

P. Crummy, Colchester Archaeological Report 3. Excavations at Lion Walk, Balcerne Lane, and Middleborough, Colchester, Essex. Colchester Archaeological Trust Ltd., Colchester 1984. xi and 224 pages, 204 figures, 6 outsize plans, 5 microfiche sheets.

Colchester was one of a number of important English towns where the increased appreciation of what was being lost in redevelopment saw the establishment of a permanent archaeological presence in the nineteen seventies. An inevitable consequence of establishing archaeological units, at Colchester or elsewhere, was a huge increase in the number of excavated sites which then had to be published. This was paralleled by an increase in the number, complexity and lead-time of specialist reports seen to be necessary and integral to a final report. It was feared that the result would be numbers of large and expensive-to-produce reports slow in appearing. This worry prompted two related responses. One was to an extent internal to the units responsible for excavation and publication, giving rise to the fascicule method of publication; that is the individual site was split into a number of aspects, be it chronological, e. g. Roman, early mediaeval; or topographical, e. g. intra-mural, extra-mural; or topics e. g. structures, pottery, bones, etc. In theory each of these could merit a separate fascicule. Fascicules could then be produced as and when ready, rather than the whole site be held up for one specialist report. The consumer could either buy all the fascicules relating to a particular site, thus building up a conventional site report, or buy all the fascicules on a particular topic regardless of site. The advantage is clearly that publication can be speeded up, and to date fascicules dealing with the structures and stratigraphy of a number of sites have appeared from several units along with some specialist reports. The disadvantages are equally clearly the fragmentation into separate publications of interrelated and inter-dependent material, and the risk that later work on particular topics may lead to radical revision of views on a topic already published.

External to the units, the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Department of the Environment (DoE) which was responsible for funding most post-excavation analysis and publication was understandably alarmed at the prospect of ever-increasing costs both as an absolute problem and as a relative proportion of the total funds at its disposal for archaeology. It therefore set up working parties of the archaeological great and good which reported under Professor Frere in 1975 and under Professor Cunliffe in 1982/3. The Frere report recommended that publication should be at two levels. Conventionally printed and thus more expensive publication (Level IV) should be confined, for sites, to 'Synthesised descriptions with supporting data' and, for material, to 'Selected finds and specialist reports relevant to synthesis'. Level III was to be a cheaper publication (e. g. on microfiche or microfilm) of the bulk of the evidence, i. e. for sites 'Full illustration and description of all structural and stratigraphical relationships' and for excavated material 'Classified finds-lists and finds-drawings, and all specialist analyses'. Thus the principle of a clear divide in modes of publication was established. This was pursued, though less specifically worded, in the Cunliffe report, with the division between volume printing and fiche print (out). Volume printing would be reserved for '... an introduction, guide and summary to the report. We call this element the report digest'. All the basic evidence and analysis go on alternative methods of publication, principally fiche. By the time this review appears the DoE in its new guise as the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (England), which has accepted the Cunliffe report, will presumably be trying to implement it.

In the light of these problems and constraints, both external and internal, relating to archaeological publication in Britain, the Colchester reports are an interesting case-study. To date, three volumes have appeared from Colchester. Besides the one under review here there have been Volume 1 (published jointly



with the Council for British Archaeology) on 'Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester' a mainly synthetic work, with little publication of actual excavation evidence, and generated by results from several sites, a sort of Level IV +. Volume 2 is a publication of Roman small-finds from the excavations. In terms of the Frere report it is a Level III work, but it is published at Level IV. Both are published with the aid of DoE grants, which means that the DoE must have vetted them. Volume 3 is a report on the structures and stratigraphy from three excavations; the sites at Lion Walk, Balkerne Lane and Middleborough. It opens (pp. 3–30) with a section on 'Roman and Medieval Colchester', a part-chronological, part-thematic treatment of how our knowledge of Roman Colchester has been increased by these excavations, with reference to others (the mediaeval content is minimal). There then follow one hundred and eighty pages of site description along with a few specialist reports (e. g. on mosaics). Much of this is detailed description of stratigraphy and features, to this reviewer's mind corresponding to Frere Level III or Cunliffe's fiche print (out) material. The specialist reports, though interesting, are not really 'relevant to synthesis' as recommended for Frere Level IV. Cunliffe suggests that the volume print should carry only summaries of specialist reports. In addition to the main volume there are five sheets of microfiche and six outside (A1) sheets folded in a separate wallet the same size as the volume. On the outside sheets go detailed plans (at varying scales) for the three sites, plus fourteen sections. The other ninety-eight sections are relegated to microfiche along with specialist reports on human remains, botanical evidence and stone sources, amongst others. The Frere and Cunliffe reports both had printed matter and microfiche in a reasonably clear functional relationship. But here, and it is a feature not confined to Colchester, and not really Colchester's fault, we are getting an attempt at an old-style report in print, with microfiche used as a grab-bag for odds and ends. In many ways this is a relief to this reviewer since he finds microfiche decidedly user-unfriendly. But the DoE/HBMC(E) having accepted the principles of the Frere and Cunliffe reports seem a long way from putting them into practice. This is unfair on the publishing archaeologist who is caught between principle and practice, and unfair on the consumer who does not know from one publication to the next what he is getting for his money and effort.

