

Ancient Roman city found off English highway

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During the development of a new 124-home complex near the A2 in Newington, Kent, the remains of an entire ancient Roman town were discovered. Construction halted immediately as workers stumbled into the nearly 2000-year old ruins.

Now, a team of thirty archeologists has spent eight months carefully examining the site, uncovering clues about how these ancient Roman citizens lived. During the exploration of the ruins, archeologists found a wide array of clues into the lives of these early Romans.

Gods and gold

In addition to coins and pottery, the team has uncovered jewelry that dates back as far as 30 BCE. There are even remains of what the team believes to be an ancient temple.

Deal Coles is the chair of the Newington History Group. He calls the discovery “very exciting,” noting that, “The scale of this site, with the huge number and quality of finds, changes our knowledge of Newington’s development.”

The Romano-Celtic temple that was discovered also contained an iron-smelting kiln and foundations for an inner temple. The remains of the temple are now in storage, as Coles and his team seek permission for archaeologists to continue to excavate the site.

There are currently just 150 known Roman temples in all of England, making this discovery even more exciting.

Temples in Briton were only built in towns that held particular significance, so that means that this settlement likely had many important people living there. The temple has been named Watling Temple and indicates that the area was heavily Romanized.

Dr. Paul Wilkinson, director of Swale and Thames Archeological Survey (SWAT) Archeology, said the discovery helps to strengthen ties between something villages have suspected all along.



Temple of Mithras, Carrawburgh Roman Fort, Hadrian's Wall (UNESCO World Heritage List, 1987), Northumberland, England, United Kingdom. Roman civilization, 3rd century. (DeAgostini via Getty Images).

Newington, Kent, might actually be a part of the long-lost Roman city of Durolevum. There is even evidence of a seven meter-wide road close to the temple. This road might link the town with Canterbury and the coast.

The team believes this to be an accurate hypothesis because the size of the residential

quarter is large enough to necessitate a road. In addition, since the settlement has a town, this site may be the long-lost city of Durolevum.

Not much is known about the Roman city of Durolevum; its exact location has been lost to history. What is known is that it was a large town that connected to the coast and had a temple.

If this turns out to be Durolevum, the historical significance could be monumental and could change, what is known of Roman occupation in and around Kent.

There is even some indication that the earliest foundation of the town existed long before the Romans arrived. There is no telling what else archeologists will find in this bounty of historical treasure.

By today's standards, the settlement would have been the size of a small town, and home to myriad workers, tradespeople, and other inhabitants.

Rome's impact on England

The Romans arrived in Britain in 55 BCE following an invasion led by Julius Caesar. Caesar was enraged that the Britons were helping Gaul and thought that by invading the island nation, Rome could capitalize on its coastlines, and continue exploration westward and to the north.

Traders often lauded the riches of the region, and Caesar wanted to capitalize on that.

Caesar and his troops were not ready for the kind of battles to which the Britons were accustomed. He planned to land his army at Dover but had to settle for another site some six miles away.

They did not expect legions of soldiers at-the-ready on the Dover cliffs prepared to fight to the death to defend their homeland. Caesar returned the following year with three times as many soldiers.

The battles were short, bloody, and established Rome as the ruling power in Britain.

By inserting themselves into the already existing culture, Rome introduced the idea of living in towns and cities to the native Britons. In turn, this helped to alter the landscape of the region.

Roman towns were laid on a grid, and streets crisscrossed to form blocks. This uniformity held allure for many Britons who had otherwise been living in small haphazard villages.

Roman rule also meant that Britons were exposed to a wide array of new goods and products that traders brought from the east and south.

When the city of Rome was under attack in 410 CE, the Roman Emperor Honorius told the Britons, “Fight bravely and defend your lives. You are on your own now.”

After the Romans left, much of Britain fell into chaos. Native tribes resumed decades-old feuds, and Nordic invaders continued to beleaguer the country with battles and raids. Many Roman towns began to crumble as Britain returned to their pre-Roman ways of life.

With the Romans gone, the Anglo-Saxons emerged as the ruling group. As farmers, they abandoned many of the roads and towns built by the Romans and set up new kingdoms.



Re-enactors from the Roman Deva Victrix 20th Legion parade through the city of Chester as they celebrate the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia on December 20, 2012, in Chester, England. (Christopher Furlong via Getty Images).

In just a few short years, the Anglo-Saxons established several independent kingdoms in the areas that had once been under Roman rule.

They were not all foreign invaders. In fact, some had served in the Roman army, and there is considerable evidence that Anglo-Saxon mercenaries notified their German relatives once Rome left Briton, “This would be a good time for us to move into this part of the world.”

The Romans defined them as barbarians since this invading force spoke only Germanic languages and were almost completely pagan.

The native Celtic population resisted the incoming Anglo-Saxon force as much as it has the Romans. However, as with many indigenous populations against a major force, the Celts had little success defending their way of life.

Because the Celts were recorded their history via oral accounts, not much is known about the specific ways in which they resisted both Roman and Anglo-Saxon influence and invasion. One thing is for sure – they moved as far from the towns and city settlements as possible, preferring instead to live on the land as their ancestors had done for countless generations.

Interestingly, many modern cities still bear the mark of Roman influence. If a place has “chester” “caster” or “cester” in its name, it is almost certainly a Roman settlement. The word “chester” and its variants come from the Latin word castrum, which means a fort.

Of particular note on the Kent construction site are the coins, which have been found in the ruins. These coins are pre-Roman, and show images of kings from distant lands, suggesting that some of the inhabitants of the ancient city were of high nobility or importance.

Next steps planned

Because the site seems to be so extensive, the SWAT team, along with Coles, has a carefully mapped out plan. They are planning to collate the data into a scientific report and then recover the excavation site so the housing project can continue as intended.

For now, that date has yet to be set.

The town seems to have been a manufacturing center of sorts, as the team has uncovered many iron furnaces. Since iron smelting was so rare in Roman Briton, it indicates that the Romans had to have exported their most advanced technological developments to the area.

There have also been discoveries of kilns and plenty of pottery to give rise to the idea that the town was also a significant export center of plates and other household items.

It is possible that these large-scale enterprises relied on slave labor, though Wilkinson and his team are still looking for authentication.

Coles expects the cataloging of the temple to take some time since it is such a significant discovery. The road also offers many clues into the life of the Briton Roman citizens.

“It proves the A2 wasn’t the only Roman road through the village,” Coles said. “As a group, we are keen to trace the route and destination of this new highway, which may have connected with another temple excavated 50 years ago on the outskirts of Newington, and a village unearthed in 1882.”

It might sound farfetched, but with the Roman penchant for building in straight uniform lines, this is entirely possible.

The next steps for the site include careful cataloging of everything that has been excavated so far. Because of the significant manufacturing presence in the settlement, it is possible that the local elite were of some means.

This gives archeologists hope that the site will continue to offer up its own sorts of riches. Once the site has told its story, the area will be covered and returned to the construction developer to build homes over the once forgotten, but now unearthed, Roman Briton town.