CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book considers late Roman urbanism in Britain, but its approach has consequences for work across the Empire on both the late Roman period and urbanism in general. Studies of late Roman urbanism have commonly been influenced by the theory of decline and fall (e.g., Faulkner 2000a; Haverfield 1912; Liebeschuetz 2000; B. Ward-Perkins 2005), while, in association with this, studies of the growth of towns and the nature of preceding settlement pattern have been directed by notions of 'romanisation' and 'civilisation' (e.g., Frere 1967; Haverfield 1912; Millett 1990; Wacher 1975). The result of this is that the archaeological analysis of late Roman towns, and perhaps Roman urbanism more generally, has not advanced to the same theoretical sophistication as some other areas of Romano-British studies such as rural settlement and identity.

This investigation focuses on the area of public space and the use of public buildings within towns in Britain, with the 'official' or 'public' towns – the *coloniae*, *municipia*, and *civitas*-capitals (Figure 1.1) – providing a further focus. The public buildings are used to evaluate the usefulness of the theory of decline for understanding urbanism and social attitudes at this time. These structures were a significant aspect of towns and the way in which they were experienced; they were perceived and used in symbolic ways (Boman 2003). As will become apparent in later parts of the book, public buildings have been the subject of a considerable number of excavations and have often received greater attention than many other aspects of Roman urbanism, being used as indicators of levels of 'romanisation', of civilisation in the 'Golden Age', and subsequent decline in the later Roman period. That they have been examined predominantly through this framework of interpretation might explain why the study of public buildings has perhaps become less fashionable in Romano-British research today. Apart from the production of important excavation reports and the discussions they contain (e.g., Fulford and Timby 2000; Yule 2005), there have been relatively few recent studies of public buildings in Britain, especially from theoretical perspectives (with important exceptions, including Creighton 2006; Mattingly 2006a; and Revell 2009). This situation indicates the need for reanalysis and the opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness of theoretical approaches when one is tackling subjects relating to urbanism.

In studying the later Roman period there is a danger of becoming preoccupied with end dates, which in the case of urbanism can be problematic, because it places too much restriction on the significance of the sites as places. With this in mind, attention will be given to the archaeological evidence of activity within towns in the late Roman period rather than attempting to fit it into a restrictive historical framework. Focus will be on

the varied evidence relating to the use of spaces enclosed by public buildings and the significance of buildings as places. Whilst space is a more geographically definable entity, place is connected with human experience, feeling, and thought; its importance need not necessarily be governed by economic circumstances or linear concepts of time (E. Casey 1996: 24–5; Ingold 2000: 149; Taylor 1997: 193). The end date of Roman Britain itself is debatable; the significance of A.D. 410 as a point of change is uncertain and it seems probable that many people continued to consider themselves as 'Roman' well into the fifth century (Bartholomew 1982; Birley 2005: 461–2; Esmonde Cleary 1989, 2004; M. E. Jones 1996). A loose framework for the late Roman period will be taken as the late third, fourth, and early fifth centuries after the 'third century crisis' (Mitchell 2007: 55–62). This has traditionally formed a dividing point between the late Roman and earlier periods, but the impact of this period of 'crisis' in Britain has been subject to review (see Chapter 3). As a result, this book concentrates on exploring methods for understanding evidence of activity that adopt a more theoretically and methodologically rigorous procedure.

Studies of the late Roman phases of towns often differ widely in methodology from explorations of other periods. In a recent study on landscape, M. Johnson (2007: 147–8, 198–9) commented on the distinction that is often drawn between work on the 'irrational' landscapes of prehistory and the 'romanticism and empiricism' of studies of the medieval period. This argument is also relevant for Roman-period landscape and settlement studies in which work has not tended to embrace the 'unfamiliar' as it has for prehistoric periods. Studies of Late Antiquity have especially been unwilling to embrace theoretical developments. In this book I attempt to draw the different approaches together. An important part of this is an examination of our understanding of Roman urbanism itself in Britain and its relationship with pre-existing land use.

