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THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITIES OF ROMAN BRITAIN

by S.S. FRERE *

The development of cities in Roman Britain began considerably later than that of cities in Gaul, and in some ways it was a more deliberate as well as a swifter process. It was more deliberate because in Britain there were far fewer pre-existing native *oppida* which could be developed into new Roman towns ; the new towns had to be created as a deliberate act of policy. And it was swifter for the same reason ; new cities were created by active government policy, of which we catch an echo in Tacitus *Agricola* 21 : *hortari privatim adiuuare publice ut templa fora domos exstruerent, laudando promptos, castigando segnes*. We shall recognise other evidence for government interest in the growth of towns.

One such piece of evidence is the impressive number of towns which were preceded, not by a native settlement, but by a Roman fort (1). Among the *civitas* capitals, preceding forts have been proved at Exeter, Cirencester, *Verulamium*, Leicester and Wroxeter, and are suspected at several others. The civil settlements outside these forts naturally attracted merchants ; and when the troops moved on later into Wales or north Britain the *vicus* remained. It is clear that land in imperial ownership must at some stage have been legally transferred to the civilian authorities to assist urban development ; for often the new town spread over the site of the fort, as it did at Cirencester (2). This points to a conscious decision to encourage towns. At this point those settlements intended as administrative centres received a grid of streets : the others were left to random expansion.

The fact is also significant as showing that, although some modern geographers and archaeologists are much attracted to the Central Place theory, whereby settlements are thought to arise at spaced intervals under the influence of economic factors, nevertheless in Roman Britain the spacing of towns is in origin purely *military*, not economic. It was only in and

* Institute of Archaeology
36 Beaumont Street
OXFORD

(1) A map of the "small towns" of Roman Britain, indicating which of them have produced evidence of a military origin, will be found in RODWELL W. and ROWLEY T. (editors), *Small Towns of Roman Britain*, *British Archaeological Reports* n° 15, Oxford, 1975, fig. 1. Thirty-one seem definite and another 12 possible.

(2) For a map showing the relationship of early fort and later city at Cirencester, see WACHER J. and McWHIRR A., *Early Roman Occupation at Cirencester*, *Cirencester Excavations*, volume I, 1982, fig. 1.

after the Flavian period, when the troops had moved on into Wales and the North, that untrammelled economic influences became influential.

The origins of urban development in Britain are divided between three periods. The first the Claudio-Neronian period, was abortive for in A.D. 61 Boudicca's rebellion brought it to a sudden end. The second period is Flavian, and the third is Hadrianic/Antonine. The great majority of the towns were foundations of the Flavian period; the Hadrianic/Antonine period was significant mainly in backward areas hitherto unaffected by urbanization.

