



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ROMAN LEGIONARY FORTRESS AT EXETER





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(unless otherwise attributed)

Design by Tony Ives



The front cover shows a reconstruction of the fortress at Exeter c. AD 70.
(Jane Reed, after C.G. Henderson and P.T. Bidwell)

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THE ROMAN LEGIONARY
FORTRESS

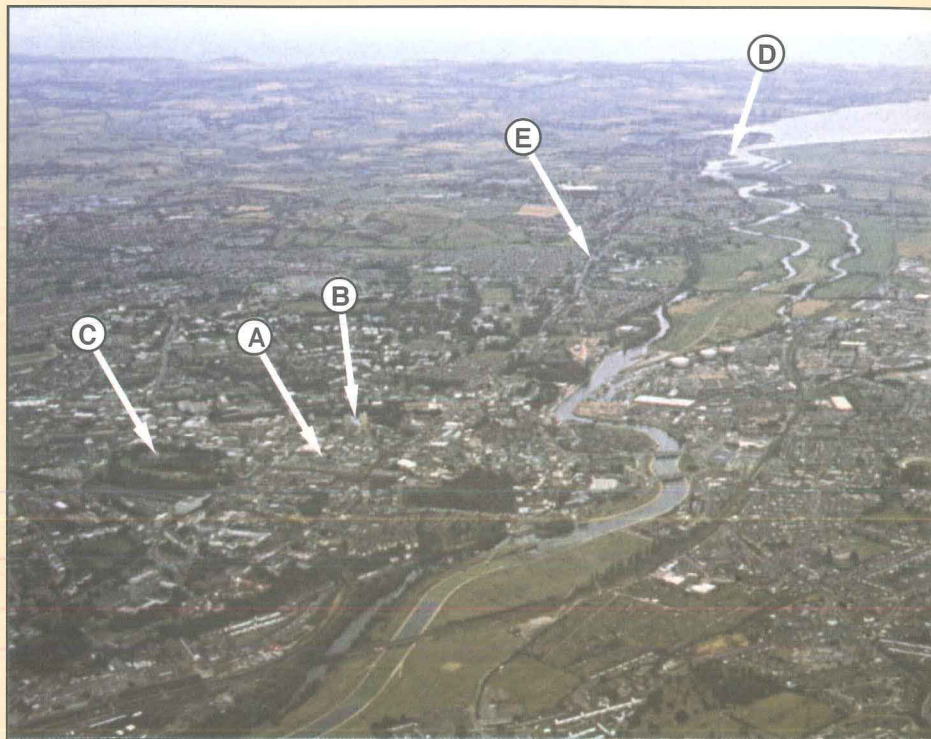


G. Young

Peter Ashmore, a modern Exeter citizen, displaying the kind of armour worn by a legionary soldier at Exeter in the first century AD.

The Siting of the Fortress

Exeter was founded by the Roman army. Around AD 50–55, or perhaps a few years earlier, the site now occupied by the centre of the city, hitherto simply farmland, was chosen for a new legionary fortress. This formed the winter headquarters of the Second Augustan legion during its conquest of South-West England. The legion must have been attracted to the site by its commanding position over the lowest crossing place over the river Exe, defended on two sides by steep valleys. Its name *Isca* was adopted from the ancient Celtic name for the Exe; it simply meant water or river. The modern name Exeter developed from this.



Aerial view of modern Exeter, showing the choice of the site of the fortress. The view looks southward down the Exe, with the south Devon coastline on the horizon. The area of the fortress is at (A), the cathedral (B) and castle (C). Topsham, the site of a small early fort and probable military occupation, lies on the edge of the estuary (D), linked by a Roman road (E) to the fortress at Exeter.

F.M. Griffith, Devon County Council



Aerial view of central Exeter, with the superimposed outline of the fortress defences. At the foot of the photograph, Exe Bridges cross the river Exe; Fore Street and High Street, which rise from the bridges up the centre of the view, follow the central streets of the fortress.

The Legion

The legions were the backbone of the Roman army: heavily armed professional foot soldiers dressed in iron armour, equipped with sword and dagger, shield and javelin. Only citizens of the Roman Empire could serve in the legions; the conquered barbarian peoples of the countries north of the Alps served as auxiliary troops. The legion which established Exeter was the Second Augusta. As its name shows, it had been founded by the Emperor Augustus in the previous century. It had served in Germany before coming to Britain in the invasion of AD 43 and had fought its way westward, capturing many hillforts, probably including Maiden Castle in Dorset. The commander in the early stages of the campaign was the future emperor Vespasian, but he returned to Rome before the legion arrived at Exeter.

The legion at Exeter would have consisted of perhaps 5,500 men: ten cohorts of soldiers (each of six centuries containing 80 men) plus officers, cavalry and some specialist craftsmen. The legionaries would spend the winter within the fortress. In summer they would be out on campaign, living in tents in temporary camps.

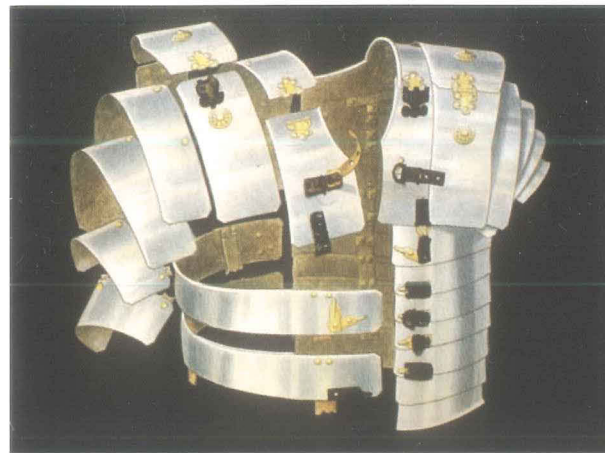


An *aureus* (gold coin) of Vespasian of AD 75–79, found below High Street. Regarding this piece Mr Norman Shiel, a specialist in Roman coinage, has written as follows:

'This *aureus* of Vespasian is a fine example of Flavian portraiture showing the rugged features of the soldier emperor who had emerged victorious from the turmoil of the Civil War which followed Nero's suicide in AD 68. Vespasian reigned as emperor from AD 69–79 and brought order and stability back to the Roman world. Much earlier in his life Vespasian had been the commander of the Second Augustan Legion during the emperor Claudius's invasion of Britain in AD

43. His biographer tells us that he led this legion into southern Britain where he encountered heavy resistance from the British tribes occupying hillforts in the area and had to fight many battles. The *aureus*, made from almost pure gold, represented considerable wealth: at the time of issue an *aureus* represented about six weeks' earnings for a legionary soldier.'

