Book of Abstracts

EXPLORING PUBLICNESS IN TOWNS IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Workshop
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Organised by
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UrbNet
CENTRE FOR URBAN NETWORK EVOLUTIONS
The Danish National Research Foundation

AARHUS
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The amphitheatre at Cirencester (Photo: Christopher Dickenson).

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Outline

Until recently, the use of public space in Roman cities is a subject that was taken for granted. It was assumed that the use of forums, bathhouses, sanctuaries, theatres and amphitheatres was well understood and was uniform throughout the Empire. At individual sites, excavations tended to focus on buildings — on dating architecture and ascribing functions. Comparative research focused largely on urbanism — the development of towns across time and space — with far less attention for the experience of life within towns. The resulting picture was one of implausible homogeneity across time and space that does little justice to the vast diversity of regions and local cultures that made up the Empire. This has not brought us very close to understanding the rich texture of daily life within Roman towns, but has led to a limited understanding of how urban society and culture was produced through interactions in public.

Recently, this situation has begun to change. There is a growing acknowledgement that there is much about public space in Roman cities that we do not understand. This is reflected in a number of recent monographs and edited volumes focussed on publicness or public spaces like forums or agoras. There has also been a surge of interest in Roman streets, long overlooked in scholarship, as public spaces where a significant amount of day-to-day life played out in less formalised ways than settings framed by more monumental architecture. One of the reasons that public space deserves our attention is because, as sociologists and anthropologists have argued for modern culture, it is space in which power relations between different groups within urban communities are contested and negotiated. Work that has taken such a theoretically sophisticated approach

to the ancient world has, however, mainly focused on Classical Athens or, for the Roman world, Rome and Pompeii. There is considerable potential for exploring the nature of publicness in other parts of the Roman Empire and to draw more heavily on archaeology in investigating this subject. Roman Britain presents fertile ground for such research for a number of reasons.

Britain's position on the fringes of the Empire, its relatively late history of urban development and the distinct regional character of its Roman towns all make it a useful place to explore how the use and experience of public space potentially diverged from other parts of the Empire. The towns of Britain have been studied systematically for well over a century and though the evidence is fragmentary, it has been well published and is readily available. Many details of urban development throughout the province have been much discussed and are familiar. The lack of literary sources and scarcity of inscriptions, while creating obstacles to interpretation, also usefully creates a necessity to place more emphasis on the archaeological evidence. For all of these reasons, Britain is a useful place for asking new questions and developing new methodologies to explore publicness. A growing body of work has already begun to move away from the more conservative approach that has characterised much writing on the towns of Britain to place more emphasis on the experience of life within the towns. Yet much remains to be done. Preservation conditions in Britain also offer advantages over more arid regions of the Empire surrounding the Mediterranean particularly regarding the potential to retrieve organic material and to use the techniques of geosciences to investigate the use of space. Such techniques have already been fruitfully applied to

excavations of Insula IX at Silchester, and it would be exciting to consider how they might now be applied in future fieldwork to cast more light on the use of public spaces.

The aim of this one-day workshop is to bring together a small group of experts who have all taken innovative approaches to the towns of Roman Britain in order to explore how we might cast new light on the public life of these towns. It is hoped that the discussion will lead to a published volume. Issues that might be explored, either through focussing on case studies or through a more comparative approach, include:

- How were notions of publicness potentially different in this part of the Empire from those in Rome or elsewhere in the Empire?

- What can be said about pre-Roman notions of publicness and how did they influence the life of the later towns?

- To what extent did the non-Roman, non-civic experience of space (rural, non- elite, religious) permeate the public spaces of the towns?

- How can we detect the presence of different groups of users archaeologically in different open parts of towns and what does this tell us about how local power relationships were structured through the use of space?

- How can we move beyond drawing inferences about the use of public space from architecture and how can we move away from looking at buildings to exploring the spaces between them?

- What role can small finds play in examining uses of space? What role can soil sciences play?

- What scope is there for new investigative fieldwork in Roman Britain to cast new light on the use of public space?

Programme

Venue: Moesgaard Museum (MOMU) Moesgaard Allé 15, 8270 Højbjerg, room 302	
8:45-9:00	Coffee and croissants - served outside room 302
9:00-9:30	**Opening** Christopher Dickenson (UrbNet/Aarhus University)
Morning Session Chair - Rubina Raja (UrbNet/Aarhus University)	
9:30-10:30	**Public Space in Roman London** Richard Hingley (Durham University)
10:30-10:40	Coffee Break - served outside room 302
10:40-11:40	**Street Encroachment in Roman Britain** Penelope Goodman (University of Leeds)
11:40-12:15	Lunch in the museum cafe
Afternoon Session Chair - Emanuele Intagliata (UrbNet/Aarhus University)	

