

# Two studies on Roman London

## A: LONDON'S MILITARY ORIGINS

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My intent is to advance some new suggestions (or rather, to revive some long unfashionable ones) concerning the origins and early development of the Roman town. Two under-reported discoveries of military-style ditches allow it to be suggested that London originated as a fort where the armies of Plautius awaited the emperor Claudius before marching on Colchester in the summer of A.D. 43. The alternative and prevailing view, that the city was a civilian foundation of *c.*A.D. 50, must be questioned. This in turn suggests a re-assessment of the rôle of London in the political infrastructure of the newly-created Roman province. It seems likely that London remained firmly under the control of the provincial government, and a major centre of operations for both army and administration. This finds confirmation in the recently-discovered evidence of fortifications and engineering works associated with extensive reconstruction in the aftermath of the Boudican revolt of A.D. 60/61.

### The discovery of London's Claudian fort

Roman London was built atop two hills on the N bank of the Thames, where islands rising above the tidal flats allowed a river crossing to be engineered. Three main areas of occupation have been defined. The focus of the town was on the eastern hill, Cornhill. This was where a forum came to be built at the heart of a regular street grid, the spine of which was formed by a road leading up from London Bridge. Settlement also extended over Ludgate Hill to the west, separated from Cornhill by the Walbrook stream, while an extensive suburb developed south of the Thames in Southwark.

There was no significant pre-Roman site in the vicinity, and most studies conclude that London was established *c.*A.D. 50 on the boundary between the 'southern' and 'eastern' kingdoms that dominated SE Britain prior to the Roman conquest. The evidence for this comes from the dating of the earliest coin assemblages found alongside the southern approaches to London Bridge in Southwark and in the Cornhill settlement, where the dominance of Claudian copies is consistent with a date towards the end of Claudius's reign.<sup>1</sup> The absence of evidence datable to the period of the conquest of A.D. 43 seemed to support the suggestion that London came into being in a secondary phase of the province's development. This in turn has given rise to suggestions that the city originated as a supply depot and trading entrepôt within pacified territories that had little need of a permanent military garrison, and where the military presence indicated by abundant finds and inscriptions can be attributed to the presence of officials and veterans involved in administration and supply. London has therefore been seen as something apart: neither the product of indigenous development nor converted from a disused military site. In M. Millett's words,

There is now a consensus emerging about the development of the city. Uniquely in Britain, the town seems to have grown up as a planned trading settlement of citizens from other provinces within a decade or so of the invasion.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Perring 1991, 6; Drummond-Murray *et al.* 2002, 50-51.

2 Millett 1994, 433. This argument influences J. D. Creighton's reading (2006, 125) of London's