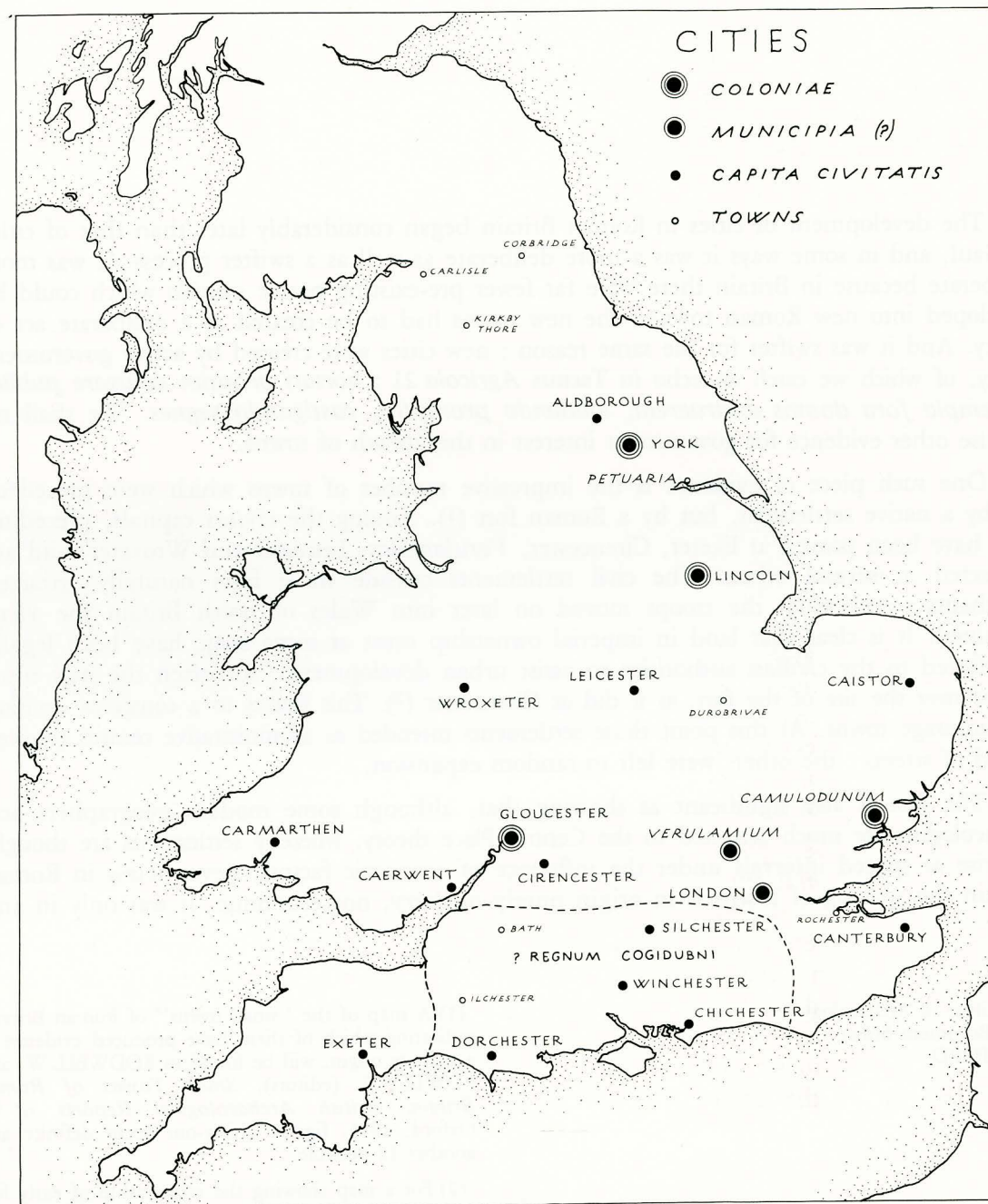


Fig. 1. The cities of Roman Britain.

