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~ GLEVUM ~

The Roman origins of Gloucester

by Nigel Spry

In 1997 Gloucester celebrated its founding as a *Colonia* - the highest status to which any Roman settlement could aspire. To learn about this, let's start at the beginning - and then we can follow on with some later history.

Kingsholm

Some time after AD 49 the Roman army - we cannot be certain but probably the 20th legion or elements of it, from Colchester - built a fortress at Kingsholm near an Iron-Age settlement beside the then course of the Severn. There appears to have been two major phases of construction, the later one bringing the site to full legionary size. The use of the fortress and its continuity of occupation is uncertain, but its probable role was as a strategic base and support headquarters for campaigns in Wales. Because of flooding the location was an unsatisfactory one; this no doubt was one reason that around AD 66 it was abandoned and the army established a new fortress one km to the south, on an area of raised ground that would in due course become known as Gloucester, where there had been earlier occupation.

A New Fortress

The new fortress, rectangular in shape and covering an area of 17 hectares (43 acres), had turf faced and 'timber strapped' clay ramparts, 3.5m high, surmounted by a timber palisade and walkway, and fronted by wide steeply cut V-shaped ditches. Substantial timber gate towers pierced the rampart on each side and between them along the ramparts were other timber towers at intervals and at the rampart corners. Between the west and east gates ran the *Via Principalis*. To the south of this road, at the centre of the fortress stood the legionary headquarters building. From here - now 'The Cross' - the *Via Praetoria* ran up to the north gate, while a fourth main street, starting south of the headquarters building, completed the pattern. The fortress was aligned more or less parallel to the Severn, the course of which was then much closer in to the site than now. Within the fortress gravel streets were laid out in a regular grid pattern and standardised barrack blocks constructed, together with other military buildings, granaries, workshops and stores.

The barracks, each for a century (80 men), had mostly plastered clay walls supported on posts set in trenches, clay floors and probably wooden shingle tile roofs. Some external walls had lias stone sleeper foundations which would have carried timber and clay walls above. Most other building would have been similarly constructed of timber and clay.

It has been suggested that this fortress was occupied by the 2nd legion, but it does now seem more likely that the site was the 20th's new home. Nothing is certain, but we do have some, albeit undated, physical evidence - a 20th legion soldier's tombstone found at Wotton and an inscription on a centurial stone of a cohort of the legion, found reused in the cathedral. Although, as we will see, the army would stay for only a generation, the finding near Kingsholm of a 3rd century tombstone of someone who had also served in the 20th legion, does hint at some sort of later continuing local connection or allegiance.

Reoccupation

Occupation of this headquarters site continued into the late 70's AD, when following the pacification of South Wales, the legion appears to have departed to take part in Agricola's campaigns in Scotland. Around AD 87 it seems to have returned from the north, and at this date the fortress underwent major changes. Some buildings were replaced by ones of stone; (the centurial stone may have been from a building of this second, 'stone fortress' phase). Barrack blocks were rebuilt with stone external walls and timber framed internal partitions. The defences were enhanced by fronting the original ramparts with a wall of large oolitic limestone blocks, packed behind with rubble. Stone gates replaced timber ones and larger ditches were cut. These new stone-faced defences were far more substantial and impressive than anything seen before in Britain, and their similarity to ones known to have been built by the 20th legion at Chester later, adds to the argument for the 20th's involvement with the rebuilding.

The Colonia

We do not know exactly how long the legion stayed after its return, but a decade from around AD 87 brings us to the accepted date of the foundation of the colonia. A *colonia* was a self governing Roman provincial city, regulated by a council and four magistrates, whose citizens enjoyed all the rights and privileges of citizens of Rome itself. *Coloniae* were established for retired legionaries, their partners and families, to provide a nucleus of loyal inhabitants to stabilise the frontiers of the empire. In Britain, Gloucester shared *colonia* status with only Colchester, Lincoln and, much later, York. Like Gloucester all these Roman cities had been legionary sites before they became *coloniae*. Such sites attracted civilian development around them; the native population providing services and comfort to the military.

The redundant fortress, the civilian suburbs, and a large tract of surrounding agricultural land called the *territorium*, were all part of the *colonia*. The *territorium* here probably included all the land between the Severn and the Cotswold escarpment, both north of the urban area and south down the vale, perhaps for about 15 km. As part of their 'retirement package' legionaries were allotted land in the *territorium*, as well as a home within the town. This also applied to 'auxiliary' infantry and cavalry soldiers, from subject tribes within the empire, who also fought in the army and were only granted Roman citizenship on completion of their service. So Gloucester's early citizens were a diverse, cosmopolitan lot.

Glevum

Not that the new city had the name Gloucester then. There is only slight evidence for pre-Roman occupation on the site and none for the local tradition of a Celtic settlement called 'Caer Glow'. (This results from an attempt to provide a Celtic origin for the British name Cair Glow, - first recorded in the 8th century - and for the Welsh name 'Caerloyw' translated as Bright Fortress). The evidence for Gloucester's Roman name comes from a number of sources - both written and epigraphic.