1.1 The towns of Roman Britain

According to many authors who have written on Roman Britain, we know what towns are and what they were in the Roman period.[1] Towns were autonomous communities at the centre of a *territorium* and were divided into smaller administrative areas known as *vici* (Mann 1996: 104–8). The town had a number of functions, including the collection of taxation, jurisdiction, and the provision of a station for the *cursus publicus* (ibid.). In Latin, the word *oppidum* was used for an urban nucleus but this term had no strict meaning and could be used to cover a number of different types of settlement (Purcell 1996a: 1069; 1996b: 335). Legal definitions of towns are recorded in classical texts – the town (*oppidum*) is categorised as a *colonia*, *municipium*, and the urban centre of the *civitas*[2] – and these have been the basis of nearly all discussions of towns in Roman Britain (e.g., Collingwood and Richmond 1969; Frere 1967; Haverfield 1912; Wacher 1975).[3] It could be argued that this status was more important than the physical condition of the settlements, which was not so easy to maintain, especially in the late Roman period.

[1] The term 'town' is used here rather than 'city', except where quotations have used the latter; both terms have modern connotations but the term 'town' is more usual when one is studying Romano-British urbanism.
[2] This reflects the divisions of *oppida* listed in the *lex Rubria* (49 B.C.) as *municipium*, *colonia*, and *praefectura* (Purcell 1996a: 1069). This was a statute by which a colony was founded at Carthage-Junonia by C. Sempronius Gracchus (Crawford 1996: 852).
[3] Wacher's hugely influential work was updated and republished in 1995 but with no changes in emphasis to its organisation or discussion.

FIGURE 1.1. Map of Britain with the location of the main towns within the study (drawn by A. C. Rogers).

Although the *coloniae* and probably *municipia* are attested historically in Britain, the nature and function of the *civitas*-capitals is more problematic,[4] and the highly centralised *civitas*-capital system based on pre-existing tribal groups, originating mainly from Haverfield's influential work (1924: 191–4), has come under some scrutiny (e.g., Laurence 2001). Studies on identity certainly indicate a much more fragmented and fluid situation in the late Iron Age, which may have been harder to resolve after the conquest (e.g., Moore 2006; cf. S. Jones 1997) than is often imagined. We need to adopt a more flexible way to interpret the roles of a wide variety of settlements that occurred within the

[4] Haverfield (1912, 1913, 1924) did not use the term *civitas*-capital but instead 'tribal' or 'cantonal capitals' and sometimes 'provincial towns'. Collingwood and Richmond (1969) and Rivet (1958) also use the term 'cantonal capital' whilst Richmond (1963) wrote of 'tribal capitals'. Haverfield's work on the tribal organisation of Britain was hugely influential and was consolidated in Romano-British studies with the use of the term *civitas*-capital from the 1960s onwards (e.g., Frere 1967; Wacher 1966, 1975).

civitates (cf. Millett 2001). 'Small towns' especially are likely to have a more significant role in administration and the economy than is currently understood (cf. A. Brown 1995; Burnham and Wacher 1990), and using categories based on size, with smaller sites being considered less important that larger ones (cf. Childe 1950; Hopkins 1978: 71), is generally simplistic. Certainly, relying on images of Roman Golden Age urbanism provides fewer opportunities for alternative viewpoints of towns and the variety of settlements. As well as these legal definitions, towns are also often defined by attributes such as size, public architecture, planning, and organisation (cf. R. White 2007: 177), and it is changes to these that encourage analyses of decline in the late Roman period.

