

H1: Rivers are a key factor in the sustainability of a settlement, as can be seen by contrasting the fortunes of Colchester and Silchester.

Silchester (or Calleva) and Colchester (Camulodunum) were both Iron Age fortified settlements. After the Roman Conquest in 43CE they became influential, defended Roman towns of a high status; as proved by the unusual wall construction at Silchester, and the fact that Colchester was the capital of Britain until the Boudiccan revolt of 61CE. However, after the Romans left Britain in 410CE their fortunes diverge. Colchester was resettled by the Anglo Saxons by 450CE, and gradually developed once again into an important commercial centre. Population estimates for the town based on recording from the Domesday Book suggest that about 2,000 people were living there in 1086, whilst by the year 1400 this had increased to 8,000 people. Silchester on the other hand was not re-settled by the Anglo Saxons, instead the nearby former Roman town of Dorchester on Thames was chosen. The small village which had been on the site of Silchester was abandoned in around 1400, possibly due to the Black Death. A key reason why Silchester was not re-settled in any meaningful way by the Anglo Saxons was that it was 10 miles away from the nearest river. This meant that it was not on a good communications or trade route and so was not suitable for the Anglo Saxon way of life. This stunted the town's rejuvenation, and contributed heavily to it being abandoned later. Colchester on the other hand had been an important trade port under the Romans (due to its location on the river Colne). The Anglo Saxons were also then able to trade from this settlement, and it grew once again, becoming one of the country's principle towns. Therefore on the basis of this comparison it appears that ease of trade was a key determinant of which settlements would prosper in the Anglo Saxon and Medieval periods, and that rivers (and easy access to the coast) were more important for trade than roads during this period. This led to towns with good road connections but poor waterway access declining (Silchester for example), whereas towns with good road access which were close to rivers and the sea developing further (Colchester).

In the past there were many factors which dictated the locating and subsequent development of major settlements, chief amongst which was the presence of a trade and communications route (in most cases access to rivers and the sea). This access to other areas of the country meant that these settlements were able to thrive and expand, whilst others were held back. This contrast can be seen in the examples of Silchester and Colchester. These towns became major Roman settlements after the conquest of the first century CE, named Calleva and Camulodunum. However, by the year 1400 Silchester had declined firstly into a village (Silcestre) before being abandoned. Meanwhile, Colchester had expanded into a city of up to 8,000 people and had spread outside of the confines of the Roman city walls. This essay will compare the settlements throughout the Roman period and then again in the year 1400, to assess what impact their respective access to a river had on their development.

Silchester or Calleva was founded as the capital of the Atrebates in 20-10BCE as an organised and fortified town of 32 hectares. It was positioned on a defensible promontory, with views to the South and East. An easy source of drinking water was available from below a thin layer of gravel at the site,

whilst dense forests not only provided protection on two sides, but a source of building material¹. It became a major trading settlement as it was well connected by ancient tracks to the majority of Southern England. Metals, grain and slaves, as well as other commodities including those from the Roman Empire were traded. As it was such a major settlement it was taken over by the Romans in order to stamp their authority on the defeated populous, after their conquest of 43CE². Calleva became the local administration centre for the raising of taxes and provision of justice, as well as trade. Under the Romans, the town was extensively remodelled. The street pattern became a grid, with shops and workshops on the two major roads (North to South and East to West), whilst richer and more ornate houses were built further back. In around 270CE a substantial wall was built around the town, enclosing an area of 40 hectares. This wall provides a clue as to the importance of Calleva to the Romans. It is 2.4km long and originally stood to a height of up to 7.8 meters. Instead of using tiles for the levelling courses as was the norm, limestone was used, which came from as far away as Bath (75 miles away). As clay has always been abundant in the area, this was a gesture meant to reflect the status of the town³. Calleva began to decline towards the end of the Roman period. The houses from this time are of a poorer construction, and follow the formerly strict grid pattern more loosely. The basilica became an industrial metalworking site instead of the centre of local administration and the town became more crowded. However, the town remained strong until 550-650CE, well after the Romans left. This period however, ended in the systematic abandonment of the town (including the infilling of wells) for, as of yet, unknown reasons.

