

Walls and Power: The Fortification of Roman Towns in Britain from the 2nd to 4th Centuries CE

ABSTRACT

From the later 2nd century CE onwards, many Roman settlements in Britannia acquired substantial defensive walls, with further waves of construction and modification in the 3rd and 4th centuries. This paper synthesises existing scholarship on the chronology, distribution, and purpose of these defences, with particular attention to recent work on small towns and road connectivity and to arguments that see late Roman fortification as a response to internal fragmentation as much as external threat. It examines major civic centres (e.g. Colchester, London, Cirencester, Verulamium), lesser walled towns (e.g. Horncastle/Banovallum), and the exceptional late defences of Cunetio in Wiltshire, where a civilian settlement may have been transformed into a fortress-like administrative and military hub. It concludes that town walls in Britannia should be understood as polyvalent monuments: at once military infrastructure, civic self-representation, instruments of economic and political control, and, in the later period, expressions of localised power in a fragmenting province.

The construction of stone and earthwork defences around towns is one of the most visible legacies of Roman rule in Britain. Yet, unlike legionary fortresses and frontier installations, urban walls appeared relatively late and unevenly across the province. Early imperial policy prioritised military strongpoints and key administrative centres, while many smaller settlements remained without substantial defences until the later 2nd or 3rd centuries CE. Traditional interpretations have seen these town walls primarily as defensive responses to external threats - northern tribes, seaborne raiders, or large-scale invasions - and as civic monuments signalling Roman status and urban identity, especially for *coloniae* and *civitas* capitals. More recent scholarship complicates this picture. Network analysis of town locations and roads suggests that the large-scale provision of defences around small towns in Roman Britain is structured by road-network connectivity rather than simple proximity to frontiers, while other studies emphasise the role of internal conflict, tribal competition and the breakdown of central authority in the later empire. Using an existing summary of walled settlements in Britannia as a starting point, this paper integrates these perspectives to reassess when, where, and especially why town walls were built and modified in Roman Britain.

2. Early Imperial Context: Forts, Not Towns

In the 1st century CE, substantial fortifications in Britain were largely confined to legionary fortresses such as *Deva Victrix* (Chester), *Eboracum* (York) and *Isca Augusta* (Caerleon); auxiliary forts along key corridors, including the Stanegate and, later, Hadrian's Wall; and a few high-status colonial or proto-urban centres. The majority of emerging small towns and roadside settlements remained unwalled. This reflects a combination of factors: relative internal security during the early decades after conquest once major resistance, such as the Boudican revolt, had been suppressed; the military's dominance in providing formal defensive architecture; and the fact that many civilian settlements developed gradually from *vici* and market centres without an initial defensive blueprint.

An important exception is Camulodunum (Colchester), whose stone walls were begun soon after the devastation of the Boudican revolt in 60/61 CE and largely complete by around 80 CE. These are often regarded as the earliest true Roman town walls in Britain and were built explicitly in the aftermath of a catastrophic internal uprising. The early date and context suggest that walls could be a direct reaction to internal unrest, predating later frontier pressures by more than a century.

3. Main Phase of Urban Fortification (Late 2nd-3rd Centuries)

From the later 2nd century onwards, there was a pronounced wave of wall building around *civitas* capitals and major towns. Substantial circuits, frequently in masonry, appear at places such as Verulamium (St Albans), with a large circuit wall and later towers and gates; Corinium Dobunorum (Cirencester), whose defences enclosed almost 100 hectares with a circuit second in size only to London; Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), where massive walls, largely 3rd century in date, were built upon earlier earthworks; and Londinium (London), where a landward wall was constructed around 200 CE and later tied into a defended riverfront. Alongside these major centres, many smaller towns also began to acquire earthwork or masonry defences during this period, often strengthened or rebuilt in stone in the 3rd century. The distribution is far from random.

