

MICHAEL FULFORD und JANE TIMBY, Late Iron Age and Roman Silchester: excavations on the site of the forum-basilica 1977, 1980–96. *Britannia Monograph Series No. 15*. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London 2000. XXVI und 613 Seiten, 242 Abbildungen/Tafeln, 113 Tabellen.

The forum and basilica of *Calleva Atrebatum*, the deserted Roman town in the modern parish of Silchester, constitute one of the classic sites of Roman provincial archaeology, reproduced countless times in textbooks and comparative studies. Any advance in our knowledge of this monument is therefore potentially of the greatest significance not only for the study of Roman Britain, but also of Roman civic architecture on a larger canvas. Though there had been earlier work on the site, it was the excavations of G. E. Fox and W. H. St John Hope, published in 1892, which first presented the plan of the entire complex. Thereafter the remains were covered over, but fears about the possible impact on them of ploughing led to an evaluatory excavation in 1977, then a major campaign of excavation in 1980–86. The aim of this latter was to exploit the 1 m or so of intact stratigraphy that had been demonstrated to remain intact, the depredations of the Victorian excavators having been largely confined to the upper, late Roman and later deposits. This stratigraphy yielded information of the first importance about the pre-Roman settlement of *Calleva*, about developments in the mid and later first century AD and about the construction and use of the basilica known from the nineteenth-century excavations.

This huge report falls into three principal sections. The first is the detailed exposition and discussion of the stratigraphic sequence, clearly laid out and easy to follow. The second is a series of detailed specialist reports on a wide range of artefactual and environmental evidence. It is worth noting here that the great majority of this evidence came from 'secondary' contexts, that is to say from the fills of pits and other features (particularly for Period 3) or from make-up and construction deposits (Periods 4, 5, 6). Essentially, therefore, these were deposits where material was discarded, material quite possibly from a number of sources and not necessarily from the vicinity of the excavated site. It is reasonable to posit that this material came from the wider complex of Silchester, but this uncertainty over source and the probable mixing of material from different sources does mean that analyses have to work at the level of Silchester in general rather than that of just the excavated area. This is a limitation that most of the specialists recognise, and discussions are framed accordingly. The third part is a general synthesis drawing on the structural, artefactual and environmental evidence to attempt a coherent picture of the development of the site and of Silchester through time. Because these classes of evidence are all at their fullest for the first century AD, before and after the Roman invasion of Britain, that is where the discussion is most detailed. This chronological focus also correlates with a current major research interest in British archaeology and major research focus of the Silchester project, the nature of late Iron Age society and the impact of the transition to Roman rule and culture. In this review I shall also adopt an essentially chronological approach.

Silchester has long been recognised as a major late Iron Age site, of the loose class called by British archaeologists an *oppidum*, a type of site characterised by its large defended area and evidence of its being a centre for political control, religious activity, specialised manufacture and long-distance trade. In contrast to the much more numerous hill-forts of the Iron Age, these sites are generally low-lying, thus conforming more to modern German than to the French archaeological usage of *oppidum*. From earlier work it was known that Silchester had a series of probably defensive earthworks surrounding the area later occupied by the Romano-British town; there are also several issues of late Iron Age coins bearing the mark *Calle*, and earlier excavations had yielded pre-Conquest pottery and other material imported from Gaul or Italy. Thus Silchester fitted most of the criteria for an *oppidum* in the British sense. The Victorian excavations did not yield much information about this period and the hope was that their excavations had been too superficial to disturb the deposits of this date. This hope was fully rewarded with the discovery of significant evidence for three major phases of pre-Conquest activity. The first (Period 1), consisted of a number of features, mainly wells and possible round-houses, apparently conforming to no overall plan and dating to the closing decades BC. In Period 2 this was replaced with activity to a much more structured overall plan. Two metalled streets were laid out on an axis at almost 45° to the cardinal points of the modern compass, and meeting at nearly 90°. These certainly betoken the control, management and division of space, though whether they amount to evidence of a 'street-grid' is impossible to say on the present evidence. The dating, to the final years of the first century BC, makes it clear that these date to before the Roman conquest, whereas traditionally it had been thought that formal streets and street-systems could only have been an introduction by the Romans. The streets were defined by ditches and flanked by rectangular, timber buildings associated with wells and other features. It would be tempting to see this radical restructuring of the settlement as a single act of replacement of what had gone before, but in fact the stratigraphy and the dating evidence do not permit such a neat antithesis. In Period 3 much more substantial roadside ditches were dug and a series of large rubbish-pits created alongside them. It was from the fill of these that much of the artefactual and other evidence came. Also of this Period was an extensive horizon of 'dark earth' which had accumulated over the features of earlier Periods, and again contained large quantities of material, especially evidence for metal-working. In places it seems to have been open long enough for a turf-line to develop. Overall, the finds of coins, probable coin-moulds, imported pottery and other objects from Periods 2 and 3 conform well with the model for an *oppidum*. In the detailed synthetic discussion Fulford makes a strong case for Silchester being exceptional in its region in terms of its artefact assemblages and in terms of aspects of its crop and livestock régimes. One particularity of Silchester is its apparently restricted size. The defensive perimeter known as the Inner Earthwork (largely underlying the Roman-period town), is now seen as late Iron Age in date, enclosing a relatively small nucleus of

