to say that over the two preceding centuries the former Roman diocese of Britannia had indeed drifted right to the fringes of contemporary

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1. *The Ruin*, vv. 21-4, tr. BRADLEY, 1982, 402, an Old English poem describing urban decay, incompletely preserved in the late tenth-century Exeter Book. CUNLIFFE, 1983 for a possible context.

2. GREGORY, *Ep.* VIII. 29.

civilisation. In aiming to bring it back, Gregory still hoped to exploit its Roman heritage. His celebrated blueprint for the organisation of the church in Britain, sent to Augustine in June 601, prescribed the establishment of two ecclesiastical provinces of twelve bishops each, centred on metropolitans at London and York.³ Whether this visionary scheme was based on optimistic reports from the missionaries themselves in the heady early days of mass conversions, or whether it emerged, as seems more likely, from Gregory's preconceptions about the survival of a Roman administrative framework in Britain, it soon became apparent that it was ill-suited to the politically-fragmented, non-urban, and thoroughly post-Roman society in which the missionaries were operating. Augustine consciously maintained Canterbury rather than London as the southern metropolitan see.⁴ And while the concept of twin metropolitans for north and south persisted, it was put into lasting practice only by the granting of the *pallium* to York in 735. By this time Gregory's idealised notions had been superseded by a much more flexible and practical approach to church organisation, dictated as much by contemporary politics and missionary preferences as by notions of central places inherited from the Roman past.

The difference between the assumptions of urban survival implicit in the Gregorian plan, and the hybrid network of bishoprics which gradually and hesitantly emerged in practice, illustrates the gulf which separates the post-Roman urban history of Britain from that of the bulk of the former western Empire. For in Britain the problem is not how towns were able to survive as centres of political and ecclesiastical authority in the new kingdoms of the west, but whether they did so at all; not how some centres were able to develop as *sedes regiae*, but whether such a concept has any meaning in an Anglo-Saxon context. Indeed, although the early Anglo-Saxon church owes much less to the Roman urban network than its continental counterparts, it can be argued that the idea of the town as a centre for the exercise of power and administration was reintroduced to England by the Roman mission along with concepts such as

3. GREGORY, *Ep.* XI.39; Bede, *HE* I. 29.

4. BROOKS, 1984, p. 11.

written law and title to land. However, the urban historiography of post-Roman Britain has traditionally been couched in terms of continuity; some analysis of the conventions of this debate will be necessary in considering such evidence as there is for the fate of Roman towns and the exercise of power from urban centres in the early Anglo-Saxon period (defined as c. 400-c. 650). The subsequent summary of the settlement forms of the Middle Saxon period (c. 650-c. 850) which ultimately gave rise to a fully-fledged urban revival in the tenth century will similarly concentrate upon how far these are connected either with royal power, or with the Roman legacy. In passing I will be drawing on comparisons with the Continent, and particularly from Frankish Gaul. But it is important to begin by emphasising that the rhythms of urban history in Britain over this period are very different. This divergence accelerates markedly in the fifth century, but its roots go deeper than that, and to illustrate this, the late Roman period is a necessary beginning.

Late Roman towns in Britain

Like the rest of the empire, Roman Britain was for administrative purposes parcelled out into a series of territories or *civitates*, each centred upon a capital. The precise status of many of these centres in Late Antiquity is nevertheless imperfectly known by comparison, for example, with Gaul. There is neither a British equivalent of the *Notitia Galliarum* to provide a hand-list of late antique *civitas*-capitals, nor a sequence of subscriptions to church councils through which the subsequent maintenance or modification of the urban network can be monitored. Instead, the British network has to be reconstructed piecemeal from intermittent and sometimes rather ambiguous epigraphic and documentary evidence. The difficulties of precise definitions of status have encouraged the development of a historiographical tradition which distinguishes between two types of town, identifiable by form as well as administrative function. Most important are the 'public towns' (*civitas*-capitals and other major centres of government), marked out by their role in the imperial administration, their suites of public buildings and their formal plans. The precise status of a few of these is disputed, but the

basic outlines are clear (fig. 1).⁵ The second category, at once much more numerous and less well-defined, is that of the 'small towns', characterised by their lack of formal planning and of substantial communal or indeed private buildings. Not surprisingly, given this classification by an absence of features, this group is amorphous and unsatisfactory, since some of the centres included within it seem far from small, whilst others seem far from urban.⁶ A very small number of these would become important in the Anglo-Saxon period (also shown on fig. 1); since they have sometimes been used to inflate the case for 'continuity', it is important to bear in mind that their Roman forms vary considerably, and that they represent less than a tenth of 'small towns' of one sort or another, the vast majority of which disappear from view in or immediately after the Roman period.⁷

The state of the towns of Late Roman Britain has been much debated in recent years, often in the context of contemporary urban developments across the Channel. Not unusually, perhaps, the basic archaeological evidence upon which the different schools of thought draw is essentially not in dispute: more opulent but fewer private houses in towns, the abandonment of a few existing public buildings and a moratorium on new ones, with the notable exception of the erection and progressive upgrading of urban defences, and the abandonment of some intra-mural areas together with the widespread formation of an archaeological deposit known as 'dark earth', the significance of which is contentious.⁸ The extensive wall-circuits, in particular, which generally encompassed cities in their entirety, and where

5. Here I follow MILLETT, 1990, p. 102-3, who lists twenty-two 'public towns'. By analogy with Gaul, it is possible that one or two secondary centres were elevated into this category in Late Antiquity. Gildas, *de Excidio* 3.2 (followed by Bede, *HE* I.1) says that there were twenty-eight *civitates*, but the notions that he had a written list (HIGHAM, 1991), or that this included centres recently elevated to bishoprics (BASSETT, 1989b, p. 228) are speculative.

6. BURNHAM and WACHER, 1990 offers the fullest treatment, with a series of subdivisions ranging from 'potential cities' to 'undefended settlements'. MILLETT, 1990, p. 154-6, lists 95 'small towns' alongside the 22 centres listed above.

7. BURNHAM and WACHER, 1990, for example, categorises Rochester among 'potential cities', Dorchester-on-Thames as a 'minor town', Bath as a specialised 'religious' site, Worcester as a specialised 'industrial' site, and Wall as a 'minor defended settlement'.

8. MILLETT, 1990, p. 134-42; ESMONDE CLEARY, 1989, p. 64-85.

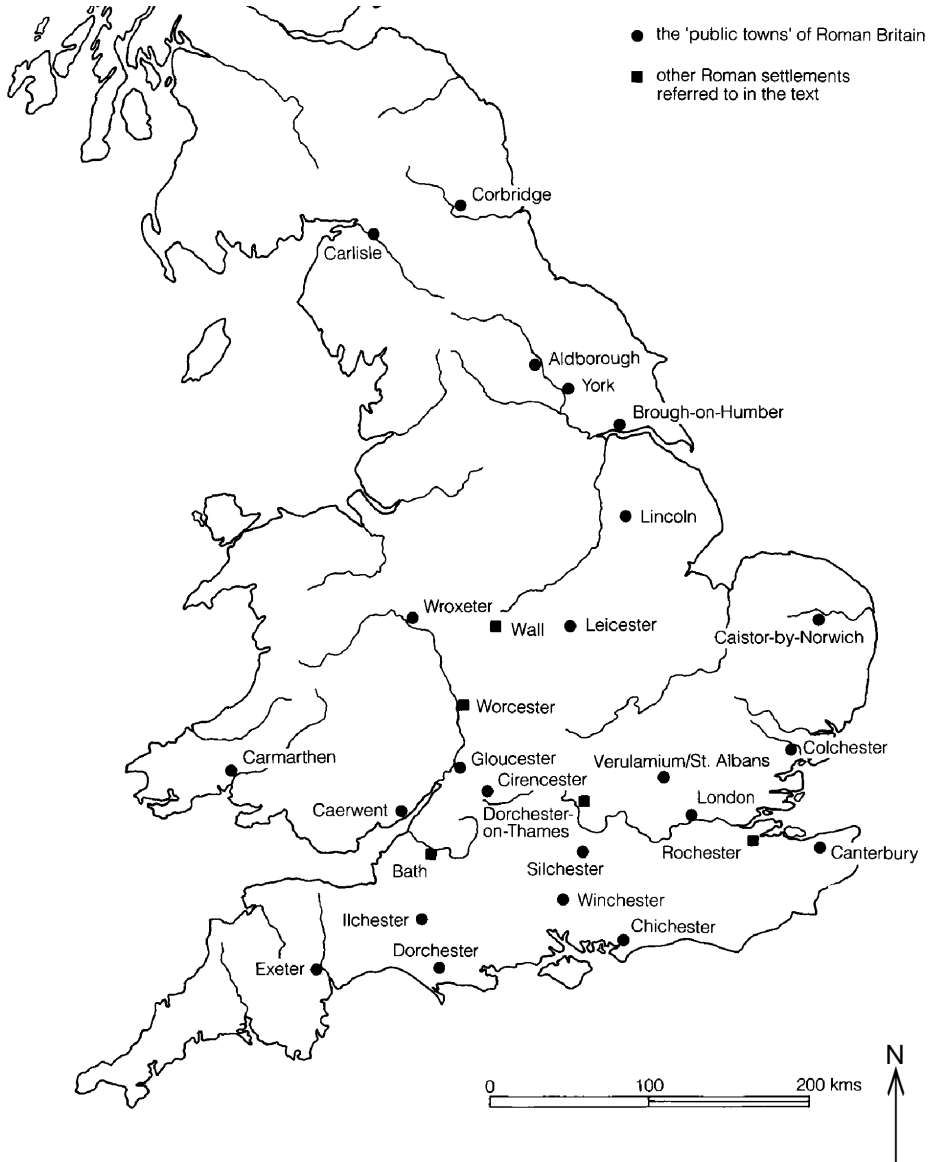


Fig. 1. Towns in Roman Britain.

the absence of *spolia* betokened care, have encouraged the drawing of optimistic and rather bullish contrasts with the supposedly hastily-built and indisputably reduced enceintes which were increasingly being provided for cities in late antique Gaul: 'the town-walls of Britain enclosed living communities, while those of Gaul formed strongpoints at the heart of their former selves'.⁹ Here, the emphasis on 'living communities' and 'former selves' may hint at an underlying assumption that the Gallic towns were moribund in comparison with the rude health exhibited by their British counterparts.

