CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

By Michael Fulford

The excavation of Insula IX, Silchester and the associated 'Town Life' project began in 1997. An area of 3,025m^2 covering the north-east of the insula was selected for total excavation of the archaeological sequence from the origins of the city in the late Iron Age to abandonment in the fifth to seventh century A.D. (FIG. 1). The reasons for investigating this particular area of *Calleva* are set out in Fulford *et al.* (2006, 4–7). The trench was bordered by the main, north–south street of the city on the eastern side, while a subsidiary, east–west street provided its northern boundary. The western and southern limits of the trench were essentially arbitrary, but their

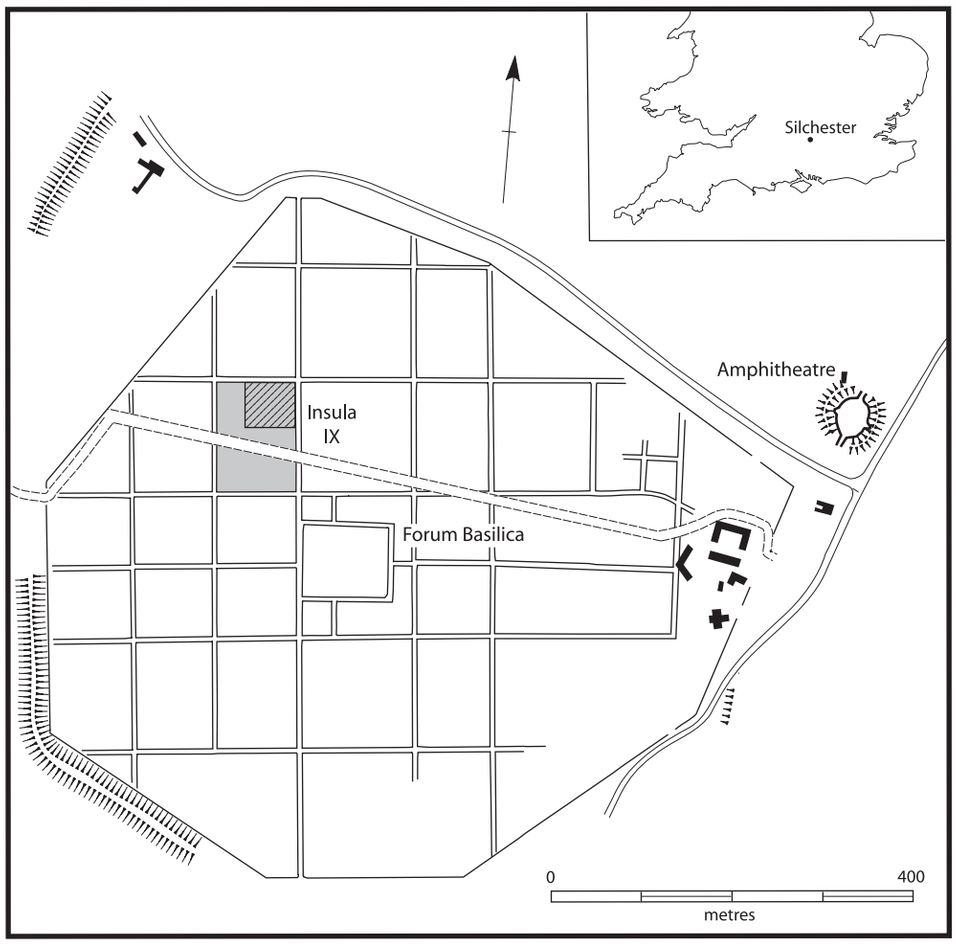

FIG. 1. Silchester: simplified Roman town-plan showing location of Insula IX and excavation area, also with present-day buildings and lanes to north-west and south-east (black), and droveway (broken lines) across the walled area.