32 ha compared with the many square kilometres of a *Camulodunum* or a *Verulamium*. Nevertheless, these excavations have enormously expanded both our knowledge and our models of and for pre-Conquest *Calleva*, and the discussion in the Synthesis is a masterpiece of integration of data and drawing out of the arguments.

Period 4 sees another major spatial reorganisation and according to the excavator marks the Roman arrival at Silchester shortly after the invasion of AD 43. At least two substantial, timber buildings were constructed on an alignment almost on the cardinal points of the modern compass, and thus at 45° to the alignment of the late Iron Age streets, which the buildings overlay and thus suppressed. Most of one north-south, long, rectangular building was excavated, its plan was simple consisting of a series of rooms of different sizes fronted by a row of timber posts; the building had undergone at least one major reconstruction. Adjacent to its northern end was the western end of an east-west, rectangular building. A beam-slot near the southern end might be part of another building, or conceivably the end wall of the north-south building projecting to the line of the posts. The buildings are difficult to parallel in late Iron Age British archaeology, but not at all difficult to parallel in Roman timber building technique. Fulford's reconstruction of the form and function of these buildings is heavily influenced by the later forum and basilica; he proposes that the two buildings form part of a series of structures surrounding a square courtyard. What this arrangement is for is uncertain; Fulford proposes two possible explanations. One sees the buildings as 'military' and forming part of a major structure in a fort/fortress, possibly a *principia*, but given the evidence for metal-working perhaps a *fabrica*. Otherwise a 'civil' explanation would see this as a precursor to the later forum. In fact, there is little or no evidence that the buildings have to be part of a courtyard arrangement; the eastern verandah of the north-south building was at the eastern limits of the excavation and there could have been another building close by, or just across the gravelled area to the east of the building. The north-south building certainly resembles structures known from installations of the Roman army. A row of variably-sized rooms fronted by a row of posts calls to mind the *tabernae* lining the principal streets of the legionary fortress at Inchtuthil (the apparent regularity of these chambers on most reconstruction plans of the fortress is belied by the evidence of the ones actually excavated). Nearer in time and space are the Claudian barracks in the fort of Hod Hill, which had only one row of rooms to the *contubernia*, not the usual two. But such plans can also be found in 'civil' buildings of the Augustan and later periods in Gaul, and some of the earliest buildings in London are not dissimilar nor are elements of the timber structures preceding the Flavian 'palace' at Fishbourne. Of course, to try to separate out 'military' and 'civil' building types at this date is probably a snare and a delusion.

