Roman Southwark’s Ritual Landscape; a study of sacred places in a Roman urban environment

Victoria Ridgeway (Pre-Construct Archaeology; Newcastle University)

This paper presents a brief introduction to the long history of religious practices and sacred places across Southwark in the first four centuries AD. It is based on data from various published by Pre-Construct Archaeology and research for an MLitt dissertation on the subject at Newcastle University, which involved an examination of published and archive material from across the borough. As this represents almost four centuries of activity across a broad area, this short paper is limited to consideration of some highlights and of the relationship between Southwark and the landscape. Geographically, this study is limited to the northern part of the modern borough, from about Harper Road northwards.

Buried deep beneath alluvial clays, the shape of Roman Southwark was very different from what we see today. Around AD50, Southwark was a low-lying expanse of sandy riverine islands, or eyots, interspersed with braided channels; a shifting landscape with extensive mudflats inundated at high tide (Figure 1). Here two eyots, (most commonly termed the north and south islands) form elements of a landbridge over the Thames, heading towards the main settlement of Londinium on the north bank.

Figure 1  Southwark’s island topography c.AD50, showing key sites mentioned in the text
The role of water is crucial to an understanding of ancient Southwark; its peculiar situation, indeed its very existence, was defined by and arguably dependent on water. The city was situated not only at a convenient crossing point of the Thames (Watson et al. 2001), but also roughly at the position of the tidal head in the mid-first-century Thames estuary. This meeting point of fresh and salt water may have been considered a ritually significant place and an appropriate location for the setting of a shrine (Rogers 2013, 16). The limit of navigation and the convenient site for a port installation, combined with the relatively unforested nature of the area, have been cited as possible factors in the settlement’s location (eg Siddell 2008).

An area of Roman Southwark around the junction of Stane Street and Watling Street may have been a ritual focus (Beasley 2006; Killock et al. 2015). The discovery of a Romano-Celtic temple complex here newly constructed in the second century, on what appears to be deliberately cleared land, has transformed perceptions of the suburb. The area occupies a liminal location between burials and occupation, townscape and countryside, water and land, at a major junction or nodal point in the landscape. It would have witnessed civic and funerary processions, as well as the frequent passage of people entering and leaving the city. A long body of fresh, spring water to the south-east of the complex might have formed a ritual focus from prehistoric times. The route from the forum to the outskirts of the settlement would have formed a processional way linking town and country.

Following this journey through the settlement we might see routine, everyday practices as well as the more formalised rituals of civic ceremony. Access across the islands and the river may not always have been possible, especially in inclement weather, and offerings may have been considered an essential prerequisite to ensuring safe passage.

Religious and ritual activity is experienced through all aspects of life, it pervades everything, not just the formal. Sacred space would have formed part of the social geography of a community, frequently linking the urban with the rural. Processions linked nodal points within an urban topography (Esmonde Cleary 2005, 2). Specific seasonal rituals, acts of purification and propitiation would have marked the year and given it shape (Henig 1984, 27). Amongst the seasonal events are rustic and family festivals which Henig considers may well have related to Celtic festivals, such as *imbolc* (lambing season), *Beltine* (spring), *lugnasad* (late summer), *samhain* (the end of autumn, harvest time). The ‘active’ part of the year ended with the rite of the ‘October-horse’ when rural activity, and coincidentally, shipping largely ceased. The annual cycle was thus secured by rituals. The temple complex was also shaped by seasonal concerns and would have changed through the year (Henig 1984, 157), as would the town with a markedly different character in summer than in winter, when travel and trade became difficult or impossible. Rites that honoured the dead, appeased the household deities or made offerings to spirits of water or boundaries may have been carried out on a cyclical basis, according to a daily or monthly round.

Superstition and magic were a part of the Roman world-view, a ‘world full of gods’ (Hopkins 1999, 17–45). There is little doubt that religion and ritual were important aspects of Romano-British culture, but just how and what that meant to the divergent population of *Londinium* is harder to determine. We have written evidence for religious and ritual practices closer to Rome, but we need to consider how this translates to a Romano-British context, where Roman and early native traditions combine and to understand the problems of syncretism and divergent Roman/Native worldviews. As archaeologists we find ‘things’ (structures and artefacts), not ideas, and the challenge lies in interpreting beliefs from objects. We are likely to see evidence in numerous ways, which can briefly be summarised as: the formal, statuary, epigraphy, votives, household shrines, placed deposits, burial rites and customs.
Burial was not allowed within the bounds of a Roman city and cemetery areas line the outskirts of urban settlements; in Southwark, where evidence for a formal boundary marker is lacking, these define the limits of occupation. Along the line of Roman Watling Street at Great Dover Street, highly visible monuments take the form of mausolea and walled cemeteries (Mackinder 2000), while elsewhere, as at Dickens Square, Lant Street and Trinity Street burials set back from the road may have been less visible. At the latter two sites early ditches contained quantities of disarticulated bone particularly skulls, placed along the bases of ditches and preceding formal burial here, perhaps reflecting the continuation of an Iron Age tradition of excarnation (Ridgeway et al. 2013; Killock forthcoming). Pottery from the ditches, including whole vessels, and animal bone might be the residues of graveside feasting, or offerings of food and drink to the dead; documented Roman celebrations include Novemdialis, Rosalia, Parentalia and Feralia.