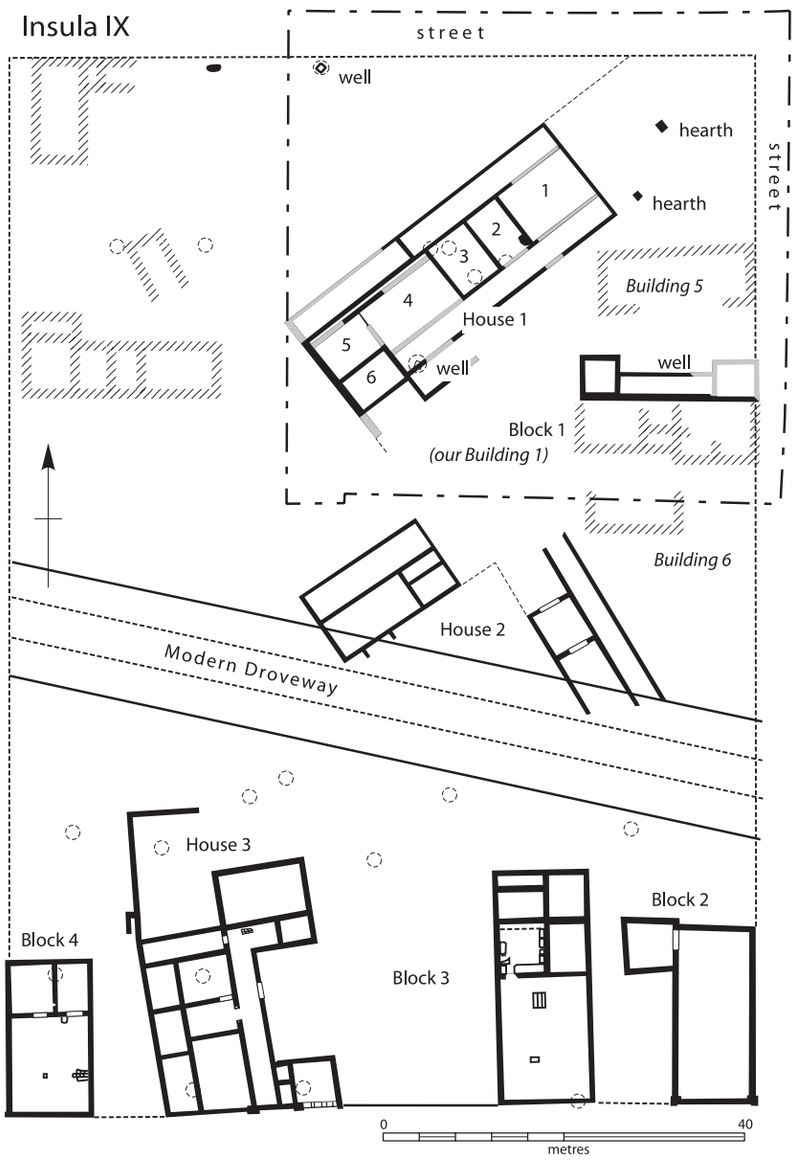

FIG. 2. Insula IX showing the plan of 1893–4, buildings plotted from aerial photographs (shaded outlines) (after Bewley and Fulford 1996, folding plan), and the current area of excavation.

positioning ensured that they encapsulated the total area of both 'House 1', oriented north-east/south-west (and thus at a completely different orientation to that of the street grid), and Building 1, oriented east–west, as described by the original excavators of the insula in 1893–4 (Fox 1895) (FIG. 2). At the time of writing the excavation, now in its fourteenth year, has reached occupation spanning the mid-to-late first/early second centuries A.D.

City in Transition represents the fifth stage in the programme of 'final' publication of this still on-going excavation, following on from the publication of the Victorian excavations (Clarke *et al.* 2001; Fulford and Clarke 2002) and of the later Roman and post-Roman occupation, including a re-analysis of the Ogham stone and its context (Fulford *et al.* 2000), the larger work published as *Life and Labour in Late Roman Silchester* (Clarke *et al.* 2005; Fulford *et al.* 2006). Both the reporting of 'Victorian' and 'Late Roman' archaeology linked conventional printed reports with websites which give access to the primary field and finds records. A completely

digital publication of the succession of buildings which constituted the 'House 1' sequence, as the excavation revealed, ('The Development of an Urban Property') was published with the associated finds and environmental reports, also with live links back to the underlying database, in *Internet Archaeology* (Clarke *et al.* 2007).

