CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS:
TOWNS, WATER AND PLACES

This book set out to examine aspects of the relationship between urbanism and water in Roman Britain analysing the way in which the waterscape formed an element of each urban development and the experience of its residents. It is important that studies on water in towns do not concentrate solely on water supply, bathhouses and other aspects of their infrastructure but also look at the way in which rivers, lakes, pools, wetlands, waterfronts and groundwater formed significant elements of townscapes. Through human use, action and experience, these components of waterscapes formed a major part of the urban settlement. The focus on water and towns in this book is also intended to change our approach to urbanism and avoid the dangerous assumption that we already understand the nature of Roman urbanism and the urban experience and that as a result no new approaches or analyses are needed.

In an attempt to understand the complexity of the relationship between settlement space and water, three frameworks of analysis were identified: geographical, geoarchaeology and cultural approaches towards studying rivers; the way in which theoretical advances in maritime archaeology can help us to understand waterfronts and port and harbour archaeology; and how developments in wetland archaeology can enable us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between human activity and wetland areas in urban contexts. Many components of waterscapes in urban settings were artificially altered as towns developed including the revetting, canalisation and redirection of rivers, the construction of waterfront installations, the infilling of waterways, wetland drainage and land reclamation. These activities transformed the land and the urban topographies, created new land, and altered the relationship between land and water. The actions taken on waterscapes, however, would not have been regarded simply as practical negotiations with land and water—and this is important for rethinking our understanding of the way in which urban space was experienced. It is also possible to conduct social analyses of these landscape events which these three frameworks allow us to do and they put an emphasis on people and agency rather than simple descriptive approaches to the material.
The presence of water has obvious practical benefits for settlements and it might be that in some cases these outweighed the disadvantages that often presented themselves in establishing towns in wet locations. It might also be that any difficulties with the location, due to seasonal or periodic excesses of water, were not recognised at the time of foundation. This possibility, however, would perhaps be less likely since the nature of most landscapes would have been well known. The cultural significance associated with watery places, however, will also have formed an important aspect of urban development. As town spaces were, constructed, actions such as altering rivers, draining wetlands and reclaiming land will have formed a significant element of each settlement biography but also transformed the way in which the landscapes were used and negotiated. Moving rivers, carrying out land reclamation and building waterfronts will have been acts that were just as monumental as constructing public buildings. Altering the landscape in monumental ways was not new in Roman Britain, as can be seen prehistoric monumental constructions (e.g. Bradley 1993; Cunliffe 2005), but altering waterscapes in a major way does appear to have been an additional aspect of the way in which land was changed and manipulated which became more intensive in Roman times. The way in which waterscapes have continued to be changed over time has been connected as much with social contexts and cultural ideas as with practical needs.

**Towns and People**

Urban development was clearly a complex process in Roman Britain and whereas in the past there tended to be emphasis on a relatively unproblematic and systematic process of military planning, coercion and Romanisation (e.g. Frere 1967; Wacher 1975), it is now clear that each case of urban development was the result of a unique sequence of events and motives incorporating the ideas and actions of local peoples, landscapes, histories, myths and external inputs and influences (cf. Creighton 2006; Mattingly 2006; Millett 1990; Rogers 2008; 2011a; forthcoming). Local perceptions of places and social traditions of labour organisation may have been just as important as external influences in the construction of towns. Through examining information relating to the scale, design and materials used in the construction activities, moreover, as with buildings analysis, it is possible to carry out more detailed social analyses of the changes to waterscapes, such as individual choices in land reclamation and waterfront construction (see Chapters 4 and 5), in terms of how they relate to the identity of those carrying out the changes (cf. Gardner 2007; Rogers 2011b).