On the basis of the dating evidence, Fulford favours a post-Conquest date for this Period, and argues that the change in alignment would be well explained by the intervention of an outside power. But he does admit that the buildings could be as early as the years leading up to

the Conquest. This does raise the possibility at least that this could be a change imposed by an indigenous authority. The territory of *Calleva* is often proposed as belonging after the Conquest to the client-kingdom of Ti. Cl. Cogidubnus, attested as a client/friendly king by Tacitus, and memorialised on an inscription for Chichester (RIB 91) as *rex magnus*. This is an argument Fulford himself develops. Recently, Fulford's colleague at Reading, John Creighton, has been proposing the striking and highly attractive argument that several of the late Iron Age rulers of Britain may have received a Roman formation whilst young *obsides* at Rome. The *casus belli* of the Claudian invasion was the flight to Rome of the presumed ruler of this central-southern area of Britain, Verica. Could we have here a building constructed in the Roman style for a 'romanised' ruler, either before or after the invasion? Such a personage would have had the power to enforce the change in alignment. The symbolism of the change of alignment perhaps also needs more work; does the reorientation onto the cardinal points show the importance of celestial bearings? Finally, one might note the presence of evidence for the working of precious metal, probably for jewellery (p. 420), in this Period, an appropriate craft to find associated with a ruler. On the other hand, from Silchester comes the series of tiles stamped with the name and title of Nero, unique in the western provinces. What this betokens in terms of possible direct imperial or procuratorial administration is difficult to assess, but could put a very different light on the Period 4 buildings.

The Period 5 rebuilding saw the construction of one of the most significant buildings from the whole sequence, the 'Flavian timber basilica'. Underlying the stone basilica, this consisted of two north-south, timber, basilican halls of matching dimensions, set to north and south of a transverse element. At the northern end were rooms and a well, adjoining the western end of an east-west north range. At the southern end were traces of an equivalent east-west south range. Enclosed within the three ranges was a gravelled surface. Given the similarity of overall layout of this timber ensemble to the succeeding stone forum and basilica, one can see why Fulford concluded '... there is no doubt that it was built to serve as the basilica of Calleva alongside the forum.' (p. 569). This interpretation was established early in the excavations, presented in an interim report in *Antiquaries Journal* LXV.1 (1985), and since widely cited as important evidence for the possibility of hitherto-unsuspected, earlier, timber public buildings preceding the more familiar stone ones, both in Britain and on the Continent. But in fact there has to be very considerable doubt. Only a couple of lines later than the quote cited above, Fulford notes that the two halls '... are definitely subservient to the entrance passage...', which is not what one would expect in a single, unitary basilica. In his attempt at a reconstruction of the architecture of this building on p. 538, Sunter admits 'It is very difficult to offer any meaningful reconstruction of the centre of the basilica', and then goes on to demonstrate just how difficult. It seems to be impossible to arrive at the single, uninterrupted interior space required to posit the whole range as a unitary basilica. If the single basilica explanation does not stand up, literally or figuratively, what al-

ternative may be proposed? As Fulford notes, it is the transverse element, interpreted as an entrance-way, that takes architectural priority: has the desire to accept the interpretation as a basilica led to an inversion of the order of things? Do we have a major, axial entrance-way flanked by a pair of matching basilican halls? But if so, what is this complex and does it have any parallels? For the latter, one might perhaps start at the near-contemporary 'palace' at Fishbourne, another major building project.

The core of the complex was arranged round a rectangular courtyard, also with an important, axial entrance-way. In the north-eastern corner of the ensemble lies the enigmatic 'aisled hall' (B. W. CUNLIFFE, *Excavations at Fishbourne Volume I: The site* [London 1971] pp. 106-100). This opens onto the road along the eastern façade of the 'palace', but apparently does not communicate with the interior of the palace. It thus seems designed to admit numbers of people, but only so far. Could it be an audience-hall or *diwan* for the less-favoured of the proprietor's social inferiors, those who were not expected/allowed to avail themselves of the grand entrance? Might it be a version of the audience-chambers becoming fashionable at the time in Italy? But it does provide us with a major basilican hall in what may be a related building complex (see below). A site which suggests that aisled rooms may have been important in Britain at this time is Gorhambury, part of the *Verulamium oppidum*. At this site there is a series of enclosures, thought to be a high-status, late Iron Age residence (D. S. NEAL et al., *Excavation of the Iron Age, Roman and Mediaeval settlement at Gorhambury, St Albans* [London 1990]). Immediately adjacent to the main entrance is a substantial aisled building. The excavators interpret this as agricultural in function, but given its position, could it have been a reception/audience room? Aisled buildings are common in Roman Britain, and they are generally seen as essentially workaday, for storage, industrial activities or for accommodation of workers. But precisely because they are so common we need to bear in mind that they may have served different functions of different status in different times and places. Did they originate as high-status buildings before being adapted to a wider range of mundane uses? Across the Channel at Corseul, the large, Flavian complex there (H. KÉRÉBEL, *Corseul* [Côtes-d'Armor], un quartier de la ville antique [Paris 2001]) has a large basilican room in what is clearly an important building complex. There is also the evidence from the Neronian double fortress of *Vet-tera*, where the *praetorium* of the legate of *legio XV Primigenia* has an arrangement markedly similar to that at Silchester of a principal entrance flanked by two large, basilican rooms. These were presumably for the reception, grading and processing of the large number of people who had business with such an important man. These are as yet straws in the wind, and it would require further work to identify other such structures prior to and contemporary with the basilican halls at Silchester. Nevertheless it seems to this reviewer that the interpretation of this range of buildings as a single, unitary basilica is contradicted by the evidence, and that there are other possibilities which do not do violence to the structural evidence.