The aim of *City in Transition* is to report the archaeology from the early to mid-second century through to the late third/beginning of fourth century A.D., which is the starting point for *Life and Labour* (Fulford *et al.* 2006). This phase of reporting is defined, on the one hand, by the construction of the first, masonry phase of 'House 1', which is represented by Early Roman Masonry Buildings 1 and 2, and, on the other, by the occupation which succeeded the abandonment of a suite of timber buildings occupying the south-eastern corner of the excavated area, which occurred around the second quarter of the second century. As with the reporting of the late Roman occupation, there is no single, definable horizon across the whole excavation area, but, just as the construction of the two masonry houses represents a distinct stage in the development of 'House 1', so, too, does the abandonment of the timber buildings in the south-east corner, even if the succeeding occupation is not, as we shall see, associated with clearly defined structures. The sequence embraced by *City in Transition* thus includes the Period 3 and 4 structures as defined in Clarke *et al.* (2007), and these periods are also retained for reporting the trench-wide occupation.

CONTEXT: INSULA IX AND SILCHESTER

The concept of *City in Transition* can be considered in a number of ways. In the local context of Insula IX and the excavated area, the period with which we are concerned takes the reporting and analysis of the occupation through to the moment of major replanning and redefinition of properties and property boundaries at the turn of the third and fourth centuries. Before that time the principal properties, Period 3 Masonry Buildings 1 and 2 and their successor, Period 4 Masonry Building 3, had been constructed on a north-east/south-west orientation, quite different to that of the street grid. By the end of the third/beginning of the fourth century, not only was Mid-Roman Building 3 completely demolished, but new buildings in masonry and timber along with their associated property boundaries had been constructed on a new orientation, the same as that of the street grid, which was itself aligned on the cardinal points (FIG. 3). Thus Insula IX in the fourth century had a very different character, at least in terms of layout and buildings, to that which it had had in the second and third centuries (FIG. 4). *City in Transition* will put flesh on those earlier structures by exploring their context within the insula and the nature of their associated occupation. In this way the report complements the *Internet Archaeology* publication with its focus on the 'House 1' structures alone (Clarke *et al.* 2007).

In the wider context of *Calleva* as a whole the time-span of *City in Transition* covers the period from the early second century, a time when the city, like the majority in the province, was apparently without defences. In fact we know comparatively little about the city at this time as so little has been subjected to modern, stratigraphic excavation, but, while it would not be prudent to imagine the plan of the city and its constituent buildings in the early second century as closely resembling that recovered by the Society of Antiquaries, it is reasonable to assume that most, if not the entirety, of the area contained by the later second-century defences was built up, but probably with a density of building not dissimilar to that found in Insula IX. However, such stratigraphic excavation as has been carried out reveals that the start of the Insula IX sequence reported here coincides with the construction of the forum-basilica in masonry and the repair of the amphitheatre in timber, both more or less, therefore, coincident with the construction of Period 3 Masonry Buildings 1 and 2, *c.* A.D. 125–150 (Fulford 1989a, 28–36; Fulford and Timby 2000, 58–68). By the end of the second century, however, the city, in common with the majority of the larger towns of Britain, had been provided with earthwork defences which were eventually replaced in their entirety in masonry by the late third century, *c.* A.D. 280 (Fulford 1984; Fulford *et al.* 1997). These excluded the amphitheatre, which itself was substantially refurbished in masonry in the early-to-mid-third century (Fulford 1989a, 37–56). The construction of our larger, Period 4 town-house, Masonry Building 3 (formerly House 1), though not closely dated,

