



Lundenwic: Anglo-Saxon London

In the Anglo-Saxon period a settlement existed called Lundenwic. It was described in 700 by the Venerable Bede, as a successful and important centre of trade. The term 'wic' meant trading town in Anglo-Saxon.

However, for a long time archaeologists struggled to find the location of this settlement. No evidence of it could be found in the area of Roman London called Londinium, the area that is now the modern City of London. As it turned out, they had been looking in the wrong place.

In 1985 the site of Lundenwic was discovered under what is now Covent Garden and the Strand. We now know Anglo-Saxon London was located around one mile west of Roman London, near the mouth of the River Fleet.

This pocket history explores some objects from Anglo-Saxon Lundenwic that help us to understand why Lundenwic was located where it was, and what life was like in this important trading town.

Where did the people of Londinium go?

The site of Roman Londinium had been mostly abandoned by the end of the 5th century after the Romans left Britain. However, there are no written sources about what happened to the people who lived in the walled city of Londinium, or where they went.

Archaeological evidence shows that many Roman towns were abandoned at the end of the Roman period. It might be that town life was no longer safe or that people thought it was better to live in smaller, more rural communities. Either way, the same thing seems to have happened in Londinium and almost no early Anglo-Saxon artefacts were found within the Roman walls of Londinium.

Archaeological excavations in the area of Covent Garden and the Strand discovered evidence of buildings, industrial activity, traded goods, personal belongings, graves, pits and road surfaces, as well as a managed foreshore for docking boats. This all points to the establishment of a new and eventually bustling trading settlement — Lundenwic. This evidence has helped us understand not only where Lundenwic developed, but also what kind of settlement Lundenwic became.

It is possible that people migrated from the old Roman Londinium to the new Anglo-Saxon trading town of Lundenwic, but there would have been other, smaller settlements and farmsteads too.

Lundenwic probably developed in the area to the west of Londinium in order to utilise the mouth of the River Fleet as a trading and fishing harbour.

Who lived in Lundenwic?

Much of the evidence we have for what type of people lived in Lundenwic comes from graves and the goods found buried in them. In the Anglo-Saxon period it was customary to bury grave goods alongside the deceased as part of the religious beliefs of the community. These sometimes help us to understand the status and connections of the individuals buried.

This ornate brooch was found in the grave of an Anglo-Saxon woman. It is made of copper and was elaborately decorated with gold plate, gold wire and polished garnets showing the wealth and status of its owner. This brooch tells us that this woman would probably have been of aristocratic, even royal birth, living in or visiting Lundenwic.



An ornate and rare copper brooch from the late 7th century, found in Covent Garden

However, Lundenwic would have been home to many different people, rich and poor, all with different roles and professions.

As a centre for international trade, it is likely that Lundenwic buzzed with foreign merchants and goods, coming to trade with the separate Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England. Lundenwic essentially stood at the centre of these kingdoms and served as a vital point of trade.

What was daily life in Lundenwic like?

Artisans and craftspeople would have lived and worked in Lundenwic, selling their highly decorated wares. For these people, it would have taken a lot of time and skill to become a recognised artisan. Many tasks had to be done by hand, and would have been physically hard work but also required dexterity and accuracy.



Piece of decorated animal jaw, late 10th century

This decorated cattle jaw might have been made in a craft workers' neighbourhood in the northwest area of Lundenwic. It may have been used to practise designs before they were repeated on metalwork such as buckles and belt fittings. There is also evidence from leather waste found in the area that leatherwork and tanning was carried out, suggesting that industry was a part of daily life in Lundenwic.

During the Anglo-Saxon period, England was divided into seven independent kingdoms; East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria, Sussex and Wessex.

European 'cone' glass beaker, early 5th century



In contrast, it seems that some people living in Lundenwic might have led cosmopolitan lives. For example, this glass beaker was probably imported from northern Europe, showing that an awareness of new and wider cultures probably existed in Lundenwic at this time.

Archaeologists can also tell a lot about the diet of the people who lived in Lundenwic from examining finds in the soil such as seeds and animal bones. They know people mainly ate beef, mutton and occasionally pork, that they would have eaten cereals as well, either used whole or in pottage, a type of vegetable stew.

The peoples of Lundenwic drank ale made from malt barely, and archaeologists have also found remains of native and orchard grown fruits and nuts. The evidence of imported fruit and herbs and spices helps to further highlight Lundenwic as an international trading town. There's even evidence of bee keeping, which would have provided honey for sweetness at a time before sugar.

This beaker has no base, meaning drinkers had to down its contents in one go! They would then rest the beaker upside down on its rim.

Did Lundenwic prosper?

Contemporary descriptions of Lundenwic say it was a busy centre of international trade. We know it would have been crowded and smelly in some places, where lots of people were living and working.

We also know that some wealthier people lived in more private areas, separate from some of the busier locations. This imbalance and the wealth from international trade meant life in Lundenwic would also have been dangerous at times. From the 830s onwards there were frequent attacks by Viking raiding parties. These were prompted by the prosperity of the town.

This coin was part of a 'hoard' of 22 small coins, called stycas, issued by kings in Northumbria. They were buried in Lundenwic at about the time of a Viking raid in AD 851, suggesting someone was hiding them. They may have belonged to a traveller from Northumbria, caught up in a raid, or someone from Northumbria who had moved to Lundenwic.



Coin from a hoard buried in Lundenwic, mid-9th century

There is evidence showing that the population and economy of Lundenwic declined in the late 8th century. There are many possible reasons for this, including the increasing Viking raids that would have made the city dangerous to live in. By the mid-9th century, Lundenwic had been abandoned and its population had moved back to the site of the old walled Roman settlement. This became known as Lundenburg.



The area of abandoned Lundenwic became known as Ealdwic meaning 'old settlement' or 'old trading town'. This name survives today in the area of modern London called Aldwych.

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