So, should we rather see the Period 5 complex at Silchester be apart of an important residential complex? Perhaps even a version of Fishbourne, here entered through the west range with its reception/audience areas in the basilican halls? A more favoured visitor would then pass by the altar- or statue-base (I prefer the latter) immediately within the courtyard to approach the principal wing which would thus be under the eastern, not the western range of the later forum? There are one or two other links with Fishbourne. Fulford (p. 573) notes that elements of the painted wall plaster from this Period are paralleled at Fishbourne. It should also be noted that in the make-up for the succeeding Period 6, and so presumably originating from the structures of this Period 5, are pieces of architectural stonework and also fragments of marble (especially from the Pyrenees) (p. 89), paralleled in Britain at this date only at London and at Fishbourne. This would suggest a more elaborate building or part of the complex than the excavated west wing – the east wing? As Fulford notes, it has long been recognised that there is a road off the alignment of most of the later street system running between the eastern range of the stone forum (and therefore of the proposed Flavian complex) and the major temple precinct to the east. A link between a major, central residence and the main temples would be very understandable. Do we have here at Silchester the urban residence of a romanised British ruler, similar to that at Fishbourne near the developing town of Chichester (with its *templum Neptuno et Minervae* dedicated by Cogidubnus)? This would, of course, have major implications for our understanding of the chronology and sequence of the transition from postulated client kingdom to *civitas*.

The *civitas Atrebatum* monumentalised its legal and administrative existence by constructing the well-known stone forum and basilica somewhere probably in the second quarter of the second century AD, at a time when a number of other Romano-British towns such as Caerwent, London and Wroxeter (and Leicester) were doing likewise. This Period 6 is the well-known phase, the 'classic' Romano-British forum complex. Despite the severe truncation of the interior deposits by the Victorian excavators, the re-excavation by Fulford still yielded much information and some surprises. The original design was a basilica with semi-circular apses at each end and an apsidal *aedes* half-way along the western side. Fulford finds such a scheme unique in Britain (though one might in passing note the similarity to the Tiberian *macellum* at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges in Aquitania, where the three apses served as entrances), and it was not carried through, the northern and southern apses being replaced with rectangular rooms. But it also seems that the entire basilica may not have been carried through to a finish. As Fulford notes, there is little evidence for any permanent flooring nor for elaborate decoration. There are pieces of architectural stonework, but on the other hand the remaining later deposits do not contain large quantities of roof-tile. There must be a distinct possibility (probability?) that the basilica was never finished. This was presumably related to vagaries in funding. It seems to have been the case in Britain that public buildings were undertaken and financed by a collectivity, such as the *civitas*. Did a

Hadrianic-Antonine flush of enthusiasm for this expression of self-identity and self-importance tail off, perhaps as other projects such as the first phase of the defences assumed a greater priority? In the later third and fourth centuries the shell of the basilica was the location for a certain amount of metal-working, evidenced by hearths, slag and waste, and insubstantial timber structures. The evidence suggests a fairly low level of activity over a century and a half or so. Fulford prefers to see this as under some sort of central control, perhaps the *civitas*, perhaps the *civitas* as agent for a higher authority, a sort of *fabrica* but one not mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum*. Well, maybe. There is also the interesting evidence of a very particular range of animal bone from a wall and adjacent pit in the north range, which produced large quantities of domestic fowl along with fish and shellfish. These were probably, as Fulford says, the remains of 'special' meals perhaps consumed by the élite (*cenae* and *epulones*) or part of some ritual.