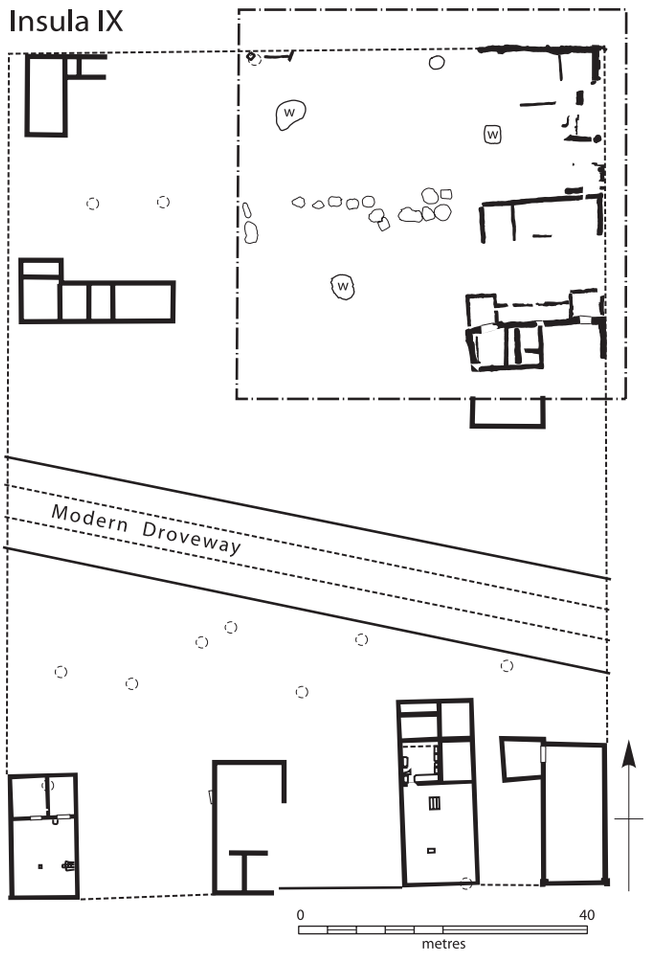

FIG. 3. Insula IX showing fourth-century occupation in the excavated area and, inferred, for the rest of the insula.