The reverse of the coin depicts Ceres holding ears of corn and a sceptre. Ceres was a Roman corn goddess, symbolic of good harvests, whose name has given us our word 'cereal'.



The soldiers at Exeter seem to have worn principally a suit of iron plate armour named *lorica segmentata*. The legionary soldiers fought, marched and often worked wearing such armour. No major find of this equipment has been discovered here, but many buckles and hooks broken from suits of this kind have been found.

Above: Fragments of legionary armour superimposed on a drawing of a suit of *lorica segmentata*, the graphic copied from an original by Mr Peter Connolly.



Sherd of a samian cup of c. AD 55–65 found in Goldsmith Street, Exeter, with the incised graffito 'L IVLI IPPONI' – the property of Lucius Julius Hipponicus. He was presumably a legionary soldier; he is the first Exeter person whose name is known.



An iron spear head from the fortress.



The decayed iron frame of a scabbard, in which a legionary would have held his dagger (left), was found in 1972 during excavations in Goldsmith Street. After closely examining the find, Dr David Sim of the University of Reading made the replicas (centre and right) in 1999. The frame is made of iron coated in tin, which gives it a silvery appearance and protects it from decay. Within the frame of the original was a wooden lining, which is believed to have been covered by leather. In this reconstruction the leather is stained red. The dagger itself was not discovered, but its form can be suggested from the form of the scabbard frame. Dr Sim found that the manufacture of these items was a demanding exercise requiring a high degree of skill.



Roman Military Sites in Devon

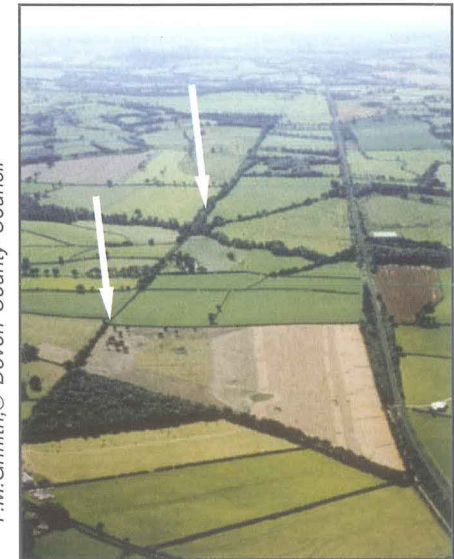
The last 30 years have seen a spectacular growth in knowledge of the activities of the Roman army in Devon; many new sites have been discovered by aerial reconnaissance, and others by excavation. It is now clear that the fortress in Exeter was at the centre of a network of forts, marching camps, fortlets and signalling stations with which the Roman army subjugated the native population.



Roman military sites in Devon, Cornwall and west Somerset.



Fortlet or signal station at Ide, overlooking the fortress at Exeter, discovered by aerial reconnaissance in the dry summer of 1984.



Above: View looking westward towards the Roman military site at North Tawton, mid Devon. Parallel to the railway, the straight line of the field boundaries (arrowed) marks the position of the Roman road running from Exeter towards Cornwall, probably laid out by the army during the period of the legionary occupation. The view shows how similar were the courses chosen by the Roman military engineers and their Victorian successors 1800 years later as they negotiated the mid Devon countryside.

The triple-ditched fort at Bury Barton, Lapford, lying within an outer enclosure and overlain by medieval and later farm buildings.

