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Londinium and Beyond

Essays on Roman London and its hinterland for Harvey Sheldon

Written by Vlad Jecan, published on December 5, 2008.

Londinium was one of the greatest cities that the Romans built in Britannia. Its military importance as well as its riches, both material and cultural, has enkindled the curiosity of many researchers. Thus, since the birth of archaeology, the greatest city in Roman Britain has been constantly excavated. The result, Londinium has probably become the most studied and well known Roman city.

'Londinium and Beyond', edited by the acclaimed researchers John Clark, Jonathan Cotton, Jenny Hall, Roz Sherris and Hedley Swain, stands as a monument to this scientific achievement. The volume is structured in four main parts, each dealing with a different aspect of life and legacy of Londinium. The first part is reserved for chronology and cartography, the second covers the aspects behind the landscape, environment and hinterland, then the researchers proceed and present their studies in the third part entitled "This world and beyond: mind and spirit" and finally, the last part deals with the daily life in Roman London. This article focuses on each part and in order to be as detailed as possible, it will comprise elements of book review, report and summarization.

The volume begins with the meticulous research by some established archaeologists in the layout of Roman London. John Clark ('Fanciful ichnography': William Stukeley's maps of (?) Roman London) concludes that the cartography work of William Stukeley in early to mid 19th century offer little new

information if any at all. Stukeley's work emulates an established tradition that sees the Tower of London as Roman and attributes the city wall to Constantine or Hellen. Clark argues that Stukeley's maps offer little knowledge of Londinium's topography. The campaign to forge a concise map of Roman London continues and Peter Rawsome (Mapping Roman London: identifying its urban patterns and interpreting their meaning) traces the developments of the city after the great fire in 125 AD to the decline in the late fourth century. By fusion of own research and data available on the city he manages to offer maps of Londinium in different time episodes.

As more information is revealed on the layout and extent of Roman London, researchers also try to identify an acceptable number of inhabitants. Hadley Swain and Tim Williams (The Population of Roman London) split their estimates for two major points in time in the history of Londinium, the pre-Boudican period and the population of 100/120 AD and AD 200. Before Boudicca sacked the city, the two researchers suggest that the number of people living in the city was about 10,000. They spot a considerable increase as for the period of 100/120 AD, Londinium had about 26,000 inhabitants and for the later period that has been conventionally fixed at 200 AD, the number increases to 30,500. Perhaps, these numbers might reflect reality. Yet prosperity is limited and a 'descent into darkness' inevitably follows. Cowie (Descent into darkness: London in the 5th and 6th centuries) argues that Londinium was probably abandoned in the second decade of the 5th century or even sooner, as from the middle of the same century only Anglo-Saxon material culture is unearthed. It seems that the Anglo-Saxon population has replaced the inhabitants in the region. The author argues, however, that only further archaeological efforts may elucidate this problem.

Following a short introduction by Johnathan Cotton where he emphasizes the aims of the research of the *Landscape, environment and hinterland* of ancient London, the researchers present their investigations concerning the 'green' aspect of Londinium. Jane Sidell (Londinium's Landscape) offers a vivid picture

of the vegetation dominating the site of Londinium in the Late Iron Age. According to the paper, from the Late Iron Age to the Middle Bronze Age the site was covered in woodland and clearance continued into the last epoch. The woodland was composed of oak, hazel, to this some evidence was identified suggesting the presence of beech, birch and holly as well as lime and elm. However, Sidell suggests that a rapid clearance occurred and the pre-Roman city was lightly wooded with grassland and local arable cultivation.