Colchester had also been an important pre Roman tribal centre; as it was the capital of the Trinovantes tribe. This settlement had been an important trading port before the Romans arrived, evidenced by finds of Roman pottery pre dating 43CE⁴. However, this settlement had been a defended farmstead 3 miles from the site of the current town. It moved to its new location from Gosbecks after the Roman invasion⁵. The Romans saw the importance of Colchester as it was the royal capital of one of the most powerful tribes in the South East. Because of this they immediately founded a fortress on a flat spur of land near the river Colne, not far from the settlement. Before this could be finished however, its use changed. Camulodunum became a colony, a place for retired soldiers to settle⁶. The walls were removed to make more space for amenities and a large temple was built at the centre, creating the first Roman city in Britain. Camulodunum became the administrative and cultural capital. In 61CE the undefended town was burned to the ground by the Boudiccan revolt⁷. After this Colchester lost its status of capital, as the rival city of Londinium was better placed for trade and communication. Colchester however remained a very important cultural centre and international trading port. By 65CE the city had been repaired, complete with a new 2.8km long defensive wall, and as the town continued to expand the port and docks on the river Colne were improved. However, as with Calleva, the town declined as the Romans withdrew from Britain, and it was abandoned in 440CE.

¹ Reading Museum: Silchester, the wooded town.

² University of Reading: About Silchester

³ English Heritage: *Silchester Roman City Walls and Amphitheatre*.

⁴ British Archaeology at the Ashmolean Museum: Ironwork from Dorchester on Thames

⁵ Dr Mike Ibeji: Roman Colchester: Britain's first city

⁶ The Colchester Archaeologist: Discovering Roman Colchester

⁷ Ben and Associates Ltd: Colchester: Britain's oldest recorded town and first city

Under Roman rule therefore, the towns of Calleva and Camulodunum were both very high status, wealthy and expanding settlements. Much of this prosperity came from the fact that the Romans had developed pre existing oppida (very early forms of towns dating from the Iron Age), which had already become trade hubs. The Romans then fostered this success and so creating their wealth and status. However, after the Romans left Britain in 410CE the towns had very different fortunes:

Early Anglo Saxon settlers moved into the abandoned town of Colchester by 450CE. This is because the ruins of the Roman town provided an easily accessible (via the river and the Roman road network) and easily defensible place for an early colony; whilst being close to the original landing sites of the Anglo Saxons on the East coast. The settlers started by building their huts on the foundations of Roman buildings, slowly rejuvenating the town over a long period of time. As building techniques improved the new population began to use the rubble from the Roman city to build with (late examples of these buildings still remain today- Holy Trinity Church for example which was built in around 1000CE) . In 970CE the Danes (who had taken over the town) were driven out of the city by Edward the Elder, who then repaired the Roman walls. After Colchester continued to grow in importance, a mint was founded there in 991CE- a clear demonstration of the influence of the town. By the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, it had an estimated population of 2,000, which had increased to 8,000 by 1400. This was because the town had continued to be an important trade centre, especially famed for its cloth, with easy access to European markets (which had a desire for British cloth)⁸. Today Colchester is still an important river settlement on the site of the Roman town, although its trade importance has declined.

The fortunes of Silchester however were very different. Unlike Colchester it continued as a populated settlement until long after the Romans left. This settlement however did not have immediate access to the Channel and North Sea for trade, despite this it continued, possibly until as late as 550CE. After this the town was systematically abandoned⁹. By the time of the Domesday Book, the only settlement in the area is listed as the village of Silcestre¹⁰ - of which only the 12th Century St Mary's church remains. This building is situated near the east Gate of the Roman town and the medieval village was situated between the amphitheatre and the town wall. This village was abandoned in around 1400, possibly due to the Black Death. It had however been a fraction of the size of its high status ancestor, as it was quite literally in the shadow of the old roman walls. The present village was founded in the 18th Century to the West of the roman town¹¹.