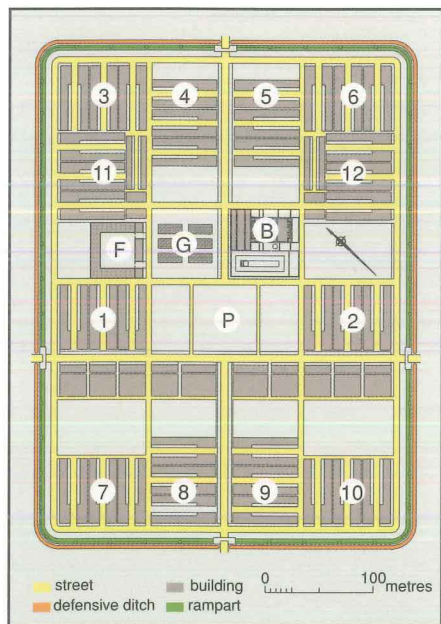


F.M.Griffith, © Devon County Council

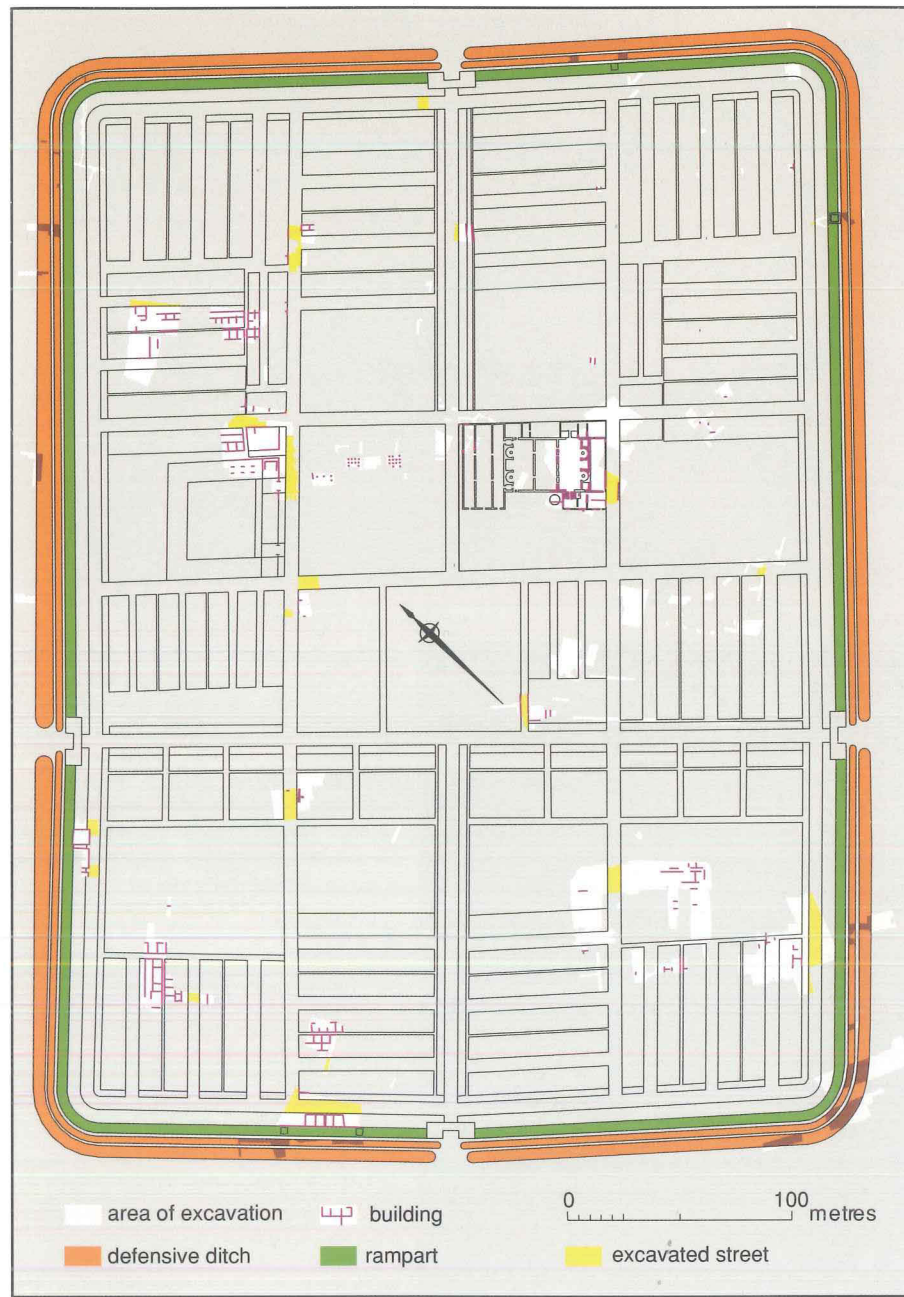
The Plan of the Fortress

The new fortress was of typical 'playing card' shape – a rectangle with rounded corners – covering an area of 42 acres (17ha) whose centre was close to the modern crossing of High Street and Fore Street, South Street and North Street. Within the defences was a grid of streets and densely-packed buildings, most of them of timber. The fortress provided not only accommodation but, like a self-contained town, catered for all the needs of an army at war: granaries for the corn supply, a hospital for the wounded, a workshop where weapons and armour could be made and repaired, and a bath-house for the soldiers' leisure. Around the edges of the fortress were the barracks in which the men were housed; at its centre were more vulnerable buildings, such as the hospital, workshops, granaries and the headquarters building.

Only a small part of the fortress has been excavated by the city's archaeologists. Nevertheless sufficient information has been recovered to offer a reconstruction of much of its plan. The position of the defences is now firmly established, and most of the major streets within are known. Recognisable parts of eight barracks, the bath-house, granaries, the workshop and other structures have been excavated.



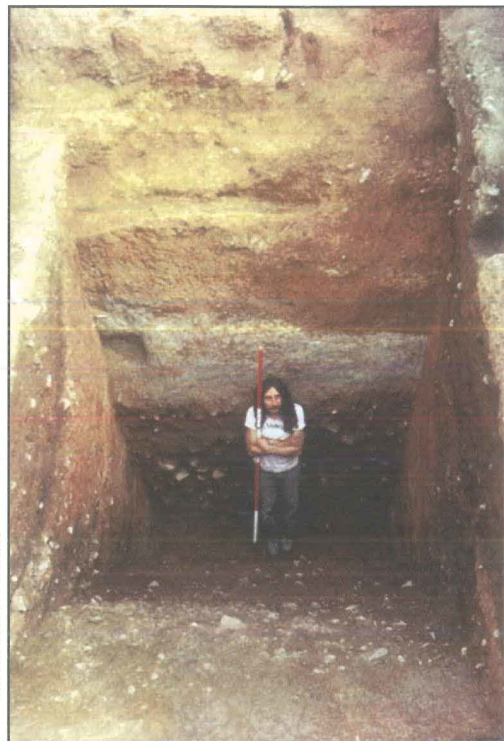
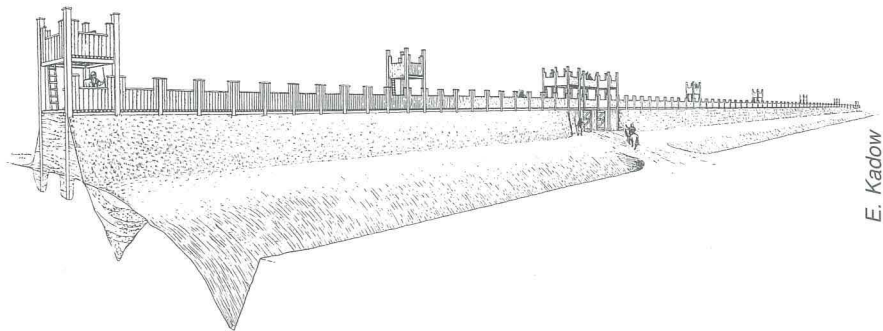
C.G.Henderson



C.G.Henderson

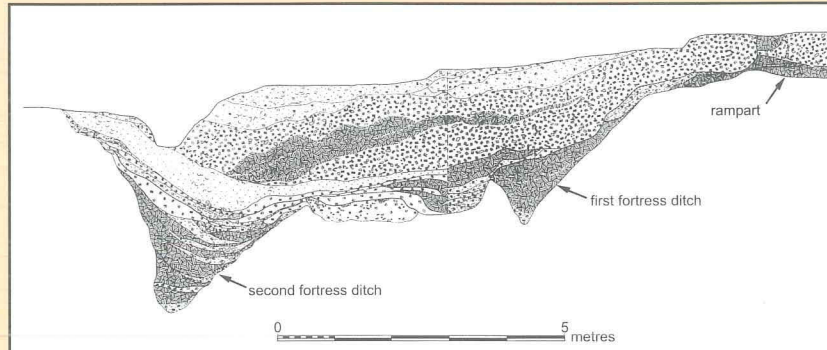
The Fortress Defences

The fortress was defended by an earth and timber rampart fronted by a deep ditch. The construction of this defence was a major undertaking: the circuit was about 1700m (more than a mile) long, with four gates and an estimated 44 towers, each 10 Roman feet square, positioned around the circuit at regular intervals of 100 Roman feet.