Recent work applying network analysis to the Roman road system and settlement pattern has shown that defended small towns in Britain cluster along highly connected road segments. They frequently occupy junctions or chokepoints where the control of movement and communication was crucial. The pattern suggests a concern with protecting the internal transport network, not just with mounting a static defence against external invasion. This large-scale provision of defences around small towns in 2nd-century Britain appears unusual within the wider empire and hints at region-specific anxieties. Rather than acting only as a frontier bulwark, town walls in this period helped secure communication routes, markets and administrative centres that underpinned the functioning of the province.

4. Late Roman Strengthening (4th Century)

By the 4th century, many towns already possessed basic walls, yet substantial reinforcement and modification continued. Across the province we see the addition of external towers and bastions, especially at gates and vulnerable stretches, the strengthening of gatehouses and, in some places, the reduction of the defended area by creating inner circuits that isolated a smaller core. These late modifications indicate a sustained concern with defence even where walls had been in place for a century or more. The period coincides with increased raiding, particularly along the coasts, the erection of the Saxon Shore forts, and a broader climate of political instability within the empire and the province, characterised by usurpations, civil wars and changes in the military command structure.

Cunetio in Wiltshire represents an especially striking late development. Its stone circuit appears to have been constructed after about 360 CE, cutting across earlier roads and streets and enclosing a smaller, more controlled core. This was not simply the strengthening of an inherited civic wall. It may represent the deliberate conversion of a road town into a fortified administrative and military compound. Within this context, town walls were not static monuments but evolving structures, adapted as local conditions, state priorities and perceptions of threat shifted over time.

5. Functions of Town Walls: Defence, Prestige, and Control

For major centres such as Londinium, walls clearly had an external defensive function. They protected the provincial capital and its river port from seaborne raiders or upriver attacks and offered refuge for surrounding rural populations in times of crisis. The massive defences at Cirencester and Verulamium likewise would have posed significant obstacles to any hostile force lacking siege equipment, securing stores, workshops and elites vital to the provincial economy.

At the same time, the scale and elaboration of some circuits far exceeded immediate practical needs. In flourishing towns such as Calleva Atrebatum or Venta Silurum (Caerwent), late 3rd-4th century stone walls enclosed generous areas relative to their likely population. Here, walls functioned as statements of identity and status: marking a settlement as a *civitas* capital or *colonia*, framing monumental cores and materialising a Roman urban ideal in stone and earth.

Other scholars have emphasised the role of town walls in internal control, especially in the later Roman period. In this perspective, fortified small towns and compact, heavily fortified enclosures are responses to internal fragmentation and localised conflict rather than exclusively to external barbarian pressure. Fortified towns could serve as refuges for local elites, guarding agricultural surplus, treasure and dependants, and could mark ethnic or tribal enclaves in a landscape of competing groups. Patterns of fire damage, coin hoards and late fortification in some regions are consistent with raiding and civil strife within Britain itself. In this view, town walls become tools for controlling access to markets and resources, excluding hostile neighbours or rival factions and asserting local autonomy as central imperial authority weakens.

6. Case Studies

6.1 Camulodunum (Colchester)

Camulodunum is often regarded as the earliest securely attested walled town in Britain. Its stone circuit was begun soon after the Boudican destruction of the colonia in 60/61 CE and completed by around 80 CE. Built explicitly in the aftermath of a catastrophic internal uprising, the walls combine a defensive response to recent trauma with a symbolic assertion of Roman authority and colonial status. They foreshadow later town fortifications but arise from a very specific conjuncture of rebellion, reprisal and rebuilding.

6.2 Londinium

Londinium's landward wall, constructed around 200 CE and later tied into a defended riverfront, enclosed an area of roughly 330 acres. The defences have been linked to threats from the sea and to the city's increasing strategic importance as administrative and commercial hub. The sheer scale and expense of the wall underline London's role as a provincial showcase as much as a military strongpoint. Its defences demonstrate how prestige and security were closely intertwined in the provincial capital.