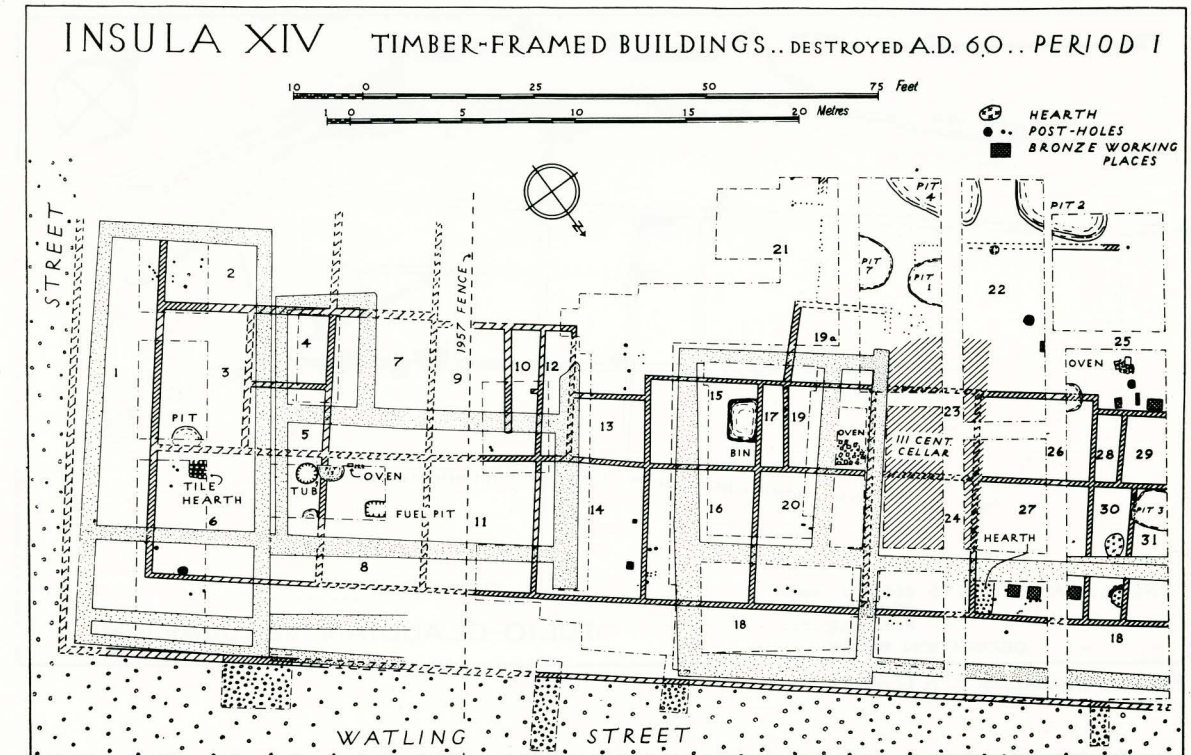


Fig. 2. Verulamium. Row of shops in Insula XIV c. A.D.49-60.

In the Claudio-Neronian period a start was made with the foundation of a *colonia* at Colchester and (probably) a *municipium* at Verulamium. London was developing as a port and mercantile centre, and at Canterbury also the earliest streets go back to this period. At this time part of south-eastern Britain formed the client kingdom of Cogidubnus, and he too encouraged urbanization. Not much is known of the beginnings of Winchester, Silchester or Chichester under King Cogidubnus, but Silchester had two successive phases of defences at this time and first-century defences are known at Winchester. In Britain the vast majority of towns received defences only at the end of the second century; those with first-century defences were evidently special cases and seem to have been either *coloniae* or *municipia*, or else places lying within the client kingdom.

We get our best picture of early urban development at Verulamium (fig. 2). Here, flanking the *cardo maximus* was a row of shops fronted by a portico looking very like barracks, all entirely built in half-timber and clearly all covered by a single roof (3). This must mean that all ten shops were in single ownership and were let out to clients or tenants. The method of construction with a clay-packed timber frame was previously unknown in Britain, and was obviously introduced by the Roman Army — as is indicated by the remains at Valkenburg in the Netherlands. So here is another indication of official interest in, and assistance to, the new cities. The Britons themselves had no experience of what was required, and the nearest source of help was the legions of the Army in Britain.

(3) For the details of this building see FRERE S.S., *Verulamium Excavations*, I, Oxford, 1972, 13-23.

