

Zeitschrift: Cahiers d'archéologie romande
Herausgeber: Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise
Band: 189 (2022)

Artikel: Urban fortifications in Britain under the Early Empire : the creation of an exceptional provincial grouping
Autor: Cleary, Simon Esmonde
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1068401>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 11.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Urban fortifications in Britain under the Early Empire: the creation of an exceptional provincial grouping

Simon Esmonde Cleary

Introduction

The province of *Britannia* under the Early Empire was exceptional in its urban defences when compared with neighbouring provinces such as Gaul and Germany.¹ By ca. AD 200 this exception took three major forms: first, the number of urban places defended at this date; second, the defending not only of major administrative centres but also some roadside sites; third, the extensive use of earthwork rather than stone for the construction of these defences. The main part of the paper will consider these defences according to the general questions raised by the organisers of the colloquium in order to give a comparative overview of the sequence in Britain and some of its problems. The concluding discussion will look first at the disparity between Britain and neighbouring provinces, particularly the Gallic provinces; second it will place these defended urban sites in the context of the road network and the incidence of military fortifications within Britain itself.

As stated above, one of the defining peculiarities of the development of urban fortification in Britain under the Early Empire was the construction of defences not only at many of the major administrative centres, here referred to as 'cities', but also at a number of smaller roadside settlements, the 'small towns' of much English-language literature.² These sites will be included in this paper, but the use in English of the word 'town' clearly implies some form of urban function/s for these places, which is by no means certain. This debate will not be addressed here; what is important for the purposes of this paper is that neither in their form nor in their associated buildings do they show much relationship to the military architecture of forts, but

they do have a relationship to the defensive architecture of the cities. This suggests that these smaller sites were in some way the responsibility of the civil authorities. To avoid the urban connotations of 'small town', the more neutral, if more cumbersome, 'defended roadside site' will be used here, which at least emphasises the importance of the road network to the great majority of these places.³

It is prudent to signal some methodological problems arising out of the ways in which defensive circuits in Britain have been investigated, analysed and dated. Very often this has taken the form of excavating relatively small trenches along a substantial structure, providing a tiny sample of the entire length. The results from this are sometimes then extrapolated to the whole circuit, implicitly assuming construction to be a single project achieved as a coherent whole. At some circuits it is clear that this is not the case, with interruptions to construction, even perhaps abandonment, or else rebuilds. Which of these is being dated in any particular excavation? There are increasingly circuits where different excavations yield conflicting dates. Moreover, any dating evidence recovered can only provide a *terminus post quem* for that sector of the circuit; whether this is a reliable guide to the precise date of that sector, let alone the entire circuit must be very debatable. In what follows these problems will be indicated where necessary.

The defences and their urban contexts

The earliest urban defences in Britain, dating to the late first and early second centuries AD, are found at six sites, three in stone, three in earthwork. The walls at Colchester, dated

¹ Esmonde Cleary 2003.

² E.g. Burnham/Wacher 1990.

³ Smith/Fulford 2019.

