

W. J. Wedlake, *The Excavation of the Shrine of Apollo at Nettleton, Wiltshire, 1956–1971*. Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London 40. Society of Antiquaries, London 1982. XX and 167 pages, 48 plates and frontispiece.

Nettleton Scrubb (or Shrub) is a Romano-British roadside settlement on Fosse Way, to the north-east of Bath. It was excavated under the direction of W. J. Wedlake between 1956 and 1971, immediately after the conclusion of his campaign of excavations at Camerton, a similar settlement on Fosse Way, to the south-west of Bath. The report on Camerton appeared with exemplary promptitude in 1958, and marked a real advance in our understanding of such settlements. Sadly the same cannot be said of Nettleton.

Given the interval between the end of the excavations and the appearance of the report, a certain amount of progress has inevitably occurred in thinking about such settlements; this is only to be expected and it would be pointless and unfair to criticise a report on such grounds. But with Nettleton this is not the main problem, the weaknesses lie much deeper involving the logic of archaeological analysis, the presentation of archaeological data, and assumptions determining interpretation.

Briefly, the site consisted of a settlement covering several hectares, of which some thirty buildings were investigated, including an elaborate and imposing Romano-Celtic temple. In addition there was evidence for an early-Roman enclosure, and for cemeteries associated with the settlement. The excavations also produced a considerable quantity of artifacts, of which the architectural and other stonework and the metalwork are particularly noteworthy. There was occupation spanning almost the entire Romano-British period, and beyond.

With such a site there is one paramount need; that the evidence shall be presented in such a way that the reader can assess the site, and can thus follow the excavator's arguments, or devise his own. Four things in particular are required: first, adequate plans of features, individual structures, and the settlement; second, adequate sections so that relationships may be established; third, an accurate and detailed description of features, structures and stratigraphy, complemented by and complementing the plans, sections and photographs; fourth, that the dating evidence is clearly presented and can be easily tied into the stratigraphy. These are long-standing requirements, not devised since 1971, yet on all four of them Nettleton fails drastically, fatally.

There is only one general plan of the settlement in the entire volume. On it are shown features of all periods (including mediaeval) at far too small a scale. There is no indication of those areas excavated and those not. Apart from the temple in its various phases, only six buildings are accorded individual plans, but not some of the most interesting and complicated such as Buildings XXIII and XXVI. Moreover comparison of the plan and text relating to Building XXVII (pp. 78–9) with Plate XLVI causes serious misgivings. The text states that the northern flue of the corn-drier abutted the northern wall of the structure, and so it is shown on the plan. But Plate XLVIb shows no such thing, indeed the corn-drier appears to be rather nearer the southern than the northern wall. Plate XLVIa suggests that the relationship between the main structure and an annexe has been over-schematised on the plan. That one is led to mistrust the few plans there are is not a happy circumstance.

Sections too are fewer than might be. Some are of individual features or rooms. Some cross several buildings and show their general relationships (e.g. figs. 17–19). In these layers are thin and stylised, nevertheless they show that such stratigraphy did survive, and could have been used to establish sequences. Only the four sections on the two pull-outs (figs. 3/4, 21/22) are presented in anything like the detail necessary for the user to corroborate the excavator's analysis or to construct his own. In one of these (fig. 3) the section appears to indicate a situation directly contrary to that claimed by the excavator. On p. 16, and elsewhere, it is assumed that Building VII is subordinate to, and therefore later than, the temple. But on the section, layer 10, a layer of white mortar apparently derived from the construction of the temple, lies up against the south wall of Building VII, sealing its foundation trench and offsets. This not only brings out the need to cross-check evidence where possible, but also introduces a recurrent interpretative problem, the temple-centred view of the settlement.

The descriptive text also has its difficulties. In the main it is arranged according to the phases of the temple, rather than building by building. The successive phases of the temple are the objects of greatest interest and most detailed description and analysis. Other individual buildings are placed according to their presumed relationship to these phases. Nowhere is the stratigraphic or dating justification for the approach in general or the application in particular laid out for assessment. The case of Building VII discussed above provides an awful warning.

