

B: POPULATION DECLINE AND RITUAL LANDSCAPES IN ANTONINE LONDON

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I turn now to the changes that took place in London in the mid- to late 2nd c. A.D. Until recently, the prevailing orthodoxy was that the settlement suffered a major population decline in this period, but new excavations have shown that not all properties were blighted by abandonment or neglect, which has encouraged some to suggest that the evidence for decline may have been exaggerated.¹ Here I wish to restate the case for a significant decline in housing density in the period c.160, but also draw attention to evidence for this being a period of increased investment in the architecture of religion and ceremony. New discoveries of temple complexes have improved our ability to describe London's evolving ritual landscape. The evidence allows for the speculative reconstruction of the main processional routes through the town; it also shows that the main investment in ceremonial architecture took place at the very time that London's population was entering a period of rapid decline. We are therefore faced with two puzzling developments: why were parts of London emptied of houses in the mid-2nd c., and why was this contraction accompanied by increased spending on religious architecture?

This apparent contradiction merits detailed consideration. The causes of the changes of this period have been much debated, with most emphasis given to the economic and political factors that reduced London's importance in late antiquity. Those arguments remain valid, but here I wish to return to the suggestion that the Antonine plague may have been instrumental in setting London on its new trajectory.² The possible demographic and economic consequences of this plague have been much debated in the pages of *JRA*, a conservative view of its impact generally prevailing. I do not propose to challenge this view, since I draw on different evidence to different ends. Changes to the economy of London, of whatever magnitude, would fail to register on any available proxy measure of economic activity in the empire. Viewed from the local perspective, however, the changing architectural topography of Antonine London may most coherently be understood as a response to plague.

To start with, we must give our attention to the evidence that allows one to describe changes to London's 2nd-c. urban topography.

Contraction in the 2nd c. A.D.

Many excavations in London have found evidence of busy construction and reconstruction down to the middle years of the 2nd c., but less compelling evidence for the continuation of such activity into the late 2nd c. and beyond. On other sites, however, construction sequences show that the 2nd and 3rd c. were no less vital than the earlier periods. This has encouraged a debate between minimalists, who privilege the evidence for contraction, and maximalists, who suspect that the scale of change has been exaggerated. The issue is complicated by the fact that absence of evidence cannot be relied upon as evidence of absence, and there are several plausible reasons why material traces of 2nd-c. and later

1 E.g., Rowsome 2008, 30.

2 Merrifield 1996, 111-12.