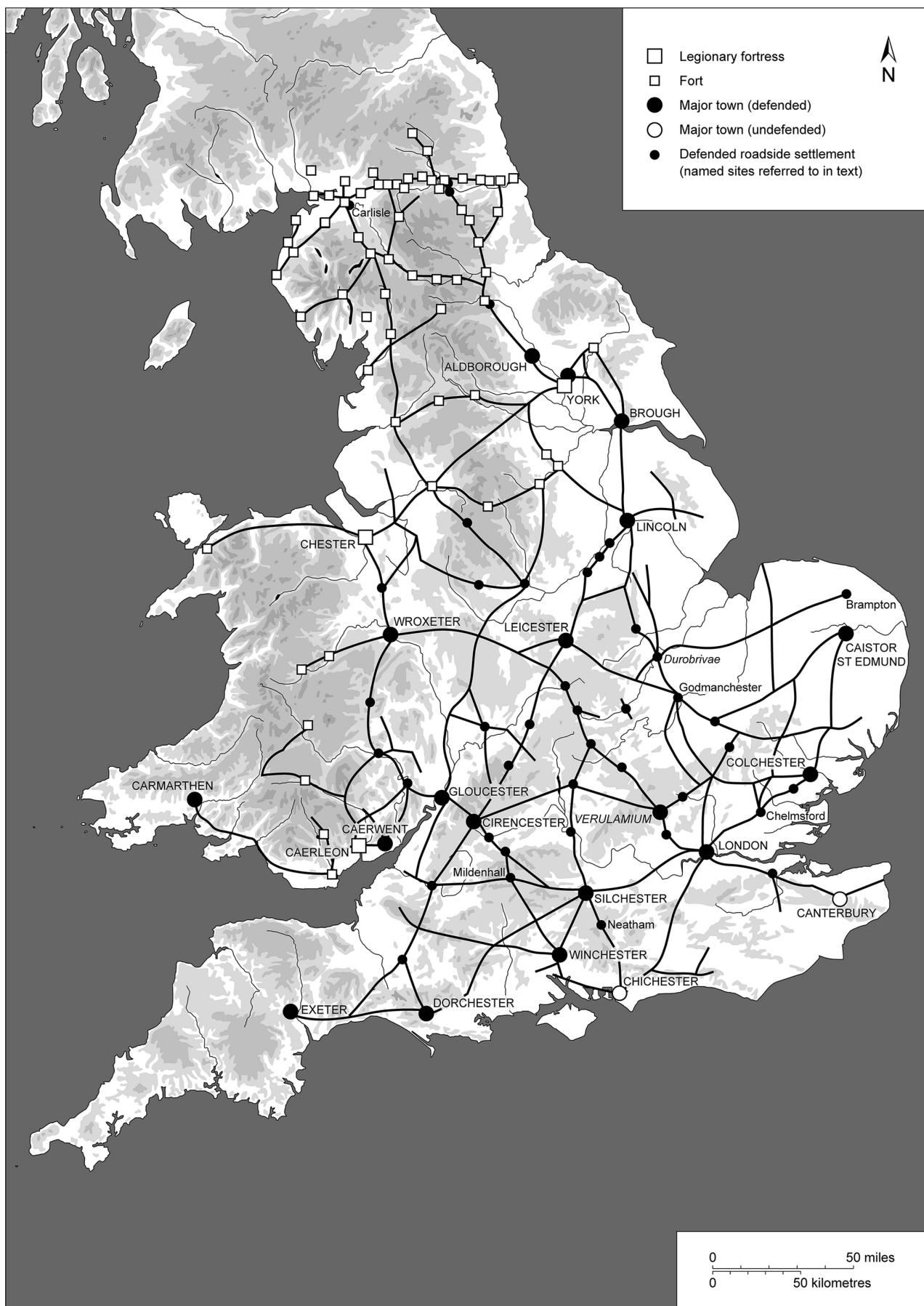


Fig. 1 Britain, military sites, major towns and defended roadside settlements ca. AD 200 (Map S. Esmonde Cleary).

ca. 70–85 and enclosing 40 ha,⁴ could be seen in part as a response to the destruction of the undefended nascent *colonia* during the revolt of Boudicca in 60/61, though probably as important was their distinctly monumental aspect. Those at Gloucester, enclosing 17ha,⁵ date to the late first/early second century and those at Lincoln enclosing 15 ha to the early second century.⁶ At both the latter the walls replicated the lines of the defences the preceding legionary fortresses. The cases of *Verulamium*⁷ and Winchester⁸ were different since at both places the defences took the form of an earthwork fronted by a ditch. At *Verulamium* the so-called '1955 Ditch' (referring to the year of its discovery) enclosed at least 40 ha. At Winchester only the northern, southern and western sides of the defences have been located, giving an area of 50 ha or more. The most complex case was Silchester, where recent survey and excavations have shown that the 'Inner Earthwork' circuit underlying the centre of the Roman city was constructed at the start of the first century AD, comfortably before the Roman invasion of AD 43.⁹ This was an earthwork fronted by a ditch and enclosing a polygonal area of 32 ha¹⁰. The 'Inner Earthwork' circuit of the early first century B.C. was retained into the Claudio-Neronian period and an extension added on the north-eastern side. By the end of the first century A.D. it was abandoned. At the turn of the first and second centuries a new street-grid was laid out. In the early second century new earthworks were constructed west of the principal north-south street (*decumanus*) of this grid: the 'Outer Earthwork'. This was subsequently extended to enclose the north-eastern part of the grid as far as the amphitheatre, but the south-eastern quadrant was not provided with an earthwork, so this circuit remained unfinished.