The reasons for the decline of Silchester have been long debated by both historians and archaeologists, as much of the story remains unclear¹². However, one of the main arguments was the lack of Anglo Saxon activity, as detailed above. Colchester is an example of a town which was settled, enabling it to slowly develop over time; whereas there was little to no Anglo Saxon activity at Silchester. Much of this is due to the geographical differences between the two sites (mainly their location respective to a river) in the context of general Anglo Saxon settlement patterns.

⁸ Professor Richard H. Britnell: Colchester in the early 15th Century

⁹ Professor Michael Fulford: City of the Dead: Calleva Atrebatum

¹⁰ Domesday Book online: What does the Domesday book contain

¹¹ Silchester Parish Council: about Silchester

¹² Professor Michael Fulford: City of the Dead: Calleva Atrebatum

When the Anglo Saxons invaded the South and East of the country after the departure of the Romans in 410CE, they began to settle in small and spread out communities. These were generally away from the sites of Roman towns, partly due to the fact that the people were scared of these places and many disliked the Romans and their way of life, but also because they did not need large centralised settlements the likes of which had gone before. Anglo Saxon society was far more dispersed than the Roman way of life that they replaced. There were no major settlements or equivalents to Roman towns for several hundred years, as markets, administration and justice were all run from different settlements¹³. The Roman town had been a place which provided all of these things, and therefore drew people into them, but this did not occur for a long time under the Anglo Saxons. Some Anglo Saxons did create small settlements within the walls of old Roman towns, but this was out of a desire to use the Roman defences not an attempt to replace what had stood there before. Therefore, the Anglo Saxons did not immediately replace Roman towns, instead when these centres did eventually develop it was as a result of prosperous trading settlements gradually enlarging. These settlements were the villages which had been founded near rivers or on the coast, as this enabled trade between settlements to occur easily and efficiently.

When we apply this more general knowledge to Colchester we can see why the settlement was sustained from the Roman period through the Anglo Saxons and to today. Colchester's defensive walls meant that it was an attractive place for the invaders to settle. Despite their general fear of old Roman settlements, people moved into the town and built huts on the foundations of the previous buildings. This provided a secure settlement, which is what saved Colchester from being completely abandoned from 440CE (it had been abandoned for a period of up to 10 years between the Romans leaving and the Anglo Saxons building there). However, Colchester was not yet anything like the major settlement which it had previously been. The town's gradual growth from Anglo Saxon village into medieval town was due to the Anglo Saxon use of the country's waterways as their main trade routes and its location on the East coast, ideally situated for cross channel trade with the Anglo Saxon homelands as opposed to the old Roman roads and ancient tracks. Therefore the settlement's position on the banks of the river Colne allowed it to prosper. The town grew wealthier and expanded over hundreds of years and by the year 1086CE and the Domesday Book it had a population of around 2,000 people¹⁴. Therefore as the Anglo Saxon system of dispersed centres of justice, trade and commerce, evolved into the more centralised medieval system, these functions moved to towns such as Colchester (which had become influential in size and wealth due to their riverside positions). Therefore the fact that Colchester was on a river, and was settled by the Anglo Saxons, meant that it could develop into a town again, instead of suffer the fate of Silchester.

Silchester had fared very differently in the important period between the end of Roman rule, and the beginning of the Anglo Saxon settlement of Britain. The town had struggled on until as late as 550CE, but importantly, the Anglo Saxons did not settle here in a major way. Instead, they created an early settlement in the remains of the nearby Roman town of Dorchester on Thames, 10 miles away¹⁵. They chose this settlement for similar reasons as Colchester; it was on a defensible position and next to a river with access to the Channel and North Sea. Silchester on the other hand whilst easily defensible, lacked easy access to water making it unsuitable for the water orientated Saxon