Whilst on the subject of presentation there are features of the publication under review which are unsatisfactory and call for revision before future volumes are published. The first is the question mentioned above of the apportionment to print or fiche of plans versus sections. Both are representations of the same thing, the stratigraphic succession, why then are the plans all published in print whereas nearly ninety per cent of the sections are on fiche? Moreover many of the sections are too large to fit on the screen of a fiche-reader all at once. It should not be that the sections are, if only by implication, downgraded relative to the plans: it is retrograde. Second, some of the plans and sections are published on the A1 sheets. Is this necessary, especially as it can mean the reader having to use one (or more) A1 plan(s), the printed volume and a reader all at the same time to understand one site! If all the plans in the report were to the same scale one could understand the oversize plans, as they generally cover an entire large site. But the plans are not all to the same scale, even on the oversize sheets. This being so it does seem that the case for the oversize sheets is more difficult to make. There are plenty of general site plans, of a more schematic nature, in the body of the book, so the scaling-down would not be impossible. Indeed it would be greatly helped if more care were taken over conventionalising the plans and sections. This must be the third major area of concern. Many of the plans are a hopeless clutter due to overloading, particularly with writing; fig. 88 is a real horror, needing fig. 89 to try to explain it. Much of this writing is explaining what surfaces or features are composed of. A proper system of conventions for the various component elements of these layers would remove this verbal fog, leaving the plans much easier to understand. One might suggest that in future Colchester volumes the current appearance of the plans is reversed, that Lettratone and hand-drawn symbols are used to conventionalise the surviving archaeological deposits, and that the areas of later disturbance be left blank on the page, reflecting their status as information. A benefit of this would be that features, which at present float in a white limbo, would be fixed in a conventionalised context; and as features are as much defined by them interrupting surfaces as by their own fills, this would be to the good. The sections are if anything worse as many of them appear simply as collections of lines, defining the interfaces between deposits. Lastly one must note the poor quality of the plate reproduction which is almost always considerably too dark.

So far this review has consisted largely of a litany of complaints and reservations, but these are about presentation. It would be churlish to leave that impression about the excavations and the information gained from them. The sites were evidently excavated with considerable skill and devotion, in the face of imminent



development. The results from Lion Walk are of great interest for all phases of Colchester's development, but the evidence for the fortress and colonia before the Boudiccan destruction is of international importance. Enough has been recovered to make the general lay-out of the Claudian fortress clear, showing as Crummy notes, that the plan-type familiar from Flavian and later fortresses dates back this far, at least. Most buildings were of timber and daub set on foundations of opus caementicium. It was clear that following the foundation of the colonia c. A. D. 49 the military buildings were just turned over to occupation by the veteran colonists who had used them as serving legionaries. This pattern is not universal in Britain (though Crummy rather underplays the Gloucester evidence) and a search through the continental literature failed to produce any convincing parallels. It is to be hoped that future work may. The details preserved by the Boudiccan destruction of construction techniques of the legionary and early colonial periods are of the first importance for the study of both civilian and military building techniques and their subsequent development in Roman Britain. After the sack much of the site lay vacant behind buildings fronting onto the north-south street to the east of the site. In the early second century the area was built up with courtyard houses behind shops, which opened onto footways alongside the streets. The buildings excavated were all of fairly elaborate plan for a Romano-British town, with no good evidence for strip-buildings of the familiar type. Even so it is salutary to see how small most of the rooms were. Also during this century were built the main colonia defences, a free-standing wall later backed by a rampart, an unusual sequence which has generated a long controversy here brought to an end. The houses lasted down into the fourth century, when they seem mostly to have been abandoned, some decaying, some being demolished with their materials being salvaged for re-use.

