

SILCHESTER ROMAN TOWN:
THE INSULA IX TOWN LIFE PROJECT: VOLUME 2

SILCHESTER: CITY IN TRANSITION
THE MID-ROMAN OCCUPATION OF INSULA IX
c. A.D. 125–250/300
A REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS UNDERTAKEN SINCE 1997

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THE MID-ROMAN OCCUPATION OF INSULA IX

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A REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS UNDERTAKEN SINCE 1997

BY

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With contributions by

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Mark Robinson, Elizabeth Somerville, Jane Timby, Klare Tootell, Paul Tyers,
Peter Warry, Jacqui Watson, Sandie Williams

And an Appendix on ‘The Iron Age and Roman Coins found at Silchester, as recorded
and catalogued by George Boon, 1951–54’ by Dave Wythe

Illustrators: Margaret Mathews with Frances Taylor, Jane Timby and Brian Williams

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Cover illustration: Aerial view of 'House 1' under excavation in 2002, from the south-west

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This reporting of the archaeology of Insula IX in the second and third centuries A.D. relates back to fieldwork undertaken between the start of the project in 1997, when the remains of the town-houses reported here, which we now know date back to the early second century, began to come to light, and 2005 when the excavation of the last pits and wells of this phase of the project was completed.

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PREFACE

The Silchester Insula IX Roman Town Life Project began in 1997 with the objective of investigating in detail the structural and stratigraphic development of a substantial area of the Roman town from its origins in the late Iron Age to its demise in the fifth to seventh century A.D. and, at the same time, capturing the evidence for the changing life and occupations of the inhabitants. Insula IX, a block devoid of public buildings at the intersection of the main east–west and north–south streets of the town, and immediately to the north-west of the forum-basilica, was selected and an area of 3,025 square metres was identified for excavation in the northern part of the insula. The latter had been excavated in 1893–4 as part of the Society of Antiquaries’ project to excavate the entirety of the Roman town at Silchester and its selection in 1997 was determined on the basis of the Victorian findings of larger town-houses and smaller buildings, probably houses-cum-workshops. Those early excavations proved to be limited to the exposure of the latest surviving phases of the masonry buildings identified by trial-trenching, leaving the majority of the stratigraphy untouched (Fulford and Clarke 2002). The quality of what has survived earlier excavation is indicated by the project completing its thirteenth season of excavation in the summer of 2009, reaching occupation of the mid-first century A.D.

City in Transition is the second ‘monograph’ report, following on from the publication of the fourth-century and later archaeology in *Life and Labour in Late Roman Silchester* (Fulford *et al.* 2006). This, in its turn, built on the publication of the Victorian excavations (Fulford and Clarke 2002) and the late/post-Roman Ogham stone and its context (Fulford *et al.* 2000). In addition, the development of the major town-house (‘House 1’) within the area under excavation was selected for electronic publication in *Internet Archaeology* (Clarke *et al.* 2007) to demonstrate the opportunities the electronic medium offers for presenting the complete underlying archive of the stratigraphic record, along with the conventional narrative of the structural and stratigraphic record and the reporting of the associated finds. This initiative built on the website publications linked to the publication of the Victorian archaeology in 2003 (www.silchester.reading.ac.uk/victorian) and of the late Roman archaeology in 2005 (www.silchester.reading.ac.uk/later).

In reporting all the archaeology across the excavation area of the period between the early second century and the mid/late third century *City in Transition* puts the relevant ‘House 1’ sequence in its wider context. There is inevitably some duplication with the electronic publication (Clarke *et al.* 2007), but the scale of the pottery and animal bone assemblages, in particular, is such that *City in Transition* only contains summaries of the previously reported material. To gain the full picture it is necessary to consult the electronic publication. Shaping the chronological scope and periodisation of the stratigraphic sequence for both the *Internet Archaeology* and *City in Transition* publications required an extensive, initial programme of spot dating using the coin and pottery evidence. This identified four periods of development of which *City in Transition* is concerned with two, Periods 3 and 4 (see below, Introduction). One exception made to this was to include a major assemblage of environmental evidence from a large latrine pit filled at the end of Period 2, *c.* A.D. 125 (see below, Robinson, Ch. 16 and Dark, Ch. 17).

While it is clear now from the ongoing excavation that Period 2 represents a radical departure from the preceding phase of occupation with the construction *de novo* of two new complexes of timber building, including the first, timber phase of the ‘House 1’ sequence, *City in Transition*

reports only on the second and third phases of that development (Periods 3 and 4). The first phase of 'House 1', as first described in Clarke *et al.* (2007), will be further reported along with the rest of the Period 2 occupation in the next stage of 'final' reporting. A significant virtue of the *Internet Archaeology* publication is that it embraces the complete lifespan of an evolving household of one or more kin groups ('House 1') and their associated property through three phases of building, from the late first century A.D. until the final destruction of the house and associated re-allocation of space within the insula in the second half of the third century A.D.

The rationale for publishing fully while the excavation still continues downwards to the earliest Roman and late Iron Age levels, and thereby reversing the normal presentation of the archaeological sequence from earliest to latest, is pragmatic: the avoidance of the accumulation of a substantial backlog of unreported structures and stratigraphy with all their associated finds, both material and biological, and environmental data. At the same time there have been significant developments of methodology which have increased the volume and range of information arising from the project. Unlike *Life and Labour*, *City in Transition* has benefited from systematic research into soil chemistry (Cook, Ch. 3) and micromorphology (Banerjea, Ch. 4), both of which have made very significant contributions to the interpretation of the occupation and use of structures in the second and third centuries. In particular, these new directions of research have led to a completely different interpretation of one of the second-century timber buildings from that reported in Clarke *et al.* (2007). This new work highlights the general difficulties that the Insula IX project has had in the identification and interpretation of timber buildings in general since its inception. *City in Transition* presents the evidence for six timber buildings which were not recognised as such with any confidence during the excavation itself. To the interpretation of two of these geochemistry and soil micromorphology have made vital contributions. Without any doubt a wider application of these approaches would have contributed significantly to the recognition and interpretation of the other structures lacking clear and coherent evidence of structural features such as clay walls, posts or horizontally laid beams.

The reports on the geochemistry and soil micromorphology are presented immediately after the description of the structural and stratigraphic sequence. In presenting their data both contributors have required colour in order to illustrate their results satisfactorily. This has also chimed well with the need for as informative a presentation as possible of the complex structural evidence and its interpretation as standing buildings emerging from the excavation of Insula IX. Indeed, as prefigured in *Life and Labour*, Mathews' reconstructions extend beyond the buildings to their context within the insula, for which colour is, of course, essential. Thus, and representing a significant departure from the publication of *Life and Labour*, that of *City in Transition* makes significant use of colour. Colour is, of course, intrinsic to the archival database record of excavation and finds' images which, as with *Life and Labour*, are available electronically via www.silchester.reading.ac.uk/cit.

We are also very pleased to publish in Appendix 1 Dave Wythe's full list of Iron Age and Roman coins originally recorded and catalogued by George Boon, 1951–4.

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