As Londinium is one of the best known Roman cities, current investigations did not manage to identify the existence of gardens. Carrie Cowan with Peter Hinton (The Roman garden in London) intend to “provide a review of archaeological information presently available in order to stimulate suggestions towards a research agenda for Roman garden archaeology in London.” The authors point out that gardens were a status symbol. They were mainly an extension of the house that offered a public reception space and not really a private space. However, the authors say that they were also used as a place for study, an extended “workroom” of the house, or for relaxing among other things. The importance of identifying the presence of gardens in Roman London is imperative as it will shed new light on the social composition of the city. In any case, studying the subject and “declaring features or plants to be unequivocally related to Roman gardening is a risky business”, the authors write. Even the archaeological evidence that might empower the presumption of the presence of gardens is tricky as what seem to be garden tools and planters may have been used in other purposes. “Ambiguity is our greatest problem, and so our evidence tends to be circumstantial” the authors say. Yet, as investigations proceed more evidence is gathered and the puzzle is put together.

In this matter, the authors point out the archaeological material found by different researchers. Thus, Cowan and Hinton remind the discovery of evidence of cultivation at Wittington Avenue near Leadenhall Street, seeds of different plants, like those belonging to the Brassica / Sinapis group have been discovered in

several sites in Roman Southwark. To this discoveries of agricultural tools like pitchforks, hoes, sickles and spades that could have been used in farming or in orchards or vineyards. However, a bigger picture can be drawn only through further investigation.

Other papers examine the road connection between Roman London and Colchester, a research made by Gary Brown (Archaeological evidence for the Roman London to Colchester road between Aldgate and Harold Hill), the evidence regarding Roman Westminster (Chris Toman – Roman Westminster: fact or fiction?) and Colin Bowlt arguments “A possible extension to Grim’s Dyke”.

The third main theme comprises papers that go ‘beyond Londinium’ quite literally. In this part, the researchers explore the world behind the physical evidence of Roman London. Thus, “This world and beyond: mind and spirit” examines the aspects of education, cults and burials in Londinium. Mark Hassall (London: Britain’s first “university”? Education in Roman Britain) follows the evidence of a ‘higher education’ institute in the Roman Britain, arguing that this was probably a reality in Londinium. His paper begins with the enumeration of the main forms of education: the litterator, who teaches children to read and write, then the grammaticus, the second level of education, the author compares him to “a grammar school teacher”, and finally, what the author calls “the nearest equivalent to a university professor”, the rhetor, the teacher of rhetoric. Each level of education is further investigated separately in detail. Hassall identifies the literary sources that indicate a possible center of learning in Roman Britain and suggests the existence of a school for rhetoric in Londinium. He reminds of the words of Tacitus, who says that Agricola encouraged the Britons to learn the liberal arts. Additionally, Hassall writes that Plutarch mentions a Greek teacher of rhetoric named Demetrius who came back from lecturing in Britain and traces the literary sources that speak of a litterator. The author points out that most provincial centers, or capitals, had a form or another of education. For example,

Trier, which was the metropolis of Belgica Prima and an imperial capital, had two grammatici; Bourdeaux, the metropolis of Aquitania Secunda had six grammatici and four rhetores. Hassall suggests that Londinium, as the most important city in Roman Britain, probably had its own number of litteratores, grammatici and rhetores.

Ian Haynes (Sharing secrets? The material culture of mystery cults from Londinium, Apulum and beyond) dedicates his paper to the study of the similarities that occur in two sites more than one thousand miles apart. The first site examined is London's Walbrook Mithraeum, a temple dedicated to Mithras. The mithraic religion is scarcely known; in fact we have only succinct information about this Mystery Cult from the ancient writers. The second site examined is the recently researched sanctuary of Liber Pater / Bacchus in Apulum, Alba Iulia, Romania. The cult of Bacchus can also be described as a so-called mystery cult as our understanding of it is pretty limited. In his paper, Haynes traces the similarities of archaeological materials found in the two sites, hence the brilliant title "Sharing secrets?". In both sites elements of Mithraic and Bacchic cult practices have been discovered, interesting are the unearthing of Camulodunum type 306 pottery in Apulum. According to the author, this "illuminates in a small way the processes by which diverse parts of the Empire could share in particular ideas about the sacred". Haynes proceeds in saying that the Camulodunum type 306 has become part of the mystery cults at a time when they were very popular.