The chronology and circumstances of the demolition and clearing of the basilica structure remain debatable. In the report Fulford distinguishes between two types of clearance. The first, more common, simply removed the walls down to contemporaneous ground surface, leaving the foundations untouched. Unfortunately, by its nature such clearance is very difficult to date. The second, 'deep robbing', removed the foundations as well. Fulford argues that these differences in technique reflect differences in chronology and purpose. Where the many thousands of tonnes of building material recovered in the clearance and robbing would have gone presents interesting problems. It is noted that the eleventh- / twelfth-century church of St May in the eastern part of the former Roman town contains little if any Roman material, suggesting that none may have been available (or at least upstanding) by then. Fulford works this into a history of the deliberate destruction of the Roman town earlier in the post-Roman period for ideological reasons. There are, perhaps, other factors and evidence that need to be considered. In his report on the defences of Silchester (M. FULFORD: *Silchester Defences 1974–80* [London 1984]) Fulford notes (p. 75) the presence of blocks of architectural stonework associated with, though not integral to, probable late (though undatable) blocking of the west and south gates. So that is a possible context for some robbing at least. But what of the walls themselves? These are dated to the later third century, by which time the basilica may well have been a 'white elephant' (a costly and unprofitable enterprise). Could the basilica have served as a quarry for the huge amounts of flint needed for the walls, in the way which was happening at the same time on the Continent? It would be interesting to know, if further work gave the opportunity, whether any of the flint in the walls bore traces of previous use such as distinctive mortar. Moreover, the photographs and discussion in that report (p. 196) of the brick / tile in the south and south-east gates shows them to be somewhat heterogeneous; again, could they be re-used from an earlier project? If the clearance of the basilica is late or post Roman, the problem remains of where all the material went. Fulford uses the baths-basilica at Wroxeter (P. BARKER et al.: *The baths basilica Wroxeter: excavations 1966–90* [London

1997)) as a parallel, there in the fourth century and later the superstructure and other parts of this basilica were cleared away. One might also refer to the civil basilica at Exeter (P. T. BIDWELL: *The legionary bath-house and basilica and forum at Exeter* [Exeter 1979]), which likewise was systematically demolished and cleared in the fifth century. In neither case do we know where the material thus obtained was re-used. On the other hand, Fulford suggests, perfectly reasonably, that significant elements of the Silchester basilica (those later subjected to 'deep' robbing) may have remained standing and occupied into the post-Roman period, perhaps as some sort of centre of power. So too, presumably, would parts of other buildings. Fulford weaves the disappearance of these buildings into the story of the deliberate, ideologically-motivated dismantling of the remains of the Romano-British city by the emerging polities of middle Saxon England which wished to emphasise other centres such as *Venta*/Winchester and correspondingly suppress the fact and memory of Silchester. The evidence for this is sketchy, as this report shows (pp. 580–81) and will need to await the fuller results from the new excavations on Insula IX, whence these ideas more largely derive. It is to be hoped that they do not suffer the same process as the Period 5 timber 'basilica' of interim conclusions becoming set in stone (so to speak) before the alternatives have been worked through.

Simply to get all the texts and reports which make up this huge volume written, submitted, collated and integrated is a huge achievement, especially in such a short time after the conclusion of the field-work. All that can reasonably be known about these 1980s excavations is presented here. The distance in the range and amount of information gathered and exploited compared with the work a century earlier is enormous. We now know far, far more about the history of this site and consequently about the development of Silchester across half a millennium and more. It is a first-rate piece of urban archaeology. I have tried in this review to set out a series of what seem to my mind to be serious shortcomings in the identification and discussion of the evidence leading to some of the most important conclusions. But rather than simply pick holes I have where possible tried to suggest alternative readings of the evidence which seem to me to make better sense and to place these within a wider context of comparable sites and developments. If any of these is deemed reasonable or even convincing then there may have to be serious re-evaluation of the sequence of events at Silchester as presented here. That the problems can be identified and alternatives proposed is, of course, the final compliment to the quality of the presentation of the site in this report.

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