The construction in earth is exceptional at this date in the Western Provinces, though one might point to the huge post-Caesarian circuit at Reims,¹¹ and there may have been something similar at Chartres.¹² It is of course also the case that the defences of military bases in Britain at this time were also in earth and turf and timber, so may have provided an example. At Colchester, Gloucester and Lincoln, the link of defences (in stone) with their status as *colonia* would seem clear. Tacitus in his description of the Boudican revolt calls *Verulamium* a *municipium*, though he was not always accurate in his use of technical terms. If *Verulamium* were a *municipium* this would have accorded it superior status. Silchester is argued to be a principal settlement within the post-conquest kingdom of the *rex magnus*

Britanniae,¹³ Cogidubnus, and therefore an exceptional case. There is no such evidence for Winchester.

These six sites seem to have remained the only defended urban centres in Britain until the middle of the second century onwards when there was a phase of construction of a considerable number of fortifications both at the cities and to create the defended roadside sites.¹⁴ These total in the region of 30 sites, though the exact number is subject to new evidence and reassessment of existing evidence. The *coloniae* of Colchester and Gloucester had earthen ramparts added inside their existing stone walls, at Lincoln the construction of a 25-hectare extension to the south, brought the total defended area up to 40 ha¹⁵. The possible *municipium* of *Verulamium* received a new fortification in earthwork, the 'Fosse Earthwork',¹⁶ possibly unfinished. Silchester and Winchester were two of eleven cities to be furnished with earthwork defences; only two cities, Canterbury and Chichester, seem not to have defended. At Silchester a new circuit was laid out, at Winchester the existing one was heightened. Twelve roadside sites were surrounded by earthwork defences and five were given stone walls backed by an earthen rampart. One city, London, by now possibly a *colonia*,¹⁷ was surrounded by the longest circuit in the province, enclosing 133 ha and consisting of a free-standing stone wall on the landward sides of the city and dating to the turn of the second and third centuries. This stone wall is part of the evidence that the intention, or at least the ambition, may have been to construct these circuits in stone. The city defences enclosed areas from 18 ha (Caerwent) up to the 133 ha of London, though the majority cluster either side of 40 ha. The areas enclosed at the defended roadside sites ranged from the very small 2.5 ha of Neatham to 17.3 ha at *Durobrivae* (Chesterton/Water Newton).

The earthwork defences consisted of the upcast from the digging of the ditches that fronted them, sometimes augmented by refuse and other material presumably from elsewhere in the settlement. They seem to have been 'dump' ramparts, with no evidence for facing or internal structure, presumably in timber, though in most cases any such facing would have been removed later at the insertion into the front of the earthwork. One site on the eastern side of the extension to the defences at Lincoln revealed a large post-hole at the summit of the rampart, possibly the remains of a breastwork or similar.¹⁸

Some cities such as Cirencester and *Verulamium* had impressive gateways constructed in stone from the outset,

⁴ Crummy 2003, 50–51.

⁵ Hurst 1986, 104–107.

⁶ Jones 1980, 51–52.

⁷ Frere 1983.

⁸ Ottawa 2017, 90–94.

⁹ Creighton/Fry 2016, 307–313.

¹⁰ Creighton/Fry 2016, 322–328.

¹¹ Neiss et al. 2007, 297–300.

¹² Sellès 2007.

¹³ Roman Inscriptions of Britain No. 91.

¹⁴ Cf. Esmonde Cleary 2003, Table 2, to which can now be added the ditched enclosure, probably defensive and of second-century date, of 36 ha at Caistor-St-Edmund, Bowden 2013.

¹⁵ Colyer et al. 1999.

¹⁶ Niblett 2001, 83–84.

¹⁷ Tomlin 2006.

¹⁸ Jones 2002, 79–81.

even if set in earthworks. At the south gate of Silchester excavations have revealed a simple masonry gate arch associated with the later-second-century earth rampart.¹⁹ It may be that the earthen ramparts were intended as a temporary, and cheaper, measure until funds and/or the availability of skilled labour permitted the construction of stone walls, as they eventually did. Possible evidence for this can be seen in the southward extension of the defences at Lincoln, where excavations on the western side showed a contemporaneous wall and earth rampart, whereas on the eastern side the wall was inserted into the front of an existing rampart.²⁰ Evidence for timber gateways associated with the earthwork phase of defences is very rare, usually removed by the later construction of stone gateways, but at the south gate of Winchester the excavations brought to light the post-pits of a timber gateway associated with the late-first-century primary rampart of the city.²¹ Though some of the stone-built circuits in Britain, including the wall at London, have yielded evidence for simple square or rectangular internal towers, nothing similar has yet been demonstrated in association with the earth ramparts.