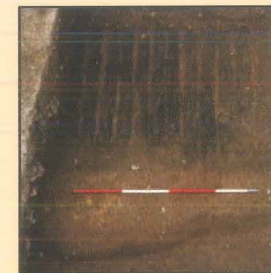


Above: Reconstruction of the defences at the front of the fortress (now the area of Fore Street). Much of the length of defences in the foreground was excavated at Friernhay in 1981, including the successive phases of ditch, traces of the two towers, the rampart and buildings behind. The position of the gateway can be calculated but it lies under Fore Street and has not been excavated.

Left: The formidable nature of the fortress defences is emphasised by this view taken from a scaffold tower on the rampart looking into the outer (second) ditch. The archaeologist stands in the bottom of the ditch; its steep outer face rises high above him.



The defensive ditch outside the rampart has now been examined on all sides of the fortress. An initial ditch with a symmetrical V-shaped profile, laid out close to the rampart, was soon replaced by one with a 'Punic' profile, with a very steep outer slope and a long slippery climb to the foot of the rampart.



The rampart was laid on a layer of parallel logs; the view shows traces of this revealed by excavation in Friernhay in 1981.

Top: A section through the fills of the outer fortress ditch, excavated at Rack Street in the winter of 1975-6. *Lower:* A measured section through the defences at Mermaid Yard in 1977.



The Legionary Bath-House

The most impressive discovery of Roman Exeter has been the legionary bath-house found under the Cathedral Green in 1971–6. About half this grand structure, which was built around AD 60, was excavated. It consisted of three large halls placed side-by-side: the cold room (*frigidarium*), tepid room (*tepidarium*) and hot room (*caldarium*) of the bathing suite. The bath-house is of national importance, since this must have been amongst the earliest stone buildings ever erected in Britain and is one of the first two or three major monuments in the story of architecture in this country. It formed the central element of a complex of buildings which would also have included changing rooms and an open-air swimming pool, covering an area of about 4000 sq m (about an acre) near the centre of the fortress.



R. Turner

The bath-house under excavation in September 1972, viewed from the top of cathedral's west front. The grid of stacks of tiles of the hypocaust basement is emerging below the walls of the later Roman basilica.



R. Turner

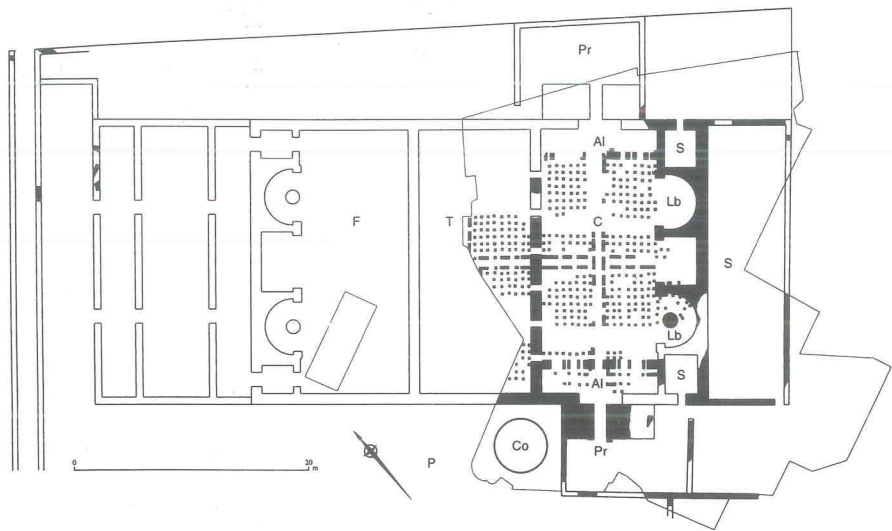
View across the hot room of the baths. The furnace house is at the top of the view; channels lined with tiles directed the heat to the centre of the room. The grid of tile stacks supported a raised floor of concrete. (The two large walls running across the view are of later date.)



Left: View in the hypocaust basement. In the distance the walls of the bath-house stand up to 1.5m high; the scars of the raised floor can be seen on each side of the ranging pole.

R. Turner

Below: Restored plan of the baths. To the right the area excavated is shown in solid black; the irregular diagonal lines running across the plan are the edges of the excavation. On the presumption that the baths were laid out symmetrically on each side of a central base-line, the form of the unexcavated portions can be reconstructed. To the left of the main bath-house, fragments of wall are believed to mark parts of the aisled hall which served as the changing rooms.



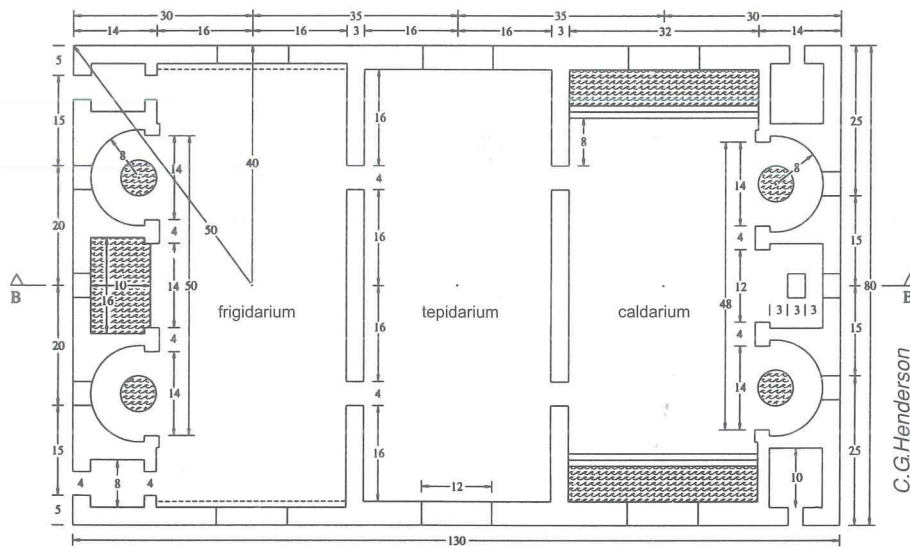
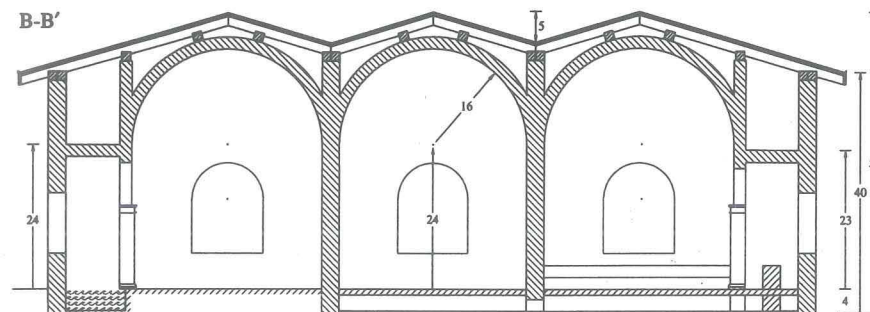
P.T. Bidwell