If few would now go quite this far, the general tenor of guarded optimism about urban life in early fourth-century Britain, derived in part from a sense that the impact of the problems of the third century was far more severe across the Channel, still holds sway. In taking a judicious view across the full range of archaeological evidence, Simon Esmonde Cleary (who quite legitimately wants to talk up early fourth-century Britain somewhat in order to make his interpretation of its rapid collapse that much more emphatic) takes comfort in the fact that late antique British towns are doing much better than those in Gaul, where the *vici* have collapsed, where *civitates* are shrunken shadows of their earlier selves, avoided by elites, and where the disruption of the third century has been much more direct and damaging to the urban economy.¹⁰ Some, however, have remained resolutely less impressed, especially Richard Reece, who has argued in a series of articles for the irrelevance of towns to the inhabitants of fourth-century Britain, setting their decline in a wider context of 'deromanization' among a native population who have had more sense than to continue to be taken in by inappropriate Mediterranean fashions. Amid much colourful reference to 'garden cities' and 'administrative villages', he sees nothing to sustain towns after the third century beyond their role

9. FRERE 1987, p. 240; this interpretation derives from the old tendency to ascribe archaeological evidence of destruction and fortification in Gaul to a generalised third-century crisis, and from a rather too ready equation between the rejection of some of the trappings of classical urbanism and the collapse of urban life in general. For a more nuanced approach to the Gallic evidence, see FÉVRIER, 1980.

10. ESMONDE CLEARY, 1989, esp. p. 82, 129.

in the imperial scheme of things.¹¹ Reece is equally keen to appeal to a Continental context, but to emphasise similarities rather than differences; here Britain exhibits the same contraction from the early imperial days of expansionism and superficial engagement, but without the saving grace of Christianity which ultimately enabled Gallic towns to persist despite their physically and functionally reduced state.¹²

One problem is that we have no indications of what the Britons thought about cities, except what we choose to read into the equivocal indications of the archaeological record; when we do hear the opinions of some fourth- and fifth-century Gauls, such as Ausonius and Sidonius Apollinaris, it is hard to conclude that their fellows had rejected all the attractions and amenities of urban life out of hand despite all the stresses and strains to which Gallic towns had been subjected. Without any similar texts from late Roman Britain, it remains hard to be sure what social and economic functions cities performed beyond the fulfilment of the demands made upon them by the state, and this legitimises pessimistic interpretations. But the rural location of late Roman pottery industries, for example, does not exclude their role in the provisioning of urban markets, as findspot distributions have demonstrated.¹³ The development of extensive new cemeteries beside late Roman towns, such as Poundbury at Dorchester or Lankhills at Winchester, suggests that towns were still acting as a focus for the dead, and so, more than likely, for the living.¹⁴ The demise of some public buildings provides only an index of one type of decline, and it can be misleading, particularly if one takes into account that in the Mediterranean, where one might have expected public monuments to be held in higher regard, the phenomenon of the intrusion of domestic or artisanal activity into some public monuments was also getting under way.¹⁵ At least some developments of this type in Britain, such as the turning-over of the basilica at Silchester to industrial use from

11. REECE, 1980 for the original argument, with expansions and responses to criticism in REECE, 1983, 1989, 1992.

12. REECE, 1980, p. 77; 1992, p. 142.

13. TYERS, 1996, p. 48-82.

14. Poundbury: FARWELL and MOLLESON, 1993; Lankhills: CLARKE, 1979.

15. LOSEBY, 1996, p. 52-8, for discussion of controlled adaptations of public buildings at Arles; POTTER 1995, p. 63-102, for similar developments in North Africa.

the late third century, were probably officially inspired.¹⁶ They mark a widespread and still imperfectly understood late antique change in attitudes which can only be read as evidence of a decline in a certain type of urbanism, and not necessarily of urban life itself.

The towns of late Roman Britain seem, nevertheless, to have been lacking in two features which could have helped them to survive as central places in a post-Roman world. The dominant features of early medieval towns in the eyes of contemporaries were walls and churches.¹⁷ The contrast between the wall-circuits of Roman Britain, which usually encompassed whole communities, and those of Gaul, where only a core area was fortified, has tended, as we have seen, to be viewed in a positive light in Romano-British historiography. But the much-despised reduced enceintes of many northern and central Gallic towns may ultimately have worked to their advantage, because they could be maintained and defended by relatively small populations, as is shown by the subsequent history of the Merovingian period, where siege warfare is commonplace, but hardly ever successful without the collaboration of some of the besieged. There is nothing to show that existing towns were used in this way in post-Roman Britain. It may be that their circuits were often too large for effective defence, at least until, much later, the rigorous manning provisions of the *Burghal Hidage* brought a few of them back into service. Equally, the apparent failure to develop smaller fortified cores within towns implies their general irrelevance to the exercise of authority in the post-Roman period.¹⁸

More problematic is the extent to which towns in late Roman Britain were reinvigorated by Christianity, which certainly gave fresh impetus to urban life elsewhere in the empire. There were certainly some bishops in Britain from early in the fourth century, and no doubt there were urban and suburban churches,

16. FULFORD, 1985.

17. e.g. Gregory of Tours: LOSEBY, 1998.

18. Defended urban areas are tabulated in MILLETT 1990, p. 152-3; the majority are around 40 ha in extent. The Cripplegate fort in London (BIDDLE, 1989, p. 23), or the Cirencester amphitheatre (WACHER, 1976, p. 17) have been proposed as fortified cores, but both claims are highly speculative.

though these have proved singularly hard to find.¹⁹ But the more fundamental difficulty lies in determining how far Christianity in British towns had developed along familiar late antique lines: a bishop in every city working in tandem with an array of saintly protectors in suburban cemeteries, establishing a new role for the city as a Christian focus, and so reinforcing its dominance over its dependent territory. Whether all this happened but was destroyed, along with almost all the evidence, in the post-Roman period, or whether the rich blend of the new Christian urbanism percolated northwards too late to give fresh stimulus to urban life is far from certain. The existence of a church in the forum courtyard at Lincoln, and of the *martyrium* of St. Alban on the fringes of the Roman town of *Verulamium* which now bears his name, are indications of what might have been.²⁰ But the exceptional nature of evidence such as this compels caution (Alban, for example, was indubitably Britain's most celebrated martyr²¹), and, to judge from the chronology of developments across the Channel, any positive impact of Christianity upon towns is likely to have been nipped in the bud in Britain by widespread social dislocation.²² Whether it would have made much difference to what followed cannot therefore be known.

The fate of Roman towns: Romano-British survivals

There are essentially two distinct models for the end of Roman Britain, usefully labelled by Richard Reece as 'decline and immigration' and 'invasion and displacement'.²³ The first, most fully evoked by Simon Esmonde Cleary, involves the widespread collapse of the Roman system within the space of at most two generations in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, leaving the *adventus Saxonum* only a walk-on part at

19. THOMAS, 1981 is fundamental. The only cities at which fourth-century bishops are certainly recorded are London, York and (probably) Lincoln, all at the Council of Arles in 314. There is no primary historical evidence to support the identification of various centres in western Britain as late Roman or post-Roman sees, as e.g. BASSETT, 1992; DARK, 1993, p. 64-8.

20. For Lincoln, see below; St. Albans: LEVISON, 1941; BIDDLE, 1986, p. 13-16.

21. *VENANTIUS FORTUNATUS, Carmina* VIII. 3.

22. Cf. the slow spread of Christianity in Belgica: WIGHTMAN, 1985, p. 282-99.

23. REECE, 1989, p. 234.

the end of the drama.²⁴ This interpretation highlights the swift and systemic demise of Roman rule in Britain from the last quarter of the fourth century, amply revealed in the collapse of existing social and economic structures; towns, villas, coinage, pottery industries, even relatively simple technologies soon ceased to exist. The post-Roman world happened upon by the Anglo-Saxons had already changed beyond recognition. The alternative, and historically dominant paradigm, which makes them the cause rather than the consequence of that change, derives primarily from a polemical work, the *de Excidio Britanniae*, written early in the sixth century by a British monk named Gildas; in default of better evidence this has been pressed into service by generations of historians beginning with Bede. In its simplest terms Gildas' version of events offers Romano-British authorities who, despairing of any further help from Rome against the raids of Picts and Scots, employ the ferocious Saxons as mercenaries. This force eventually rebels and wreaks havoc, but subsequently meets with plucky resistance from a relict (but increasingly depraved) native leadership who have successfully halted their advances down to Gildas' own day, but whose conduct necessitates the call to repentance which makes up the vast bulk of his work.²⁵ Into the sparse, endlessly debated but enduringly vivid historical framework provided by Gildas have been woven a host of fleeting, ambiguous, confused, derivative or late indications in other sources to tell a story which in its main outlines is as familiar as it is fragile. In ill-documented periods such as the early middle ages the few historical 'events' tend to assume unwarranted importance, and here they have also been strung together to create a master narrative which gets us from Roman to Saxon via mid-fifth-century invasion, a Romano-British recovery c. 500 which confined the Saxons to eastern Britain, and their renewed advance westwards from the mid-sixth century. The archaeological evidence usually reveals more gradual trends, but in Britain, curiously enough, it is the meagre written sources which have been used to construct a picture of change through time while the archaeology points to a sudden and fundamental transformation before the historical narrative

24. ESMONDE CLEARY, 1989.

25. GILDAS, *de Excidio*, 14-26 for this narrative.

gets under way. Contrast contemporary developments in Roman Africa, for example, where the lurid accounts of the Vandal conquest in some of the written sources are mitigated by archaeological evidence of a much more gradual pattern of social and economic change throughout Late Antiquity.

In trying to determine what role, if any, was played by towns in the power struggles of this period it is best to begin by examining their possible function as centres for the exercise of power by a relict Romano-British administration. Any archaeologically-perceptible activity in Roman towns in the fifth century has tended to be interpreted in the context of their notional role as centres for the exercise of authority over sub-Roman territorial units. This concept is far from unlikely, but has little historical to commend it beyond two vague passages in Zosimus, which are usually conflated. The first of these records some sort of attempt by the Romano-Britons to organise themselves independently of the Roman state, while the second recounts how shortly afterwards, in 410, Honorius sent a rescript to the *poleis* of Britain telling them to defend themselves.²⁶ But amid the extremely scanty sources for the fifth and sixth centuries, only two entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written down as we have them in the late ninth century, remain to hint at the possible significance of former Roman centres as native strongholds. The first reports how in 491 the Saxons 'Aelle and Cissa besieged *Andredesceaster*, and killed all who were inside, and there was not even a single Briton left alive'.²⁷ Under 577 it is recorded that 'Cuthwine and Ceawlin fought against the Britons and killed three kings, Conmail, Condidan and Farinmail, at the place which is called Dyrham; and they captured three cities, Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath'.²⁸ Unlike some early annals of the *Chronicle*, neither of these entries is intrinsically implausible. The former describes the reduction of a Saxon Shore fort at Pevensey (giving the correct Latin name, *Anderida*), the latter what might reasonably be taken to represent the British

26. ZOSIMUS, VI. 5. 3; VI. 10. 2. The secondary literature on these confused and confusing passages is extensive: see esp. THOMPSON, 1977 and BARTHOLOMEW, 1982, which THOMPSON, 1983 seeks to refute.