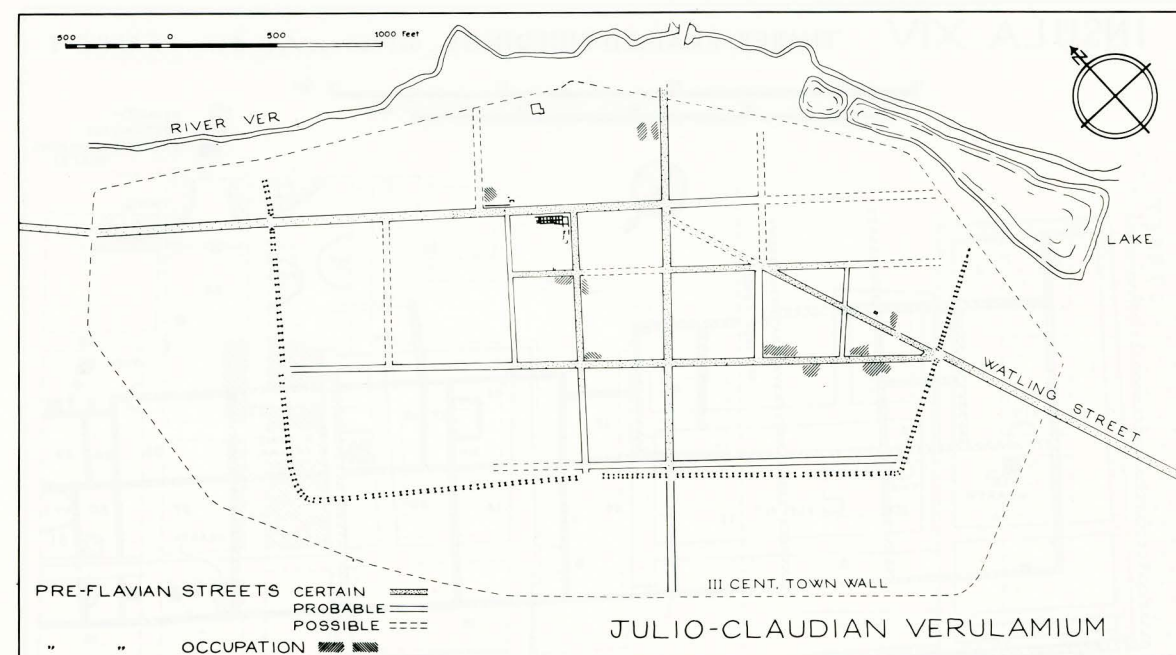


Fig. 3. *Verulamium*. c. A.D.49-60.

In 61 the whole of the early city at *Verulamium*, like Colchester, was destroyed by Boudicca, and it lay desolate for 15 years. At length, in the late 70s construction began again on a large scale. Not only were the shops of *Insula XIV* rebuilt to a similar but slightly less regular, less military-looking plan, but other buildings such as two temples and a market hall were provided, and the *forum* was dedicated in 79 (fig. 4). The *forum* was a colossal structure, overwhelming anything else in the city; it covered 2 ha and is an early example of a type of *forum* well known in several Gaulish cities. But other *fora* built in the late first