The dating of individual sites remains fluid because of the considerations outlined in the Introduction. Because of this it cannot be established whether these essentially similar defences were constructed at the group of 30 or more sites more-or-less simultaneously or whether the constructions were spread over a longer period. This in its turn impacts on arguments as to whether this phase of defence-building was the result of a single decision at a high level or of a number of decisions at the level of individual sites or of *civitates*. This matter is discussed further in the last part of the paper. There is no real *terminus ante quem* for this group of defences. Antonine coins are not a very reliable aid to dating since it is clear that this coinage continued circulate well into third century. On the other hand, the ceramic types, particularly *terra sigillata*, are characteristic of the later second century with few excavations on defences reporting third-century East Gaulish forms and decorative schemes or more local wares of that period.²² Thus the main peak for the inception and construction of this phase of urban defences at both cities and defended roadside sites seems to lie in the second half, possibly the last third, of the second century, with work at some sites probably extending into the first third of the third century.

In the case of the earthwork defences the source of most of the building material was as local as it could be, the ditch in front of the rampart. For defences wholly or partly in stone, or with stone elements, it is clear that the stone was for the most part obtained locally where possible. Thus at sites such as Cirencester, situated in an area of good-quality

building stone, the late-second-century gateways were constructed in that material, including possibly from the quarries immediately to the west of the line of the defences. Sites such as Silchester and Verulamium, which lacked good local stone for their gateways, made use of flint from the nearby chalk geology, with brick for elements requiring more regular shapes than those afforded by flint nodules, such as quoins or the jambs and voussoirs of arches. London, which lacked both good freestone and local flint deposits used 'Kentish Rag', a form of Greensand from the area of Maidstone in Kent some 110 km. south-east of London (accessible by river) along with brick from the 'brickearth' clays around the city.

Because of the nature of the earth ramparts and the usually limited areas of them examined in modern times there is little that can be said about their construction techniques. Detailed recording and analysis of the earliest walls in Britain has been undertaken at Colchester, Gloucester and Lincoln. At both Colchester and Lincoln the stone defences were of a standard construction in the Western Provinces, a core of coursed rubble bonded by thick layers of lime mortar faced front and rear in small blockwork (*petit appareil*). At Colchester²³ the wall is unusual for the thickness of the brick courses.²⁴ Detailed analysis of the stretch of wall to either side of the west (Balkerne) gate shows clear evidence for the junctions between different stints of work, and elsewhere evidence for putlog holes and culverts have been identified. The first walls of the 'upper *colonia*' at Lincoln²⁵ were of stone throughout with no evidence for brick courses. At Gloucester the early-second-century stone wall and the gate-towers are notable for the use of large, carefully cut large ashlar (*grand appareil*) blocks for the facing, lending the walls an extra monumental aspect.²⁶

The stone circuits of the later second to early third centuries have on the whole not been subject to the same level of detailed structural analysis, with the notable exception of Silchester.²⁷ This is particularly regrettable in the case of the circuit at London where the construction of the wall appears very uniform throughout its length, suggesting that the project may have been brought to completion in a relatively short time. At Gloucester and Lincoln the existing early-second-century stone walls were refurbished and in the case of Lincoln heightened. To date no inscriptions or other written evidence for the construction of the defences at Romano-British civil sites has been recovered, so we remain ignorant of who was responsible for the design, execution and financing of these structures.

Evidence for the disuse and abandonment of defensive circuits within the Roman period rather than from the early fifth century on has not usually been looked for; there has

¹⁹ Fulford 1984, 42–51.

²⁰ Jones 2002, 79–81.

²¹ Biddle 1975.

²² Hartley 1983.

²³ Crummy 2003.

²⁴ Cf. Crummy 2003, Fig. 5.6.

²⁵ Jones 1980.

²⁶ Heighway 1983, 3–4, 29–30, 43–47; Hurst 1986, 104–108.

²⁷ Allen 2013.

perhaps been an assumption that 'once defended always defended'. But this is an interesting question, especially perhaps for the less durable earthwork defences considered here. The clearest example is *Verulamium* which has three successive circuits of defences. The first, the so-called '1955 Ditch' has already been mentioned. It seems to have been deliberately slighted around the middle of the second century.²⁸ Each of the two points where the line of this defence were crossed by the main through-road ('Watling Street') was memorialised in the third century by an arch, suggesting the line retained some ritual or other significance.²⁹ Somewhere around the mid second century a new, larger circuit was constructed in earthwork (the 'Fosse Earthwork'). Its exact course remains a matter for debate, as does the suggestion that it may therefore have been unfinished.³⁰ Nevertheless, it became redundant around the middle of the third century when the new city wall was constructed in flint with brick courses, mainly on a different alignment.³¹ At two cities there is evidence for the contraction of the defences from the circuit in existence at the end of the second century. At Caistor-St-Edmund (or Caistor-by-Norwich) the later stone walls with contemporaneous earth rampart and dating probably to the third century occupied a much-reduced area of 14 ha compared with the 36 ha of the second-century earthwork enclosure.³² At Wroxeter, it is possible that the northern third of the second-century earthwork defences enclosing 72 ha was later abandoned and a new northern line constructed along the southern lip of the valley of the Bell Brook where there is a pronounced earthwork.³³