Despite these external changes, the significance of towns as places and foci of activity continued. It has been argued that a loss of population in the early fifth century is an important indicator of an end of urban characteristics at some sites (e.g., Biddle 1984). Certainly there are now deserted sites such as Silchester (Fulford, Clarke, and Eckhardt 2006) and Wroxeter (White and Barker 1998), which indicate that urbanism eventually came to an end here. Falls in population on some sites from the fifth century may represent political and economic change (cf. Dark 1994),[5] but these sites retained their importance as places and they were foci of church construction in the medieval period (cf. Bell 2005). Roman-style urbanism did eventually come to an end at all of the town sites in Britain, as did the Roman Empire.[6] The towns had varying biographies and post-Roman histories but it is important not to view the eventual outcomes as providing evidence of support for decline in the later Roman period. This book concentrates on the actions and experiences of people in these places in the later Roman period for which there is considerable opportunity for reanalysis.

Urban settlements in the past are not now as easy to understand as researchers once thought, which means that the dichotomy between continuity versus 'decline' is not a simple one. Approaches more common in areas such as urban geography, phenomenology, and landscape studies (e.g., Edensor 2000; Hall 2006; Massey 2005; Simonsen 2003; Tilley 1994)[7] demonstrate that studies of Roman urbanism are in need of greater theoretical rigour, especially to aid in the understanding of urban behaviour and aspects of continuity, transformation, and change in urban sites. There is a considerable amount of literature on place and space and the city in humanistic geography, reacting against positivist spatial science. Studies of the city have, for instance, begun to look at the 'lived bodily experience of city life' (Edensor 2000); human action is an important part of these sites. Edensor's work *Moving through the City* (2000) explored the way in which people act upon the city, inscribing their presence through movement in a process of continual remaking through which the city is continually regenerated. The city and its architecture are the physically and symbolically bounded spaces or stages for movement and interaction and, for Edensor (ibid.: 123), these moving 'performative' processes ceaselessly reconstitute the symbolic values of sites. Within archaeology, phenomenology has mainly been applied to prehistory, with far fewer studies relating to the Roman period. This has created an

[5] In the case of Silchester, a possible forced abandonment of the settlement in post-Roman times has been argued because it formed a threat to the development of new power bases (Fulford et al. 2006).

[6] However, it could be argued that the Roman Empire continues to be influential in the world to this day.

[7] Phenomenology originates largely from philosophical works such as Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1988; first published in 1927 in German with the first English translation in 1962). Here phenomenology is the science of the being of entities. Heidegger's term *Dasein* states that the most important form of being is being-in-the-world.

unnecessary methodological divide, because phenomenology could also be of use for understanding past cultural meanings in Roman and later periods, especially for areas such as Britain where there are few written texts.

Simonsen (2003) writes of what she terms 'walking in the city', an act which 'spatialises' the city and turns it into a collection of narratives of meaningful individuals. For her, cities are constituted by people practising in place (Simonsen 1997: 161); they are collections of stories (Massey 2005: 130) that build up over time – as places they have a narrative and 'accretional' quality (Thomas 1996: 83). Likewise, for Pile (2005: 1), an important part of the city is the social processes, customs, and traditions of the inhabitants, and, returning to the Roman period, for Willis (2007a) towns can be seen in terms of landscape events in which visual and phenomenological aspects are important. These are now unavoidable aspects to tackle in urban studies of historical periods; towns are far from straightforward and knowable. This focus of study on urbanism marks a considerable contrast with the dominant economic and political explanations in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of considerable post-war urban planning and, consequently, much archaeological work within towns.

In connection with this, 'landscape' is now a complex and problematic term within archaeology and has been the subject of much debate (e.g., M. Johnson 2007; Tilley 1994). The rational and economic view of land derived from post-medieval Western Europe is not always helpful for considering the use and understanding of land in earlier periods. Landscapes should not only be studied by empirical means but also through theoretical approaches. The term 'place' instead puts greater emphasis on the way in which sites were constructed, experienced, and used over time (Cresswell 2004). 'Natural' elements could be as significant and meaningful within landscapes as artificial features, although the dichotomy between culture and nature would not have been as marked as it is today (e.g., Bradley 2000; Insoll 2007):[8] '"natural places," then, have an archaeology because they acquired a significance in the *minds* of people in the past' (Bradley 2000: 35).