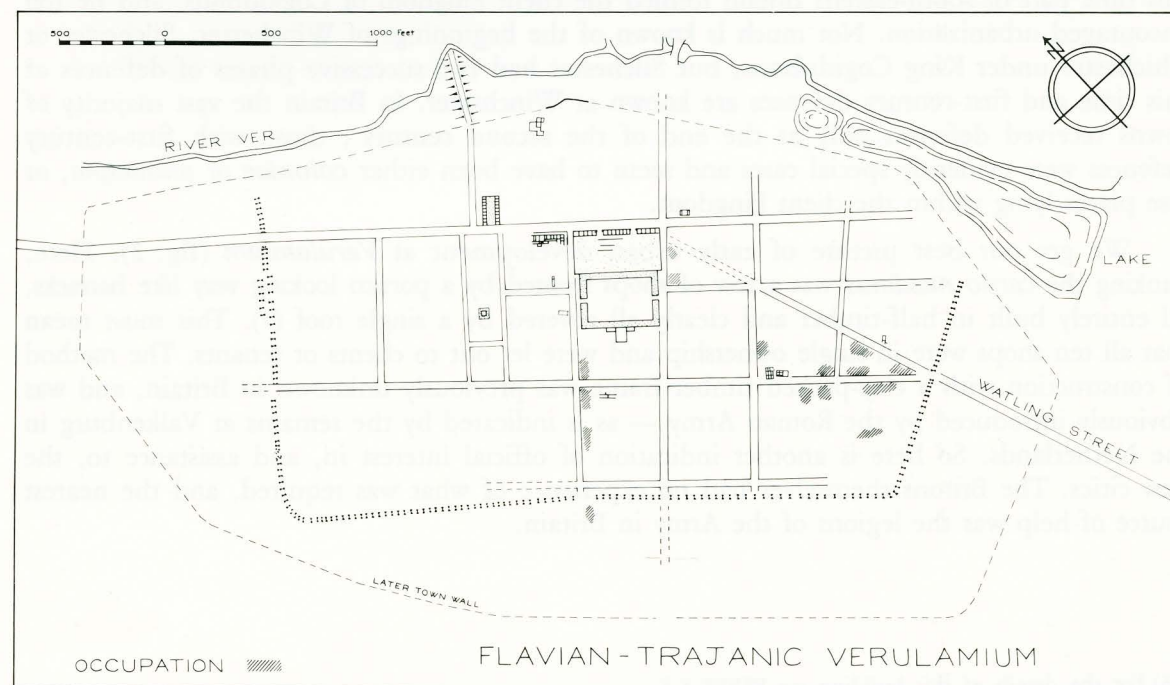


Fig. 4. *Verulamium*. c. A.D.75-115.

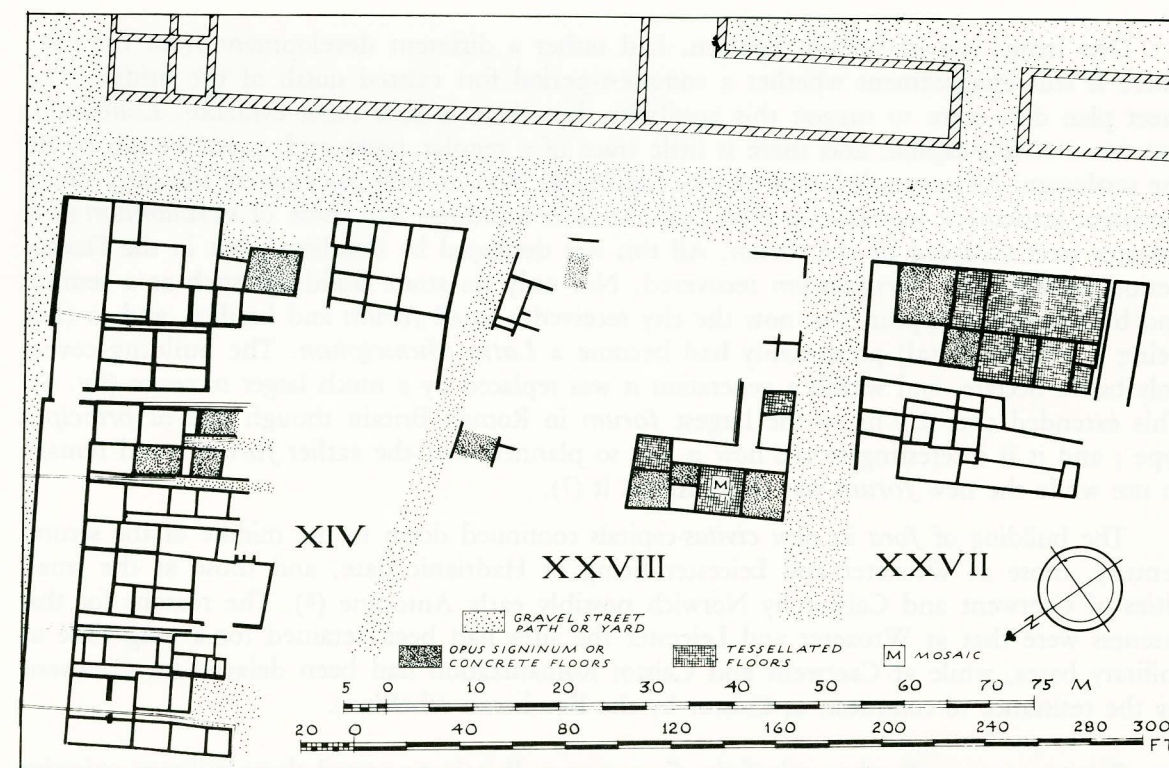


Fig. 5. *Verulamium*: *Insula XIV* c. A.D.150-155. Half-timbered buildings destroyed in the Antonine Fire and part of the *Forum* across the street.

century or later in Britain were all of the so-called *principia* type, and may suggest that army planners were still assisting the urbanization programme. This type of *forum* was more suitable for communities with little wealth. When *Insula XIV* was rebuilt in 130 and again in 150, the needs of traders had expanded considerably (fig. 5), and the fact that the structures are no longer under one roof may suggest that individual private *ownership* was replacing a landlord-tenant relationship. By the middle of the second century this part of *Verulamium* contained a number of private houses (fig. 5) as well as these shops; and though one or two are of comfortable size, they are still minute compared with the huge *forum* nearby (4).