In contrast to the Lion Walk site, lying within the defences of fortress and colonia, the Balcerne Lane and Middleborough sites lay outside. But they have distinctive contributions to make to our understanding of Roman Colchester. The Balcerne Lane site yielded useful information on the western defences and extramural structures. The legionary fortress defences had of course been slighted before the Boudiccan revolt, after which shock new defences were constructed on almost the same line at Balcerne Lane. Using irregularities in the street plan north of the Temple of Claudius Crummy suggests that at this period the northern defences lay to the south of their second-century line. This technique of recognition of earlier circuits fossilised in street plans is familiar from mediaeval towns, and it is encouraging to see it applied to a Roman town. Less convincing is the suggestion that in the late first century the defences were extended westwards. This idea is based essentially on a short length of ditch only 1,50 m deep found in Crouch Street. One would like to see a lot more evidence before accepting this extension. Balcerne Lane also yielded a much-disturbed sequence of timber buildings fronting onto the London Road, though the property plots proposed again seem to rest on shaky evidence. In addition there were a stone Romano-Celtic temple, and a massively-founded shrine. South of the road lay a second-century house with stone sill walls. There was also considerable evidence for the town's water supply.

The Middleborough site also produced evidence for early timber buildings, succeeded by stone-founded ones of which only one could be extensively excavated. This consisted of a courtyard house with mosaics behind a range of shops fronting the road out of the north-western gate and close up against the presumed northern town ditch. The area has long been known for the extensive building(s) complex the other side of the river Colne at the Victoria Inn. Both the Middleborough and Balcerne Lane sites show that from an early period, probably dating back to the time of the military presence, there was occupation outside the formally laid-out nucleus of fortress and colonia. In the second and third centuries this occupation was of a standard clearly comparable to that within the defences.

The decline of this occupation and of the colonia in general are considered by Crummy largely in terms of the threat posed by Anglo-Saxon raiding. At the turn of the third and fourth centuries the town ditch was extended through the London road outside the Balcerne gate. At this general time the stone-founded building outside the gate fell into disuse, as did the Middleborough building. Crummy suggests that the threat which caused the construction of the Saxon Shore forts saw the strengthening of Colchester's defences and the preceding or consequent abandonment of the suburbs. A site of particular importance in this respect is the north-eastern (Duncan's) gate. Until the last century there was a bank running across outside the gate; and in the last century and this Duncan and Hull excavated at the gate finding traces of destruction by fire on two occasions, the earlier sealing a third- or fourth-century coin. Crummy assumes this blocking of Duncan's Gate to relate to that of the Balcerne Gate, and that the fires are late-Roman.

They could perfectly well, on the available evidence, be early mediaeval. Do we have Vikings rather than Saxons raiding? Literary or other evidence for Saxons attacking (or having the capability to attack) late-Roman towns is decidedly hard to come by.

Crummy's view of the decline of Colchester is very much from a traditional historical standpoint. Other points of view are possible. If one surveys the overall development of Colchester one can suggest that it reached its peak at the end of the second century with the suburbs at their maximum extent, extensive pottery industries and numbers of extra-mural temples, along with a well built-up intra-mural area. But the third century sees the decline of some of these, hastening towards the end of the century with the virtual disappearance of extra-mural activity, and in the fourth century the defended area suffers decline. Is it that Colchester's status gave it an economic head-start that it could not in the long run sustain in the face of developing local competition? Even in the fourth century one must be wary of seeing too much decline. Granted many of the buildings at Lion Walk were abandoned during the course of the century, nevertheless the materials of some of them were salvaged, implying new building elsewhere in the town. Nor must one forget that the early mediaeval town of Colchester, and town it was, was physically largely confined to a built-up strip along the High Street. Lion Walk yielded two 'Grubenhäuser', unfortunately published in Volume 1 rather than here. It would be nice to know more of the physical state of the fifth-century town in which they were constructed.

This report has its weaknesses, but they are principally of presentation and cannot all be laid at the door of Colchester Archaeological Trust. The content of the report is full of interesting evidence and stimulating discussion, and it is a pleasure to see so much good work published and so promptly. We look forward to future volumes in the series which, one hopes, will have learnt from any shortcomings of this one.

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