27. ASC, *s.a.* 491.

28. ASC, *s.a.* 577.

concession of three cities and their territories after defeat in battle, though its laconic nature leaves it open to interpretation. Both types of conflict could readily be paralleled in contemporary Frankish sources. The problem is that in Britain they are unique, and, moreover, they stand alongside textual references to conflicts at various hill-forts. The implications of the archaeology are notably similar in revealing numerous cases of the refortification of hilltops in this period, but only one example of a post-Roman repair to an urban wall-circuit, the ill-dated Anglian Tower in York.²⁹ An annal of 571, meanwhile, records the capture after a battle of four named *tunas*, or estate-centres, none of which are known to have been of Roman origin, but which seem analogous in importance to the three west country cities mentioned six years later, and indicative of a post-Roman system of territorial organisation.³⁰ Whatever these annals mean (and their evidence cannot safely be pushed too far) they provide more evidence for the early emergence of new centres of power and administration than for the survival of old ones.³¹ The remarkable absence of later traditions recording conflicts over cities in the post-Roman period does not prove that there were none, but it does imply major discontinuity at some stage.

The archaeological evidence, meanwhile, provides barely any support for the survival of any recognisably urban settlements much beyond the date of Honorius' celebrated rescript.³² The sporadic evidence for the abandonment of structures in towns accelerates in the last quarter of the fourth century, while the fabric of surviving public and private buildings is allowed to deteriorate. The encroachment of timber buildings onto streets, the failure to maintain sewage systems, the widespread accumulation of rubbish and, ultimately, the intrusion of burials into urban areas all suggest a real and marked decline from the civic standards of earlier periods. The suburban cemeteries of the fourth century go out of use, suggesting either a serious fall in urban populations, or, if we prefer to assume that these also included the dead of nearby settlements, that cities had lost

29. ALCOCK, 1987 on hillforts; BUCKLAND, 1984 for the Anglian Tower.

30. ASC, *s.a.* 571.

31. SIMS-WILLIAMS, 1983 for the problems of the *Chronicle*.

32. ESMONDE CLEARY, 1989, p. 131-61 is a splendid summary.

something of their focal role. Meanwhile, the accumulation of much-debated deposits of 'dark earth' within cities begins to spread. Whether these soils represent some sort of cultivation or simply the remains of collapsed buildings within which the usual array of wasteground flora were beginning to grow, they cannot be described as an index of conventional urban vitality.³³ The universality of all these phenomena in towns in the late fourth and early fifth century is very striking. The major problem, however, is that they become progressively more difficult to date. Coins stopped reaching Britain after 402, and ceased to circulate by perhaps c. 420; their disappearance makes the independent dating of artefacts impossible, although there are good grounds for thinking that the production and distribution of pottery for both regional and local markets, which had already shown signs of stagnation, also ended at about this time.³⁴ At present the only way to demonstrate the continuation of occupation beyond the early fifth century is therefore to show the accumulation of stratified archaeological deposits above layers containing the latest dateable material.

On the vast majority of town sites there are no archaeological sequences to indicate continued activity beyond the middle of the fifth century at the latest. Insula XXVII at *Verulamium*, where a new town-house was built in c. 380, has long been the shining exception.³⁵ A subsequent extension to the house had its mosaic floor patched before it was cut through by a corn-drier or perhaps a hypocaust. This in turn had its furnace repaired before it was demolished prior to the erection of a substantial new hall or barn. Finally, this building went out of use before a water-pipe, built in the Roman fashion, sliced away one of its buttresses. There is nothing to date this sequence beyond its initial phases, but the multiplicity of later developments, and the repeated evidence of use, repair, and remodelling implies it must extend over a significant, albeit indeterminate, period; the excavator proposed

33. Overviews: BROOKS, 1986, p. 93-4; ESMONDE CLEARY, 1989, p. 147-8. More specialised analyses: MACPHAIL, 1981; YULE, 1990, BLOCKLEY *et alii* 1995, p. 18-19, p. 260-3. FAULKNER, 1994 and 1996 offers a different and fresh approach to the problem of decline.

34. Coins: KENT, 1979, p. 21-2; pottery: FULFORD, 1979.

35. FRERE, 1983, p. 214-26.

that it went into the last quarter of the fifth century. But now this celebrated sequence has been trumped by the evidence from the baths basilica site at Wroxeter, recently published in full.³⁶ The scale of the methodological problem here is easily illustrated if we set the proposed projection of the sequence into at least the later seventh century alongside the sum total of the finds: 'a single coin, a brooch and a long pin, a few sherds of pottery, a handful of radiocarbon dates, and a remnant magnetic date.'³⁷ First, the basilica went through numerous repairs and modifications which are thought to have lasted right through the fifth century, before most of the structure was carefully demolished; activity on the site, however, continued. A series of rectilinear rubble platforms were laid, the largest of which supported a very substantial timber-framed building, assumed from the scale of the platform to be of two storeys (fig. 2). Evidence of at least thirty-five other timber buildings (and one of masonry) was found, some of which were clearly very basic in conception, although others may have had a residential function. The only helpful indication of absolute chronology is the *terminus ante quem* for this phase derived from the radiocarbon dating to 600 x 790 (at 95% probability) of a burial inserted in one of the rubble platforms after the demolition of the building upon it, just before the site was definitively abandoned. On the basis of relative chronological indications, such as depth of stratigraphy and extent of wear, blended with the historical assumption that the abandonment of the site was connected with the extension of Anglo-Saxon settlement to this region, the excavators suggest that the site was abandoned in the second half of the seventh century. The preceding phase Z, with its rubble platforms and substantial timber building, would perhaps therefore have extended from c. 550-c. 650.

This is not the place to debate either the chronology or the proposed monumentality of phase Z in detail. Instead, if we take these for granted and concentrate on what the evidence from Wroxeter or *Verulamium* might tell us about post-Roman cities in general, it is clear that these sequences represent the continued use of some urban sites well beyond 410 by people with some

36. BARKER *et alii*, 1997.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

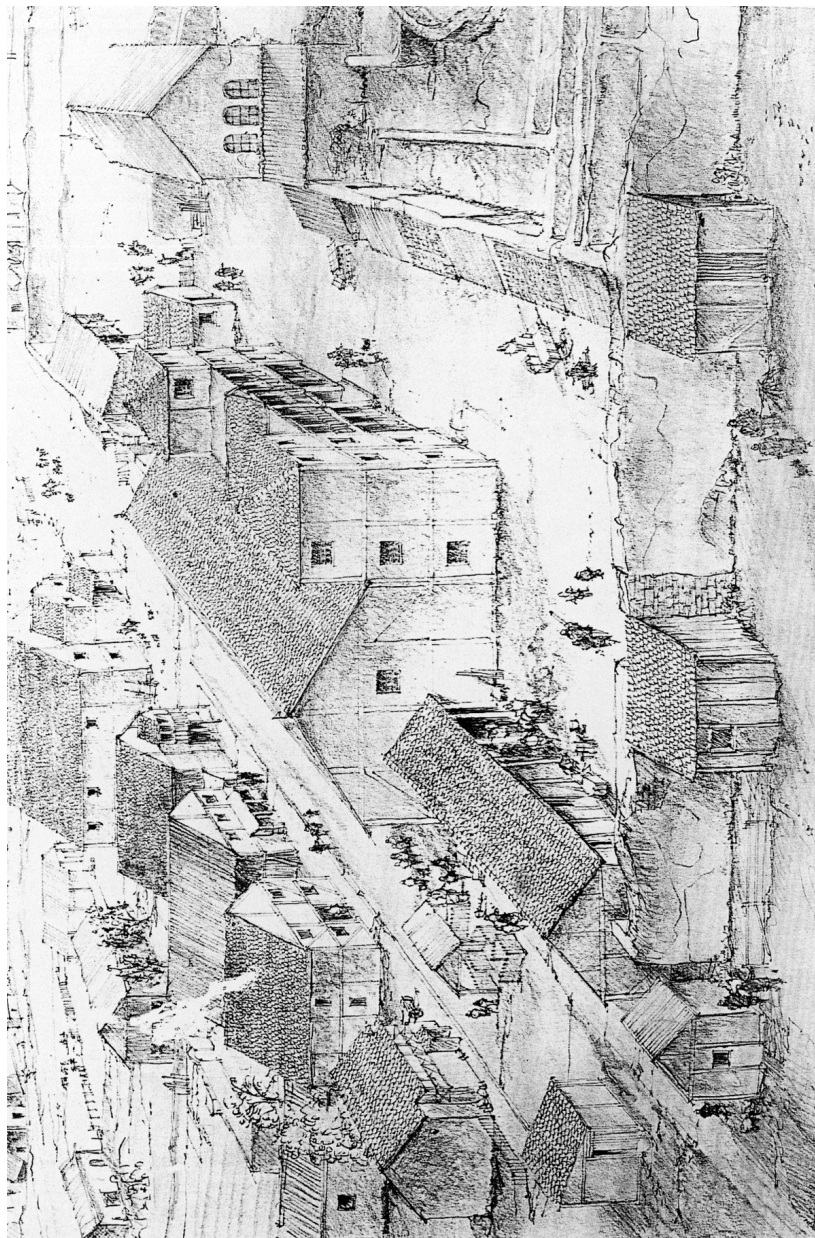


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the baths basilica site at Wroxeter in Phase Z (Barker, 1997, fig. 324, reproduced by kind permission of English Heritage).

control over resources, whom the building techniques suggest were probably Romano-Britons. However, it is questionable whether they were acting in a public or a private capacity, and downright dangerous to use either Wroxeter or *Verulamium* as a model for the widespread survival of Roman towns, or even of life within them. Whatever the extended *Verulamium* sequence represents, excavations on a dozen other sites within the city suggest that it was surrounded by the ruins of structures abandoned, as elsewhere, in the early fifth century.³⁸ The overall picture from Wroxeter is less clear-cut, but claims that the activity on the baths basilica site is paralleled on neighbouring insulae, to the extent that 'what must be postulated is the revival of the entire city centre in a changed form for perhaps as long as a century before it was finally abandoned', appear to rest on foundations as shallow as those of the great building of Phase Z.³⁹ A similar leap of faith is required to accept the excavators' convictions that what we have here is still a town: 'an isolated, self-sufficient urban community, holding on to its territory', a territory notionally identified on the basis of parish boundaries, and more speculatively equipped with a bishop.⁴⁰ The Romano-British magnates of Wroxeter come to sound like the early Mormons or the Amish in their withdrawal from the world around them. Meanwhile, they supposedly maintain tax-systems and an active church while contriving to remain 'artefactually invisible' for over two centuries, and continue to exercise political control without any apparent need to defend themselves against attack.⁴¹ And if we still want to assume that Wroxeter is the base of Romano-British magnates of some description, then it should be borne in mind that they are exceptional in several respects, and perhaps not all that successful. Their contemporaries appear

38. The latest abandonment suggested elsewhere (Insula XIV. 3) is c. 430: FRERE, 1983, p. 93-101.

39. BARKER *et alii*, 1997, p. 235. In an engaging conceit, the report includes late nineteenth-century photographs of a town in British Columbia to show how slight foundations can support substantial timber-framed buildings. It can scarcely be a coincidence that the town in question is called Barkerville.