In general the descriptions of dimensions and details of construction are competent. But without the support of plans or photographs they cannot really give an adequate idea of the thing being described. Usually the physical description is followed by a discussion of the possible function of a structure. This can on occasion lead to some strain, for instance with Building XXIII where the presumption that it is a cemetery chapel (it is near some graves) is hard to reconcile with the excavated evidence, as the excavator finally admits by implication.

Two main weaknesses bedevil any attempt to reconstruct a dated sequence. The first is that it is impossible to tie the dated material to the stratigraphy, both because of the lack of any description of the stratigraphy, and because so many of the locations given for individual items are so vague as to be of no use. The second weakness is that the excavator appears unsure of the use of dateable material, and particularly of the concepts of *terminus post* and *ante quem*. For instance there is a coin of Vespasian under the floor of the first phase of the temple, the temple is accordingly dated to the late first century. But on p. 8 a hoard of coins down to Marcus Aurelius is described in terms which make it sound very much as though these coins also were under the shrine floor, and on p. 11 a coin of Faustina I is said to be contemporary with the construction of the first-phase shrine. This later date would incidentally fit better with the revised relationship between the temple and Building VII. Or again on p. 11 we find 'A coin of Plautillus (A. D. 205–10) found in the layer of white stone chippings, which was laid down when the large platform was made above the octagonal revetment wall, indicates that the circular building must have been built before A. D. 210' (the circular building is the first phase of the temple). Quite apart from the fact that it is Plautilla not Plautillus, the statement shows a complete misapprehension of the role of a coin in forming a *terminus post* or *ante*. The dating sequences cannot be reconstructed from the evidence presented in this report, yet they are a *sine qua non* for understanding and interpreting the site.

To catalogue at such length, and in such detail, shortcomings in a report may be felt by some to be unnecessary, and disobliging to a respected amateur archaeologist. This reviewer takes no pleasure in such a catalogue, but is of the opinion that it must be undertaken to show why the basis on which analysis and interpretation of this site are founded is inadequate. It must be a precondition of the discussion of such analysis and interpretation that the weaknesses are understood and accepted.

The earliest major feature on the site is the trapezoidal ditched enclosure lying on the presumed line of Fosse Way (under the modern road). Only lengths of ditch were traced, and no internal structures (presumably of timber) were encountered. The ditches were filling up in the later first and early second century. The date is early and the form unusual; it would be interesting to know more of its interior and of its relationship to Fosse Way.

Pride of place in the report goes to consideration of the development of the Romano-Celtic temple which stood on the western side of the settlement. Originally a relatively simple circular stone shrine, it was augmented by the addition of a massive octagonal podium faced with rusticated stonework. This platform was itself modified and the circular shrine dismantled to accommodate an elaborate octagonal temple with colonnaded ambulatories. The internal structure of this temple was complex, with radial walls defining a central space off which opened eight chambers, one of them the entrance. In addition details of the porch, a window, and an aedicula at the entrance were recorded. Several of the walls survived up to 2 metres in height. This was due to the mass of superincumbent rubble, which itself contained much architectural and structural stonework. With this evidence to hand it is a pity that there is no argued reconstruction – on paper if not in situ. Some not very illuminating parallels are adduced for the temple's plan; the difficulty encountered in finding comparanda being another indication of the singularity of this temple. Later four of the chambers were walled off from the central space, but nevertheless continued in use. The resulting cruciform plan is compared, surely anachronistically, to that of Christian churches, and a Christian phase posited. Subsequent pagan religious and domestic use are discussed below.

Another structure for which considerable architectural evidence survived was the rectangular Building VII to the north of the temple. At one stage this extended across the Broadmead Brook on bridge-like piers. This last building has already been referred to in connection with the major interpretative bias towards viewing the settlement entirely as a dependency of the temple. There is no reason why this should necessarily be so, any more than the possession by a village of a large parish church means that the village is a dependency of the church. This approach leads to some curious suggestions such as that contained in the last paragraph on p. 18, which has no basis in observed archaeological evidence. Again, there is the tendency to call structures 'lodges' (e. g. Buildings XVI, XVIII, XIX). These 'lodges' are set in some of the walls lining

the streets. The excavator interprets these as bounding temple precincts. They may just mark off properties from streets. The settlement itself is also defined by a wall, of some architectural pretension, against the steeper valley sides. The comparison of this feature with that at Glanum is surely to be preferred to the suggestion of a defensive function.