Natural elements could also be meaningful – they were not simply mundane aspects of the landscape. It is important to recognise that these meanings could survive to be used and transformed in different periods. Some archaeological studies of landscapes, for example, are now emphasising that certain places were the focus of occupation and activity over long periods of time, arguing that there was a 'repetition at them of ritualised acts' (Gosden and Lock 1998: 6; see also Miles et al. 2003). Places were laden with meaning through continued activity and the way in which features of the landscape were experienced. Roman towns often developed in the context of these pre-existing places and topographies imbued with symbolism and religious significance. Many of the places in which Roman towns were located were already foci of activity, which included both man-made features such as earthworks and natural features such as rivers, wetlands, and woodland. Roman towns that do not appear to have been located on monumentalised sites were nonetheless influenced by places with existing activity and meaning. Actions were influenced by visible

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[8] The term 'natural place' has recently been debated by Insoll (2007) as an inappropriate differentiation from 'man-made places' in prehistory because the use or experience of sites in any way will have made them, in some respects, humanly created. This is an important discussion that looks at the blurring between 'natural' places and human spaces. Insoll's study looks at sacred groves and temples or shrines in prehistoric Europe. As an analogy he also looked at sacred places in the Tongo Hills of northern Ghana and demonstrated that even the 'natural' shrines were human constructs because they were 'sustained' or even 'created' by sacrifices, prayers, offerings, and other activities.

aspects of the landscape, and historical and mythical knowledge of the past (Bradley 2002: 80–1; Gosden and Lock 1998: 6). The continued use of towns in the late Roman period was part of this chronological sequence of meaning on the sites, which was built up over time.

The foundation of Roman towns in Britain also had ritual elements (Creighton 2006; Niblett 2005a: 105; Woodward and Woodward 2004). Studies have drawn on knowledge of Roman town foundation elsewhere in the Empire (e.g., Rykwert 1976) but have also demonstrated that there would have been local influences, and that an understanding of the towns and their setting was affected by places that had pre-existing meaning. An examination of the long-term meanings attached to the sites of Roman towns and the way in which they were used as places can help us to move beyond notions of decline in the later Roman period, a time when there was less emphasis on Classical forms of monumentality.

1.2 Late Roman urbanism

It is impossible to analyse and understand archaeological evidence without at least some influence from the modern social context in which it is being undertaken, but historiographical studies make it clear that many major cultural influences have affected the way in which archaeology has been approached. Recent years have seen a number of publications on the historiography of Roman archaeology in Britain and the English-speaking world and the formation of tradition (e.g., S. Dyson 2006; Hingley 2000, 2008; Todd 2004). However, there are a much larger number of publications on the decline and fall of civilisations and empires (e.g., Heather 2006; Tainter 1988; Yoffee and Cowgill 1988). These are valuable in their evaluations of the potential external and internal threats to large-scale organisations, but they do not necessarily allow analysis of experience at local levels where change will have been variable and interpreted in different ways. It is important not to view these entities in isolation following predetermined life cycles of growth and decline. This is where an analysis of the archaeology at a local level can help us. Changes to the economy and bureaucracy, for example, will not have had the same impact or have been perceived in the same way across the whole Roman Empire.

The theory of 'decline and fall' used in late Roman archaeological interpretation, including urban studies, is very much socially constructed and value laden. Much of the data for public buildings within towns were excavated and published with preconceived notions of the nature of Roman towns and the ways in which they changed in the late Roman period. There is still considerable uncertainty about the nature and function of public buildings in Roman Britain and the way in which they were used in the late Roman period, which should be addressed in greater detail. Sir Mortimer Wheeler's Verulamium (the Roman town near the modern city of St Albans) excavations in the 1930s (Wheeler and Wheeler 1936) emphasised a vision of decay and degradation in the late Roman period, with little appreciation of the considerable amount of evidence of activity, and the resulting image of the town has been influential in late Roman studies. Most accounts of late urbanism have tended to compare the excavated evidence unfavourably with that of the so-called Golden Age and contrast it negatively with the 'romanisation' of the towns (e.g., Faulkner 2000a; 2004; Liebeschuetz 2000). As Christie (2006: 185) emphasises, however, the inevitable physical decay in later Roman times does not 'denote the end of a town, but

rather a redefinition, an ideological modification to the previous conception of "towns" or urbanism'. Decline and fall is especially related to economic models of understanding settlement, development, and change.