Roman London was a multi-cultural city, its population deriving from across the empire, adding to the mix of divergent religious practice and beliefs. This may be demonstrated by the example of a young woman buried at Lant Street accompanied a folding knife in the form of a panther, paralleled only in an example from Carthage. Oxygen isotope analysis demonstrated that this individual, and many of those buried with her, spent their childhood in a climate similar to that of the Mediterranean (Ridgeway et al. 2013). Whilst more recent work on her mtDNA demonstrates that she had blonde hair, light blue eyes and connections to south-east Europe (R. Redfern, pers. comm).

Figure 2  Folding knife with ivory handle, in the form of a panther, which accompanied a burial at Lant Street Southwark

Around the junction of Stane Street and Watling Street throughout the first and second centuries, fifteen wells or shafts formed a focus of repeated deposition primarily of complete or semi-complete ceramic vessels, but also articulated animal and human bones; one example contained three complete dogs and a human skeleton. Near-complete vessels were also deposited in associated ditches, although not to the same extent. This focus of activity has been interpreted as a travellers’ shrine or way-station (Beasley 2006, 65). Located at a nodal point and within a liminal zone, at a cross roads, between areas of burial and domestic habitation, water and land, this shrine may have been used by travellers departing Londinium towards the coastal ports or entering the city.

The ritual/secular dichotomy in an archaeological context is problematic and has been extensively discussed elsewhere (e.g. Hill 1995; Brück 1999). The distinction between rubbish and ritual, sacred and profane, is not necessarily clear-cut. Where proven ritual/funerary practice exists, for example in the setting of a cemetery or a temple, the interpretation of other aspects of ritual is less problematic
than on a site with no obvious ritual or religious focus. The deposition of animal remains may be interpreted as food waste in a domestic context, and as ritual feasting in a cemetery – yet the archaeological evidence may appear superficially similar. At Swan Street interpretations rest on the associations between complete but deliberately pierced vessels – this action being interpreted as the deliberate decommissioning or ‘killing’ of the pots – and partially articulated animal remains, the resulting deposition practices being interpreted as an essential pre-Roman (Iron Age) ritual pattern.

Activity at Swan Street declined significantly c.AD140–250, coinciding with the establishment of the religious precinct at Tabard Square, only 180m to the east, possibly indicating changing religious practises of the populace. The evidence from Tabard Square itself is somewhat equivocal: structurally, concentric walls forming a square structure, paralleled elsewhere in Britain and frequently in Gaul, equate to a very particular form of building: the Romano-Celtic Temple, reflective of a syncretism of beliefs. The temple sits within a precinct defined by ditches occupying a low-lying aspect, on the edge of settlement, the liminal zone between water and land, between the zones of the living and of the dead (Figure 3). It was built on land which had been reclaimed from the water by deliberate dumping and consolidation. Yet, there are very few votive objects of the type seen in many contemporary temple sites.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3** Artist’s impression of the temple complex at Tabard Square in the third century AD, looking south-east from a vantage point which in modern-day terms roughly equates to the top of the church of St George the Martyr

We can reconstruct the basic form of the temple structures based on parallels elsewhere. The internal decorative scheme was identified from wall plaster recovered from the site: red panels were enhanced with a candelabra design, lower portions of the external walls were rendered and painted dark red. It measured c. 10.45m square externally, the inner *cella* measured c. 4.85m square externally, and was thus small and private. The architecture of this space tells us a lot about how proceedings may have been carried out – clearly only an elite few would be able to enter the inner space. By contrast a large paved external open area permitted these few to be regarded by many. We know little of the liturgies performed here, nor of the extent of public involvement, although we do have evidence for the cremation of sheep and their burial, presumably following sacrifice. The *suovetaurilia*, the sacrifice of a ram, pig and bull, frequently associated with processional rituals to purify the land, is indicated on reliefs depicting such scenes from Britain and may have been performed here.
The formal setting of temples or shrines (other than the very small and private) would have been the focus of festivals, dramas, processions and sacrifices. Music and sound would have been important and double pipes, cymbals, bells and rattles are all attested (Henig 1984, 39). A further nine formal religious sites have been identified north of the river – these are sites where the structural remains of a temple complex of some form or another have been found. These sites are not all contemporary, rather they conflate the evidence from four centuries of worship.
The form of a building might suggest that it was a temple, whilst occasionally evidence from inscriptions or statuary might indicate the deity or deities worshipped; the Walbrook Mithraeum being a case in point (Shepherd 1998). Depictions of Mithras, an eastern solar deity associated with Sol Invictus (the unconquered sun) and who represented the triumph of good over evil, in conjunction with the ground plan of the structure, identifies a particular building as being associated with this mystery cult. Statuary at Tabard Square was less helpful. A few barely identifiable fragments of torso may derive from statuary. A larger than life size bronze foot came from a figure that may have graced a column (bronze was most frequently melted down for reuse – stone may have found its way into nearby buildings or building foundations). Statuary includes a piece of a Purbeck marble figure, a fragment of a figure with drapery and a piece of sculpture with fin-like detail which may represent part of a sea creature, such as a dolphin.

