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978-1-107-00844-1 - Late Roman Towns in Britain: Rethinking Change and Decline

Adam Rogers

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LATE ROMAN TOWNS IN BRITAIN

In this book, Adam Rogers examines the late Roman phases of towns in Britain. Critically analysing the archaeological notion of decline, he focuses on public buildings, which played an important role, administrative and symbolic, within urban complexes. Arguing against the interpretation that many of these monumental civic buildings were in decline or abandoned in the later Roman period, he demonstrates that they remained purposeful spaces and important centres of urban life. Through a detailed assessment of the archaeology of late Roman towns, this book argues that the archaeological framework of decline does not permit an adequate and comprehensive understanding of the towns during this period. Moving beyond the idea of decline, this book emphasises a longer-term perspective for understanding the importance of towns in the later Roman period.

Adam Rogers is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester. He has published articles on the archaeology of the Roman and Late Iron Age periods, especially in the areas of settlement and landscape studies, religion and ritual, and historiography.

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ADAM ROGERS

University of Leicester



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*For my father
who would have loved to have seen this
work through to publication.*

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is about our understanding of Roman urbanism and settlement change. It focuses on an archaeological study of the late Roman phases of towns in Roman Britain through a critical examination of the term ‘decline’ and examines the way in which towns as sites and places continued into the later Roman period. The emphasis on decline is a theoretical approach like other interpretative theories within archaeology, but authors of late Roman studies have not always felt comfortable in engaging in such debates when analysing archaeological material. The structures and uses of public buildings within towns provide a detailed case study for redressing this situation: the monumental architecture was used traditionally to demonstrate romanisation and civilised living, which was then followed by decay and ruin when their appearances began to change. Public buildings were meaning laden with rich biographies that formed major parts of the significance of towns as places. The towns themselves were symbolic places with long histories within wider landscapes. This book discusses the varied evidence for the continuing use of public buildings and alternative ways of interpreting these material representations of action in the past. Themes here include structural changes to buildings, timber additions to buildings, industrial activity within them, and their continued focus for many other kinds of activities.

Integrated into this study is the importance of historiography, demonstrating that many traditions within Roman archaeology and history, including theories relating to urbanism, landscape, and decline, developed within specific social contexts of the modern world. As a case study this is demonstrated by an investigation of Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (published between 1776 and 1788), the context in which it was written, its reception in later times, and its impact on archaeological interpretation. By taking a longer-term perspective, this book also argues that it is necessary to challenge our understanding of Roman towns as part of the reanalysis of their later phases. This is undertaken by an investigation of the settlement and landscape context in which Roman towns developed. Many of these landscapes were meaningful, monumentalised by both artificial and natural features and ritualised before the appearance of classical urbanism. When towns in the later Roman period are placed within this wider context of landscape use over time, alternative visions of their later phases can be sought.

This book draws on a large amount of archaeological material, both published and unpublished, and it would not have been possible without the assistance and kindness of a large number of people. Firstly I would like to thank Professor Richard Hingley, Dr Anna Leone, and Professor Colin Haselgrove (now at the University of Leicester), who were always helpful, insightful, and willing to give their time as my supervisors whilst I was

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