

II

The Prehistoric Background

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AT all times the history of London and the lower Thames valley has been linked with the river: as a port open to continental influences of many kinds; as a highway transmitting goods and ideas in many directions. This section aims by way of archaeological distributions to establish patterns of settlement by 'period' rather than to give a complete picture of the archaeology of the region at any given time.¹ In so doing it may provide a background against which the development of the later city can be seen. In pursuit of this limited objective the distributions are simplified so as to distinguish between objects or sites which by their character indicate settlement and those which may reflect only transient movement. For the former, structural features associated with occupation sites or burials are obviously the most reliable: remains of dwellings or defensive enclosures, industrial activity, burial-pits, or mounds and other features to do with burials; for the latter, single finds of artifacts which may say nothing more than that the man who made or used them passed that way. (The exception is pottery which, whether local or imported, is taken to imply settlement.) The two sorts of evidence combine to provide a spatial view of human activity over the period to which they belong. Chronologically they fix in a moment of time processes which spanned centuries if not millennia; and they must be understood in that sense.

Though its wealth of stone implements has made the lower Thames valley a classical area for the study of lower palaeolithic man this account opens with the emergence of 'modern' conditions at the end of the Pleistocene Ice Age. Before that time the evidence is normally buried in the fluvio-glacial deposits of gravel, sand, and brick-earth which intermittently flank the present river. Though amongst the later of these deposits there are some of upper palaeolithic 'date' there is very little sign of upper palaeolithic man. The first effective colonists of post-glacial times were people whose equipment of flint, bone, and antler tools is recognizably that of the mesolithic hunter-fisher folk who emerged with the changing environmental conditions which followed the retreat of the ice. For the London area they were of north European origin, reaching England by way of land surfaces which linked the island with the Continent because of the low post-glacial sea-

level.² In very general terms the pattern of mesolithic settlements falls into two parts. To the south there were many settlements along the spring-line at the foot of the North Downs escarpment and on the scattered gravel and sandy subsoils of the intermediate area. Some of these may well have been due to movement along the tributaries of the Thames; many were linked with the Weald. Intensive occupation of the chalk of the North Downs continued throughout prehistory, but for London the other element, that based upon the river, was probably of far greater importance, whatever the contacts between the two.

The title 'Maglemosian' (Danish *Maglemose* = 'big bog') applied to the riverside settlers reflects their living conditions in their north European homeland and the hunting-fishing economy on which their livelihood depended. The riverside sites with their constant supply of fish were no doubt at least their semi-permanent settlements; signs of their presence elsewhere away from the river may mark hunting-camps of a more temporary kind. Maglemosian finds occur in the western reaches of the river from Fulham to Hammersmith and Brentford,³ with a further concentration at Ham. Further east and in the neighbourhood of the City finds are fewer, apart from a concentration at Westminster which includes a site discovered in 1890 in Spring Gardens, St James's Park, in close proximity to the Tyburn stream. The Spring Gardens site is an indication that, given favourable circumstances, other discoveries may yet be made in the built-up central area of London. In any case, conclusions drawn from the disparity between east and west may be misleading, now as later. The gradual adjustment of land- and sea-levels to those of today was an ever-present if unperceived feature of life for riverside populations. Earlier surfaces were successively submerged and covered by later alluvial and other deposits; evidence of the people who lived on them comes therefore from disturbance by dredging or other activity, or is buried by the later accumulations and so rarely seen. This is particularly true for the lower reaches of the Thames towards the estuary, where the later deposits are both extensive and deep, so that the relative absence of archaeological finds of all periods may be more apparent than real. But in any case conditions along the main river as a whole militate against the discovery of actual

¹ Map no. 2 presents the distribution of sites and artifacts of the Iron Age at the period immediately preceding the establishment of the Roman city. It is based by permission on a survey of a joint working party of the Department of the Environment, the Greater London Council, and the Museum of London: *Time on our Side?*, Museum of London (1976). The inset maps of the city area for other prehistoric periods are based on the Museum's records, with the permission of the Director and the help of Miss J. K. Macdonald.