6.3 Cirencester (Corinium Dobunorum)

Corinium Dobunorum, second-largest defended circuit in Roman Britain after London, provides an instructive example of a major civitas capital. Built mainly in the 2nd-3rd centuries, the walls enclosed nearly 100 hectares with a circuit of approximately 3.6 kilometres. Excavations reveal impressive gates and later towers, indicating continued investment in defence and display. As the second city of the province, Cirencester's walls illustrate how civic prestige, regional importance and genuine concern for security could all be expressed in a single monumental envelope.

6.4 Horncastle (Banovalium?) - a Late, Lesser Walled Town

Horncastle in Lincolnshire is a key example of what has been termed a late Roman "lesser walled town". Archaeological evidence shows an unenclosed settlement to the south, occupied from the 1st-4th centuries, and a separate later walled enclosure on a defensible position between the rivers Bain and Waring. The defences of this enclosure date to the late 3rd or early 4th century, with no evidence for earlier occupation within the circuit. Traditionally identified, though not securely, with Banovalium ("wall on the Bain") known from the Ravenna Cosmography, Horncastle combines a late construction date, a small defended area and a strategic river-crossing location. This mixture aligns well with interpretations that see such walls as local strongholds in a troubled late Roman landscape, serving internal security and elite control more than frontier defence or traditional civic display.

6.5 Cunetio (Cunovetio), Wiltshire - Town, Tax Hub or Late Roman Fort?

On the River Kennet near modern Mildenhall, east of Marlborough, lay one of the most perplexing fortified settlements in Roman Britain. Cunetio was neither a provincial capital nor a known legionary base, yet in the later 4th century it acquired defences of extraordinary scale. The buried settlement, known principally from aerial photography, geophysical survey and limited excavation, extended across more than 18 hectares. Its later stone circuit enclosed about 7.5 hectares, replacing an earlier double-ditched earthwork enclosure of approximately 6 hectares.

The stone wall had mortared flint foundations approximately 5 to 5.9 metres wide, projecting bastions and a monumental southern gate with a broad carriageway flanked by towers. Seventeen bastions have been identified, although their irregular spacing suggests that others may remain undiscovered. Dating evidence from the western entrance indicates that the stone circuit was constructed after about 360 CE, probably during the period 360-380. This makes it among the latest, and perhaps the latest, major stone defences known from the civilian area of Roman Britain. At some stage the western carriageway was deliberately narrowed until it admitted pedestrian traffic only, a change that suggests increasingly restricted access.

Cunetio's location is essential to understanding the investment. It stood beside a river crossing and at the junction of as many as six important roads, linking routes towards Silchester, Bath, Winchester, Old Sarum, Wanborough and Cirencester. Internally, the central and eastern parts of the town possessed a planned street system and substantial stone buildings. A large courtyard building of at least twenty-four rooms occupied a central position and may have served as a *mansio* or another official public building, although its precise function remains unproven.

The later circuit did more than surround the established town. It was laid across earlier streets and approach roads, preventing some former routes from continuing to function. The result was a radical alteration of the settlement's morphology and probably of its purpose. Such a project was likely beyond the resources of an ordinary small-town community. Archaeologists have therefore suggested that Cunetio may have become a regional administrative centre, a collection point for taxes and military provisions, a base for a component of the late Roman mobile field army, or some combination of these roles.

The taxation hypothesis is especially relevant to the *annona militaris*, the system through which food, fodder and other supplies were collected for the army. A strongly defended compound at a major road junction could have received, stored and redistributed such resources while controlling official travel through the Kennet valley. Yet the archaeological evidence does not prove this role. Environmental samples recovered during the 2009 evaluation contained too little cereal material to confirm large-scale storage or collection, and no inscription identifies the site as a tax office, granary complex or military headquarters.

INTERPRETIVE CAUTION

The phrase "late Roman fort" is useful as an interpretation of Cunetio's fortress-like character, but it should not be treated as a proven identification. No named garrison, legionary fortress plan or formal military inscription has been found. The strongest formulation is that the late enclosure may have functioned as a fortified state compound, perhaps combining administration, taxation, supply and a *Comitatensian* military presence.

