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## Hypothesizing Roman Alnwick

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In his Viewpoint, Cataldi (2013) puts into print a hypothesis first proposed at the IGC urban morphology conference at the University of Northumbria in 2004 (Cataldi *et al.*, 2004). I spent some time on the morning following its presentation suggesting to delegates why this was a false hypothesis. Unfortunately it has now been resurrected in print and so I too must turn to print.

The first point to make is that Roman Britain was not Italy. The area between Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall was the extreme northern edge of the Roman Empire. It was a military zone and for much of the period was disputed territory, to the extent that the Romans by about 105 CE withdrew back behind Hadrian's defences, though at one time they had marched troops beyond the River Forth into Perthshire (Scotland). Even then, there were subsequent periods of revolt in these border areas when troops had been withdrawn to serve elsewhere in the Empire (Wacher, 1978 pp. 38-58). Secondly, although the coastal plain and broad river valleys of present-day Northumberland were, and are, good agricultural land, the Pennine uplands are boggy moorland and, for much of the year, extremely inhospitable climatically. This is a landscape where walkers could quite easily 'sink into the mud' (Cataldi, 2013, p. 125), though in this case they will sink into peat bogs. A walk on Alnwick Moor, just to the west of the town, would prove the point. There are prehistoric ridgeway routes on the Northumberland hills, marked by cairns and small earthwork fortifications, but they are not necessarily the easiest way to traverse the land over long distances. Thirdly, until the eighteenth century the vast majority of this upland was unenclosed woodland and moorland: almost all the field boundaries derive from the enclosures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Using mapped field boundaries as evidence of Roman grid planning is therefore injudicious in the extreme without close examination of enclosure map evidence to determine which, if any, field boundaries derive from pre-enclosure times. The leap backwards by another 1000 years to hypothesize a Roman origin, as Cataldi does, is still more injudicious.

Cataldi's hypotheses, however, begin not in Northumberland but in south-east England, using the Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain, which is published at the scale of 16 miles to an inch: in

other words, it is an extremely small-scale map on which to base a metrological argument for a geodetically oriented grid of 12-mile-sided squares covering the whole country except for the extreme north of Scotland. Archaeologists and landscape historians have, over the past century, beginning with Haverfield (1921), investigated the evidence for Roman centuriation (grid planning) in the rural landscape. They have found a number of small areas, most of them in the south and east of the country, where historic field boundaries, tracks and roads hint that such planning may have been a reality in a few places on a small scale. There is very little evidence that grid planning took place on a large scale or over extensive areas (Dilke, 1971), though Peterson's recent work has hypothesized a number of larger-scale grids similar to Cataldi's. However, none of the speculated grids are north of Hadrian's Wall (Peterson, 2006).

A closer look at the evidence around Alnwick demonstrates how the argument breaks down at the local scale. Cataldi's Figure 3 shows the Roman road which was later known as the Devil's Causeway. If this is examined on the Ordnance Survey 1:25 000 map (OS Explorer Map 332, 2005) (not the 1:50 000, which does not show field boundaries), it can be traced running approximately north-north-west, 6-8 km west of Alnwick. Sensibly, it does not follow the topographical ridges, but passes from the Coquet valley into the Aln valley by way of a traverse across Lamb Hill, a mere 200 m high, using the valleys of small streams to ascend and descend the steep slopes. Then, having crossed the Edlingham Burn, the road crosses the low hill on its northern side before descending steeply into the valley of the Coe Burn, a minor tributary of the River Aln, which it crosses 1-2 km to the north. On the level land to the east of the Coe Burn, and a few hundred metres to the north of the Devil's Causeway road, the Romans built their fort of *Alauna*. This is marked on the Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain as at Learchild. High Learchild Farm is in fact about 1 km south west of the fort, on the other side of the Coe Burn, but the fields around the fort were known as Low Learchild. It is noteworthy that there are only four or five farmsteads within a kilometre or so of the fort and it is because there is no overlying later settlement that the fort was discovered in 1945 through the air photographic

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explorations of St Joseph (1951, p. 56). Later photographs, taken in the early 1950s, show that there were at least two periods of construction, so the fort was expanded, or made smaller, at some point in its history (St Joseph, 1955, p. 85). It has not been excavated and so there is no dating evidence. The fort is a large one – 244 x 183 metres, or about 4.4 ha. The fort's name is known from Ptolemy's *Geography* (II, 7) and the *Ravenna Cosmology*, where it is referred to as one of the three 'towns' (*polis*) of the Votadini tribe (Rivet and Smith, 1979, p. 245). It is listed between Corbridge (*Corstopitum*) and High Rochester (*Bremenium*) in a correct geographical sequence. However, Rivet and Smith suggest that these classical references may be repeating the name of another *Alauna*, the fort of Ardoch in Perthshire. There are up to eight places in Roman Britain named *Alauna*, all taking their name from the rivers on which they stand. The most urbanized of these settlements was at present-day Alcester in Warwickshire, on the River Alne, which was succeeded by a small medieval borough (Rivet and Smith, 1979, pp. 243-6).

So where does this leave 'Roman Alnwick'? The current town is 8 km from the Devil's Causeway Roman road and it is 8 km from the Low Learchild Roman fort. There is absolutely no archaeological evidence for a Roman presence within the later town bounds. It is located in the military zone beyond Hadrian's Wall where local people were no friends of the Romans, and where the Roman military authorities had to work hard to maintain order, usually with too few troops to do the job properly. It is extremely unlikely that there were troops to spare to man another fort at Alnwick so close to Low Learchild and so far from the only strategically important road through this part of the country. Finally, forts in the military zone rarely generated much in the way of civilian settlements at their gates, and these *vicus* settlements became ruinous as soon as the troops were withdrawn. They were not self-sustaining commercial entities (Wacher, 1978, pp. 38-58).

