

S. S. Frere, *Verulamium Excavations 2*. Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London 41. Society of Antiquaries and Thames and Hudson Ltd., London 1983. xvi and 346 pages, 47 plates.

Verulamium reports have a particular standing for students of Roman provincial archaeology. The three to date have all represented great advances in our knowledge, both in terms of excavation technique, and in the information gained thereby. The 1936 publication of Mortimer Wheeler's excavations was the first of a major Romano-British urban site since Silchester and Caerwent. It showed how the application of improved methods of excavation could enlarge the amount of potential information. It is of course unfortunately true, as Frere notes, that Wheeler did not make the best use of the evidence he had won. Frere himself started his excavating at Verulamium very much on Wheelerian lines with the trenches laid out as a grid of boxes with relatively large permanent balks intervening. It soon became clear that the balks

obscured vital information such as walls, and in later seasons Frere favoured a larger, open area of excavation, particularly for the complex stratigraphy of Insula XIV. This approach was subsequently taken up in the later 'sixties in Biddle's excavations at another Romano-British town, Winchester, was later developed by Barker at Roman Wroxeter, and is now standard practice on many British and continental urban sites. One might also note that, like Wheeler's 1930s excavations, Frere's Verulamium excavations provided a trained cadre of excavators, many of whom went on to leaven all aspects of British archaeological activity, as a glance at the names listed on pp. iii-iv will confirm.

Frere's Volume I concentrated on the detailed exposition of the timber-framed and later stone structures of Insula XIV, where deep stratigraphy yielded to his meticulous technique a precise record of the vicissitudes of an area of the town. This was the first time that a large area of a Romano-British town had been excavated and reported with as much attention to vertical sequence as to horizontal plan, and it had a great effect on our perception of Romano-British towns. Volume II reports on the other sites excavated during Frere's 1955-61 campaign. It exhibits the same attention to the stratigraphy and chronology of the sites, but whereas Volume I had most to say about first- and second-century Verulamium, Volume II is particularly informative and rewarding about the city in the third, fourth and fifth centuries.

Volume II opens with a section blandly entitled 'Introduction'. In fact this is a full-dress analysis of what knowledge has been gained to date of the nature and development of pre-Roman and Roman Verulamium. As with all Frere's writings the exposition is a masterpiece of clarity. This is not the clarity of bold conclusions which cannot be hampered by the unavailability of countervailing evidence, but it derives from a deep knowledge of the evidence, and, equally important, of the limitations and peculiarities of the evidence, particularly that for date. Gone are the 'bombed' city of the third century; the 'Constantinian renaissance' is re-assessed and extended; and the decayed city of the later fourth century is replaced by one still active into the fifth. In addition we now know more (if still very little) about pre-Roman Verulamium; more also about the changes through time of the fortunes of particular areas of the city, which, as we shall see below, must make us cautious about generating theories on the town as a whole from the evidence of individual sites. This Introduction is a model of how the history of a town can be deduced from its archaeology, yet remaining always conscious of where we do not know or are not sure.

The bulk of the report is taken up with description and analysis of a large number of sites; first a number of public buildings, then private houses by Insula. Though tables of dating evidence for all phases are included in the text, there is a minimum of illustrated and discussed finds, only an amount of stratigraphically-significant coarse pottery. All other finds are being held over to the forthcoming Volume III.

With the public buildings the greatest space is given over to discussions of the defences and of the forum/basilica complex. Frere's work produced evidence of a hitherto unknown early defensive circuit (the 1955 Ditch), and has made possible a re-evaluation of the nature and date of the Fosse Earthwork and of the later stone walls. The 1955 Ditch enclosed 47.6ha. (119 acres) of the central street grid. One outstanding problem of these defences is their date: pre- or post-Boudiccan? The datable material recovered does not permit of a resolution of this question, but Frere inclines strongly towards the former. Another problem is their form. There is no trace of a wall inside the ditch, and the material thrown into the ditch at its filling suggests that there was originally an earthen rampart. Britain was to develop a tradition of such rampart-and-ditch urban defences and it is easy to come to regard them as normal. But in the context of the western provinces as a whole they are almost unique, especially at so early a date. Does their origin lie with indigenous earthwork defences, or with Roman military defences? And whichever it may be, why do they occur in Britain and, seemingly, nowhere else? In his re-examination of the Fosse circuit Frere concludes that it was never completed, and that it dates to the mid second century. His suggestion that the diverting of labour consequent upon the devastation of the city centre by the Antonine fire prevented its completion is attractive, especially as it relates the sequence to events internal to Verulamium. His later-third-century date for the stone wall circuit is acceptable as at the time many other towns in Britain were furnishing themselves with lengthy stone enceintes, in contradistinction to the much reduced areas then current on the Continent.