40. BARKER *et alii* 1997, p. 241-7 (quotation from p. 247); bishop: BASSETT, 1992, p. 35-40.

41. GELLING, 1989, p. 187: 'perhaps the only certainty about the person who held court in the timber mansion at Wroxeter is that he was not anticipating trouble'.

to have preferred the security of hill-forts as bases from which to exercise authority; the finds from these sites also suggest that they were in closer contact with neighbouring and even Mediterranean powers.⁴²

In fact, the evidence from *Verulamium* and Wroxeter is not so surprising, if we accept that neither the systemic collapse of Roman Britain nor the bloodthirstiness and efficiency of the Anglo-Saxon newcomers was such as to cause everybody to abandon their homes and run for the hills at the first opportunity; this is not, after all, what happened in northern Gaul or the Balkan provinces. Similar extended but localised sequences could probably be reproduced at other late Roman town sites by archaeologists with the right combination of technical skill, the requisite time and resources, and also the luck to find these needles of continuity amid a haystack of abandonments. But it must again be emphasised that they remain the exception rather than the rule, and that, even where it does exist, settlement on town sites, however substantial and 'Romanised' it may be, is not urban by definition, and certainly does not axiomatically illustrate the survival of a *civitas*-based Roman administrative system.

Although one can certainly observe a Romano-British elite who succeed for the better part of two centuries, at least in western Britain, in maintaining or carving out political territories, their activities fall largely outside the scope of this paper, because there is very little good evidence to suggest that these territories were centred upon former Roman towns. There have been many attempts to divine the existence of sub-Roman territories from archaeological and topographical evidence of various types. Ill-dated earthworks and parish boundaries of later periods are claimed to preserve post-Roman political territories or to demonstrate the existence of otherwise unrecorded early bishoprics; the distribution of Anglo-Saxon settlement revealed by their cemeteries is said to expose enclaves of Romano-British power centred upon towns.⁴³ Some of these assertions may be locally

42. ALCOCK, 1987; cf. BARKER *et alii*, 1997, p. 248 for an admission of Wroxeter's deficiencies, at odds with the confident assertions about urbanism.

43. Territories: e.g. Silchester (O'NEIL, 1944), Great Chesterford (BASSETT, 1989a, p. 24-6). Bishoprics: BASSETT, 1992. For urban enclaves, below. DARK, 1994 for

valid, but in general terms they are outweighed by the sheer scale of the evidence for discontinuity. The near-silence of the written sources for the use of towns as power bases is amplified by the widespread archaeological indications of urban decay. This is not altogether surprising if we accept that the social transformations of the period around 400 were on such a scale that cities had lost their focal role in the extraction of resources from their dependent territories, and with it much of their *raison d'être* as centres of power.

The absence of archaeological evidence from Roman town sites is thrown into sharper relief by the excavations of high-status secular settlements in British territory at naturally well-defended sites such as Dinas Powys, South Cadbury or Tintagel.⁴⁴ This tends to confirm how by the end of the fifth century a different type of society was emerging from the rubble of the Roman system, which was probably much more akin to that of its Anglo-Saxon neighbours than its Roman predecessor, and which had developed its own central places to suit new imperatives. The British church, as far as we can see, followed suit; here it is worth noting that the only region of Gaul where the Roman episcopal network did not survive more or less intact is that area of Brittany (settled, of course, by Britons) which lay outside Merovingian control.⁴⁵ The post-Roman emergence here of a monastic episcopate surely provides a better model for ecclesiastical developments in western Britain than the supposed survival of bishops in otherwise abandoned Roman towns. The British kingdoms of the west had little use for towns; we might suspect that the rulers of any surviving enclaves of Romano-British power further east would eventually have come to a similar conclusion. Nevertheless, such polities could conceivably have remained centred upon cities for long enough to be taken over as going concerns by the Anglo-Saxons. This hypothesis is best considered within the general context of a concept which has exerted much influence over early medieval British historiography: continuity.

an overview stretching the case for continuity to its limits, but even this can find little to say about towns.

44. For the exercise of power in Celtic Britain see esp. ALCOCK, 1987.

45. BERNIER, 1984; LOSEBY, forthcoming.

From Roman to Saxon: the tyranny of continuity

In Merovingian Gaul, as I have argued elsewhere, the Roman urban network survived the transition to Frankish rule substantially intact.⁴⁶ The Franks adopted the Roman administrative system as the most efficient means of resource extraction available, aided and abetted by a Gallo-Roman aristocracy who ensured that it continued to work. Cities were not merely relics of the past, propped up by a few city-based ecclesiastics, but the essential framework through which royal government functioned until at least the end of the sixth century. The writings of Gregory of Tours in particular show how operations as diverse as tax-collection, holiness, military service and territorial division were organised at the level of the *civitas*, so helping to explain the complex nature of Merovingian politics. Kings fought their civil wars not from geographically-coherent blocks of territory (though these were beginning to emerge), but across a patchwork quilt of variously-allocated cities. Bishops were based in cities, rulers maintained urban residences, and elements of municipal administrative machinery including tax-registers and archives continued in operation. This is not to say that the Frankish cities through which Augustine and his companions apprehensively travelled in the late 590s were necessarily that grand; the excavated remains of Gregory's Tours presently look a lot less impressive than one might imagine from his writings.⁴⁷ But the Roman cities nevertheless formed the building-blocks around which the transition from Roman to Frankish rule was organised.

There is at present very little to suggest that anything similar generally occurred across the Channel in Britain. One fundamental difference is that evidence of a substantial Anglo-Saxon presence only begins to accumulate after the breakdown of urban society so amply revealed by archaeology. Attempts to insinuate the Anglo-Saxons into the fabric of Roman life before this happened by associating them with items of military equipment or pottery, so permitting the appearance of federate troops in the streets of late Roman Dorchester-on-Thames or Winchester,

46. LOSEBY, 1998; LOSEBY, forthcoming.

47. GALINIÉ, 1997.

or of settlers in East Anglia, have been shown to be flawed.⁴⁸ Instead, the Anglo-Saxons can only have happened upon the shadowy post-Roman phase of urban life described above. It is hard enough to prove that this really existed, let alone to deduce any relatively consensual or widespread handover of functioning units of local government to the newcomers and their aggregation into political territories, as happened in Gaul. Nevertheless, continuity has often been regarded, as Martin Biddle put it in the classic overview of Anglo-Saxon urban history, as 'inherently more likely'.⁴⁹ This assertion is symptomatic of a general problem. Just as Gildas' *superbus tyrannus*, who made the fatal mistake of employing Anglo-Saxon mercenaries, bestrides the history of the fifth century, so the concept of continuity has exercised its own curious tyranny over the post-Roman urban debate in Britain.

The trouble with 'continuity' as a category of analysis is that it is as flexible and as slippery as 'feudalism'. On the one hand it can (and to have any real meaning should) be interpreted more or less literally. Dodie Brooks has painstakingly analysed the evidence for strict continuity of settlement from Roman to Saxon on urban sites, taking this to require clear indications that there was no chronological break in activity between the latest 'Roman' levels and the earliest signs of an Anglo-Saxon presence. This cannot be shown anywhere, even at Canterbury, although here it might be conceded that, since the break seems to last for barely a generation, it falls within any reasonable margin of error.⁵⁰ Even so, the latest Roman levels remain devoid of Anglo-Saxon pottery, while the earliest sunken-feature buildings of the later fifth century are sunk into 'dark earth' which had already accumulated. The material cultures of late Roman Britain and early Anglo-Saxon England remain distinct in urban deposits. Brooks' argument can be summed up in a phrase familiar on

48. Military equipment: ESMONDE CLEARY, 1989, p. 55-6; cf. esp. HALSALL, 1992 for a critique of similarly doubtful assumptions of ethnic identity in the Rhineland. Pottery: GILLAM, 1979.

49. BIDDLE, 1976, p. 103; cf. WACHER, 1974, p. 411: 'continuity is in accordance with probability'.

50. BROOKS, 1986, and in more detail for Canterbury, BROOKS, 1988; for the 'margin of error' BLOCKLEY *et alii*, 1995, p. 19, which nevertheless accepts the absence of associations between the late Roman and early Saxon assemblages.

London Underground: 'mind the gap'. At the other extreme, Warwick Rodwell has assembled the evidence for the erection of churches on Roman town sites, moving seamlessly between the few well-documented cases, which begin in the seventh century, and analogies which necessitate varying degrees of inference and extend right across the Anglo-Saxon period. His conclusion is that these show 'a continuity of hierarchical structure evidenced by the physical location of domestic and religious centres ... the *location* [his italics] of local power and authority is the continuous thread'.⁵¹ Brooks offers a narrow, even mechanical, definition of continuity, both in time and in form, and rejects it; Rodwell meanwhile stretches continuity thinly across time and space, extrapolating institutional from physical structures, and so accepts its existence. In truth the criteria are so flexible as to be useless, and the concept is intrinsically flawed; the term 'continuity' should be eschewed unless the historical processes which are envisaged to underlie it are made transparently clear.

In fact those processes remain decidedly elusive, in part because until the seventh century we lack any historical sources to tell us what use the Anglo-Saxons might have made of the former Roman towns. The likes of *Verulamium* and Wroxeter, as we have seen, are the best representatives of a 'post-Roman' phase of activity on town sites, a phenomenon which is not attested beyond the middle of the fifth century elsewhere. It is worth bearing in mind that if either of them had retained any role as a central place, then this function was ultimately lost, and that in both cases it is tempting (if largely hypothetical, or indeed circular) to associate their demise with the assertion of Anglo-Saxon political control.⁵² There are other Roman towns, nevertheless, which do re-emerge in the works of Bede as the sites of newly-created bishoprics, and go on to be significant Middle Saxon centres (fig. 3). The temptation here has been to assume that their significance somehow persisted across this intervening period, and so through the transition from Romano-British to Anglo-Saxon political control.

51. RODWELL, 1984 (quotation from p. 3).

52. e.g. BARKER *et alii*, 1997, p. 241.

The archaeological record, however, offers little to sustain this hypothetical continuity. At Canterbury there is now a relative abundance of evidence for settlement of the early Saxon period, beginning around the middle of the fifth century, but with an apparent hiatus around 500, and an apparent intensification of occupation only from around the time of Augustine's arrival at the close of the sixth century.⁵³ Over forty structures of fifth-seventh century date have been excavated, almost all of them sunken-feature buildings (SFBs). There are a few indications of artisanal activity, but little to distinguish early Saxon Canterbury from contemporary rural sites except the adjacent presence of a crumbling Roman townscape which it largely ignores, and, paradoxically, the absence of the more substantial timber halls which tend to be found elsewhere alongside SFBs.⁵⁴

For the most part, post-Roman York presents an even bleaker picture, dominated by the accumulation of the ubiquitous dark earth, representative of horticulture at best, and offering no certain traces of a human presence in the city apart from the ill-dated repairs to the wall-circuit at the so-called Anglian Tower.⁵⁵ The potential but highly controversial exception to this picture of decay derives from the excavations of the Roman *principia*, which overlooked the city from a site at the heart of the fortress now occupied by York Minster. The long-awaited site report, however, indicates that there is very little to sustain the well-known claims made for the intermittent use of the basilica for royal assemblies and other less-elevated activities on into the ninth century.⁵⁶ Instead, the most plausible interpretation is more mundane: rapid and eccentric structural modifications (and other developments such as the intrusion of burials) at the end of the fourth century suggestive of major ideological and social change, followed by the removal of the basilica floor, the

53. BLOCKLEY *et alii*, 1995; cf. BROOKS, 1988.

54. BROOKS, 1984, p. 24-5 suggests that the Roman theatre may have retained a ceremonial role, but it need have been nothing more than a monumental and hazardous obstruction.