For the defended roadside sites the question is less clear, largely due to the question rarely having been considered, probably abetted by the publication of multi-phase palimpsest plans, which can imply that defences once constructed persisted thereafter till the end of the Roman period. Many defended roadside sites received in due course stone walls. Because of their durable nature, it tends to be assumed that stone walls were maintained; this is, of course, incapable of proof or disproof on current evidence. But there is a handful of sites where earthwork defences of the later second century were not succeeded by a stone wall and there is evidence for their disuse within the Roman period. These include Brampton (Norfolk),³⁴ where the ditch was infilled in the later third or early fourth century and Neatham (Hampshire) where the enclosure ditches of the end of the second century had been infilled by the mid to later third century.³⁵ A different situation is visible at Mildenhall (Wiltshire) where

the stone defences of the later fourth century take a different line outside the late-second-century earthwork defences though influenced by them; probably therefore the latter were disused but remained as a landscape feature.³⁶

Urbanistic context

As noted above, there is a clear relationship between the juridical status of four of the six places defended by the early second century, the *coloniae* of Colchester, Gloucester, Lincoln, the possible *municipium* of *Verulamium*. Winchester was a 'civitas-capital'. Silchester may also have been, or a principal site in the 'client kingdom' of Cogidubnus. This accords with practice at the time elsewhere in the Western Provinces, where defences were clearly linked with juridical status.³⁷ For the major phase of defences of the second half of the second century, the link is less clear-cut. On the one hand, nearly all the *coloniae* and 'civitas-capitals' as well as London (a *colonia*?) received defences at this period (the two which apparently did not, Canterbury and Chichester, were later to be walled). On the other hand, the defended roadside sites exhibit no evident status and there were other comparable roadside sites that were not defended at this date. A *mortarium* stamp from near *Durobrivae* reads *Cunoarda vico Durobrivis urit*, and that others of this class of site ranked as a *vicus* is plausible. But it is not certain all were, and anyway *vicus* is hardly an elevated juridical status. Other reasons for why these sites received defences at this period, not related to status, are discussed below in the Discussion.

There is little evidence from Britain for boundary-markers to urban sites prior to the construction of defences, but this may in part be because that very construction has obliterated all trace of any such pre-existing features. The site with the most complex evidence for a series of shifting boundaries is Silchester.³⁸ This sequence has been summarised above, though the course of the final form of the defences in the later second century does not seem to have been directly influenced by its predecessors. The street-grid laid out a century earlier extended beyond the line of the final form of the defences, particularly to the north. Therefore it may have had some sort of boundary with what lay beyond, particularly with the domain of the dead, whether or not materialised by a feature such as a ditch (for which there is currently no evidence). There is evidence from Wroxeter that the construction of the later-second-century defences may have involved adjustments at the edge of the existing street-grid, though on nothing like the scale of Silchester.³⁹ Otherwise, the site for which it has been most

²⁸ Frere 1983, 47–49.

²⁹ Frere 1983, 75–82.

³⁰ Niblett 2001, 83–84.

³¹ Frere 1983, 49–53.

³² Bowden 2013, fig. 3.2.

³³ White et al. 2013, 197.

³⁴ Knowles 1977.

³⁵ Millett/Graham 1986, 157–159.

³⁶ Corney 1997.

³⁷ Esmonde Cleary 2003, 77–79.

³⁸ Creighton/Fry 2016.