¹³ Doctor G.R. Jones: Anglo Saxon England: Settlement- rural and town life

¹⁴ Domesday Book Online: What does the Domesday book contain

¹⁵ University of Oxford: Dorchester on Thames: History of the area

way of transporting goods in bulk. Another factor in the choice of Dorchester over Silchester may have been the fact that Dorchester was abandoned after the Romans left, whereas Silchester was not. The fact that the Britons struggled on at Silchester possibly prevented the invading Saxons from choosing it as a location for an early colony. Because of these reasons, Silchester was not re-settled by the Anglo Saxons; in fact it is one theory that it was the Saxons who filled in the wells at Silchester in an attempt to suppress the British. Therefore Silchester was not able to develop into anything more than a farming community reliant on other settlements. This community was the village of Silcestre recorded in the Domesday Book, which was situated between the remains of the amphitheatre and the old town wall. This was a small village living quite literally in the shadow of what had gone before and it was abandoned by 1400, possibly due to the Black Death.

It therefore seems that much of the decline of Silchester was as a result of its original positioning. It is thought that this area was chosen due to its commanding views to the South and East. It was protected on the two other sides by dense forests which also provided a good source of building material to its original Iron Age founders. Finally there is a ready supply of water just below the shallow layer of gravel which covers the site. However, the fact that there was no direct access to the river meant that this settlement did not fit the changing needs of the people resulting in its fading. Dorchester on Thames was chosen instead as being more suitable, although this soon became overshadowed by the rapid growth of Reading. Reading was on the major road between London and the south West¹⁶, and so grew like Silchester had previously done for the same reason. This, coupled with Reading's position further down the river Thames from Dorchester meant that it had the benefits of road traffic and river trade, as opposed to Dorchester which had less road traffic.

Therefore we can see that the presence of a river and access to the sea at Colchester, and the lack of one at Silchester, resulted in their fortunes being very different after the Romans left Britain. Colchester was a defensible trading post, whilst Silchester was only a defensible promontory. This meant that Colchester was able to expand in wealth and population, whilst Silchester was left behind by better placed rival settlements. This is a pattern we can see more widely across the country. Large, historic settlements tend to be either on the coast, or on a river; as these positions provided an easy source of communication and trade. The differing fortunes of the towns cannot be wholly put down to their location in relation to rivers, but the contrasting development of Silchester and Colchester demonstrates that rivers were a key factor in the sustainability of settlements in the post Roman and Medieval periods.

Therefore we can see that the geographical position of these settlements was very influential in their sustainability, dictating their development and history. The presence of a river (and therefore access to the sea) at Colchester, and the lack of one at Silchester, resulted in their fortunes being very different after the Romans left Britain. Its favourable local geography led Colchester to be a defensible trading post, whilst Silchester was only a defensible promontory. This meant that whilst Colchester was able to develop further, expanding in wealth and population, Silchester declined, as it was overtaken by better placed rival settlements. The geography of the sites is therefore able to explain the differences in their development, as it dictated their sustainability as settlements. This is a pattern we can see more widely across the country. Large, historic settlements tend to be either on the coast, or on a river; as these positions provided an easy source of communication and trade.

¹⁶ The Highways Agency: A Brief History of our Roads

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Acknowledgements: Doctor Paul Sealey, Colchester Castle Museum.

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Thomas Cromwell: History and Description of the Ancient town and Borough of Colchester in Essex, 1825 Published by: Robert Jennings, Poultry and Swinborne and Walter, Colchester. (only used for general descriptions of the town due to its age)

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http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=s9dLAAAAMAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gb_s_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Maps:

AngloSaxons.net: A map of the major settlements in the C9th. Notice the inclusion of Colchester, Dorchester and Reading but not Silchester. A larger version can be found at: <http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=get&type=map&id=map9c>



Photographer's resource.co.uk: Map showing the Roman roads and cities of Britain in 150CE. Larger version available: http://www.photographers-resource.co.uk/a_heritage/Roman/Roman%20roads.htm