That leads to Cataldi's final strand of evidence for his hypotheses, namely the *-wic* place-name of Alnwick. He is correct in his assertion that this derives from the Latin *vicus*, but it is a loan word in Old English that has a number of meanings, some of which have urban connotations and others of which do not. Its most common meaning is 'dairy farm' (Smith, 1956) and there are other *-wic* settlements in the vicinity of Alnwick, including Denwick, over 1 km to the north-east, meaning 'dairy farm in the valley', and Howick, 'the high

farmstead', a few kilometres farther towards the coast. The element with the closest association to Roman sites is *wīchām* names, which are thought to be the location of Roman estates, often associated with Roman villas in the south of England, which became medieval parishes (Gelling, 1978 pp. 69-72). The urban *-wic* place names are attached to the coastal and riverine trading places that developed around the North Sea and English Channel in the late-eighth and early-ninth centuries (Hodges, 1989, pp. 69-104). Some of these places were close to preceding Roman settlements (though they did not overlie them), such as Hamwic (Southampton), Eoferwic / Jorvic (York) and Lundenwic (London), but others were on previously unoccupied sites, such as Gyppeswic (Ipswich), Dunwich and Norwich. It may be that Alnwick takes its name ('trading settlement on the River Aln?') as a, thus far unrecognized, already developing trading settlement of the eighth / ninth century. Berwick-on-Tweed ('barley farm', or, more probably, 'place where barley is traded') should also be added to this group of settlements. However, these are late eighth-century possibilities at the earliest and the Romans had withdrawn from Britain in 410 CE, so the origins of Alnwick are firmly where M. R. G. Conzen placed them – in the Anglian period, not the Roman. A 'more unified theory of urban morphology' (Cataldi, 2013, p.128) needs to be based on firm factual foundations, not hypothesis and speculation.

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## Excavating the origins of urban form: Çatalhöyük

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The early Neolithic settlement site of Çatalhöyük on the Konya Plain of central Anatolia, Turkey merits greater attention from urban morphologists for the evidence it provides of a very early urban form. Originally discovered by British archaeologist James Mellaart in 1958, Çatalhöyük ('twin mound' in Turkish) was initially identified as an early urban complex. Extensively excavated during 1962-1965, it was originally estimated to date from 6500 BC (Mellaart, 1967). Recent carbon 14 dating has revealed a range of eighteen settlement levels from 7400 BC to 6200 BC (Cessford, 2001), making it among the oldest substantial urban settlement complexes yet discovered in the Near East. Excavation by British archaeologist Ian Hodder from 1993 onward has divided the site into three areas: the South Area originally excavated by Mellaart, the North Area, excavated by Hodder, and the recent West Area site, revealed to be a Chalcolithic mound, dating between 6200 and 5200 BC (Connolly, 1999; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2013).

The primary focus of the Çatalhöyük site has been the South Area, where the oldest settlement levels have been excavated, notably Level VIB, now dated to 6500 BC (Cessford, 2001) with its complex of single-cell mud-brick, square rooms (Figure 1). Hodder (2007, p. 26) has characterized Çatalhöyük as 'a dense corporate huddling of houses'. This early agglomerated urban form differs substantially from the more familiar lateral form of medieval burgages and access streets as described by Conzen (1960). Instead the Neolithic form of Çatalhöyük had a vertical succession of settlement layers, each house cell replicating the form of an earlier family kinship room (During, 2005). The mud-brick houses were built on top of each other, replicating the former footprint of the earlier cell.

As a group, the kinship house cells formed an extensive array of adjacent rooms as seen in Level

VIB, now dated at 6500 BC (Figure 1). Here there is a connected group of rooms with a series of open spaces, originally thought to be communal 'courtyards' by Mellaart (1967), but now understood by Hodder (2006) to be refuge waste areas for sewage and trash: in effect proto-fringe zones for the complex. With access to each room cell by ladder, the roof areas probably served as open work platforms for domestic activities such as pottery, food preparation and weaving, which were already established in the Neolithic period. The room cells were used for cooking with an oven. They contained a raised sleeping platform, and were also used for burial of the dead (Mellaart, 1967, p. 60). The walls were whitewashed with lime, and sometimes decorated with hunting murals in the tradition of Palaeolithic cave art (Mellaart, 1962), although this has been vigorously debated (Hodder, 2007). The rooms were kept 'scrupulously clean', as Mellaart (1964, p. 59) noted, and whitewashed to reflect the light, as there were no wall openings or windows. The only access was the ladder opening which also served as a smoke vent, as in the pueblo settlements of the south-west United States (Hodder, 2006, p. 25).

From the excavations by Mellaart and Hodder over the last half century, Çatalhöyük emerges as a proto-urban settlement of the early Neolithic period, among the largest discovered in the Near East based on domesticated agriculture and animal herding. Estimates of population size now range between 5000 and 8000 at the height of settlement, c. 6500 BC (During, 2007), certainly within the modern classification of a town, covering some 13 ha. It is this extensive area and complexity of form that has justified Çatalhöyük as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Hodder, 2013). It preserves an early urban form that exhibits the transition from a Palaeolithic cave site, with its windowless mural rooms and hunting scenes, to a Mesopotamian town layout, with its square mud-brick houses and fringe