55. JAMES, 1995; BUCKLAND, 1984 for discussion of the tower; a fifth-century date seems most likely, but uncertainty continues.

56. CARVER, 1995 carefully sets out the alternative versions while making his preference clear; cf. ROSKAMS, 1996 for broader context and one possible interpretative framework.

accumulation of layers of mud-silt and the deposition of an abundance of animal bones, mostly pig. This so-called 'small pig horizon' is likely to represent an extension of activity into the fifth century as on other sites. It was followed by a prolonged period of dereliction, until the emergence of a high-status cemetery from the late seventh century suggests the establishment of a church somewhere in the vicinity. The character of the fifth-century occupation remains uncertain; the intrusion of a number of hearths raises the possibility of the centralised provision of specialist services, but any adjacent high-status residence is hypothetical, and any magnates lording it from the former basilica do not seem to have commanded substantial resources. Analysis of the bone assemblage suggested merely 'a small subsistence farming unit with little market demand, supplying the essential meat, hides, milk and wool for a family or community of unknown but relatively small size'.⁵⁷ The hall of the basilica was, alas, more butcher's yard than aristocratic assembly-hall.

The archaeology of late Roman and early Saxon Lincoln is similar to that of York. Again, there are widespread indications of decay and abandonment in the late fourth century, with little to suggest any prolonged extension of activity down into the fifth, and a marked lack of Anglo-Saxon material until the late ninth century.⁵⁸ But again there is a solitary, controversial exception: a building established at the centre of the forum courtyard, very plausibly interpreted as an early church in view of its apsidal east end, the graves found within and around it, and the subsequent presence on the site of the demolished medieval church of St. Paul in the Bail. Initially, this was associated with the arrival of the Roman mission in Lincoln in 627 in the person of Bishop Paulinus, a hypothesis supported by the find of a seventh-century hanging-bowl in a grave-pit which lay within the building, even if no direct stratigraphic association between them was recovered.⁵⁹ But the principal chronological indications, provided by a series of radiocarbon dates derived from bone and

57. RACKHAM, 1995, p. 555.

58. VINCE (ed.), 1993 for good overviews of the various phases of Lincoln's archaeology.

59. BEDE, *HE* II.16; GILMOUR, 1979, most recently updated in JONES, 1994.

timber samples, suggest that the earliest burials were of fifth-century date. The imprecisions of this method are well-known, and, in the absence of clear stratification, the association between these burials and any structures is also not without its problems. The most that can safely be said at present (pending publication of the full report) is that there was certainly a church in the forum courtyard by the seventh century, and, in order to account for the presence of the burials, it is reasonable to infer that there may have been one earlier, if not on this site then perhaps in one of the surviving buildings of the surrounding forum complex. What this would say about the function of Lincoln as a central place in the fifth- and sixth centuries is nevertheless far from clear, given the uncertainties of the dating and the absence of context. By combining it firstly with the lack of early Anglo-Saxon material from the city and the survival of its Latin name, and secondly with the presence of an Anglian *praefectus* at Lincoln in Bede's account of the events of 627, it can be used to postulate some form of continuous political function for the city which survived a transfer at some point from Roman to Anglian control.⁶⁰ But this only goes to show how such continuity can at best be constructed only from the accumulation of ambiguous fragments. More tellingly, evidence of settlement at Lincoln before the ninth century otherwise remains negligible.

If York flatters to deceive, and Lincoln is ambiguous, then Winchester and London offer more straightforward negatives. The scatter of sixth- and seventh-century Anglo-Saxon cemeteries around Winchester looks promising, but the relatively extensive excavations within the walls have drawn a blank. Again the sequences which do continue into the fifth century soon peter out, and, apart from the merest scatter of sixth-century pottery, there are signs of a slow resumption of activity only from late in the seventh century.⁶¹ London, meanwhile, is a void: 'nowhere ... is there any positive evidence for occupation extending into the fifth century, let alone any later'.⁶² However, the perils of

60. VINCE (ed.), 1993, p. 36-8, p. 77, p. 141-2 for various suggestions to this effect.

61. BIDDLE, 1975, p. 116-9 (Southgate), p. 303-5 (Lower Brook Street). But cf. the overview in BIDDLE, 1973, p. 233-43, postulating some form of continuity.

62. VINCE, 1990, p. 12.

theorising from an absence of evidence are especially obvious here, since a similar lack of Middle Saxon material from the city led Richard Hodges to express doubts about the veracity of Bede's account of a thriving emporium, only for it to be more or less immediately discovered outside the walls on the northern shore of the Thames.⁶³ This extra-mural settlement around the Strand does not, however, begin until the seventh century. The church which Bede tells us the Roman missionaries dedicated to St Paul at London in 604, presumably on the intra-mural site of the later cathedral of that name, remains devoid of any archaeological context.

It has been argued that this makes no difference: 'in the peculiar circumstances of London the value of the archaeological negative is nil'.⁶⁴ This assertion is supported in a number of ways. London was significant both before 400 and after 600, and so must have retained some role in the intervening period; the archaeology is unsatisfactory, because the appropriate levels have been destroyed and the scale of excavation is severely restricted compared with other cities where evidence has been found; the absence of Anglo-Saxon material within the city, and of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries within a radius of eight miles around it, reflects the existence of a Romano-British exclusion zone. But these arguments are both fragile and insufficient. Sites can resume their significance after a break, especially those with geographical advantages or abundant monumental remains. Physical continuity does not in itself imply continuity of authority; indeed the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary of power included the adoption of pre-Roman monuments, for which no continuous significance can seriously be claimed.⁶⁵ The absence of evidence from London in this period is in fact typical of most former Roman town sites; the inevitable limitations of the sample at any given city are offset by the cumulative nature of the archaeological void.⁶⁶ Finally, if there was a Romano-British presence within the city which was able to keep the Anglo-Saxons out or to absorb

63. BEDE, *HE* II.3; HODGES, 1982, p. 69-70. For the Strand settlement, below.

64. BIDDLE, 1989, p. 22.

65. BRADLEY, 1987.

66. AS SHOWN IN BROOKS, 1986, though her approach is rejected in BIDDLE, 1989,

them, it has left no cultural markers of its own; this would in any case still be insufficient to show that London retained its focal role after the putative Anglo-Saxon assertion of authority.⁶⁷ This last counterfactual assertion, explaining the absence of material remains of one group of people by invoking the thoroughly hypothetical presence of another, only serves to highlight how flexible arguments for continuity have to become.

Why then is the notion of 'continuity' so attractive and so tenacious? The part it plays in the post-Roman urban debate is scarcely unique to Britain, but elsewhere it generally takes place over a much more substantial body of evidence, and is more overtly loaded with differences of perspective which divide along ideological or disciplinary lines.⁶⁸ In part, perhaps, it is because the reification of continuity obviates the difficulties of explanation across a period which is more or less prehistoric. Alternatively, it could be said to result from forcing the archaeological evidence into an interpretative straitjacket which derives its constraints from the afore-mentioned master narrative of the transition from Roman to Anglo-Saxon rule. If we can get Romans and Saxons in cities in quick succession, this can be tied into either Gildas' account of a rebellion of Saxon mercenaries against their (presumably city-based) Romano-British paymasters, or, less convincingly, into his prophecy of a later collapse of pockets of sub-Roman rule in the face of further Saxon advances in the sixth century. Both of these would permit the Anglo-Saxons to take over enduring sub-Roman urban territories.

But it is more convincing to think the scale of the transformations around 400 had ushered in the beginnings of a very different social formation even before any potential changes associated with the *adventus Saxonum*. This new society was agrarian, local and small-scale, and the indications of status

67. Similar claims have been made for other cities, e.g. Lincoln, Silchester and *Verulamium*, but in each case they depend essentially on a lack of evidence which can be otherwise explained.

68. The liveliest debate is of course in Italy: see esp. WARD-PERKINS, 1997, and on the general subject of urban continuity WARD-PERKINS, 1996, though the assumption that the issue in Britain has been resolved (p. 11-12) seems like wishful thinking. ROSKAMS, 1996 is a rare example of a British attempt to consider urban continuity within an ideological framework.

display through moveable wealth, personal adornment, feasting and burial, together with the lack of evidence for a market economy or for advanced technologies, indicate that it had no social need, or indeed basis, for urban life. To adopt a familiar distinction, there is nothing to indicate that people in post-Roman Wroxeter or early Saxon Canterbury were enjoying town life, rather than simply living in what had been a town.⁶⁹ Usually, there is also nothing to show that the inhabitants of what were once towns led lives which were materially any different from those who dwelt in the countryside. Urban institutions went the same way as urban lifestyles. While in fifth-century Gaul towns retained numerous functions which could be taken over wholesale by the Franks, in Britain the no longer gave any meaningful access to power. The assorted leaders of the Anglo-Saxons had no urban legacy to work with, primarily because it had already disintegrated beyond repair. Instead, they participated in a struggle for control of resources, both among themselves and with the Romano-Britons, about which we will always know very little. The prior collapse of the Roman order meant that its towns were not literally and conceptually central to these conflicts, as they were in sixth-century Francia, but incidental; the search for some form of urban transition, or the application of any model of political or institutional continuity along continental lines, is misguided. There is no necessary reason to assume that the little activity which is archaeologically perceptible in towns in this period generally has anything to do with their past functions and status. What we see in Britain is the 'continuity' of inertia: of physical remains rather than centres of power.

Power in early Anglo-Saxon England

Power in early Anglo-Saxon England resided in persons rather than places. By the time written sources tell us anything of substance about these people, the development of hierarchies of rulership was well advanced. Bede, the most valuable of our sources, was clearly writing in the later stages of a process of

69. WACHER, 1974, p. 411-22 for the distinction.

kingdom formation which was not yet complete.⁷⁰ Lurking behind the much-discussed overlords and the rulers of major kingdoms (or what were becoming major kingdoms) there survived in Bede's day a third, nebulous class of potentates who on their better days, or in the past, might have described themselves as *reges*, but who were increasingly finding themselves in some sort of subordinate relationship to a grander ruler. One such person is Tondberht, *princeps* of the South Gyrwe in the Fens, the only recorded noble in Bede to contract a royal marriage.⁷¹ The origins of Tondberht's status are not entirely clear. Is he a minor royal, or favoured nobleman, with authority over a subordinate block of territory, or the scion of a once independent dynasty whose territory is being subsumed into a larger unit? In other words, which stage of a process of state formation do he and the South Gyrwe represent: the delegation of authority from already-established major kingdoms, or the annexation of lesser polities by still-emerging superior powers?