The most important inscription is that on a tombstone in Rome of a soldier of the 6th legion who was born in Gloucester. Part of the inscription reads ... M.VLPIO.NER. QVINTO.GLEVI... (... Marcus Ulpius Quintus, of the Nervan voting tribe, birthplace Glevum ...). NER here clearly points to a 'dedication' to the Emperor Nerva forming part of the name of the soldier's birthplace. Nerva was emperor from September AD 96, following the assassination of despotic Domitian, until January AD 98. It is logical therefore to believe that the *colonia* at Gloucester was established between these dates; hence the celebration in the year 1997.

Wording on a tombstone found at Bath establishes Roman Gloucester's top-rank civic status: ... DEC COLONIAE GLEV (... decurion (councillor) of the colonia of Glevum ...) A 7th century schedule known as the Ravenna Cosmography gives COLONIA GLEBON, while the name CLEVO is used in a 3rd century route list called the Antonine Itinerary. It is from this somewhat lean evidence that it is inferred that the city's Roman name was COLONIA NERVIANA (or Nervia) GLEVENSIS (or Glevensium), shortened to GLEVUM.

Early Development

Within 15 years or so of the military to civilian transition, we see the building of new privately constructed properties replacing the earlier barracks. At this period we see the first use of tiles stamped with the 'Gloucester Corporation' mark RPG (Rei Publicae Glevensium). Public buildings, temples and bath houses, were under construction in stone. Piped water began to be supplied. Drains and sewers were laid. On the site of the legionary *principia* an imposing central Forum, (the main public square), was laid out surrounded with colonnades and flanked on three sides by part timbered ranges of shops. Closing off the south of the forum was the 100m by 40m Basilica, (the assembly hall that was the centre for the *colonia's* government and law).

As the century progressed substantial new houses were built by thriving descendants of the early veterans. Others families had left to live on their farms in the countryside - successful ones would become owners of villa estates in the years ahead. Outside the original walled area occupation had flourished, particularly towards Kingsholm and outside the Northgate along the road that lead to cemeteries at Wotton and on to the district capital at Cirencester. By natural movement and by reclamation the Severn was slowly moving to the west, and so the suburbs expanded in that direction too. Towards the end of the century, the original *colonia* defences were enhanced by extending the bank inwards and by construction of new stone interval and corner towers.

A Successful City

In the late second century AD the city reached its zenith of culture and prosperity, and of overall size (around 150 hectares (380 acres)). In the main, its inhabitants within the walls lived in substantial stone houses, the homes of more affluent ones had mosaic floors, under-floor heating and decorated plaster walls. They shopped in stone colonnaded streets and markets, where they admired public statues, such as the imposing equestrian one erected in the sandstone paved courtyard of the forum, that by now had been rebuilt in stone. They worshipped in the temples, relaxed in the baths, attended the theatre and visited the amphitheatre outside the wall to see entertainments and displays; (but so far none of these buildings has been found). They, or their employees and slaves, may have worked in a town business or an industry in the suburbs - perhaps down near the stone quay alongside the Severn, which by this time had moved west to a course 250m from the original defended area.

Roman Britain was divided into four provinces in the early 4th century. It is most likely that Glevum, as a colony, became the provincial capital of *Britannia Prima*, in the same way that colonies at York and Lincoln became capitals of their respective provinces. There is some evidence that at this time Glevum possessed a mint.

Defence and Decline

At the very end of the third century or the start of the 4th century, major changes took place to the city's defences. The 2nd century wall was replaced in two stages by a stronger and higher one of stone faced concrete resting on courses of massive reused stone blocks. In parts of the wall replaced in the second stage, the blocks rested on deep timber foundation piles. Stone external towers were added; two parallel wide ditches were also cut in front of the new walls. These military fashion defences, possibly part of a wider strategic scheme for the defence of southern Britain, were constructed, (as were similar fortifications at Cardiff and Caerwent), in response to a perceived external threat coming via the Severn Estuary and the river itself. History does not tell us if these enhanced defences were ever needed.

Life continued, buildings were remodelled, even the latest elaborate mosaic floors installed. However, as the century progressed the overall threat to the stability of Romano-British life increased because of unremitting Saxon raids on the east and south coasts and of Irish and Pictish pressure in the north. The economic effect of this in centres like Glevum was to produce a rapid decline in the urban lifestyle and a particular collapse of urban administration.

Decay and Defeat

Distress and decay followed swiftly throughout Britain after the removal of the military in AD 407. Roman traditions continued, but the fabric of a city such as Glevum could not be supported. Buildings fell into disuse and from now on any new ones would be constructed in timber. As time went on into this Sub-Roman period, the old defended town was in decay, and the focus of settlement seems to have been concentrated beside the river. By the middle of the 6th century, here as elsewhere, strongmen, appointed or otherwise, came to the fore to lead military opposition to Saxon or Saxon controlled populations who were settling in the southern fertile river valleys. From the traditional account in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which is questioned by some, we learn that in AD 577 a decisive battle was fought at Dyrham that ended in the slaying of three of these British 'kings' and the capture of their cities. One of these kings was Conmail of Glevum. For Roman Gloucester time had run out.

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For the detailed current understanding of the early history & the topography of Roman Gloucester, see 'The Coloniae of Roman Britain: New Studies and a Review', pages 73-85, 113-135, 152-159 & 177-189. Henry Hurst (Ed.) Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 1999.