² For a detailed account see A. D. Lacaille, *TLMAS* 20 (1961), 101-50 and *ICH Middlesex*, i (1969), 21-8.

³ Sites on the river are located by names on the north bank unless their position is precisely known. For most early discoveries the location is approximate, often within rather wide limits.

occupation sites. It is in the lateral valleys, the Colne and the Lea in particular, that 'floors' with associated flint-working have been revealed by gravel-digging and dated by the environmental evidence of related peat-deposits within the period c.8000 to c.6000 BC.

In the gradual establishment of modern conditions which went on throughout the mesolithic age the second important environmental factor was the afforestation which accompanied (or followed) the improved post-glacial climatic conditions. It must suffice to say that throughout the later Boreal and into the Atlantic climatic phases (c.7000 to c.3500 BC) the build-up to a climatic optimum of relatively warm moist conditions created a forest-cover which, though it varied according to local geology and topography, was nevertheless to all intents and purposes complete. At one end of the scale the heavy soils (the London Clay in particular) carried a dense mixed oakwood; at the other, only on the lightest sandy soils did scrub replace trees. Even the chalk which defines the London basin to north and south, today characterized by open downland, bore its own type of forest.⁴ Though as food-gatherers the mesolithic people did not clear the land for cultivation they made some contribution to the progressive elimination of woodland, in the interests primarily of agriculture and food-production, which has gone on ever since. It seems likely that they carried out some clearance in the course of their hunting activities; in any case, the number of Thames picks, the rod-like flint axes capable of felling trees, most of them probably of mesolithic date, which have been found in the London area is sufficient indication of the way in which they exploited the available timber. Many Thames picks, in spite of their name, are found away from the river, commonly on the gravel lands with their open woodland, rarely on clay. But while like all hunter-gatherers the mesolithic people were possessed of a high degree of mobility, their chief centres of life lay along the river and its tributaries. As will be seen, throughout later prehistoric times the riparian settlements continued with little variation, no doubt incorporating some newcomers with the pre-existing community and maintaining a continuity of site if not of culture. The gravels took on real importance in the fourth millennium BC with the arrival of the neolithic farmers. Well drained, with an amenable soil and relatively light open woodland, the gravels were well suited to the primitive capacities of early farmers. Their attraction for settlers of all periods is well exemplified by the 'air-photography sites' of the upper and middle Thames, on which can be recognized an unbroken succession of remains which range from the neolithic to the early medieval period.⁵

The lower Thames does not at present display the same wealth and variety as does the country around Oxford. On *a priori* grounds, bearing in mind the wealth of material from the river, it would be expected that the London gravels would be as rich as their counterparts elsewhere. Here the insurmountable problem for all periods is presented by the built-up areas of Greater London, which mask what they have not destroyed. It is certain that much in the way of structural remains will have gone unobserved during past building and other operations; and while it is likely that more aerial survey could be done, field-work, whether on the

ground or from the air, is often handicapped by difficulties of terrain. Hints of the possibilities are provided by sites which survive in existing open spaces, such as the Queen's Butt on Wimbledon Common, a possible neolithic long barrow; possible round barrows in Richmond Park; 'Boadicea's Grave' in Parliament Fields; place-names also, for example, Barrow Hill on Primrose Hill. On the other hand the site on 'Greenfield Common' near Staines (National Grid Reference, Ordnance Survey: TQ 053708), recorded by Stukeley in 1776,⁶ lost sight of and built over in the present century, still survives in part as a crop-mark in the playing-field of a school.⁷ Conclusions from distributions about population-spreads become meaningless in the face of so much uncertainty: it is impossible to do more than generalize about the region as a whole. For both the neolithic and Bronze Ages the distributions remain more or less the same, with variations only in density. Apart from the chalk country of the south, where a many-sided activity never flagged, single artifacts are spread somewhat diffusely over the gravels with only limited signs of activity elsewhere. Added to the neolithic axes are a few finds of pottery and especially the causewayed camp at Yeoveney, near Staines; to the east of the City finds are rarer. The settlement support for the Bronze Age is provided mainly by the cremation cemeteries on the western side at Acton, Yiewsley, and elsewhere.⁸ The areas to the east of the City (that is, the Lea Valley and beyond) again show little change. Intensive work now proceeding in the built-up territory may make it possible in time to determine whether any of the empty spaces on the maps are original or due to the accidents of later history. In any case, the apparently scattered nature of the distributions in the gravel areas contrasts strongly with the concentrations along the river. The bareness of the estuary westwards to the Pool of London echoes the relative emptiness of the riparian areas to the north and south of it. Both periods are well represented by both river and land finds in the City. Westwards there are minor concentrations along the Westminster-Chelsea reach. From the mouth of the river Wandle onwards artifacts, from the river or its margins, are almost continuous. The chief concentrations are at Fulham-Putney and Brentford, with smaller groups at Hammersmith, Mortlake, Richmond, and Kingston. The densities vary between periods with the neolithic finds much diminished west of Kingston, the Bronze Age only slightly more numerous as far as Hampton. The length of the Thames from Putney (or slightly to the east) to Kingston provided the focal points of life over a period of some three thousand years, maintaining the pattern which the mesolithic people had begun; and the scatters of finds in the hinterland on both sides of the river reflect this. More is said later about the position of the City.