Precise details of the forum and basilica will continue to be a niggling weakness in our knowledge of Verulamium because the late-Saxon parish church of St Michael (itself of considerable interest for the post-Roman history of the city) with its churchyard overlies the site of the basilica. Whereas the layout of the



forum is clear if unusual, the basilica presents Frere with many difficulties. The problem is simply stated: the only evidence for the basilica is its overall area and short lengths of three walls. The overall dimensions are huge, 121,3 m (400 feet) by 61 m (200 feet), but the three known walls all lie to one side of the longitudinal axis. The walls were of much the same width, but we do not know if they were of similar construction or differed, that is, whether they are contemporaneous or not. Frere assumes the former, but the account by Page in *Victoria County History of Hertfordshire Vol. IV* pp. 134–5 shows that the building had suffered in the Antonine fire, and that on one of the walls were parts of columns of differing diameters. It may be that we do have a rebuild as well as the original layout. Frere offers three different reconstructions of the basilica, supported by architectural drawings by his wife. One (Plan B) involving a long thin basilica looks a non-starter. The other two, covering the entire area available for the basilica, have considerable problems both of ground plan, requiring a double-aisled basilica as well as the offices, and thus of vertical cross-section and lighting. Despite Mrs. Frere's best efforts the resulting reconstruction drawings show exteriors with all the grace and style of an aircraft hangar. Given the minimal actual evidence it may be better to admit that *ignoramus et*, for the foreseeable future, *ignorabimus*, rather than suggest we know more than we can.

Underlying the forum area is a rather irregular late-Iron-Age ditch, circumscribing roughly the same area as that to be taken up by the forum insula. This is one of several different indications of pre-Roman use of the valley floor found during Frere's work. The area lies outside the main complex of Prae Wood earthworks (for which see now Hunn in *Britannia Vol. XI*) usually taken as the nucleus of the oppidum of the *Catuvellauni*. Yet the ditched enclosure and the evidence of buildings, burials and 'coin moulds' suggests that the area near the river may have been significant. The general impression gained of the Iron Age occupation is of considerable complexity and mixing of functional areas.

Turning from public to private buildings, Frere presents results from excavations in advance of the widening of Bluehouse Hill, a mediaeval road running across the Roman city roughly along its short axis. Because of the occasion for the archaeological work, excavation took place in a relatively narrow strip, therefore the complete plans of buildings could not always be recovered, a situation exacerbated by the fact that the cutting of Bluehouse Hill as a hollow-way had destroyed all the Roman structures along its line. Nonetheless Frere recovered particularly complete evidence for the area of the city between the forum and the theatre (*Insulae XIV, XXVIII, XXVII*) and in *Insula XXI*. Each structure is meticulously presented and discussed, though often the reader feels as though he is being sandbagged by the sheer quantity of closely-packed evidence. It was the mounting problem (and cost) of presenting such evidence that led a working party of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments to recommend in a report under Professor Frere's name that this sort of evidence be presented in a microfiche archive. This appeared too late to affect the format of this report, but had it not this would have been a very different volume. Much of it would be on fiche, with the Introduction playing a central role. Yet, hard going though it is to read the evidence as presented in the report as it stands, how much harder it would be to have to get at it on microfiche which is more strain on the eyes and where one cannot keep flicking backwards and forwards to check or remind oneself. Though some may take this report as an example of the evils microfiche seeks to avert, to this reviewer it tends to show that, laborious though the evidence is to use set in type, microfiche would be worse; and that the relegation in a specialist publication of primary evidence to fiche benefits only the accountant, not the user. The trouble is accountants usually win.

Given the number of structures excavated and the complexity of the stratigraphy it would be pointless to try to review the report structure by structure, so instead some general points about Verulamium are perhaps worth making. The first is the wealth of evidence for construction methods. Volume I of course introduced us to the evidence for timber-framing techniques, and this volume tends to show many of the same techniques, though there are variants, such as those in the timber buildings of *Insula XXVIII*, or the Neronian post-built structure in *Insula XVII* (p. 105) which is a construction technique suggested as being non-Roman. Equally interesting is the accumulation of evidence for 'masonry' buildings. Frere makes it clear that there is evidence for very few of these buildings having been carried right up to the eaves in masonry. Instead he shows that three types of evidence point to the majority of stone walls having acted only as sill-walls for timber-framed or other walls. The first is the flat tops of many of these walls, some, such as *XXI 1* and *2*, showing seatings for timber members. The second is the absence of masonry rubble over the surviving parts of the structures. The third is the presence of clay rubble, and in the case of *XXI 2* some of the