12:15-13:15	**Community and the Individual: The Nature of 'Public' Space in Early Urban Centres in Britain** Lacey Wallace (University of Lincoln)
13:15-14:15	**The Forum, Politics and Civic Identities in Roman Britain** Louise Revell (University of Southampton)
14:15-14:30	Coffee Break - served outside room 302
14:30-15:30	**Decentring Cities of the Roman Era: Examining Urban Development and Function in Britain in the Roman Period through the Implications of Decentring Urbanism** Adam Rogers (University of Leicester)
15:30-16:30	**'Public' as Spatial Categories or Human Groupings: Investigating Their Meanings and Expressions in Towns in Roman Britain** Simon Esmonde Cleary (University of Birmingham)
16:30-17:00	Final Discussion Chair - Christopher Dickenson (UrbNet/Aarhus University)
18:30	Speaker's dinner in town at Restaurant Slap Af

Abstracts

Public Space in Roman London

Richard Hingley (Durham University)

This paper will explore the available archaeological information for public spaces in Roman London, drawing upon the research incorporated in my recent monograph. It reviews the role of London as a port and trading centre and the available information for trading within the Roman town. The idea that this trading function may have built upon the role of London as a meeting place during the Late Iron Age will be reviewed. The Bloomberg writing tablets support the idea that London originated as a trading settlement during the first few years after the conquest on Claudius. Initially, a market may have existed on the site that was later to become a forum. The forum and two market halls may have provided formal foci for trade and marketing in the developing town. Trading evidently also occurred alongside several of the streets of the town, as the major excavations at 1 Poulty have demonstrated. It will be argued that concepts of meeting and exchange in London built on the experiences of the people from across the Channel that swiftly came to live in the town, but also on the pre-existing roles that this location had played in the centuries before Claudius invaded.

Street Encroachment in Roman Britain

Penelope J. Goodman (University of Leeds)

In a city, street frontages constitute interfaces between different types of space. The streets themselves are usually considered public space, developed for and used by a wide range of people, and generally owned and controlled by some form of local authority. But fronting onto them are a wider variety of different spaces, including properties owned by private individuals or groups, and communally-owned monuments and buildings with specific functions and purposes.

Across the Roman Empire, textual and archaeological evidence both attest to the regular breaching of street frontages by the built structures along them. This phenomenon is usually referred to as encroachment and associated with late antiquity. But scholars of that period increasingly recognise that it is particularly characteristic of late antique cities which remained populous and economically active. Indeed, it is also identifiable from a much earlier date. For example, an Augustan inscription from Rome (CIL 6.31572) claims that the emperor restored 'from private hands into public' a large area at the crossing of two roads around an altar and statue to Mercury. The difference between the High and Late Empires is thus more one of character and scale than of whether this type of behaviour occurred at all.

In Britain, minor street encroachment can be identified in settlement centres from soon after they became established in the province; though here as elsewhere it does intensify in scale and frequency during late antiquity. It also occurs in a wide

range of settlement types, including administrative cities (e.g. Verulamium, Caerwent), secondary agglomerations (Bourton Bridge) and even forts (Pumsaint). In Verulamium, archaeologist and historian Rosalind Niblett has noted that "there was a widespread tendency for buildings to encroach onto the edges of streets". But this observation can be made thanks to the site's unusually extensive archaeological record, and we should not assume that similar encroachment did not take place in settlements with patchier archaeological footprints. The majority of buildings involved in the known examples are houses, shops and workshops, and thus likely to have been privately owned, but some are monumental buildings: for example, the fourth-century Romano-Celtic temple east of the forum at Caerwent.

The mere presence of encroachment in Britain is by no means unique to the province, but looking at the British examples as a set gives us the opportunity to think about this phenomenon in a focused cultural context. The public nature of the street space means that any breaches inevitably occur at the interface between the interests of different groups: in particular the general public as users of the roadway and the individuals or groups who have created the breach. Encroachment can thus provide insights into the competing interests at work in an intensively-occupied and dynamic environment, and how these played out in the control of and relationship between public and private space. This paper will explore the interests, motives and incentives which may have been at work when street frontage lines were breached in Roman Britain, and ask what the known examples suggest about the relationship between legal ownership and control of urban space, and the practical processes of negotiation, agreement or simply acceptance of change.

Community and the Individual: The Nature of 'Public' Space in Early Urban Centres in Britain

Lacey Wallace (University of Lincoln)

In considering what a town in Roman Britain was and what function and significance 'public space' had within it, we are faced with knotty issues of defining what distinguished 'public' from 'private', what features Romano-British urbanism shared with that on the Continent, and what impact LPRIA settlement and monuments had on these ideas. People in Britain built the early urban centres in very different ways and for a variety of purposes, but rarely with the full suite of buildings and spaces that we might identify as 'public space' in contemporaneous centres on the Continent. Later truncation, ephemeral materials, and key-hole excavations mean that our interpretations often rely problematically on projecting back from the later development of Romano-British towns. This contribution will, therefore, examine if we can study how the indigenous British and immigrant town-builders and dwellers conceived of urbanism and how their diverse knowledge and experiences combined to make 'public space' in early urban centres in Britain.