Many of the objects that provide the evidence for this continuity are indicators of distant connections and of movement in many directions: in the neolithic period there were stone axes from 'factories' in Cornwall, Westmoreland, Wales, and the Midlands, with the occasional continental example;⁹ in the Bronze Age large quantities of metal products, many of high quality, from Ireland and the west generally, and also from various continental sources. Pottery

⁴ J. d'A. Waechter, *ICH Middlesex*, i. 8-10.

⁵ D. Benson *et al.*, *The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels*, Oxon. Arch. Unit (1974).

⁶ W. Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1776), 7.

⁷ Rediscovered by O. G. S. Crawford, *Antiquity*, 7 (1933), 290.

⁸ J. C. Barrett, *TLMAS* 24 (1973), 111-34.

⁹ For a summary of results to date: J. K. Macdonald in H. C. Chapman (ed.) *The Archaeology of the London Area: Current Knowledge and Problems* (1976), 27-8.

is not recorded on a comparable scale, possibly because less readily recognizable in the dredging operations which produced most of the material. It is a commonplace that the presence of so many objects in the river has not been satisfactorily explained. But whether derived from submerged or eroded settlements, lost by accident or in warfare or deposited as votive offerings to a river-god, they indicate a wide range of trading activity. Added to this, throughout the latter part of the Bronze Age from about 1400 BC onwards trade was associated with an industry which though not necessarily centred on the river made the lower Thames valley one of the chief centres of bronze production in the country.

In the prehistoric Iron Age the general distribution underwent subtle change though the total number of finds is smaller. Positive evidence of settlement—that is, structural remains, as distinct from chance finds of pottery or the like—is more abundant than in the Bronze Age, though the claylands continued almost untouched. New discoveries of sites fill out the settlement pattern in areas close to the river on both the north and south side; but the excavations are usually limited and conclusions to be drawn from them correspondingly slight. The most completely known settlement is the so-called Caesar's camp at Heathrow,¹⁰ with its small group of huts and its unique temple structure, the whole enclosed by a massive but much ploughed-out bank and ditch. Within the main defences there was a smaller, later enclosure. The main settlement was probably larger than most, but between them the two represent the types that might be expected on the open gravel lands, and there are parallels for the smaller one on the gravels of the middle and upper Thames. Also on the analogy of other gravel areas there were no doubt unenclosed settlements. The true hill forts like the Wimbledon Caesar's Camp and that at Holwood Park, Keston, stand away from the river; their relationship with the valley-sites is not clear. The agricultural foundation upon which all early communities are based was provided by these or similar settlements. It is attested by the sickles which have been found along the river. They are successively of flint, bronze, and iron,¹¹ though admittedly not all the last are necessarily of prehistoric date. Ancient fields survive only at a distance, as Farthing Down, on the chalk south of Coulsdon.