³⁹ White et al. 2013, 204.

frequently argued that there was a pre-existing boundary at the construction of the defences is London. This is particularly the case in the north-eastern part of the city, where on a number of sites boundary ditches of a metre and more in depth have been encountered. Suggestions that these may have constituted an early earthwork defence to the city⁴⁰ are difficult to sustain in the face of the fact that the lengths of ditches are of different dimensions. Another explanation may be that they represent a series of boundaries whose existence influenced the laying-out of the line of the city wall.⁴¹ Whether these were simply property boundaries or might have also been ritual demarcations between the domains of the living and the dead is worth considering. That such a demarcation could be over-ridden by an extension of the city is demonstrated at London by the fact that the construction of the western part of the city walls enclosed a first-century cremation cemetery, technically a *locus religiosus* which should not have been encroached upon. To date there is no evidence for earlier boundaries at defended roadside sites, though this is probably in large part an artefact of the lack of the necessary excavation on them.

There was a marked distinction between what lay within the defences of the cities when compared to the defended roadside sites.⁴² By the later second century when the majority of city circuits were constructed, the cities had orthogonal street-grids with public and private buildings arranged in the *insulae* defined by the streets. By and large the lines of the defences enclosed the built-up extent of the cities as they were at the date of fortification, hence the variation in area defended alluded to above. There were some sites where the defences enclosed a larger area, thus including areas of unbuilt-up land. Cirencester and *Verulamium* (the 'Fosse Earthwork') were good examples, probably also London and perhaps also Caistor-St-Edmund. In this they echo earlier cities in Gaul and Germany such as Nîmes and Vienne and of course Avenches. But in most cases the defences were in proportion to the occupied area. At the defended roadside sites the situation was very different. These sites, strung out along one or more through roads, lacked the relatively regular plan of the cities so could not practicably be entirely enclosed within a circuit of defences. Moreover, the functional and monumental vocations of these defences very probably differed markedly from those at the cities, thus the rationale/s for choosing the line of the circuits was not the same, as considered in the Discussion. So at the defended roadside sites the defences seem only to have enclosed a limited area at the centre of any existing settlement. Sometimes, for instance at Chelmsford (Essex) or Godmanchester (Cambridgeshire) certainly or *Durobrivae* probably, the defences

enclosed a *mansio* of the *cursus publicus*. Temples also can be found within the defences.

For settlement *extra muros* the situation is the inverse of what we have just seen for that *intra muros*. At the cities there was very little settlement outside the walls, what there was generally taking the form of roadside ribbon development on the approaches to the gates. By contrast, at any defended roadside sites the majority of the settlement lay outside the defences. These areas overwhelmingly took the form of simple, rectangular 'strip buildings', very often associated with evidence for artisan crafts and/or the transformation of raw material such as metals. The most extreme example is *Durobrivae* where the 17.3 ha of the defended area lay at the heart of a sprawling complex covering at least five times as much as that within the defences. Outside the line of the defences are also to be found the cemeteries. These are best attested for the Early Empire at the cities,⁴³ where extensive burial-grounds of this period are known from places such as Chichester, Colchester, Gloucester, London and York. For the defended roadside sites the evidence is much more sparse, cemeteries of this date are known at some of them.

In many ways, as will be argued in the next section, the walls should be seen as a type of monumental building. In terms of the building materials and construction techniques, the stone walls down to the early third century strongly resemble the stone-built public buildings and monuments such as the forum or the baths, partaking of the common Roman provincial techniques of walls with rubble cores faced in small blockwork, often with regular brick courses. Unfortunately we have very little evidence for the architectural adornment of the gateways of this date in order to see how closely they match the architectural stonework of the other public structures. It might also be noted that the construction of defences in earthwork is not unlike that of the amphitheatres at the cities of Roman Britain such as at Cirencester or Silchester.

Another way of looking at the construction of defences in relation to other types of monument is to look at the matter chronologically. It has been shown that to a great extent the construction of defences at the cities from the second half of the second century follows on from the main phase of construction of other public buildings and monuments (*fora*, baths etc.) from the first half of that century.⁴⁴ It can therefore be argued that at the cities of Roman Britain the surpluses available for the undertaking of major monumental constructions, having first been largely deployed on public buildings and monuments such as *fora* and baths was then diverted to a new class of monumental undertaking, the defences. Of course, this is not a hard-and-fast rule, cities such as the early *coloniae*, Silchester, *Verulamium* and Winchester diverge from this pattern, but

⁴⁰ E.g. Howe 2002, 7–9.

⁴¹ Hingley 2018, 101–103.

⁴² Esmonde Cleary 1987, Ch. 2.

⁴³ Pearce 2013; Pearce 2015.

⁴⁴ Faulkner 2000, esp. Fig. 2.14.

at least the overall pattern is consistent enough to be able to identify divergence.