Current fashion tends to favour the latter model of gradual absorption⁷²; in the period after Bede, a series of Mercian royal charters reveal the ongoing downgrading of the heads of formerly independent dynasties to mere *subreguli* or *duces*, providing the clearest examples of such subordination in action.⁷³ Whilst it is impossible to tell how many of these lesser polities had once existed, a lengthy list can be assembled by combining the evidence of Bede with that of other texts, and in particular with a document known as the *Tribal Hidage*. The latter, traditionally held to be a Mercian tribute-list of the late seventh century, names thirty-five peoples together with their assessments in hides, the unit normally used for such purposes in Anglo-Saxon England.⁷⁴ It reflects the degrees of kingliness found in Bede in its juxtapositions of major kingdoms, such as the East Angles (30 000 hides), with middle-sized but otherwise obscure peoples, like

70. CAMPBELL, 1986, p. 85-98 dissects the nuances of Bede's vocabulary of royal power.

71. BEDE, *HE* IV.19; CAMPBELL, 1986, p. 89.

72. See in general the papers in BASSETT (ed.), 1989.

73. YORKE, 1990, p. 112-4 for a crisp summary.

74. DAVIES and VIERCK, 1974, p. 224-36. The reign of Wulfhere (658-75) has been thought to provide the most likely context, but see KEYNES, 1995, p. 24-5, for the problems of this interpretation.

the people of the Chilterns (4000 hides), and lesser groups including the South Gyrwe (600 hides). The list is also consistent with Bede's more incidental indications of the systematic hidation of smaller units, and the potential exploitation of them by larger kingdoms. Other written sources occasionally reveal the existence of *provinciae* or *regiones* within the larger kingdoms. Some of these may simply reflect administrative subdivision, but others seem to have once enjoyed a degree of political independence.⁷⁵

These smaller units are the equivalent of the Merovingian *civitates*, in the sense that they formed building-blocks which could be aggregated in various ways to create kingdoms, and they functioned as areas of assessment as well as territory. But while the Franks sought to maintain the Roman framework of land division and resource extraction, centred upon and administered from cities, the origins of the Anglo-Saxon system are far more obscure, and its basis seems essentially rural. Kings organised their control of surplus through a series of *villae* (often qualified with the adjective *regia* or *regalis*), or in Old English *tun*, to which food rents and other services would be rendered for consumption by the royal retinue on a regular circuit. These *villae* could encompass extensive areas of land and incorporate several dependent settlements, the obligations of which were perhaps complex and closely defined.⁷⁶ These could in turn be grouped into larger economic units, some of which had been reduced, by the time we encounter them, to the status of *regiones* or *provinciae*, but which may once have been independent kingdoms. The apparent similarities of this framework among the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but also within those territories which remained under British control, have encouraged a tendency to seek its origins in earlier estate organisation.⁷⁷ But although continuity

75. e.g. the *regio* of the Stoppingas: BASSETT, 1989a, p. 18-21. It might nevertheless be questioned whether all these *regiones* are the product of absorption rather than administrative subdivision.

76. CAMPBELL, 1986, p. 95-7, p. 108-11. But the applicability of the influential multiple estate model to early Anglo-Saxon England is highly questionable, as is the distant origin of these estates: see JONES, 1976, and GREGSON, 1985 for one critique, to which JONES, 1985 responds.

77. But not, it should be noted, in Roman towns, conspicuous by their virtual absence from the papers on early kingdom formation in BASSETT (ed.), 1989.

is assuredly more likely at this level than further up the settlement hierarchy, the projection of estate boundaries backwards from later evidence is hazardous and likely to remain a matter of faith. While our knowledge of the extent of Roman estates remains imprecise, the balance of evidence from late Roman villa sites is tipped heavily in favour of discontinuity.⁷⁸

The best-known (but perhaps atypical) illustration of what one of these royal estate-centres could be like is the excavated site of Yeavinger, high in the Cheviot Hills in the north of Northumbria.⁷⁹ Bede tells us that the missionary bishop Paulinus visited King Edwin and his queen and spent thirty-six days in the work of conversion here, but that the site was subsequently abandoned by Edwin's successors in favour of a new *villa regia* at *Maelmin*, near Milfield in the valley below.⁸⁰ This decision, readily comprehensible to anyone who visits the area in less than perfect weather, is also a useful reminder that the estate-centre or royal base within a territory can move, even if the estate itself remains stable.⁸¹ The series of large timber halls, potential religious foci, and possible livestock corral excavated at Yeavinger, not to mention its location, suggest that the realities of early Anglo-Saxon kingship lay a long way from the former Roman towns. Even if an intriguing structure, akin to a section of theatre seating (perhaps for assemblies), has tended to be interpreted in a classical light, it seems that here as elsewhere royal association with pre-Roman landscape features, however haphazard, may have been just as important in laying claim to power.⁸² Barrows, after all, were more familiar and immediate indications of status to the early Anglo-Saxons than the derelict monumental vocabulary of the Roman past.

78. Among a vast literature see e.g. BASSETT, 1989a favouring continuity, or ARNOLD and WARDLE, 1981 for post-Roman territorial reorganisation, criticised in WELCH, 1985. EVERITT, 1986 offers a notably-balanced account of the evolution of settlement in Kent, finding that (p. 343) 'the case for continuity is easy to overstate and more complex than appears'. MILLETT, 1987, reviewing RODWELL and RODWELL, 1986, is a fine demonstration of the limitations of the archaeological evidence for rural continuity.

79. HOPE-TAYLOR, 1977.

80. BEDE, *HE* II. 14.

81. cf. CAMPBELL, 1986, p. 113 for examples of names which applied originally to areas, but came to designate centres established within them.

82. BRADLEY, 1987.

The evidence from Yeavinger is as remarkable as it is largely unparalleled, though substantial halls of comparable date and similarly-sophisticated timber architecture have since been excavated at Cowdery's Down, near Basingstoke.⁸³ We have no way of knowing if such structures could be found at all royal villas in the early seventh century, but presumably buildings on a scale fit to accommodate the king and his retinue in the style to which they were accustomed was a minimum requirement. In contrast to the widespread picture of abandonment in the former Roman towns in the sixth century (Wroxeter and Canterbury being the clearest exceptions), the countryside sees a vigorous renewal of activity in association with a growing competition for status and resources, organised around centres of emerging royal power which were themselves essentially rural or, more rarely, occupied naturally well-defended sites. The principal centre of the Bernician royal dynasty of northern Northumbria was the forbidding coastal rock of Bamburgh, not one of the forts along Hadrian's Wall.⁸⁴ The correlation between known Anglo-Saxon estate-centres and Roman walled places is negligible, and indeed the vast majority of royal *tun* have no known Roman antecedents.⁸⁵ Instead, the Anglo-Saxons had developed their own circuits for the exercise of power and extraction of resources through estate-centres which were much better suited to the agrarian realities of small-scale kingship and limited surplus production, and which were not necessarily fixed. This system was completely different to its Roman predecessor, and had no necessary reason to incorporate its centres. However, the end of the sixth century saw the re-appearance in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of a social and economic power which lent a new distinction to some centres of the Roman past: the church.

The origins of Anglo-Saxon urbanism

By the time Bede completed his history, in 731, bishops were based in eight former Roman centres, and a ninth was about to become permanently established at Leicester. Six of these,

83. MILLETT and JAMES, 1983. There is no proof, however, that this is a royal site.

84. BEDE, *HE* III. 6, 12, 16.

85. SAWYER, 1983 for a hand-list of royal *tun*; cf. BLAIR, 1992, p. 240, n. 55.

Canterbury, London, York, Lincoln, Winchester and Leicester, had been Roman cities; two, Rochester and Worcester, fall into the nebulous 'small town' category; one, the enigmatic *Dommoc*, was probably located in an old Saxon Shore fort. An early see in another 'small town', Dorchester-on-Thames, had been suppressed, almost certainly on political grounds.⁸⁶ Seven other stable bishoprics, meanwhile, had emerged at sites of no known Roman significance (fig. 3).⁸⁷ This is not a consistent pattern, which is hardly surprising given its gradual and interrupted development, and the considerable influence of changing political and ecclesiastical circumstances upon its evolution. In general, sees were clearly organised around peoples and kingdoms, not surviving *civitates* or other Roman territorial units.⁸⁸ There remain two distinct ways of interpreting the foundations of sees on Roman sites. Either the missionaries established themselves there because these were already important centres of power, or because that was the model of church organisation with which they were familiar from the continent. To put it crudely, were bishops following kings, or vice versa?

Bede, our only authority for the first wave of foundations, gives the decisive role in them to kings. He never explains their motives, but it has often been assumed that the selected sites were already the principal centres of royal power. Bede makes this clear, however, in only one case, Canterbury, which he describes as the *metropolis* of Aethelbert's *imperium*.⁸⁹ Whether Aethelbert saw it as his 'capital' is perhaps questionable; the Canterbury tradition which Bede was following would have obvious reasons for emphasising the prior importance of the city, especially given the early departure from the Gregorian plan.⁹⁰

86. For the conversion in general, MAYR-HARTING, 1972; *Dommoc*, RIGOLD, 1961; Dorchester: YORKE, 1982.

87. Lindisfarne, Hexham, Whithorn, Hereford, Sherborne, North Elmham and Lichfield. Much (in my view too much) has been made of the proximity of the latter to the Roman 'small town' of Wall: BASSETT, 1992, p. 29-35.

88. The suppression of Dorchester is a case in point. No convincing connections have been made between the limits of Roman *civitates* and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms or sees.

89. BEDE, *HE* I. 25; cf. I.33.

90. It is worth noting that Bede uses *metropolis* only three times in Anglo-Saxon contexts, twice of Canterbury and once of London, and all in the context of Augustine's mission. It seems reasonable to think he was following a written source (Nothhelm's report?) rather than employing the term to make a point.



Fig. 3. Post-Roman and Anglo-Saxon settlements.

Otherwise, the most promising association of these centres with existing political authority comes from Lincoln, where Paulinus' first convert was remembered as the *praefectus* of the city, even if the archaeology suggests it was very largely deserted.⁹¹ Elsewhere, Bede leaves the situation vague. The only time we hear that the Northumbrian king Edwin came to York was for his baptism. The church in London was built not by the king of the East Saxons in whose kingdom it lay, but by his overlord Aethelbert, who may have been imposing his own (or more likely his bishop's) political geography on Essex rather than reflecting an existing arrangement. The West Saxon sees of Dorchester-on-Thames and Winchester were simply given by kings to their first bishops, as was Rochester in Kent by Aethelbert.⁹²

The assertion that these cities were already seats of royal power or even *palatia* thus generally lacks direct documentary support. But it remains commonplace, for example at York, where much has been made of the flawed archaeological evidence from the *principia*, or at Winchester and London, where the continuing absence of intra-mural archaeological evidence has been countered by projecting evidence from much later periods back into the seventh century, including some very dubious traditions.⁹³ In fact, there remains no certain evidence of Anglo-Saxon royal palaces in former Roman towns until the tenth century. Similarly, the recorded movements of Anglo-Saxon kings before that date suggest that Roman towns enjoyed no especially privileged place on peripatetic royal itineraries.⁹⁴ Instead of postulating the existence of hypothetical royal palaces in deserted settlements, which seems a perverse way for status-conscious rulers to assert themselves, it is simpler to ascribe the initiative behind the siting of these early episcopal seats to the church. The original Christian missionaries had brought with them preconceptions of a special status for Roman centres, fortified by Pope Gregory's blueprint for diocesan organisation, which

91. *ibid.* II.16; above.