By examining the context and origins of the concept of decline and fall, one finds it possible to move away from an uncritical acceptance of this interpretation of change and transformation, in both late Roman studies and studies of the post-conquest arrival of civilisation. Edward Gibbon's (1737–94) *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (published 1776–88) is a key example of how the context of a text and its reception can have an influence on later academic thought and endeavour.[9] Gibbon's work had a huge impact on antiquarian and early archaeological practice and theory. Gibbon's attitude to the Golden Age and to pre-conquest settlement, as well as his knowledge of structural remains in Rome, proved highly important in shaping approaches to the Roman Empire and its later phases.

Gibbon did not use the term 'romanisation', but his approach to the conquered West, his appreciation of the cultural superiority and civilisation of Rome, and his coverage of decline in the later Roman period were similar to those of later writers. These authors, influenced by Gibbon, used the term as a convenient summary of the processes that they perceived took place after Roman conquest (e.g., Haverfield 1912; cf. Rogers and Hingley 2010). The approach of Francis Haverfield (1860–1919) and others, working in the context of the British Empire and its imperial endeavours (which drew on contemporary understandings of ancient Rome for guidance and support), influenced the development of the discipline of Roman archaeology for decades to come. This genealogy of imperialism has now been studied in some detail and its impact on Roman archaeology has been subjected to considerable critical review, highlighting the emphasis on Roman elite viewpoints and the simplistic understanding of provinces such as Britain that this provided (see especially Hingley 2000, 2008; Mattingly 1997a, 2004, 2006a; Webster and Cooper 1996). This book contributes to the debate on romanisation and imperialism, emphasising the pre-existing values attached to places in Britain, the nuanced experiences involved in urban development, and the continuation of activity within these places into the later Roman period.

The late Roman phase of towns was an important period of these places and was part of the long-term use of these sites. As activity at many of these sites in the late pre-Roman period need not be seen as inferior to Roman urbanism, the late Roman phase of towns was also a significant period that requires analysis. In the case of many towns, such as Canterbury, Lincoln, and Winchester, the sites have remained important to the present day, albeit in a form different from Roman urbanism and via different pathways and spatial mores. In all cases the settlements had complex biographies, often also with some form of continuation from pre-Roman times. A number of themes relating to Roman Britain in the later Roman period are examined in detail here, including structural changes to the urban public buildings, timber constructions within them, and industrial activity. The detailed examination of the use of public buildings complements other studies of towns that have focused on the monumentality of public buildings and the use of space in earlier periods (e.g., Boman 2003; Favro 1996; Revell 1999).

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[9] Reception studies have been especially important in looking at the use of classical texts (Beard and Henderson 1995), but they are also crucial for studying later works.

Christie's (2006) analysis of late Roman Italy, emphasising the concept of transformation rather than decline, is useful here: The structures of late Roman townscapes remained much more than simply skeletons to the early medieval towns that followed. The 'physical parameters' of the public buildings 'remained visible and even active' well into the post-Roman period even if 'some components were in part robbed out or even razed' (ibid.: 270). The structures continued to have an impact on the experience of these places despite the fact that the towns were neither static nor resistant to change. Towns were continually evolving and adapting: some buildings were demolished, and the material reused, whilst in other cases structures were maintained and repaired and the buildings absorbed additional functions or changed use entirely. These complexities in place biography represent peoples' actions, needs, and desires in the past; there was no strict dichotomy between continuity and change. Edensor's (2005) innovative study of modern-day industrial ruins also demonstrates that the structures could remain valued and important within towns beyond their original use; they also entrapped meaning from the past that survived in the present. These studies suggest that although towns change and appear to deteriorate, they can still remain viable and functioning places with considerable importance and meaning.