The paper entitled "A samian bowl by Crucuro and the cult of Hercules in London" by Joanna Bird follows the veneration of Hercules as a god and as a hero in Londinium. Bird argues that the discoveries associated with Hercules in London represent proof that this god was very popular in the city. Hercules was worshiped mostly by soldiers due to his supernatural powers, but also by civilians both men and women. The author reminds the reader that in the Celtic world, Hercules also gained healing powers. In any case, the people of Roman London loved this god and the discoveries of the Southwalk wall painting, the statue from

Ludgate, the Southwark statuette and some votive offerings from Walbrook suggest that the evidence coming from London is of personal nature.

Nick Bateman (Death, women, and the afterlife: some thoughts on a burial in Southwark) examines one interesting burial in the cemetery excavated at Great Dover Street in Southwark. Due to the archaeological material discovered the author offers two theories. One concerns the life experience of the person buried, who is a female gladiator and the second theory follows the deconstruction of the images as religious iconography. In this case, the author suggests that “what we are witness to is a complex ritual based on belief in the afterlife and the possibility of resurrection”. Bateman suggests that the aspects of the burial represent one characteristic of Roman spiritual experience and that is the fusion of Greek, Egyptian and Latin strands of belief.

The final part of “Lodinium and Beyond” focuses on the life in Roman London. Gwladys Monteil (The distribution and use of samian inkwells in Londinium) follows the distribution of samian inkwells in an attempt to show that perhaps these suggest that pen and ink records belonged to the merchants. This, probably, proving that the economic growth of the city can be traced through this distribution. In his study, Monteil shows that in the first years of Londinium, perhaps from 50 AD to 69 AD, inkwells are present mainly in the eastern part of the town and may be said that in this part ink writing was foremost used by traders and the military. Starting with the rule of Vespasian, thus entering the Flavian period, the number of samian inkwells have increased considerably and spread rapidly. However, the Monteil points out that samian inkwells are practically absent in rural and roadside settlements.

One very important aspect in Roman life was health-care. In his paper, Ralph Jackson (Imagining health-care in Roman London) traces the evidence that point to health-care in Roman London. As at that time, it was believed that just through religious activities and different diets one can regain perfect health, the author

follows the evidence of surgical practices in Londinium. Jackson also offers a detailed catalog of Roman surgical tools found in the city. Also concerning health is the paper of Angela Wardle (*Bene lava: bathing in Roman London*) where she offers a comprehensive catalog of related archaeological material discovered. Wardle points out that bathing was not a local tradition and that it was implemented in the city through Roman technology and this might be an aspect of “Romanization”. Additionally, she shows that baths were present in Londinium at all periods of time.

The last two papers focus on the luxury materials. In this matter, Martin Henig (*Intaglios from Roman London*) publishes a detailed catalog of intaglios found in Londinium and opens a discussion regarding these esthetically marvelous pieces. Henig describes in detail almost every intaglio and discusses their meaning and purpose. John Shepherd’s paper (*Luxury colourless glass vessels in Flavian London*) regarding colorless glass vessels opens with a citation from Pliny that says that these vessels were more valuable than gold or silver. The colorless glass vessels found in Londinium have been gathered into four major groups and Shepherd briefly describes each one. His study concentrated on about 120 fragments of glass found, which in late first century AD would have been “among the most valuable glass vessels being produced in the Empire”.

“Londinium and Beyond” is a masterpiece of British archaeology. Each article offers the latest information on the subject it treats. This volume is imperious to every archaeologist and researcher focusing on Roman archaeology. Additionally, the way it was written the general public will also be delighted with the new information they will discover.

In archaeology, one cannot go without a graphical representation of the material discovered. Be it a simple piece of pottery to the graphical reconstruction of a Roman fortification, the ability to see the object in ‘full color’ is absolutely imperative. In this matter, “Londinium and Beyond” comes with the exquisite

graphical reconstruction of artifacts, extraordinary maps and superb images, all represented vividly and with great professionalism.

“Londinium and Beyond” is dedicated to Harvey Sheldon, an archaeologist who since the late 1960s has promoted the studying of Roman London and campaigned to protect the city’s rich archaeological and historical heritage.

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