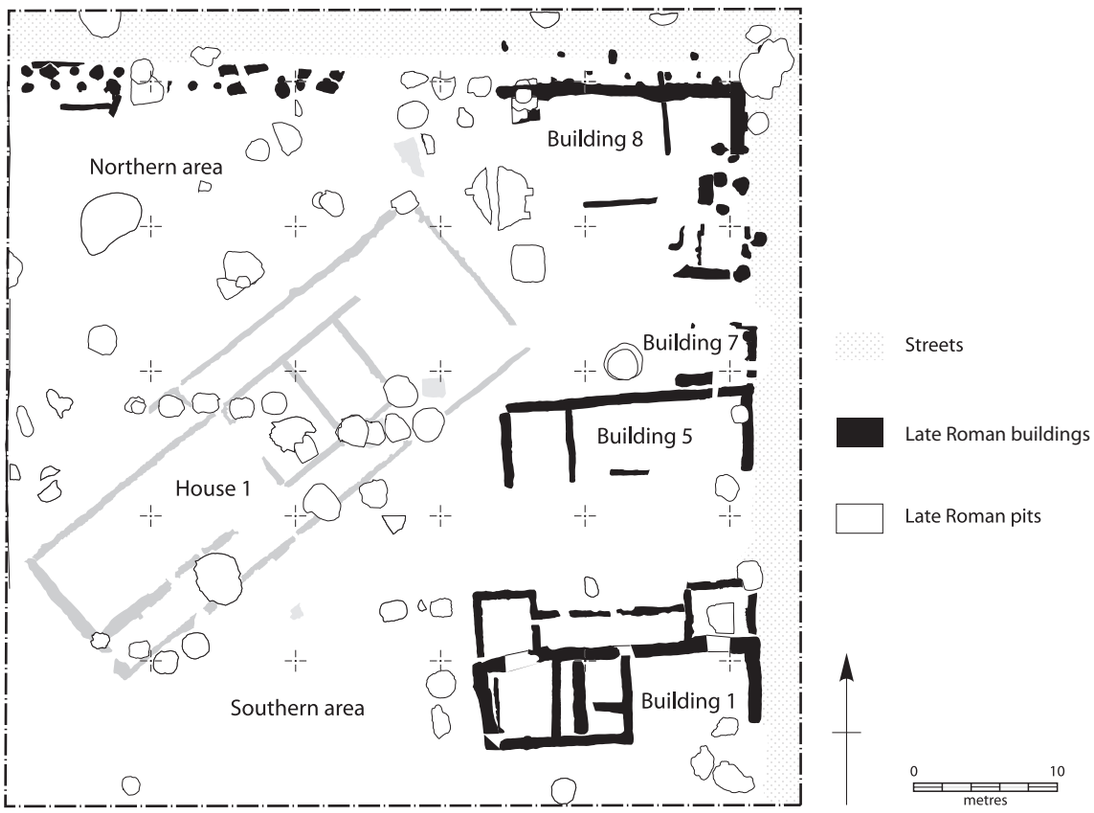

FIG. 4. Insula IX: excavation area showing location of fourth-century buildings (in black) and occupation including pits and wells (outline); and (in grey) Period 4 (third-century) Masonry Building 3 (Society of Antiquaries' House 1).

is approximately contemporary with the earthwork phase of defences and the rebuilding of the amphitheatre.

At about the time of the rebuilding of the city walls in stone, *c.* A.D. 280, the great public space of the forum-basilica was given over to metalworking: copper alloy, pewter, iron-making and iron-working all being evidenced (Fulford and Timby 2000, 68–78). The major change of function indicated by the development of metalworking in the forum-basilica finds a parallel in the evidence for widespread change elsewhere across the city in the use of private space. In recalling that the end of the third century saw the demolition of the final phase of building on the 'House 1' site in Insula IX (our Period 4 Masonry Building 3), we should also note that there is evidence from other insulae, both close to Insula IX in the north-west quarter of the city and further to the south, of similar, radical change whereby houses oriented differently from the grain of the street grid were demolished and replaced by buildings which conformed to the orientation of the street grid (Fulford *et al.* 2006, 249–52). By focusing on the occupational evidence from Insula IX between the early second and the late third century, we have the possibility of gaining insights into the life and welfare of the occupants over some six generations, about 175 years in total. This *City in Transition* sequence thus spans two periods which saw coincident investment in both private and public building: the construction of residential housing and public buildings in masonry in the early second century; and the construction of new houses in the context of a larger urban reorganisation alongside the rebuilding in stone of the city defences in the late third century. However, the latter period also saw a significant change in the function of the forum-basilica.

CONTEXT: SOUTH-EASTERN BRITAIN

If we look beyond Silchester to other, neighbouring towns in Britain where archaeological investigation has shed light on this period, we can point to both parallel and divergent developments. Some of the best evidence derives from the immediate neighbours of London and Verulamium. The latter has a broadly similar history to Silchester in respect of the provision of defences, but Frere's work in Verulamium (1955–61) involved the excavation of a number of town-houses in advance of the widening of the modern road which bisected the city more or less along its central north-east/south-west axis. The results shed important light on the development of commercial and residential housing in the city. In particular, in terms of the histories of individual buildings, these findings contradicted those of the Wheelers who excavated in Verulamium in the 1930s (Frere 1972; 1983; Wheeler and Wheeler 1936). Instead of further evidence for a town much reduced by the perceived impact of the economic crisis of the third century, Frere demonstrated considerable vibrancy in the town in the second and third centuries, particularly in the context of the development of shops-cum-workshops and private housing. Nevertheless he also noted a change of tempo between the Antonine period and the late third century. Up to the destruction of an extensive area of the city by a major fire dated *c.* A.D. 155 (Frere 1983, 13, fig. 8), he recorded four successive phases of building and expansion among the twelve timber-built shops fronting Watling Street in Insula XIV between *c.* A.D. 75 and 155 (Frere 1972, 23–98). After the fire the frontage remained undeveloped until the late third century when six large masonry shops were constructed. Although the number of premises was less than in the mid-second century, the extent of the built-up area was closely comparable. However, he commented, 'Private dwellings had been small and plentiful: now they were large and correspondingly fewer. It appears that the curial class had at last come to town, but in doing so had changed the city's character to that of a residential, slightly sleepy, country town' (Frere 1983, 16).