clay still in situ on masonry wall tops. Evidently timber-framing was always the rule at Verulamium, indeed in some buildings (e. g. XX 1, p. 161) the evidence is for walls purely of tamped clay with no framing. The change from timber to masonry construction is generally presented by archaeologists in terms of progress, with the implication that timber constructions are inferior. This report makes it clear that a timber or clay building can be quite as substantial and well-appointed as one constructed in masonry throughout. Building XXI 2, mentioned above, had tessellated floors, a fine mosaic, and yielded the great sheets of fallen wall- and ceiling-plaster (p. 162 ff.). Even a timber-framed building with no masonry sill-walls such as XXVIII 3 could contain a mosaic and painted wall-plaster. Most surprising perhaps is the evidence that such buildings may even have had tessellated upper floors (cf. Building XXI 1, p. 147). It should be accepted that, properly shielded from the weather and properly maintained, such structures could be as sophisticated and durable as their masonry equivalents; as the huge numbers of surviving mediaeval timber-framed buildings in Britain and Europe testify.

The area in which this report makes us more aware of the limitations in our knowledge is in what the great majority of rooms were used for. In some of the earlier timber buildings, particularly in *Insula XIV*, there are pits let into the floor of some of the rooms, the contents of which permit an identification of the use of the room, metal-working or whatever. But in many timber building rooms the floor is a plain one of clay or *opus signinum*, or presumably in many cases a plank floor, though little evidence for these is presented. On such surfaces virtually anything may have happened. There is also little evidence for types or placing of furniture. In the more substantial 'masonry' buildings *opus signinum*, tessellated and mosaic floors are just as unreadable. This is not a problem peculiar to Verulamium, and is one which will continue to vitiate our understanding of the uses to which buildings were put, or the number of people who lived in them. In this connection Building XXVIII 1 is particularly fascinating. In dimensions and general lay-out a courtyard house of a type familiar in the larger Romano-British town, Frere's analysis of its plan shows that it is in fact a honeycomb of interdigitating elements. Along the street frontage opposite the forum is a range of rooms including two latrines, one of them public. The other rooms may have been shops. Along the side street dividing *Insula XXVIII* from *Insula XIV* was a block of rooms interpreted, *faute de mieux*, as the main living-quarters of the property. At the end of this wing is a block, integral in build with the rest of the structure, but probably self-contained, and in plan resembling a small winged-corridor house. Behind the shops and the main residential block is an underground shrine, frustratingly unfinished therefore unascrivable, approached by a ramped corridor. So what on casual inspection appears to be a courtyard house in fact can be shown to have at least four separate components.

On a more general level this flexibility can be seen in the development of the overall townscape of Verulamium. Influenced by the presence of street grids, and by the frequency, solidity and permanence of buildings excavated at Silchester, Caerwent, or by Wheeler at Verulamium, students of Romano-British towns have tended to assume that street frontages should be built-up. Any departure from this, especially in town centres, is a deviation from the norm. This is very much the attitude displayed by Frere in his Introduction, where gaps in occupation of a length of frontage of up to half a century are puzzled over. Yet in this report and in Volume I it becomes clear that such gaps occur in virtually every *Insula* and on virtually every site examined. If so we may have to view them not as deviations, but as part of the normal development of Verulamium's urban fabric. Does this mean that we are going to have to abandon our model of relatively static built-up areas in favour of a more fluid one, where, due to lack of constraint on space, buildings could be put up as needed, and not necessarily replaced on the same site? It must be admitted that this would predicate an odd sort of urban land market. But it would also have important repercussions on our view of town development, and not just at Verulamium. No longer would one or even more vacant sites be useable as evidence of decline, if one were to accept that there were always vacant sites in a town. For instance there are those who would characterise Romano-British towns in the fourth century as a shadow of their former selves, pointing to vacant sites and a lack of rebuilding. But decline is a relative matter; what if they have fixed their base-line for comparison too high, to 'fully built-up' second century towns, to a Golden Age that never was?

Verulamium also provides us with the now-famous sequence in *Insula XXVII* extending down into the fifth century; but this report makes it clear that other buildings such as XIV 3 also had a late life, making XXVII 2 less singular at Verulamium. Barker's work at Wroxeter, and recent discoveries at Canterbury make it less singular in late-Roman Britain.



To be able to bring out such general problems and themes is a tribute to the quality of the excavated evidence and its presentation here. Verulamium II has given us quite as much to chew on and over as Verulamium I. Anybody interested in the problems of urban archaeology and its information yield, or in the problems of Roman provincial towns cannot ignore this volume. Having read the Introduction they would be foolish not at least to pursue points that interest them into the body of the text. Once again a Verulamium report has advanced many areas of Roman urban archaeology and Professor Frere has put us all in his debt.

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