92. *ibid.* II.14 (York); II. 3 (London, Rochester), III. 7 (Dorchester, Winchester).

93. York: above. Winchester: BIDDLE, 1973, with critique in YORKE, 1982. London: BIDDLE, 1989, 22-6; cf. the more cautious treatment in VINCE, 1990, p. 54-6.

94. Mapped in HILL, 1981, p. 83-4. The Mercian kings, in particular, show a marked preference for Tamworth, and when in the vicinity of London, for Chelsea.

their new converts had not hitherto shared. It is no coincidence that the first wave of sees founded by the missionaries were all established on Roman sites, even though the majority of these were in eastern Britain, and so notionally in the areas of greatest political upheaval. The earliest exceptions to this pattern were in the north, where the parallel mission from the Irish church was inspired by a different concept of church organisation, and where it is no coincidence that there is no subsequent revival of Roman urban sites. It is also notable that Aidan, the only bishop in Bede who ostensibly exercises a preference over the location of his see, chooses a site a convenient distance from the nearby royal centre at Bamburgh rather than within it.⁹⁵ No other bishoprics were established at non-Roman sites before Theodore arrived at Canterbury in the late 660s to give the flagging mission fresh impetus; thereafter pragmatic considerations took precedence, and the church adapted, as in other respects, to the distinct operations of Anglo-Saxon society.

The curious enthusiasm of the seventh-century missionaries and monastic founders for ready-made Roman enclosures of whatever nature comes across even more clearly in the lengthy catalogue of forts which they secured as bases from kings who seem only too happy to give them away.⁹⁶ The emphatic contrast between this and the marked lack of correlation between known *villae regales* and Roman walled sites suggests that 'old forts were of little interest to early medieval rulers'.⁹⁷ Before the late seventh century at the earliest, I suspect that much the same could be said of old towns. There were those within the church, however, who, while indifferent to any gradations of status among Roman settlements, remained conscious of a basic distinction between Roman and non-Roman. In writing about settlements Bede generally took considerable care to distinguish a Roman site from other categories of settlement, preferring *civitas* for the former and, depending upon whether or not it was fortified, *urbs* or *locus*

95. BEDE, *HE* III. 3 for the foundation at Lindisfarne 'ubi ipse [Aidan] petebat'. The desire of Aidan to avoid being too close to the court is nevertheless made explicit only in later sources.

96. RIGOLD, 1977, BLAIR, 1992, p. 235-46, with sundry examples.

97. BLAIR, 1992, p. 240.

98. CAMPBELL, 1986, p. 99-119 traces an overall pattern, even if the exceptions require some 'repellently paradoxical' explanations.

for the latter.⁹⁸ Although the evidence is limited, his contemporaries show signs of similar discrimination, and in one case at least there are signs that a Roman origin may have developed a certain snob value in ecclesiastical circles. The anonymous author of the witness-list of the council of *Clofesho* in 803 consistently drew a distinction between bishops of *civitates*, the sees which were former Roman centres, and those of *ecclesiae*, which were not.⁹⁹ This is surely connected with the abolition at the same council of the metropolitan status of Lichfield, elevated at the behest of the Mercian king Offa in the face of considerable opposition from Canterbury; Lichfield was, after all, a mere *ecclesia*. Such things had once mattered to the church, and they could still be used to make a point; it is much less evident that they were of great concern or consequence to kings until late in the ninth century.

This is not to say that secular Anglo-Saxon society could ever have been ignorant of the Roman past, the relics of which were prominent and easily distinguishable around them, but that it had no particular, privileged use for it. The green shoots of urbanism which begin to emerge afresh in the seventh century exploited the dark earth of Roman sites where appropriate, but generally in response to present needs rather than some vague sense of their past importance, and not because they had continuously remained centres of power. The consolidation on these and other sites of settlements which would ultimately develop into towns can conveniently be summarised under three headings: the *mynsters*, the *wics*, and the *burhs*.

Although the episcopal organisation of the Anglo-Saxon church only belatedly came into line with the political framework, there are traces of the precocious development of a network of major churches in closer relation to the main operational centres of authority, the royal villas. These churches were often known later as minsters, though the term is in fact misleading, since it was originally applied to all communities regardless of their organisation or status.¹⁰⁰ It has previously been argued that many of them were founded at, or more often near, royal estate-centres

99. HADDAN and STUBBS, III, p. 546-7.

100. FOOT, 1992.

and held parochial jurisdiction over their dependent territories.¹⁰¹ This would have been a deliberate and systematic act of policy by kings anxious both to promote conversion and to reinforce their local networks of power, so providing the interface between political and ecclesiastical spheres of influence which on the Continent had been afforded by the *civitates*. Such an arrangement probably explains the location of some of the bishoprics established in non-Roman centres from the later seventh century, such as Lichfield, Selsey and Sherborne, endowed with royal estates of appropriate size.¹⁰²

The general applicability of the 'minster model' is nevertheless a matter of some controversy, not least because it is far better-attested in some regions than others, and because the identification of these minsters and especially their attendant *regiones* often depends to a significant extent upon much later evidence, particularly that of parish boundaries, which can come to assume an autonomous authority over the landscapes of earlier periods.¹⁰³ But if there remains the suspicion that the emergence of minsters is too diverse and complex a phenomenon to be subsumed within a single model, it is the case that some of these foundations would give rise in the longer term to towns. The major monastic communities were, after all, often more substantial than contemporary secular settlements, had a regular need for craftsmen and supplies, and often functioned as trading centres.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, a forthcoming reinterpretation of the relationship between minsters and royal power argues persuasively that minsters are better seen not as secondary developments at existing royal bases, but the primary factors in the stabilisation of power at particular centres.¹⁰⁵ While seventh-century kings still remained committed to itineration, necessitating the fragmentation of resources, the

101. See in general BLAIR (ed.), 1988, esp. HASE, 1988 for a good regional demonstration of the methodology.

102. CAMPBELL, 1986, p. 140; for Sherborne: KEEN, 1984, p. 208-12.

103. See the critique in CAMBRIDGE and ROLLASON, 1995 (though this gets bogged down in semantics), to which BLAIR, 1995 responds. SIMS-WILLIAMS, 1990, p. 138-43, p. 168-72 argues effectively for a more evolutionary pattern of development in the diocese of Worcester.

104. CAMPBELL, 1986, p. 141; BLAIR, forthcoming, ch. 5.

105. BLAIR, forthcoming, ch. 5. I am very grateful to the author for showing me a draft of this chapter in advance of publication.

requirements of the church were different, and encouraged the continual channelling of production towards fixed centres, the redistribution from them of any surplus, and hence the gradual emergence of markets. These were not yet towns in the early and middle Saxon periods, but many of them would be; the origins of most of the eleventh-century boroughs of Wiltshire, for example, can be traced back to an early juxtaposition of ecclesiastical and secular power-bases.¹⁰⁶ The lack of contemporary evidence means that the debate about the priority of these influences is likely to continue.¹⁰⁷ But, as with the re-emergence of some Roman towns as central places, it is tempting to see the church as a catalyst, stimulating new developments in secular authority rather than reflecting existing, let alone continuous, patterns of power.

The series of coastal trading settlements, often known as *wics*, but perhaps better described as emporia, presents similar problems to the minsters in that it is debatable how far their emergence should be seen as a uniform phenomenon, and to what extent it represents a deliberate act of royal policy. Four are known from excavation, two on waterfront sites outside the Roman walled areas of London and York, the others at Hamwic and Ipswich. The existence of a number of settlements of similar type, for example in Kent, can be inferred from the written sources.¹⁰⁸ At Hamwic, the best-known but also most debated of these sites, occupation began around the end of seventh century and had largely ended by the middle of the ninth. The settlement extended over more than 40 hectares; it was undefended, but there are some indications of a boundary ditch and also of a planned and carefully-maintained street-system. Rough estimates imply a maximum population of 2000-3000; the environmental data shows that they took little direct involvement in agricultural or stock-rearing activities, but were provisioned from outside.

106. HASLAM, 1984, and cf. other chapters in the same volume.

107. See for example the emergence of Northampton, with the contrasting emphases of WILLIAMS, 1984 and BLAIR, 1996.

108. For overviews see originally HODGES, 1982, p. 47-86, and, more accessibly, 1989, 69-104; SCULL, 1997 is a good new summary, concentrating on emporia. For the individual sites see e.g. Hamwic: MORTON, 1992, ANDREWS, 1997; Ipswich: WADE, 1988; London: VINCE, 1990, p. 13-25, BIDDLE, 1989, p. 23-29; York: KEMP, 1996.

Instead, there is ample indication of a wide variety of artisanal activities, though on a household rather than an industrial scale, and an abundance of imports from the continent. The most plausible interpretation of Hamwic is that it represents a specialised type of royal vill, concerned with the administration and redistribution of long-distance trade (and perhaps its own manufactures) rather than surplus local agricultural production. Some exclusive role in the economic system for Hamwic might help to explain why sceattas were minted here in such profusion, but very rarely found outside the settlement.

How far Hamwic should be used as a type-site for a distinctive category of settlement is perhaps debatable, but it is clear that the emporia established on former urban sites have far more in common with it than with their Roman predecessors. The Fishergate site in York provides similar indications of craft production, controlled provisioning and continental contacts extending from the late seventh to the middle of the ninth century, but the excavated area is very small. One of the most striking features is its location near the confluence of the Rivers Ouse and Foss, some distance outside the Roman city, which still seems to have been largely deserted but for a number of religious foundations.¹⁰⁹ In this respect York is closely comparable with Middle Saxon London, where, since its discovery in the early 1980s, the so-called Strand settlement along the northern shore of the Thames west of the Roman city has swelled to over 60 hectares through a mixture of excavations, watching briefs and the reinterpretation of earlier data (fig. 4). Even if our knowledge of the density, character and evolution over time of this settlement is inevitably patchy, it is clear that Bede was justified in calling the London of his day an emporium. Other written sources confirm royal involvement in its trade; the Kentish kings maintained a hall and an official at London in the later seventh century, and the exemptions granted by Aethelbald of Mercia in the 730s and 740s show that he and his predecessors levied tolls in London and elsewhere.¹¹⁰ Its mint seems to have been intermittently prolific from the mid-seventh century onwards. But while Hamwic seems to have been planned and regulated

109. cf. JAMES, 1995; ROSKAMS, 1996.