More information was, however, provided by an inscription. This had been placed face up in the base of a pit covered by a tile of almost identical dimensions, suggesting that it had been deposited
with some reverence when the temple went out of use. The fills of the pit or shaft contained pottery dating to 350-400 AD or later, suggesting that the inscription was removed from the temple in the very last decades of Roman Empire in Britain. Whilst we cannot be certain to what building or structure this relates, lettering suggests a second-century date which is broadly compatible with the construction of the temple and we might therefore infer that it is associated with the founding of the complex, or of one of the buildings or statues there.

The inscription has been translated thus:

To the Divinities of the Emperors (and) to the god Mars Camulus. Tiberinius Celerianus, a citizen of the Bellovaci, moritix, of Londoners the first […] (RIB III, 3014: Tomlin & Hassall 2003, 364).

It is the first example from the capital to use the word Londiniensi or ‘Londoners’ it also informs us of the name of the benefactor, Tiberinius Celerianus, a citizen of the Bellovaci, a Gaulish tribe whose territory was centred on modern Beauvais. These connections are further evinced by the use of the word moritix, a Gaulish word meaning sea-farer or sea traveller but, where found on other inscriptions, seemingly connected to trade. This therefore suggests a man who hailed from northern France and probably traded or travelled regularly with that region but whose home seems to have become London. He may have formed part of a wider community from Gallia Belgica that had developed in the city. Mars Camulus was a deity entirely in keeping with the dual tradition of a Romano-Celtic temple. The Celtic god Camulus, twinned with the Roman god Mars, was popular in Celerianus’ homeland of the Bellovaci but only one other inscription from Britain is dedicated to Mars Camulus (Grew 2008), this example coming from the Antonine wall.

In addition to the Roman Pantheon the Roman and Celtic world contained an array of lesser and less obvious deities. Spirits of the place, or genii loci were everywhere and ‘the whole land was full of little gods whom it was a good idea to propitiate’ (Henig 1984, 169). The lares familiaris, gods of the home, were almost certainly ubiquitous, yet might not be easily detected archaeologically. Springs, trees and cross roads would all have been points of contact with the spirits, yet offerings at such locations can be difficult to determine archaeologically. Easily perishable objects, plants and other foodstuffs as well as objects placed above ground may leave little or no material trace.

Water, and offerings into water would clearly have been important in the context of Southwark and the river crossing. Numerous water gods, goddesses and nymphs are known, as well as many gods of rivers; some ubiquitous, others specific to particular places, ranging from nymphs associated with particular rivers to the mighty Neptune and Poseidon (Adkins and Adkins 1996). Close to Tabard Square, the freshwater spring adjacent to Great Dover Street cemetery may have influenced the choice of deity on display here - perhaps Oceanus, Neptune or Tamesis – as evidenced by the recovery of the carved stone head of a bearded god (Blagg 2000, 61–62).

Adjacent to the Thames, excavations within a crypt beneath Southwark Cathedral in 1977, near the southern bridgehead, revealed a timber-lined well in the backfill of which was found the skeletons of a dog and cat, a mass of building material and a very important group of stone objects, most probably deposited in the fourth century or later. The statues themselves appear to be of second or third-century date and include a hunter deity, a genius, part of a male figure in marble, a funerary chest, tombstone and votive altar. The structure or structures from which these derive remain unknown. It is plausible that there was a shrine in the vicinity – as suggested by the altar and statuary, but this would not explain the tombstone and funerary chest, which would derive from a mausoleum or similar, but seem out of place in this location. However, the probability of a shrine or shrines set on London Bridge has been suggested on the basis of finds dredged from the Thames (Brigham 2000, 34). Altars, columns and central chapels are all known features of Roman bridges:
altars dredged from the Tyne in Newcastle were presumably originally set on the bridge, constructed where the river (protected by Neptune) met the tidal sea waters (under Oceanus; Allason-Jones 2002, 2–3), mirroring London’s situation at the tidal head of the Thames.

This a very brief overview of some of the ritual practices attested across Roman Southwark as demonstrated archaeologically is a story concerned with processions and with the crossing of water. The traveller from London to the south-east and the ports of Richborough or Dover, would begin their journey in Roman Southwark, passing ritual complexes at Greenwich and Springhead, and no doubt many other places en route along Watling Street. In the context of the Urban Sacred in Southwark it is worth reflecting that this was to become the pilgrimage route to the shrine at Canterbury encapsulated in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Moreover the foci of ritual activity identified here (at Tabard Square/Swan Street) and the well beneath Southwark Cathedral are located at points in the landscape which were to become the focus of two of the suburbs greatest religious houses (Figure 6); this is not to suggest a continuity of activity at these locations, but to reflect perhaps on the importance of place.

Figure 6  Southwark’s early island topography in relation to the modern street map
Bibliography