No-one would deny that a city's defences, in earth or in stone, can be used as fortifications, a safeguard for the city and its inhabitants (though who was to do the defending remains a problem). This was the accepted way of looking at the urban defences of Roman Britain, both cities and defended roadside sites, for many years. This approach sought to argue that the earthwork defences of the later second century formed a coherent group and thus could be interpreted in historical terms as a centrally-directed reaction to external threat such as the breaching of Hadrian's Wall in the 180s or the withdrawal of troops by the governor Clodius Albinus in his bid for the purple in 193-97.⁴⁵ But the increasing realisation that the dating mediums for these structures are very problematic, as outlined in the Introduction, meant that it became increasingly difficult to ascribe the whole group to a sufficiently tight date-bracket to posit a single causative event. There was also a reaction against interpreting archaeological evidence for Roman Britain in terms of the very lacunose textual record. So whilst not denying that these circuits were built to be defensible, at least in theory and once complete, more recently emphasis has shifted to their monumentalising aspects.⁴⁶ In general terms, the provision of city defences over much of the Western Provinces was, as we have seen, a mark of superior civic status, so city defences in Britain should be seen in that light. These defences were in themselves substantial undertakings, defining the cities from their surroundings and making it clear to anyone approaching these places that they were of special status. At London, the construction of free-standing walls accorded very much with the tradition of monumental civic defences in Gaul and Germany. Though London was the only circuit in stone throughout, the presence at a number of cities of stone gateways, monumentalising the entrance to the city, clearly suggests considerations of status display. In due course the earthwork defences would have stone walls inserted into the front of the earthworks, completing the monumentalisation of these circuits. So for the cities, the intention to represent these places as important and superior places cannot be doubted. For the defended roadside sites the position is more difficult. In general terms, again, compared with Gaul and Germany the fortification of some of this class of sites was exceptional, making it difficult to use continental parallels to illuminate the situation in Britain. These places did not hold superior juridical or administrative status, unlike the cities. Moreover, whereas nearly all the cities were defended at this period, only a selection of the range of roadside settlements was, suggesting motives other than simply auto-representation. On the other hands, some of these circuits were faced in stone from the outset, giving them a monumental aspect. Even the

earthwork defences did set the areas within them apart, physically and conceptually. And as at the cities, the majority of the sites initially defended in earthwork were enhanced by the subsequent addition of stone walls, certainly markers of more significant places. So even though the rationales behind the fortification of the defended roadside sites may not have been the same as at the cities, there was certainly an aspect related to the representation of these places as out of the ordinary.

Discussion: The disparity between Britain and the Gauls and the Germanies

It has long been acknowledged that the decision to construct fortifications at urban sites in the Roman empire was not a matter simply for decision at the level of the individual city: licence to fortify had to be sought at the highest level. The other side to this coin, less often acknowledged, is that such permission could be withheld, for whatever reason/s. Not surprisingly, such contrary decisions do not make it into our surviving written evidence. But this does mean that when we are considering the reasons for the granting of permission for defences to so many places in Britain, we must also consider that a great many comparable places in Germany, and more especially Gaul, did not receive such permission.

The evidence for the need to seek licence to fortify and the religious status of fortifications is to be found in the *Digest*. The clearest stipulation about seeking permission is contained in *Digest* 50.10.6: '*De operibus quae in muris vel portis vel rebus publicis flunt aut si muri extruantur divus Marcus rescripsit praesidem aditum consulere principem debere.*' 'Concerning works which are undertaken on walls or gates or public possessions or if walls are to be built, the deified Marcus issued a rescript that the governor being approached he had to consult the emperor.' Marcus Aurelius (161-80) was writing at the time when urban fortifications in Britain may have been under construction. This is a more specific injunction in the context of a general injunction that public works needed the permission of the emperor in *Digest* 50.10.3.1. Further imperial interest in walls is shown in *Digest* 1.8.9.4: '*Muros autem municipales nec reficere licet sine principis vel praesidis auctoritate nec aliquid eis coniungere vel superponere.*' 'City walls however may not be rebuilt without the permission of the emperor or of the governor nor may anything be put against them or on top of them'. Clearly there was a two-stage process, first approaching the governor, with him remitting the matter to the emperor, presumably with his advice on the request. As Michel Aberson points out in his paper, walls were also endowed with a religious character, a *res sancta*, and as such within the competence of the emperor as *pontifex maximus*. Even to cross the walls other than at the gates was a religious offence (*Digest* 1.8.11).

⁴⁵ Cf. Wacher 1964; Frere 1984; Wacher 1998.

⁴⁶ Esmonde Cleary 2003; 2007; Wilson 2006.