The last main way in which the army affected urbanization was in the foundation of *coloniae*. And here there has been a very important discovery. Both at Colchester, founded in 49, and at Gloucester, founded in 96-8, the earliest veterans lived under paramilitary conditions. At Colchester in the early colonial period the centurions' houses remained standing and were not replaced by new buildings (5). At Gloucester the early barracks were indeed demolished, but the earliest colonial houses were of exactly the same type only more of them were crowded into the available space. Not until 150 does a true type of town house appear (6). Thus in early second-century Gloucester the general standard of living was rather lower than in some contemporary *civitas*-capitals. This forms a strange contrast with what we know of early Xanten or Köln.

(4) For a discussion of the development of *Verulamium* see FRERE S.S., *Verulamium Excavations*, II, London, 1983, Introduction.

(5) See CRUMMY P., *Britannia*, VIII, 1977, 65-105 for the development of Colchester.

(6) For Gloucester see HURST H., *The Antiquaries Journal*, LII, 1972, 24-69; LIV, 1974, 8-52.

One major city in Britain, London, had rather a different development from the rest. There is still disagreement whether a conquest-period fort existed north of the bridge. The street plan does seem to suggest this possibility, but there is little other evidence. *Londinium* was not a *civitas*-capital, and there is little trace of a regular street grid, even though by 60 the settlement had extended west of the Wallbrook. We can only say that by the early fifties a civilian settlement was arising, with large wooden buildings like those of *Verulamium* near the area later occupied by the *forum*. All this was destroyed by Boudicca; but in the Flavian period London like *Verulamium* recovered. Not only do stone buildings such as a temple and bath-building appear, but now the city received a small *forum* and basilica, and so (not being a *civitas*-capital) presumably had become a *Latin Municipium*. The building covers only half a hectare, and within a generation it was replaced by a much larger successor (fig. 6). This extended over 2.9 ha — the largest *forum* in Roman Britain though still of *principia* type; and it is interesting to see how it was so planned that the earlier *forum* could remain in use while the new *forum* was rising round it (7).

The building of *fora* in new *civitas*-capitals continued down to the middle of the second century, those at Wroxeter and Leicester being of Hadrianic date, and those at the small cities of Caerwent and Caistor by Norwich possibly early Antonine (8). The reasons for this lateness were that at Wroxeter and Leicester the sites had been retained for a long time as military bases, while at Caerwent and Caistor Romanization had been delayed (at Caerwent by the resistance to conquest, at Caistor by the Boudiccan rebellion).

To summarize: By the end of the first century Britain possessed three military *coloniae* and two probable *municipia*. It is interesting to note that all three *coloniae* were placed on the sites of earlier legionary fortresses, which had become redundant and surplus to requirements. This was convenient, because the land was already in imperial ownership; natives did not have to be expropriated a second time; defences and even, as we have seen, accommodation already existed. At Colchester, indeed, the legionary defences were promptly dismantled, and the city lay open to Boudicca's attack; but at Lincoln and Gloucester, probably because of this example, the legionary defences were retained and soon were faced with stone walls. *Civitas*-capitals were built in planned form for native communities, and *fora* were soon provided together with other public buildings such as temples, market halls, theatres and amphitheatres (9). This programme of urbanization, most of it achieved between 75 and 140, was a triumph of Roman planning and political organization, for the native British themselves were relatively much more backward than those of Gaul, possessing few large nucleated settlements at places suitable for subsequent urban development. Below the rank of *civitas*-capital, the smaller towns of Roman Britain possessed neither street-grids nor major public buildings apart from temples and *mansiones* of the public post; but they too were walled in the third century.

(7) For the London *forum* see PHILP B.J., *Britannia*, VIII, 1977, 1-64 and for a good general account of the city see MARSDEN P., *Roman London*, London, 1980.