Public buildings framed activity that allows the detailed study of continuity and change of use. On a larger scale, the town as a whole was a space that gathered people and controlled movement, interaction, and experience. Public activities such as street processions, ceremonies, and speeches would have taken place within the town and linked with the public buildings (Lavan 2003a: 181). These could have continued unaltered into the latest phases of the town when forms of monumental architecture had begun to decay (Roueché 1999).[10] Whether such rituals took place in Romano-British towns is uncertain without documentary evidence, but the idea raises complexities that require acknowledgement. Movement of people to, from, and around towns was an important element providing meaning and representing ongoing activity at sites (cf. Insoll 2007).

1.3 Implications for the Empire as a whole

Although there will have been many local factors, differences, and influences across the Empire, it is important not to consider Britain in isolation but to keep in mind the broader picture (cf. Swift 2000). The reconceptualisation of late urbanism in Roman Britain in this book will be of huge importance for considering towns elsewhere. Archaeological studies of the late Roman period in other areas such as France, Spain, Italy, and North Africa have tended to rely more on historical frameworks and accounts in documents, of, for example, 'barbarian' invasions, for understanding the late phases of towns. This is, in part, understandable, because many useful texts survive that refer to events in these areas of the Empire that do not exist for Britain. The available evidence can, however, sometimes

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[10] The ritual of *Adventus*, for example, was the means by which powerful cities greeted incoming dignitaries; it had a strong relationship with the monuments within the town, including the gates, arches, statues, and colonnaded streets (Lavan 2003b: 330). Roueché (1999) has looked at inscriptions of acclamations within public spaces at Ephesos and Aphrodisias during Late Antiquity and demonstrated that certain places within the towns, outside the public buildings, were foci of public ceremony and that this continued into the later Roman period. It is uncertain whether this occurred in Britain, but similar rituals across the townscapes and hinterlands are possible.

be problematic and lead to an overreliance on historical frameworks without addressing the theoretical complexities and potential of the archaeological evidence, although there have been some important recent works that do address some of these issues (e.g., Christie 2006; Leone 2007).

Kulikowski's (2004) reanalysis of some of the urban excavations in Spain has demonstrated how unconvincing some of the dating used by the excavators has been because of their attempt to fit the evidence with historical events. The situation is changing across Europe, but there is still much to be done to raise awareness of the difficulties of interpreting the evidence. In other conquered parts of the Empire, as in Britain, the pre-Roman evidence associated with town sites is frequently viewed as inferior to what came after, and most accounts of Roman urbanism do not address pre-Roman activity or an understanding of the landscape in any detail (e.g., Bedon 1996; Keay 1988; Maurin 1992).

1.4 Some practical considerations

One major issue that has to be recognised when one is attempting a study of the public buildings of urban sites is that there are vast differences in the state of preservation of each of the buildings and the extent of the excavations that have been undertaken. In a number of cases, the buildings have also been subject to intervention in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, which has led to the disturbance of stratigraphy and the loss of later phases (e.g., Silchester – see Fox and St. John Hope 1893; and Caerwent – see Ashby, Hudd, and Martin 1904). Another cause of disturbance is the robbing of stone walls and floors of buildings during later archaeological periods. Post-war development within modern towns provided an opportunity to uncover Roman period buildings, but often excavation took place rapidly and in difficult circumstances (e.g., Leicester; see Cooper and Buckley 2004). It is likely that the latest Roman phases will have been particularly affected by urban disturbance, because they were often of a less substantial nature than earlier ones. Finds assemblages and less substantial features such as late floor layers, hearths within buildings, or timber structural remains will have been lost more easily than the earlier stone buildings.