The celebrated Cunetio Hoard adds a further layer of intrigue but must be kept chronologically separate from the late stone defences. Discovered immediately south of the town in 1978, it contained 54,951 coins and was buried around 274 CE, roughly a century before the stone circuit was constructed. It demonstrates the movement and concealment of very substantial wealth at Cunetio during the political and monetary turmoil of the 3rd century, but it cannot be treated as the treasury of the later fortified centre.

Cunetio appears to have remained occupied into the early 5th century, before the specialised administrative and economic systems that may have sustained it ceased to function. Its abandonment creates a telling paradox: some of the strongest inland defences in Roman Britain were built only decades before imperial government withdrew. If the enclosure protected taxation, army supplies, officials or mobile troops, then the walls lost their central purpose when the state network behind them disappeared. Cunetio may therefore have ended not because its fortifications were weak, but because the institution they served no longer existed.

7. Discussion

The evidence discussed above suggests that no single explanation suffices for all walled settlements in Britannia. Instead, the meaning and function of town walls shifted over time and varied between sites. In the early phase (1st-early 2nd century), fortifications were concentrated in legionary fortresses and auxiliary forts, with a handful of exceptional civic projects such as Colchester arising from specific crises. In the main civic phase of the later 2nd and 3rd centuries, walls spread across *civitas* capitals and important small towns, driven by a blend of prestige, urban planning ideals and emerging security concerns. The road-network focus of defended small towns points to an interest in controlling movement and securing communications within the province.

In the late Roman phase (late 3rd-4th century), continued strengthening of existing circuits and the fortification of lesser towns coincide with political fragmentation, economic contraction and intensified raiding. Compact, heavily fortified enclosures make most sense when seen through the lens of internal conflict, regionalism and the breakdown of central control. Horncastle may represent a local stronghold in which security and elite control took precedence over traditional civic display. Cunetio, by contrast, may record an unusually late attempt by the Roman state to retain control of roads, taxation, supply and mobile military power. Its defences transformed rather than merely protected the existing settlement.

The comparison is significant. Town walls might serve civic communities, local magnates or the imperial administration, and the same circuit could perform more than one of these roles. A gate could repel attackers while also regulating traders, travellers and taxable goods. A bastioned wall could display Roman authority while sheltering officials, stores or troops. Walls were therefore not passive edges around towns. They were active instruments through which communities and governments organised access, resources and power.

Conclusion

The walling of Roman settlements in Britannia was neither a simple, linear response to external barbarian threat nor merely an architectural expression of civic pride. Instead, it emerged from changing combinations of military strategy, administrative status, road-network connectivity and internal political dynamics. Early exceptional projects like Colchester reflect the trauma of rebellion and the desire to materialise Roman authority in stone. The wide adoption of walls around *civitas* capitals and major towns in the later 2nd and 3rd centuries expresses both prestige and a concern to secure key nodes in the provincial transport and communication network.

The late Roman fortification of lesser towns such as Horncastle, together with modifications to existing circuits, makes most sense when viewed against a background of internal conflict and localised competition for power. Cunetio carries the argument further. Its immense post-360 defences, their disruption of earlier roads and the possibility of administrative, taxation and military functions suggest that an established town could be recast as a fortress-like state compound. The interpretation remains provisional, but it demonstrates how difficult it is to separate urban defence from the machinery of imperial control.

Seen over the long term, town walls in Roman Britain chart the province's trajectory from confident conquest and integration to defensive consolidation and eventual fragmentation. At Cunetio, Rome may have built most massively at the very moment its authority was becoming least secure. The walls endured underground; the roads, taxes, commands and institutions that gave them meaning did not. Roman town walls remain crucial for understanding how communities negotiated power, identity and security at the edge of the Roman world.

Sources for the Cunetio case study

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