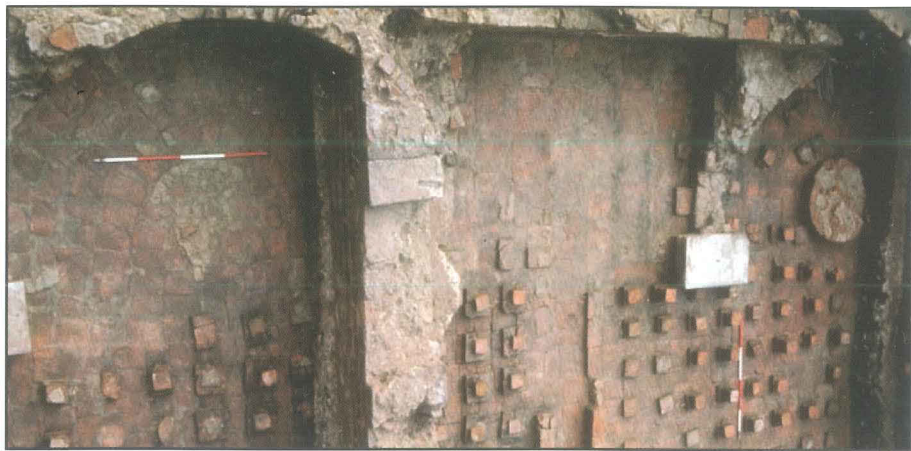
P.T. Bidwell/ E.W. Haddon

Museum model of the excavated area of the baths. To the rear is the caldarium (hot room); in the foreground is part of the tepidarium (warm room).

Below: A section and plan of a proposed reconstruction of the bath-house, showing the manner in which the three great vaults over the three principal rooms leant against one another and were buttressed by the apses at each end of the structure.



C.G. Henderson



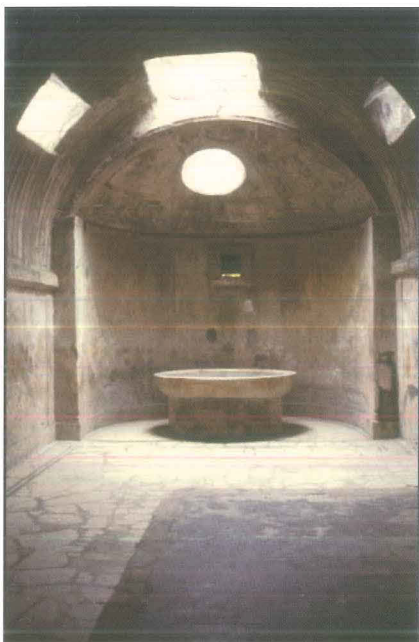
R. Turner

Above: View of the end wall of the hot room, its rectangular central recess flanked by semi-circular apses, the lower one partly covered by a later wall. The photo has been orientated to align with the model, right.



P.T. Bidwell/ E.W. Haddon

The museum model showing a reconstruction of the arrangement of central recess and apses shown in excavation above.



C.G. Henderson

A contemporary surviving bath-house at Pompeii. The semi-circular apse at the end of the room houses a circular *labrum* (basin) in the manner of the apses at Exeter.

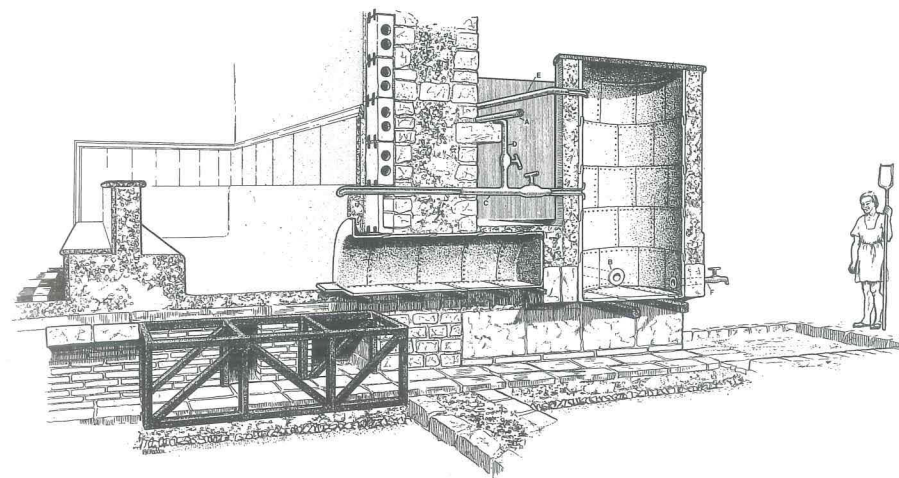


A length of rim of one of the circular basins (*labra*) in the apses in the hot room. The stone is Purbeck marble, a material quarried from Purbeck in Dorset, which could be polished to resemble true marble.

Right: View of the furnace house. Massive blocks of volcanic stone line the sides of the central flue, whose floor remains heavily scorched. The masses of masonry flanking the flue would have supported a boiler.



R. Turner



P.T. Bidwell/ E.W. Haddon

Above: Reconstruction of the heating system on one side of the hot room (*caldarium*). The side wall of the bath-house rises at the centre of the view. To the right is the furnace house, where a tall boiler stands above the flue. To the left a plunge-bath runs along the inner face of the wall; an iron cage helps support its great weight.



Left: Fragment of mosaic from the legionary baths showing a central circle or disc flanked by horses or similar creatures. They may be capricorns (goats): the capricorn was the symbol of the legion, alluding to its founder Augustus, whose birth sign this was. The find is of great interest, since this is the earliest mosaic known from Roman Britain.

The Barracks

The legion consisted of 60 or more centuries; by this time each century consisted of 80 men. Each century consisted of ten *contubernia* — groups of eight soldiers who ate, worked and slept together. The century was housed in a long barrack block of distinctive and standardised design. At one end was the centurion's house, occupying the full width of the barrack. The remainder of the building consisted of a row of square inner rooms of repeated plan, with an outer row of slightly smaller equipment rooms and a verandah. On campaign the eight men of a *contubernium* would share a tent; in the fortress they lived in one rear room of the barrack, storing their equipment in the room in front of it. The Exeter barracks whose plans can be reconstructed had twelve compartments — ten occupied by the *contubernia*, the others possibly by under-officers.

