

Reconsidering Britain's first urban communities

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Questions about the foundation and cultural make-up of Britain's first towns have been long debated. The creation of new cities was a crucial element in the economic and cultural assimilation of a new province, having ramifications for the trajectories of later generations as well as the immediate situation following the conquest. A dominant feature of the debate about urban origins in Britain is the interpretation of evidence relating to buildings and urban morphology, whereas the contribution of the evidence from finds has arguably been minimal. My intent here is to review the historical scenario of the foundation of Britain's first towns in light of artefactual evidence. I will focus on the evidence of Claudio-Neronian brooches and imported finewares (and their predecessors), which have already contributed to the debate as chronological indicators but perhaps offer more potential for new insights into cultural connectivity and social practice.

Britain's first towns: scholarship and debate

In what is considered the old orthodoxy on the origins of Romano-British towns, the Roman military had a prominent rôle. According to S. S. Frere, army involvement was twofold: first, in an official policy of technical assistance (from surveying to construction), second, in developing abandoned military bases into new towns while harnessing the economic and strategic potential of such locations.¹ As elaborated by J. S. Wacher, the creation of major civil centres or *civitates* was seen as a deliberate and official act, involving a choice between the improvement of an existing indigenous settlement or the promotion of a fort *vicus*.² While the rôle of the locals of later generations was acknowledged in this narrative, the impetus for urbanism was seen as state-driven, top-down and interventionist.³

Much changed following the influential work of M. Millett,⁴ who placed emphasis on the agency of the surviving pre-conquest aristocracy acting under the *laissez-faire* guidance of the imperial authorities. He believed Rome to have been less interventionist than did Frere and Wacher. Where they existed, 'native' social hierarchies and infrastructure were maintained in the new provincial system, with local élites being left to transform themselves. Regarding the urban question, Millett drew attention to the fragility of the evidence for significant official intervention, specifically Frere's analogy between the architecture of *Insula XIV* at *Verulamium* and barrack blocks at Valkenburg.⁵ Where evidence for military occupation at the first *civitas*-capitals in the southeast was thought to be incontrovertible, such as at *Verulamium* and Silchester, Millett downplayed its significance as being of low intensity, short-lived, and peripheral,⁶ emphasising instead the continuity with pre-existing enclosed settlements called *oppida*.⁷

1 Frere 1987, 230; see also Webster 1966 for the classic argument on the evolution of towns from abandoned forts.

2 Wacher 1995, 20.

3 As usefully summarised by Grahame 1998.

4 Millett 1984; 1990, 65-101.

5 Frere 1972, 9-11; cf. Millett 1990, 69-72.

6 Millett 1990, 77-78.

7 For a discussion of this contested term in Britain and Europe, see Pitts 2010a; Fichtl 2000; Colin 1998; Woolf 1993 and Collis 1984. The term *oppidum* spans a diverse range of large settlement