There was a strong element of continuity from the later Bronze Age into the Iron Age, which is seen in the stratigraphical succession at the site known as 'Old England', Brentford.¹² It is probably present also in the prolongation into the later period of the later Bronze Age tradition of metal-working which has already been noted. Extended now to iron and adapting according to its own ideas continental (Hallstatt–La Tène I) models, the industry included in its output pieces of high quality evidently intended for an aristocratic or ruling class, in a society which incorporated newcomers from the Continent and was becoming increasingly stratified. Much of this material evidently served a display or ceremonial purpose. It includes a series of early (fifth–fourth century BC) daggers of a type which in continental Iron Age cemeteries seems commonly to mark aristocratic

¹⁰ W. F. Grimes in S. S. Frere (ed.), *Problems of the Iron Age in Southern Britain* (1958), 25–6. Since this was written later work has shown that the primary occupation of Heathrow had its beginnings in the late Bronze Age.

¹¹ Flint sickle from the Thames at Chelsea: BM, *Later Prehistoric Antiquities* (1953), iii, 8; lists of bronze sickles: C. Fox, *Prehistoric Soc. Proceedings*, NS 5 (1939), ii, 242 *et seq.*, and *Arch. Cambrensis* 96, ii (1941), 157 *et seq.*; list of iron sickles: *ICH Middlesex*, i, 55.

¹² R. E. M. Wheeler, *Antiquity*, 3 (1929), 20–32.

graves.¹³ The daggers, of iron with bronze sheaths and attachments, have been found in a compact group along the western reaches of the lower Thames between Battersea and Mortlake, rarely anywhere else—though an outlier from the river at Southwark should be noted. Of continental (Hallstatt–La Tène I) ancestry but of native manufacture, it has been claimed for them that with other pieces of aristocratic equipment 'associated with the activities of a leading class, they reveal the metropolitan area of an aristocracy whose tribal territory must have extended over the London Basin'.¹⁴ It is unnecessary here to take the matter further than to acknowledge the primacy of 'west London' during the early part of the Iron Age from about 550 BC onwards; but nothing is in fact known of the political organization and tribal relationships of the lower Thames valley at this time. The archaeological evidence presents it as a period of varied movement and interaction, with links with the successive continental cultures of Hallstatt and La Tène; it was the period also of the emergence of the Celtic art-style as an international phenomenon which in Britain developed its own insular character. But during the last decades of the second century BC the situation changed drastically. The first appearance of Belgic influence at this time substituted a phase of complex movement for a relatively static period in which (whatever the artistic development) there seems to have been no intrusion of any significance. The evidence for this change is provided by the coinage—imported in a sequence of movements from Belgic Gaul—which in due course was imitated in a series of locally produced British issues.¹⁵ Complicated as are both the movements and the associated coin-types, the consistent feature of their distribution is that apart from the first groups the London basin shows no sign of having been deeply involved. Such Belgic coins as exist are largely confined to the western sector, continuing therefore its earlier importance; the thin scatter of coins in the neighbourhood of the site of the Roman city would not seem to indicate any noteworthy activity there. Nor does the situation change with the emergence of the Belgic dynasties and their consolidation in the decades between Caesar's expeditions in 55–54 BC and the Claudian conquest in AD 43. Belgic interests lay elsewhere—in relation to the Thames, in the open gravel-covered areas of the middle and upper reaches of the river. In the final phase the distributions of inscribed coins, which put names to places and rulers, are accepted as approximating to tribal areas, the boundaries of which with little change became the cantonal boundaries of the Roman province. The Thames was one such, with the centres of power moved elsewhere. It is this decline in importance that accounts for the reduced volume of Iron Age finds already noticed, though it leaves unexplained the presence of one or two metal artifacts, like the Battersea shield, which do not seem to be in keeping with the changed conditions. At the same time individual settlements such as those at Hammersmith and Brentford evidently persisted and retained their importance into the Roman period.

In what has gone before little has been said about the site of the city of London itself. It has long been thought that a

¹³ E. M. Jope, *Prehistoric Soc. Proceedings*, NS 27 (1961), 307–43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 321.