Other buildings are more clearly of an industrial nature, reinforcing the view that Nettleton falls in line with other roadside settlements, rather than being priest-ridden. It is clear that by the fourth century a considerable amount of manufacture was being undertaken, including the working of iron, bronze and pewter. The excavator suggests that this is a shift in the economic base to compensate for the fall-off in visitors to the now semi-ruinous temple. It would be interesting to know if this industrial phase is indeed confined to the fourth century, but for reasons which should by now be clear this cannot be assessed. One structure to which attention should be drawn is Building XXXII. This was the housing and leat for a water-powered mill-wheel. Water-mills are a feature of the Romano-British landscape about which we as yet have little evidence, but which may have been of considerable importance. The vast number of mediaeval water-mills in this country bear witness to the suitability of the river system to this device; indeed the river-management associated with these later mills may have helped obscure the sites of Romano-British examples.

The first- to fourth-century occupation at Nettleton yielded a large number of finds in many materials, though no mosaics. We have already noted the remarkable quality of the architectural stonework, and it is a pity that though T. F. C. Blagg has commented on some of the pieces he was not invited to undertake a full analysis of this group, which is of at least regional significance. A similar fate has befallen some of the other material. That recovered from the temple has fared somewhat better, though the interpretation of the ironwork from the late shrine as parts of a shield is unconvincing. Perhaps for once a 'ritual' explanation should be sought?

One aspect of the site which is never brought together, but of which there are tantalizing glimpses through the text, is its late- to sub-Roman history. The most important and fascinating sequence is that in the temple. The building seems already to have been partly ruinous when, in the mid fourth century, a crude shrine was cobbled together in its north-western part. This phase was brought to an end by the collapse onto the shrine of the northern vaults of the temple. The surviving southern chambers were now given over to domestic occupation. Two of the chambers and part of the central area seem to have been for human habitation, one of the chambers for animals, a certain amount of structural alteration taking place. The ambulatory now became a dump for household refuse, an extraordinary thickness accumulating (and accounting in part for the preservation of the podium). This would indicate continued occupation for a considerable length of time. The deposits of this phase contain coins down to the House of Theodosius, but of course the occupation could have continued much later. Amongst the rubble of the final decay of the temple structure was found a quantity of human bones, some of them bearing cut-marks, some of them stained as if originally they had been in contact with metal. The dis-articulated nature of the bones, and the absence of the metalwork causing the staining makes it clear that they have been disturbed. The excavator suggests that they represent the last inhabitants of the temple, massacred, buried by the collapse of the building, and later disturbed by stone-robbers. Had this been the case one would have expected the bones to be comminuted. Another explanation which can be advanced is that the bones were originally burials made in the rubble of the temple and subsequently disturbed by stone robbers. The staining would accord with this. In addition there is evidence of decapitation. This may have been due to fatal violence, but it is also now a recognised feature of late-Romano-British burial practice.

No other part of the settlement has yielded such an impressive sequence. The fourth-century Building XVIII was demolished in the latter part of that century and its site covered by a dark deposit containing hundreds of coins down to the House of Valentinian. Other buildings show mixed fortunes. Buildings IX and XIII seem to have burnt down ca. AD 350, but others, such as XV, XX, XXV and XXX continued in use later. Buildings X, XIII and XXVI had late (undated) dry-stone walls added to them, in the case of Building X subsequent to an extension of Valentinianic or later date. Building XII was in part standing into the mediaeval period. Despite the difficulties of dating it would seem that the settlement continued well into the late fourth century, and in all probability on into the fifth. This part of Britain was, of course, not to fall unter Anglo-Saxon control until well on into the sixth century, so the Nettleton evidence is important, and tantalising in its incompleteness. How much could we have learnt of the changes in the dark fifth century?

It is this cry of 'how much could we have learnt...' that perhaps best characterises one's response to the Nettleton Scrubb report. A site so obviously of the greatest interest and value in many fields has not and cannot yield the information it could have. It can only be a matter of deep regret that the success of Cameron could not be built upon for Nettleton.

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