Many of the towns are densely occupied today, and often only very small and widely separated areas of buildings have been exposed at any one time. This can influence the extent to which the structural history of buildings and the distribution of activities within them can be reconstructed. At Canterbury, for example, the *forum–basilica* has only been uncovered in very small areas (Frere and Bennett 1987). The extent of the theatre that has been uncovered is also minimal (Bennett 1988) and the St. Margaret's Street bathhouse, although being the subject of a number of excavations, has had a relatively small area of the total structure uncovered (K. Blockley et al. 1995). At other major Roman towns such as London (Figure 1.2), Colchester, and Cirencester, our knowledge of the public buildings is still fairly limited. Excavations in Leicester have produced some important indications of the extent to which Roman levels were destroyed by later activity. The walls of the *forum–basilica* on the St. Nicholas Place site had been heavily robbed (Buckley 2000), whilst excavations at Causeway Lane revealed widespread destruction of stone metalled areas and walls as a result of later medieval ploughing; a section of metalling and wall was found preserved, having fallen into a pit (R. Buckley, personal communication). At Blue Boar Lane and St. Nicholas Circle there were rare finds of late Roman mud brick, which

had apparently been used as late structural material (R. Buckley and N. Cooper, personal communication), suggesting that mud brick buildings may have been fairly widespread across the town at this time.

Similar kinds of evidence have also come from other towns. At Verulamium, Frere (1983) demonstrated that small areas of *opus signinum* floor were, as a result of plough damage, all that survived of large areas of late occupation, whilst at the Lion Walk site in Colchester a fragment of Roman stratigraphy that had collapsed into a robber trench dating to the twelfth century was the only evidence surviving of late Roman occupation in that area of the site (P. Crummy 1984). It does now seem certain that there will have been more timber structures within towns in the later Roman period that will not have survived later disturbance, as were identified at Wroxeter where there was only limited later activity on the site (Barker et al. 1997; see Niblett, with Manning and Saunders 2006: 101–3 for a discussion on Verulamium). This has important implications for any argument seeking to emphasise the reduction of activity within towns in the later Roman period, and building in timber at this time need not be considered in terms of decline.

An important related issue is that of 'dark earth' that occurs on many of the sites below the early medieval occupation. The term was devised in London during excavations in 1977, and it was around this time that its importance in considering late Roman and post-Roman activity on sites was suggested (Macphail 1981: 309; Roskams 1991: 64). Prior to this, the dark earth had been interpreted as flood silts (Kenyon 1959) or the result of market gardening (Sheldon 1978: 40). Roskams (1991: 64–5) has suggested that the dark earth is largely a product of imported, dumped earth that may or may not then have been reworked. Apart from studies such as those by Macphail (1981, 1983), constraints on time and money have often meant that dark earth has not been carefully studied, and in some cases it has been removed without analysis to access earlier levels (Roskams 1991: 64–5).

A more recent analysis of sites in London has argued convincingly that in a number of cases the dark earth is more likely to have resulted from the truncation or reworking of late Roman occupation and stratigraphic layers, including the continuing use of the buildings together with features such as timber and clay buildings on the sites (Yule 1990: 620; see Section 8.2). An analysis of the stratigraphy and material also indicates that the assumption that dark earth formation took place only after site abandonment is probably not the case (Yule 2005: 80). At the 15–23 Southwark Street site, for example, there had been considerable post-Roman disturbance, including the removal of much of the dark earth. What did survive, however, contained a number of late Roman coins and it had the appearance of reworked late Roman strata, indicating use of the building here (Cowan 1992: 59–60). Similarly, the Winchester Palace site in Southwark had dark earth that contained considerable evidence of activity, including coins and the debris from bone pin manufacture, which may have been taking place in the building in its latest phase (Yule 2005: 78–9). If dark earth can represent late activity in these structures, then it clearly has implications for understanding late Roman towns. It highlights the caution needed when one is making assumptions about the latest phases of use of public buildings and the date of abandonment.

Analysing the use of public buildings in the later Roman period necessitates an examination of excavated finds assemblages associated with them. There are now some challenging approaches to the use of archaeological records and finds distributions in archaeology (cf. Hingley and Willis 2007). Important studies have examined the distribution of finds on