(8) Wroxeter *forum*: ATKINSON D., *Report on Excavations at Wroxeter 1923-27*, Oxford, 1942, RIB 288. Leicester *forum*: HEBDITCH M. and MELLOR J., *Britannia*, IV, 1973, 1-83. Caistor by Norwich: FRERE S.S., *Britannia*, II, 1971, 1-26. Caerwent *forum*: WACHER J.S., *The Towns of Roman Britain*, London, 1975, fig. 7 and pp. 375-389.

(9) For such buildings see WACHER J.S., *The Towns of Roman Britain*, London, 1975.

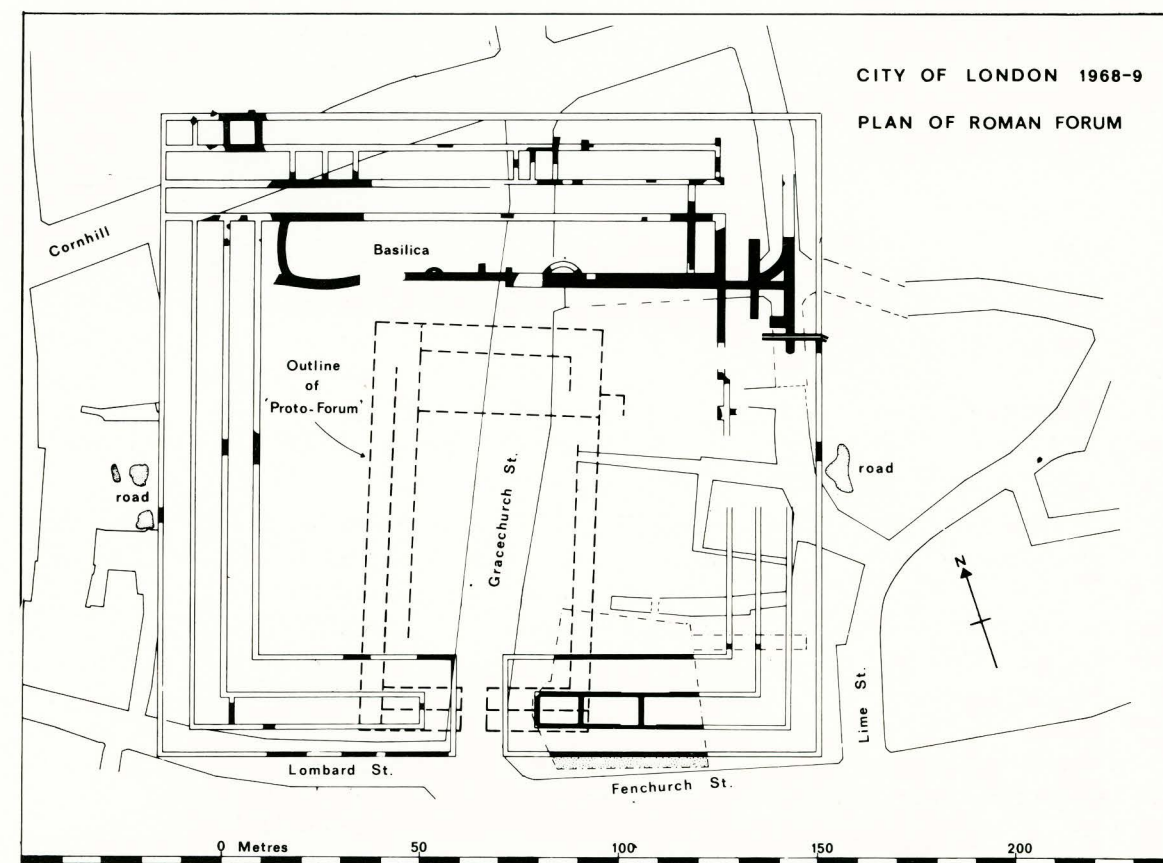


Fig. 6. London. Plan of the *Forum*, showing the position of the earlier smaller *forum* in dotted lines (after PHILP B.J., *Britannia* VIII, 1977, 38, fig. 13).