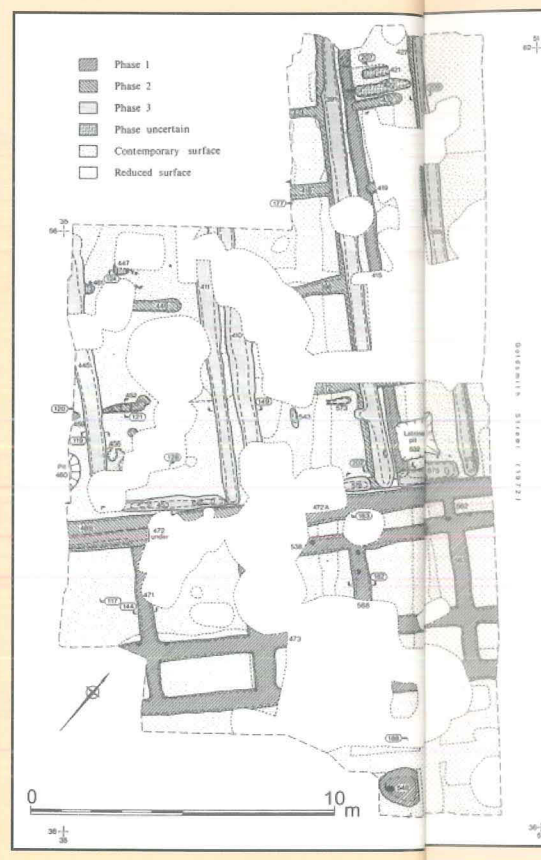
Barracks were arranged in blocks of six, each block housing the six centuries of a cohort.

Construction

Each barrack had a framework of stout upright timbers whose feet were embedded in trenches. At Exeter the walls were demolished entirely upon the departure of the legion *c.* AD 75; upon excavation only the trenches in which the wall timbers were bedded (within which are soft silty patches marking the former positions of posts) and the clay floors of the rooms are the only traces of these buildings. They require skilled excavation.



Model showing the likely appearance of a barrack block as if in the course of construction.



Right: Legionary barracks buried below the gardens of houses in Bartholomew Street, under excavation in 1980. The long trenches running parallel to the garden walls mark the main walls of the barrack block.



Left: Plan of post-trenches dug for the construction of three closely-packed buildings in Goldsmith Street in 1972. At the top are the back-to-back inner rooms of two barracks. Parts of their plans have been destroyed by later pit-digging.

The Workshop (*fabrica*)

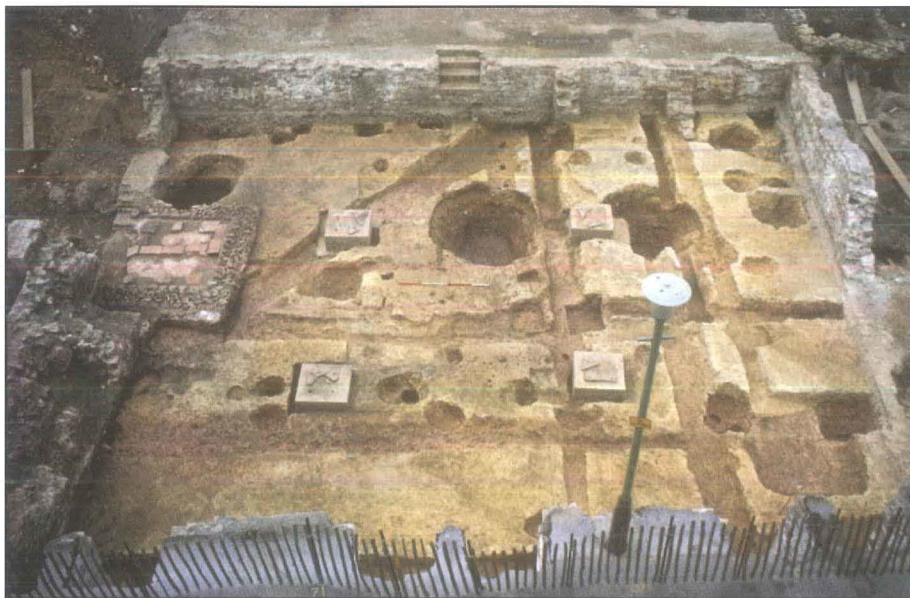


C.G.Henderson

The workshop (*fabrica*) was positioned towards the centre of the fortress; it underlay much of the modern Guildhall Shopping Centre. It probably consisted of four long halls arranged around a central yard. One corner of the *fabrica* was excavated in 1972. Part of one of these halls, with the adjacent office and entrance, was found.

Left: A post-trench of the *fabrica* after excavation, with impressions of posts at its bottom.

Below: The excavation of a cellar in Trichay Street in 1972. At the bottom is a military street, running from left to right. The verandah of the *fabrica* runs along the street frontage, with a square room behind, interpreted as an office. The aisled hall of the *fabrica* lay behind this (top of the view).



R. Turner



C.G.Henderson

The *fabrica* under excavation in Trichay Street in 1972. The large square pits in two rows, some with post-holes within, are the post-pits of an aisled hall. Within the hall are various smaller features including shallow troughs and many post-holes. The hall was one end of a large building in which metalworking took place.

The Household Goods of the Soldiers

The soldiers of the legion at Exeter, posted to a remote place on the edge of the known world, were supplied with goods from a wide range of places in the Empire which allowed them to maintain a Roman lifestyle. Finds from the fortress include goods from Italy, Spain, Greece, the eastern Mediterranean, northern and southern France and the Rhineland.



G. Young

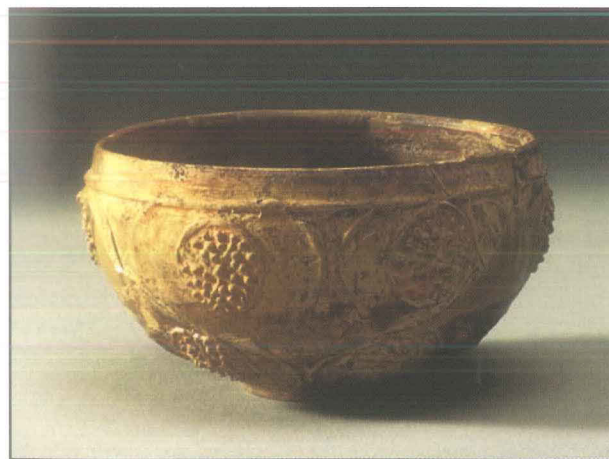
The sheer volume of artefacts recovered from the fortress bears testimony to the impressive scale of the army's supply system. Here Graham Langman, the Exeter Archaeology Finds Officer, studies the major collection of first-century pottery found in the ditches of the military compound at Coombe Street in 1989. Goods from a wide range of sources in the Roman Empire lie on the tables.