Clearly, therefore, the emperor had to be involved in the granting of licence to fortify at so many cities in Britain, and probably also the defended roadside sites. Equally clearly he must have been involved in the refusing of a licence to almost any city in Gaul, especially the Three Gauls, which may have requested it. Given the prestige of city walls as monuments for the representation of the importance of a city it is hard to believe that some of the major cities of Gaul without the status of *colonia* did not seek such permission. So there must have been some long-term presumption at the level of the emperor and his advisers that permission be withheld in Gaul, a presumption that lasted right through the first and second centuries and on into the third. Therefore, the frequent granting of permission to the cities of Britain must argue for a presumption in favour of such grants at this high level. Likewise, the authorising of defences at second-order places such as the defended roadside sites must have been subject to control, at the level of the governor at least, if not of the emperor himself. So what may have prompted the divergence in imperial and gubernatorial practice either side of the Channel?

The close relationship of these civil fortified places to the road network is clear. The majority of cities formed important nodes on the road system and the very term adopted here for the lesser fortified places, 'defended roadside sites' confirms this: no lesser defended site is known not on a formally engineered road. It is a feature of the development of Romano-British studies, that the army and military sites have tended to be studied separately from civilian sites according to different sets of research questions. The argument here will be that if the incidence of fortifications at both military and civil sites around the year AD 200 is studied together then Britain has a remarkably dense network of defended sites from the Channel to Hadrian's Wall. Forts, cities, and as the name used here suggests 'defended roadside sites' all lay along the network of major land communication axes ('Roman roads'). Moreover, many of them related to the roads singled out as of imperial interest by their inclusion in the *Itinera* of the Antonine Itinerary.⁴⁷ The map (fig. 1) of the distribution of fortified civil and military sites in relation to the principal roads shows overall the terrestrial communications network afforded by the roads studded with these defended places. This is particularly true for the 'core' of the province from the south coast up to Hadrian's Wall, with both military and civil fortified sites becoming scarcer to west (e.g. Wales, the South-West) and to east (much of East Anglia and what are now Lincolnshire and East Yorkshire). Thus the main long-distance axes of communication from the continental empire up to the garrisons along Hadrian's Wall and to its rear were secured by chains of fortified places, which also secured internal lines

within the province. Nothing like this was created in the Gauls under the Early Empire. In the Germanies the chain of forts and fortresses and their linking roads performed essentially the same function along the Rhine and the Upper German *limes*, but there is no series of defended civil sites corresponding to those in Britain to the rear of the frontier forts. In Britain also, many of the defended sites lay along routes mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary, especially the three long-distance *Itinera* stretching from Richborough to the Wall (*Iter II*), London to Carlisle (*Iter V*) and London to York (*Iter VIII*). That other such sites lay on roads which do not appear in the Antonine Itinerary suggests both a wider context for the defended roadside sites and probably also the circumstances of compilation of the Itinerary.

The presence of so many fortified civil places in Britain as compared with neighbouring provinces, the complementarity with the distribution of military defences, the relationship to the major roads, the evidence of the Antonine Itinerary would seem to make a plausible argument for a degree of planning and control unlike the more reactive situation normally envisaged for the construction of civil fortifications. This suggests that the construction of defences in Britain under the Early Empire at both cities and defended roadside sites was not simply a matter of local initiatives approved at a higher level, but conversely of the concerns of the central authority being reflected by construction projects in the province. The work was presumably carried out by the local civil authorities, the *civitates*, which may account for two features of these defences. At the cities, permission to construct defences, even if indicated from on high, was still a matter of urban representation, so at these sites the opportunity was taken to fortify areas proportionate with the occupied area, or greater, and on occasion to construct signifiers of status such as elaborate, stone gateways. The involvement of the civil authorities may also explain why the defended roadside sites varied considerably in area and form rather than just being a series of military-style enclosures (like the fourth-century '*burgi*' along Watling Street); again local, non-military factors may have been taken into account in the choosing of the lines of the defences. It must be acknowledged that in proposing a single, over-arching rationale for the creation of defences and the choice of their location this proposal may be accused of ignoring the discrepancies in dating from these sites. But these could be discrepancies caused by the time-lag between inception and realisation, not to mention the particular circumstances and individual sites and modern excavation on them. But such a proposal does at least have the merit of seeking to explain why the incidence of civil defences in Britain under the High Empire is so at variance with other provinces.

⁴⁷ Cf. Rivet/Smith 1979, 150–180.