In London, where the construction in stone of the landward circuit of the city walls took place as early as the beginning of the third century, but without an initial phase of earthwork defence, there is evidence between the early second and the late third century of both new developments and abandonments. In the case of the latter there is a record of the development of dark earths on the site of residential buildings and shops-cum-workshops demolished or abandoned in the second half of the second century (see Perring 1991, 76–89 ('The city in contraction')). On the other hand, there is also evidence for new investment in public building, such as the

commemoration of the restoration of temples to Jupiter and to Isis, around the middle of the third century and the construction of the riverside section of the town walls shortly afterwards (see ibid., 90–105 ('The restoration of the city')). A little earlier, and certainly by the 240s, there had also been major reconstruction work on the waterfronts on the north bank of the river (Brigham and Hillam 1990, 138). In the second half of the third century there had also been significant demolitions, including two altars and a late Antonine or Severan monumental arch, whose remains were incorporated into the riverside section of the city wall (Perring 1991, 107–9). The forum-basilica was also largely demolished at the end of the third century (Brigham 1990, 82). In contrast to the evidence of public buildings, and as a consequence of the truncation of archaeological deposits by later development, much less has survived from London (and Southwark) to chart the pattern of development of private housing in the third century. In the same way that new shops were eventually constructed in masonry on the Watling Street frontage of Verulamium Insula XIV, similar developments may have taken place above or alongside London properties abandoned in the second half of the second century.

As more and more evidence comes to light, a strong sense of individuality emerges for each city. Nevertheless, in the sense that, through the loss of monumental architecture, including the amphitheatre (for a while) and the forum-basilica, London experienced more radical change in the third century than can be discerned at Verulamium, one is tempted to see a parallel with Silchester and the 'loss' of its forum-basilica. The truth is, however, that without modern research into its forum-basilica, we do not know the comparable situation in Verulamium. The problem of comparing urban histories is brought into sharper focus over the question of abandonment of commercial and residential properties in the later second and third centuries. How widespread was this phenomenon? On the face of the London evidence it would seem that there was significant abandonment, but this has to be tempered by our uncertainty over the extent of the loss, through truncation by subsequent medieval and modern development, of later Roman stratigraphy which might contain evidence of subsequent, new building. In the case of Verulamium, for example, it would appear that plots left vacant following the Antonine fire eventually saw rebuilding. In some cases this happened in the first half of the third, rather than the late second century, while in others there was significant delay, as in Insula XIV, where the street frontage was not apparently redeveloped for over a century, and in Insula XXVII the large courtyard house was not built until the late *fourth* century (Frere 1983, summarised pp. 14–15). Immediately beyond the boundaries of the city itself, it is the second half of the second century which saw the demise of the Verulamium-region pottery industry (Tyers 1996, 199–201).

While Frere contradicted the Wheelers' view of the effects of the third-century crisis on the city by drawing attention to the amount of development occurring throughout the third century, such that 'by the last quarter of the third century Verulamium possessed all the physical attributes of a first-class classical city' (1983, 19), he did not highlight the period between the late second and early third century when significant areas of the city remained derelict. In essence it is this period which could be regarded as the equivalent of the Wheelers' 'bombarded city' of A.D. 273 (Wheeler and Wheeler 1936, 28). Even if the immediate cause of, or trigger for, that dereliction may have been different in Verulamium to what it was in London, the fact remains that conditions were not such as to encourage rebuilding within two or three generations after the fire of *c.* A.D. 155. Perhaps the situation in the two cities, as far as commercial and residential building was concerned, was not so different between the later second and later third century? The more fundamental difference between London and Verulamium is that, in the case of the latter, we do have uninterrupted stratigraphic sequences which continue into the third and fourth centuries. The same is also true of Colchester where modern excavation has produced important sequences of development through the Roman period. Like Verulamium, there is evidence of uneven development, particularly in the century following the Boudiccan destruction, with some areas remaining open as cultivated spaces for long periods and, in one case, for most of the Roman period (P. Crummy 1992, 33). The period which sees the greatest density of occupation, including the development of large, courtyard-plan, town-houses, is, as evidenced by the excavations at Lion Walk and Culver Street, from about the middle of the second into the early third century, a period which coincides with the *floruit* of the Colchester pottery industry (P. Crummy 1984; 1992).