¹⁵ D. F. Allen, *Arch.* 90 (1944), 1–46; 'Celtic Coins', *OS Map of Southern Britain in the Iron Age* (1962), 19–55; and in *Problems* (above, n. 10).

significant component in the siting of the Roman city had been the continuing post-glacial adjustments of land- and sea-levels, to which reference has already been made.¹⁶ By Roman times the level of the sea was about four and a half metres below that of today; the head of the tidal estuary of the Thames had moved westwards. The result was to create favourable conditions for a crossing along the London–Westminster reaches of the river. Favourable land approaches—a sandy belt flanked by extensive alluvium to east and west in Southwark on the south; the high gravel terrace rising almost immediately from the river on the north—fixed the actual crossing at ‘London Bridge’.¹⁷ This is a drastically oversimplified statement on a very complicated subject, but whatever the basic imponderables arising from incomplete evidence the fact of the Roman crossing remains. The question relevant to the present subject concerns the possibility of there having been a pre-Roman predecessor. Here it must be said that while on the north ‘natural’ ways which might be of prehistoric origin can be identified on courses directed towards the river in the region of the City,¹⁸ they appear to have no counterparts in the less clearly defined topography of the south. There are not therefore the clear-cut indications of a river-crossing such as present themselves at Fulham–Putney, where prehistoric occupation was continuous on both banks. However that may be, finds ranging through the prehistoric periods are sufficiently numerous to suggest that the twin hills on which the first city stood saw a good deal of pre-Roman activity. The difficulty here is that all the evidence takes the form of chance finds that do not appear to have been associated with any structural remains which would help towards an assessment of the character of the activity. And there is the added problem that over some parts (for instance, that to the south of St Paul’s) Roman and later digging of one sort or another may have destroyed the ancient surface on and in which such features would be found.

The neolithic age discoveries are almost entirely limited to axes of flint or igneous rock. It has been pointed out that some of these finds may not be authentic in the sense that they may have been treasured in later times for their supposed magical properties. It seems unlikely that more than a small

proportion of the twenty or so axes from the immediate area of the City could have been the subject of such a practice. There can be few localities of comparable size away from the ‘axe factories’ of the chalk country which have produced axes in such numbers, but in the absence of other cultural material their true significance remains uncertain. The overall distribution is diffuse; the lack of precision in most of the site records robs such groupings as there are of any meaning. This is also true of the Bronze Age. Metal finds are distributed over the area with no marked concentrations, though the number as shown on the map of the pre-Roman times (which as in all periods omits finds with such vague locations as ‘London’) are about the same. There is a predominance of forms from the latter part of the period. Pottery has been recorded only twice. There is an early Bronze Age beaker found in mysterious circumstances in Leadenhall Street. Fragments of a later Bronze Age urn, of a type which may be either domestic or funerary, come from recent excavations in St Martin-le-Grand. Finds of Bronze Age metal from the river off the City are probably more numerous than the map indicates: there are others which cannot be even as closely located as those shown.

In the Iron Age the city area reflects the decline in the London basin as a whole. Wheeler in the survey already quoted concluded on the evidence of the pottery that there was no indication of a pre-Roman settlement on the site of London which could be regarded as the direct worthy precursor of the Roman city. Recent work has done nothing materially to modify this view. As compared with the earlier periods there is a falling-off in finds; coins also are scarce. Again, as far as can be seen there are no concentrations to hint at settlement areas. The nature of the activity implied by these period distributions remains to be elucidated: for the moment a succession of scattered settlements may be the answer. It is no doubt an over-simplification to ascribe the decline of Iron Age life (if decline it was) in the lower Thames solely to changes brought about by the Belgae, for there is much to learn. None the less, in the Belgic system *Londinium* would have been an irrelevance, with the river reduced to a boundary and the growth and drawing powers of the tribal centres elsewhere.

¹⁶ For a summary of the evidence, R. E. M. Wheeler, *RCHM*, iii, 10–18; and for a more recent appraisal, G. H. Willcox, *TLMAS* 26 (1975), 285–92.

¹⁷ P. R. V. Marsden, *Geog. Mag.* 44 (1972), 840–5.

¹⁸ Grimes, 40–6.