The Forum, Politics and Civic Identities in Roman Britain

Louise Revell (University of Southampton)

The forum in the western provinces has been the subject of significant archaeological explanation, to the extent that the typical plan, decoration and viability over time are largely understood. Less understood is what the forum was for within this region. It has had ascribed to it a number of roles: political, economic, religious; it has also been analysed as the vehicle for the creation of elite power, whether that of the emperor or that the urban elites. However, how far can we reconstruct how these functions were realised in the daily practices of the peoples of the provinces? This is a question which is particularly acute for Britannia, where the monumentality of the forum complex is often viewed as something of a white elephant. In this paper, I will open up the question of the use of the forum in Roman Britain, and how that ties into imperial and local power. The lack of written evidence has perhaps hindered such questions in the past, but using analogy with other western provinces as well as the architectural layout of the British examples, I will explore how such spaces might have been used, and in doing so, how the peoples of the province encountered and created new political identities.

Decentring Cities of the Roman Era: Examining Urban Development and Function in Britain in the Roman Period through the Implications of Decentring Urbanism

Adam Rogers (University of Leicester)

This paper develops the concept of decentring as a framework for urban studies. Coming especially from post-colonial studies, this concept is geographical in emphasising the need to examine variations in urbanism and different traditions of urban development from a global and regional perspective. In the case of the Roman Empire, it allows us to place emphasis on regional and local developments in urbanism and through post-colonial influences. Decentring also allows us to break down the urban characterisations and hierarchies that we construct and rethink the nature of the urban-rural divide. More than this, decentring also allows us to deprioritise the questions that we ask when studying and analysing urbanism and develop different questions and frameworks for the interpretation of material. As such, we can challenge the nature of archaeological analysis and interpretation all together. In examining urbanism and urban development in Britain in the Roman period, we can deprioritise the questions that we ask when studying the cities of Rome and the central Mediterranean and bring forward new questions and perspectives on data analysis. We can approach archaeological interpretation in a way that moves away from the intellectual baggage that tends to accompany Roman period urban studies on the cultural superiority of Rome and classical urbanism. This paper will examine the decentring of Roman period towns in Britain. My work has emphasised the need to think about

local landscapes and urban biographies, and we can follow the implications of this also in studying urban development and function, the nature of urban buildings and spaces as well as people's lives within these towns. This paper will examine these issues through decentring urbanism and explore the implications of this decentring on analysing Roman period urbanism.

'Public' as Spatial Categories or Human Groupings: Investigating Their Meanings and Expressions in Towns in Roman Britain

Simon Esmonde Cleary (University of Birmingham)

There is a dissonance between the meanings and significance of the Latin word *publicus* with its cognates and the modern word 'public' with its. This warns us that we are dealing with two different thought-worlds, and we need to bear this in mind in Britain where the evidence is often rather oblique. Was there a spatial category of 'public' in towns in Roman Britain and was there a human 'public' in the sense of a body of citizens in these places? Do such dissonances help us explain aspects of the development of these towns over the Roman period?

At a coarse level one might come up with three categories of 'public' space in towns in Roman Britain, one 'closed' and two 'open'. The 'closed' spaces are largely those of the familiar 'public

buildings', forum, baths, theatre, amphitheatre etc., where certain functions were performed, but in what way/s were these 'public' in our sense/s? One category of 'open' space that has been receiving increasing attention is streets, not just as a physical armature, but as a social one. Less considered to date have been the 'spaces between', the fact that in Roman Britain some buildings stand in 'open' ground or in precincts. As well as some fora, this applies in particular to temples. Do we here have something more akin to our notions of 'public' both as space and as humans?

The 'public buildings' of Roman Britain have long been seen as modest in scope and largely devoid of the inscriptions and statuary of other regions. So did they perform the same functions of social reproduction as in other regions? How does this feed into their development, often uncompleted, into the late Roman period; fates which seem to have been very variable?

Venue

Moesgaard Museum
Moesgaard Allé 15, 8270 Højbjerg, bldg. 4240, room 302

N.B. Enter the museum building through the back (marked with purple on map)

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Website

Find more information at this website:

https://urbnet.au.dk/news/events/2020/
exploringpublicnessintownsinromanbritain/

GDPR

Note: We may take photographs during the workshop, which we store and use for e.g. reporting purposes. If you do not want us to use photos in which you are depicted, please contact Mie E. Lind (melind@cas.au.dk).

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Front Cover: Paving on the Forum of Roman Caerwent (Photo: Christopher Dickenson)

Back Cover: Roman theatre at Verulamium (Photo: Rob Hinkley [CC BY-SA - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0])

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