What is the situation at Silchester? Unfortunately, because of the lack of excavation of commercial and residential building in the town, our only source of modern, excavated evidence is Insula IX. Here we have an indication of a significant caesura in the latter part of the third century with the final abandonment of 'House 1' (here Period 4 Masonry Building 3) and its associated plot and the replanning and rebuilding in the insula (Fulford *et al.* 2006). As we have remarked above, there are indications of significant and comparable, major change elsewhere within the town at this time, but yet to be explored through modern excavation. The question is whether the extensive replanning, evidenced by the abandonment of properties not aligned with the street grid, was occasioned because properties had been abandoned for some time, and thus presented an opportunity for radical change, or for other, perhaps, political reasons. Consideration of the material evidence from Insula IX should allow us to address the question whether there was a significant period of abandonment before the rebuilding at the end of the third century. On the face of it, the evidence from Silchester, in terms of radical change, for the second half of the third century would seem to be different to that from London or Verulamium. It remains to be seen, however, how similar the record is for Silchester in comparison with London and Verulamium for the earlier period, the second half of the second century and the early third century.

These analyses of urban histories have to be seen against the context of a larger economic environment which was common to the cities of the South-East. In terms of the wider contacts as exemplified by the evidence of ceramics and material culture more generally, the second and third centuries saw major changes, particularly in relation to long-distance traffic. While the period from the A.D. 120s saw the influx of fine, sigillata tablewares from the workshops of Central Gaul and, to a lesser extent, from those situated in Eastern Gaul and on the Rhine, from early in the third century the traffic is almost entirely confined to that emanating from the latter region. The beginning of the third century also saw the end of the bulk importation of the olive-oil-carrying amphorae (Dressel 20) from the Guadalquivir valley in the province of Baetica, southern Spain. Officially-minted coin of the second and beginning of the third quarter of the third century is also rare — a possible symptom of a decline in the circulation of goods and money. Thus, with the exception of tableware imports from East Gaul and the Rhineland, there is little evidence of substantial long-distance trade between Britain and the rest of the Empire after the second decade of the third century (Fulford 1989b; 1991).

In southern Britain there are also some significant changes in the regional production and distribution of manufactured goods between the second and late third centuries. Our best source of evidence is, of course, pottery and it remains to be seen whether similar large-scale changes can be discerned in other industries. As far as Silchester and its immediate neighbours are concerned the period sees the demise in the second half of the second century of the Verulamium-region industry, which had been a significant source of kitchen and domestic wares from the third quarter of the first century A.D. Whether related or not to the fortunes of the former, this period sees the rise of the Colchester and Thames estuary (BB2) industries with decline at the end of the second/beginning of the third century. However, these have little impact on Silchester. On the other hand there are potteries which continued to develop significantly throughout the period and which, between them, account for the bulk of consumption at Silchester. These include the nearby Alice Holt industry which produced kitchen wares, the more distant, south-east Dorset cooking and kitchen ware (BB1) industry, and, to the north, the Oxfordshire industry, which produced mostly kitchen wares and mortaria in the second century and effectively replaced supplies from the Verulamium industry. Later, like the New Forest industry to the south, Oxfordshire developed capacity in the manufacture of table wares imitative of sigillata and other wares, from the middle decades of the third century (Tyers 1996). The latter, whether produced in the New Forest or Oxfordshire workshops (or further north in the Nene Valley), had almost completely replaced the range of table wares imported from East Gaul and the Rhineland. What can we conclude? For Silchester there appears to be consistency and stability in the local and regional sources of pottery through the second and third centuries, with the Verulamium-region industry being the only significant defaulter. With the loss of imported wares the regional sources become relatively and absolutely more important. If the ceramic evidence is seen as a proxy of economic activity

more generally, it would seem to imply greater strength in the regional economy of central southern Britain in the second and third centuries.

The extent to which we can map economic and social behaviour from Insula IX between the second and the third century will depend on the incidence and scale of well-dated deposits and on the degree of continuity of occupation. However, with a methodology which embraces the integration of systematic and quantitatively-based analysis of environmental data provided principally by plant and faunal remains with a wide range of quantified material culture, including the evidence of activities such as metalworking, it should be possible to provide a richly-resourced picture of change over time. This in turn will offer a context in which to set the headline pattern of changes presented by the more conspicuous ceramic and numismatic evidence at a provincial level.