Two saucepans (*paterae*) were found encrusted together in a pit in Friernhay in 1981. They were deposited in the early second century but belong to a type used by soldiers at the time of the fortress, and it seems at least possible that they were in fact used initially in the fortress.



Above: Examples of the high-quality pottery made around Lyon in France which was distributed by the army to its legions in Britain and Germany. These products, with their pale buff fabric and lustrous brown slip, arrived in Britain until about AD 70, and are a characteristic find on early Roman military sites in southern Britain. The items shown here are a small cup and the tops (*disci*) of three decorated lamps.



Above: An almost intact specimen of a 'carrot amphora' found outside Exeter's South Gate. Such vessels were so named from their bizarre shape. It is believed that they were made somewhere in the east Mediterranean, perhaps Turkey, but the kiln sites have not yet been found. They are presumed to have held some special food – perhaps dates or prunes.

This delicate cup of Lyon ware was excavated by Lady Aileen Fox in 1946 in an officer's house in the fortress.

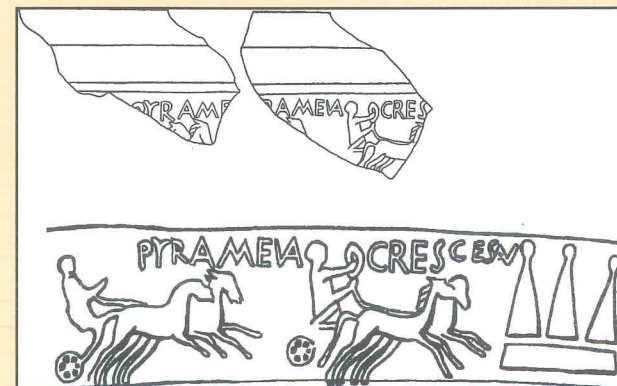


In the pre-Roman Iron Age native potteries operated around Poole Harbour in south Dorset. The potters worked without the use of wheel or kiln, making highly competent hand-made wares fired in bonfires, typically black wares with burnished surface. The Roman army needed such coarse pot for everyday use, and, having gained control of Dorset, used or employed these native potters to supply the army. As the legion moved to Devon their wares were brought to Exeter, where sherds of such vessels form the most common artefacts found in the Roman fortress and town. The photograph shows a selection of examples of first-century Black-Burnished ware from Exeter. Many of the forms of vessel used by the Roman soldiers belonged to types of pottery used in prehistoric Dorset farms; others show that the Dorset potters soon began to make new forms of pot imitating those brought to Britain by the Roman army.



This hollow fluted shaft with a terminal in the form of a ram's head was found during the rebuilding of central Exeter following the bomb damage of World War II. It comes from a *patera* – a small saucepan. The style of the piece indicates a date before about AD 75, so it belongs to the period of the military occupation of Exeter. It presumably formed part of the equipment of a legionary soldier.

Two fragments of a type of globular cup with mould-blown decoration showing chariot racing, found at Topsham in 1933. The line drawings show the designs, with a restoration of the full scene below, based on complete finds elsewhere in the Roman Empire. The three triangles at the right edge of the design are the finishing post. Cresces, to the right, has won the race and is holding a laurel wreath; above him are the words CRESCES AV [= Hail Cresces]. Behind him is Pyramus, above whom are the words, Anne Robinson-like, PYRAME VA [= Pyramus goodbye]. c. AD 55–75.



Two glass vessels – a beaker and a cup – found by workmen excavating the foundations of the British Home Stores building in Fore Street in 1951. They are the most complete examples of Roman glass excavated so far in the city. They date to c. AD 50–75; their place of production is not known but may have been the Middle Rhineland.

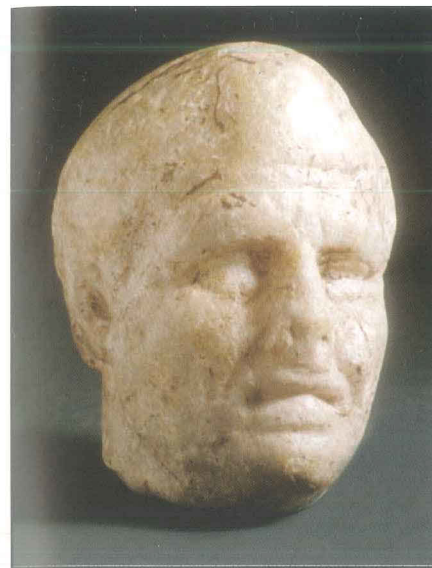


A series of plain samian pottery vessels from various sites in the fortress. These red tablewares were mass-produced on an industrial scale in southern Gaul. They were made in highly standardised shapes, then dipped in a slip containing the mineral illite which gave the characteristic glossy surface when fired. The forms shown here are typical of the years AD 50–75.



Rim of a mortarium (mixing bowl) stamped 'VITANII', made in the area of Bartholomew Street, Exeter, just outside the legionary defences in a probable military compound. Vitanius was a potter supplying mortaria to the Exeter area. He is one of two craftsmen working at Exeter in the first century whose names have come down to us; the find dates to c. AD 75–90.

Religion

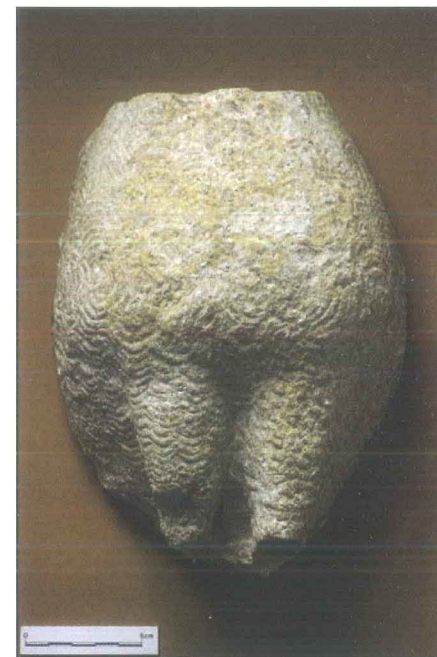


Left: Found in 1971 in Goldsmith Street, this miniature male portrait head in white Italian marble dates to the mid to late first century AD. It shows a man in late middle age. In publishing this piece Dr Roger Ling, an authority in the study of Roman sculpture, noted that the carving is in the veristic style in which the face was shown in dry, often unflattering, realism, whilst the use of the drill, used here for the hair, dates the piece after c. AD 60. Since it is unusually small, it may have come from a memorial in a private house or a tomb.