110. KELLY, 1992; VINCE, 1990, 93-117.

with control of overseas trade in mind, it seems more likely that royal exploitation of long-distance exchange via London developed, initially at least, on a more *ad hoc* basis.

Much remains to be determined, however, about the physical relationships involved in that exploitation. It has been argued that *Lundenwic* functioned in conjunction with a series of high-status residences within the city's Roman walls, in accordance with a twin-site model previously suggested for Hamwic and Winchester, 18 kms inland, where an undefended trading port would have operated in tandem with a royal ceremonial focus inside a Roman walled centre.¹¹¹ Any intra-mural settlement at London is nevertheless as archaeologically invisible in the Middle Saxon period as it was in the fifth and sixth centuries; there remained the community at St. Paul's, and the bishop of London certainly engaged in trade, but the presence of other powerful magnates within the city is hypothetical. At Winchester, meanwhile, occupation certainly resumes from the seventh century, but its high-status character is far from proven archaeologically, and there are no reliable documentary indications of a regular royal presence before the tenth century.¹¹² Moreover, the supposed division of functions between Winchester and Hamwic has been shown to ignore the administrative significance of the latter as a royal estate-centre (*Hamton*) important enough to lend its name to Hampshire.¹¹³ If the fortunes of the two must be interpreted together, then the rise of Winchester is more likely to be consequent upon than contemporary with the decline of Hamwic.¹¹⁴ A similar shift of emphasis is certainly apparent in London where a close connection exists between the abandonment of the *wic* in the ninth century and the first substantial indications of a renewal of intra-mural activity in what written sources now call *Lundenburh* (fig. 4). 'It is ... quite clear that large-scale

111. BIDDLE, 1989, 23-8; for Hamwic and Winchester: BIDDLE, 1973, 242-7; 1976, 112-6.

112. BIDDLE, 1973 offers the most optimistic interpretation of seventh-century Winchester, esp. p. 261, where it assumes the mantle of a proto-capital. YORKE, 1982 and 1984 show that its development is much later, and that it does not assume any 'national' significance before the tenth century.

113. RUMBLE, 1980; YORKE, 1982, p. 80-1.

114. MORTON, 1992, p. 68-77 for an overview of Hamwic's status and its demise.

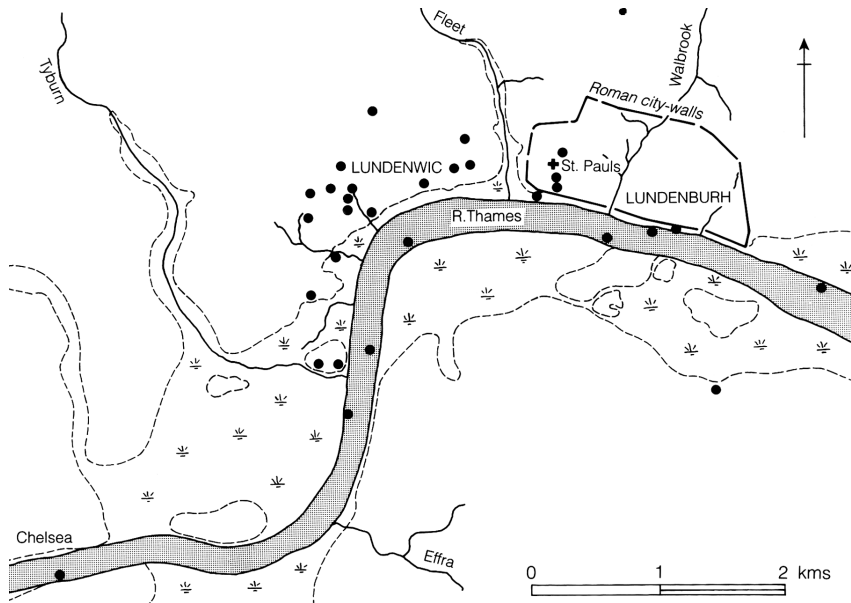


Fig. 4. The changing settlement foci of Roman and Saxon London.

occupation within the walled city started only after the Strand settlement had ceased to exist'.¹¹⁵

An historical explanation for the demise of the Middle Saxon emporia is not hard to find. By the middle of the ninth century the attacks of the Vikings had led to the breakdown of the North Sea exchange-system which the emporia were designed to exploit. They also encouraged a preference for defended settlements, and it is in this context that the renewal of vigorous activity inside the walls of former Roman cities like London and Winchester is best interpreted. While there is no doubt that kings took a close interest in the emporia, the theory that they maintained a distinct high-status settlement in an old city nearby is rooted in a misplaced assumption about the conceptual supremacy of Roman sites in Middle Saxon secular society. The waterfront developments at York and London need to be seen

115. VINCE, 1990, p. 18-25 (quotation from p. 25).

in the context of contemporary exchange-systems and networks of power which sought to exploit the natural advantages of these sites rather than their Roman associations, and largely left the direct use of the adjacent walled areas to the church. The emergence of Hamwic illustrates the possibilities for the evolution of sophisticated forms of settlement and resource exploitation in Middle Saxon England which originated in present opportunities not former glories.

If in some respects this evolution was interrupted by the Vikings, in others their impact accelerated its development. Their raids had highlighted the importance of fortification; Asser, for example, emphasises how York did not yet have secure defences when the Vikings invaded Northumbria.¹¹⁶ He goes on to explain how his hero, King Alfred, embarked upon a widespread programme of renewal in the late ninth century which included the restoration of some *civitates* and *urbes* and the establishment of others 'where there had been none before'. Royal residences were also 'moved at the royal command from the ancient places, and beautifully erected in more suitable ones'.¹¹⁷ A royal memorandum known as the *Burghal Hidage*, which probably dates from late in the reign of Alfred's son Edward, shows how the development of fortified places was systematised.¹¹⁸ It lists thirty West Saxon and three Mercian *burhs* ('walled settlements') together with a complex (and impressively accurate) provision of the necessary manpower to defend them based on the existing system of tax-assessment in hides. A detailed analysis of the *Burghal Hidage* and its implications lies outside the chronological scope of this survey, but three general points are worth emphasising. The first is the basic ability of Anglo-Saxon kings to command men and resources in order to get things done. Secondly, the incorporation within the system of an eclectic mixture of Iron Age forts, existing Anglo-Saxon settlements and old Roman towns highlights how there was nothing special about the latter; their refurbishment, and indeed the scheme as a whole, was dictated by pragmatic rather than ideological considerations. Finally, and most

116. ASSER, *Life of Alfred*, c. 27

117. *ibid.* c. 91.

118. BIDDLE and HILL, 1971; BIDDLE, 1976, p. 124-37. HILL and RUMBLE (eds.), 1996 for detailed discussions of various aspects of the *Burghal Hidage*.

specifically, it has been shown that some of the *burhs* were designed from the outset with commercial as well as purely defensive considerations in mind.

Alfred and his heirs were building upon and systematising an existing concept of urbanisation which seems to have originated in Mercia. The network of Mercian *burhs* only becomes clearly apparent in the tenth century, when it comprises the same combination of revived Roman circuits and, more often, new fortifications as its West Saxon equivalent. But the first indications of a royal right to exact public services, including *burh* work, appear in Mercian royal charters from the middle of the eighth century.¹¹⁹ Although Offa's Dyke provides a vivid demonstration of the impact of Mercian power in the landscape, archaeological confirmation of earlier activity at the tenth-century Mercian *burhs* is still disappointingly meagre; though occupation on several of these sites clearly originates in the Middle Saxon period, only Hereford clearly exhibits indications of a pre-Alfredian phase of planning and fortification.¹²⁰ The locations of many of the Mercian *burhs* at the bridging-points of rivers are however strikingly consistent, and suggest that this was a major factor in their development. Nevertheless, in default of further evidence the intriguing hypothesis that they represent a system of defence and market formation established under Offa seems premature.¹²¹ It is also over-dependent upon reasoning back from the later West Saxon model; the suggestion that these foundations were intended to provide a systematic defence against the Vikings is chronologically unconvincing, while the notion of a conscious royal policy of stimulating the economy by the deliberate foundation of markets seems to run ahead of the contemporary sophistication of the Mercian minting-system. Instead, it might be suggested that the Mercian *burhs* represent the more gradual consolidation of settlement and authority around the minster churches and royal estate-centres which undoubtedly existed at some of these sites.¹²² In the eighth and early ninth centuries the most important of these central places

119. BROOKS, 1971.

120. SHOESMITH, 1982.

121. HASLAM, 1987.

122. HASLAM, 1987, p. 89, and the table on p. 80.

were acquiring a wider range of functions, and becoming more stable. This vital stage separating the agrarian estate-centres of the early Saxon period from the towns which would emerge in earnest in the tenth century is still imperfectly understood. But while these developing Middle Saxon nuclei were probably less like towns than the vibrant emporia upon which recent research has tended to concentrate, they are arguably more representative of the evolution of a vernacular tradition of urbanism.

Conclusion

There were no capitals in Early and Middle Saxon England, and arguably no towns. The thorough collapse of the Roman system in Britain meant that the Anglo-Saxons did not inherit an urban tradition. The assertion that centres such as London or York were still politically significant when the Augustinian mission arrived depends only on prior assumptions and doubtful continental analogies. While the re-use of the *principia* at York as a royal hall or of the derelict Roman theatre at Canterbury as a location for Kentish royal ceremonial seems superficially attractive, we have no real indications that the early Anglo-Saxon kings thought like this and quite a few that they did not. In the fifth and sixth centuries they had no use for the Roman towns. Unlike their Frankish equivalents, these neither offered ready access to a still functioning administrative and taxation system, nor sheltered an influential and aristocratic church. It is a curious feature of the historiography that the Anglo-Saxons are supposedly so constrained by the past on their arrival, only to be allowed to be innovative (and highly successful) in their approach to rulership from around the seventh century onwards. In fact two-thirds of the triune tradition of rulership –barbarian king, but also Roman emperor and Old Testament monarch– which had rapidly evolved on the Continent had simply passed them by until it was reintroduced by the church. Instead, before our historical sources begin, the Anglo-Saxons were developing their own circuits for the exercise of power and mechanisms for the extraction of resources based on royal villas and *regiones*, and arguably much better suited to the realities of a form of kingship which was initially small-scale and would be enduringly itinerant. These circuits may not have ignored the Roman past entirely,

but nor did they have any particular respect or privileged place for it. However, the church did, and encouraged a renewal of activity on some Roman sites while simultaneously insinuating itself into the real networks of power at the level of the estate. The future directions of Anglo-Saxon urbanism - the emporia, the minsters, and the *burhs* - all made use of Roman sites where appropriate, but generally in response to present needs, not in an attempt to perpetuate or draw legitimacy from the past. Augustine and his plucky colleagues had gone to the end of the world to bring the Anglo-Saxons back into the Roman orbit, but in the meantime their converts had learnt to do without towns. The work of conversion would proceed rather more swiftly than the renewal of urbanism. The sense of awe in the Old English poem with which this paper begins was not for the Roman past, but for the divine power which had reduced its earthly cities to ruins.

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