Right: Sculpture of a bird in Purbeck marble, found in a late first-century pit under the Guildhall Shopping Centre, perhaps reflecting the cult of the Emperor. Regarding this sculpture the late Professor J.M.C. Toynbee, a leading authority on Roman art, wrote as follows:

'The sculpture represents the front portion of the bird's body and the upper section of each of its legs. The legs, chest, and sides of the body are carved with a series of curved relief-lines running in different directions, which represent feathers very naturalistically and sensitively rendered. It can be said with certainty that it was worked in Britain by an artist from abroad. Its delicate sculpting betrays the hand of a very competent craftsman trained in the naturalist tradition of classical art.

The notably massive proportions of the breast and the military character of the find-spot make an eagle the most likely candidate for its identity. It might, if an eagle, have stood beside ... a statue of Jupiter or of an emperor in Jupiter's guise; and such a group would have found a natural place in the headquarters building of a legionary fortress.'



The Departure of the Roman Army

Around the year AD 75 the legion's work in bringing South-West England under Roman control must have been regarded as finished, and it moved to South Wales, establishing a new fortress at Caerleon near Newport. The military buildings at Exeter were dismantled.

The remains of the fortress lie buried between 1m and 2m below the modern city. Although none of it stands above ground today, the modern visitor can still appreciate something of the scale and natural strength of the site. Outside the fortress the roads they laid out, notably the Fosse Way – a great feat of Roman military engineering running east to Honiton, then all the way to the contemporary fortress at Lincoln – remain in use today.

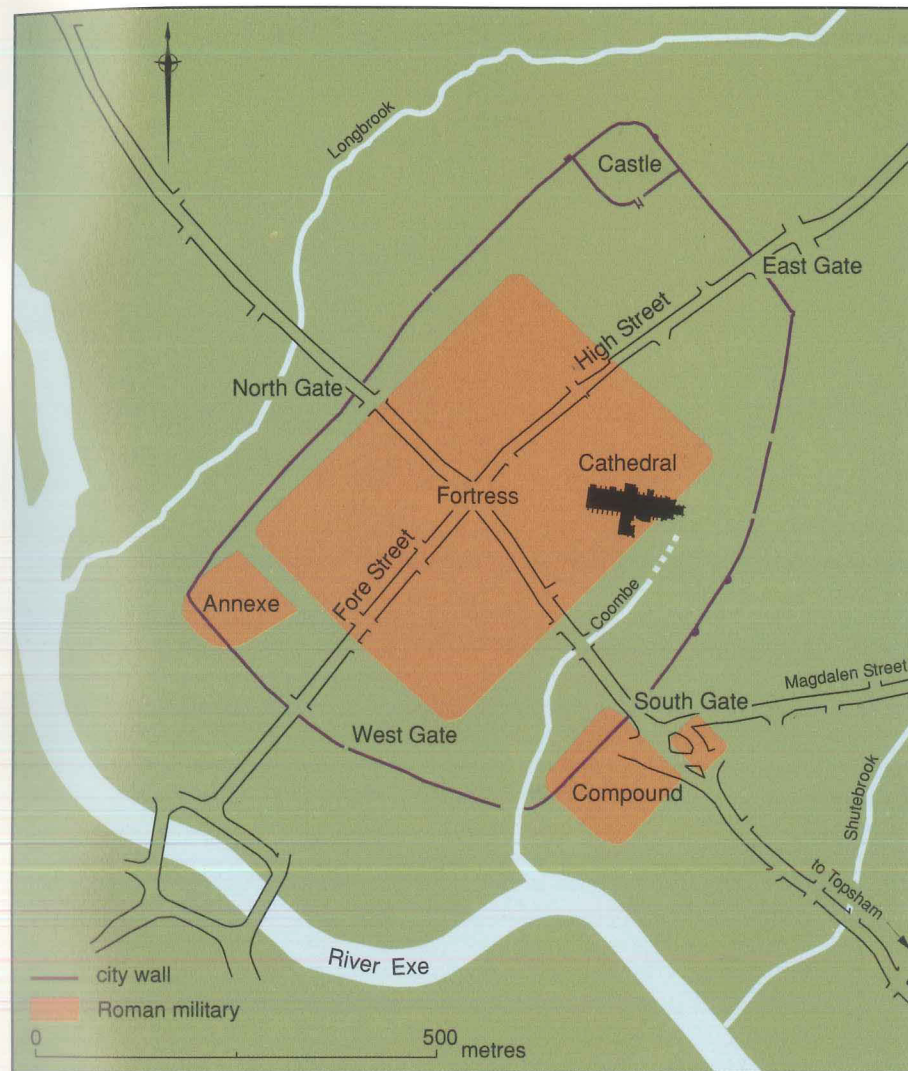
Right: Fragments of antefixes – the ceramic plaques placed at the eaves of the roof of the legionary bath-house at Exeter. Their motif was a pair of dolphins. Beside them (right) is shown a cast of an antefix from the same mould, found at the fortress of the Second Augustan Legion at Caerleon in South Wales, which was founded around AD 75. The use of the same mould at the two fortresses is an important clue that the legion moved around AD 75 from Exeter to Caerleon.



Cast courtesy of The National Museum of Wales



Left: This dispersed hoard was found during excavation in Holloway Street in 1973-4. It consists of three different denominations of Roman coin – the *as*, *sestertius* and *dupondius* – of three emperors, Claudius, Nero and Vespasian. They were buried c. AD 73-5. It is likely that they were deposited upon the clearance of the military buildings outside the South Gate upon the departure of the legion.



Plan of the centre of Exeter, showing the relationship between the legionary fortress with its compounds and annexe, the circuit of the city wall, and the medieval and later streets, castle and cathedral. The city wall was built after the legion left Exeter and enclosed more than twice the area of the fortress.

The Fortress under the Modern City



0 100 metres

area of excavation building excavated street city wall

defensive ditch rampart