

Guildhall: beyond the amphitheatre

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IT IS NOW over a year since the excitement of the Guildhall amphitheatre excavations by the Museum of London Archaeology Service. Although the greater part of the digging was indeed accomplished by the end of 1993 it may not, perhaps, be realised by many readers that trenches of some considerable size are still being excavated; indeed excavation is likely to continue well into 1995. So it will be some time before work on post-excavation can really get going. It has been, of course, a massive project, generating thousands of contexts and other records, and it will clearly take a very long time to analyse and then publish this abundance of new and important information on Roman, Saxon and medieval London. There is also an intention by the developers, the Corporation of London, to dedicate one complete floor of the new Art Gallery building to a Museum centred around the excavations and our discoveries, but this too is unlikely to open for some considerable time. In view of the long time-scale of the project, therefore, it seems a good idea to publish occasional provisional assessments of particular aspects of the material – partly, of course, with the intention of generating interest in or feedback from other archaeologists and historians.

Some provisional interpretations of the sequence have already been disseminated¹ and for that reason this article will not describe either the Roman amphitheatre, the Saxon buildings, or the medieval sequence. Instead it will concentrate on aspects of the archaeology which have received little attention so far. It is important to remember that all statements are provisional and things may look rather different – though hopefully not completely wrong! – in a year or so.

The masonry amphitheatre, which is now well known, probably dates from around AD 120; much has been said and written about it. Some mention has also been made of the timber amphitheatre

which is now known to have preceded it, provisionally dated to c AD 70. One of the most interesting aspects of the discovery of a timber amphitheatre of this date is surely the implications it has for what may have preceded the Roman fort immediately to the north west. Current thinking has the masonry fort, as first identified by Grimes, dated to around the same time as the masonry amphitheatre², but it is not known whether there was any earlier military installation on the site beforehand. However, both timber and masonry amphitheatre seem clearly too large for an exclusively military audience. It may be significant that a road leading north to the south gate of the fort (Road 9) is flanked by buildings of Flavian date³.

However it is with activity to the east of both amphitheatres that this article is primarily concerned. Work towards a MAP2 style Assessment has now started on the Roman features recorded outside the amphitheatres in the far east of the site. The early history of the area seems to have involved the digging of many large pits, possibly for the extraction of gravel. At the moment it is unclear whether any of this activity preceded the timber amphitheatre or was contemporary with it. There was also a complex network of drains and gullies at the east end of the site, some of which were certainly in use with the early timber amphitheatre. The number of re-cuttings and indeed completely new alignments of these drains and gullies around the turn of the 1st century AD suggests some more or less persistent problem with drainage⁴. By the beginning of the 2nd century, this drainage system does not appear to have been working very well at all: the whole area seems to have become something of boggy rubbish tip. The previous drainage system was effectively abandoned, filled up with successive dumps of both domestic and industrial waste. Large quantities of pottery were found with this, and provisional

of the Foster Lane Glass' *Pop Archaeol* 5 no. 4 (1983) 23.

1. N. Bateman 'The London Amphitheatre' *Current Archaeol* 12 no 5 (1994); also I. Betts, N. Bateman and G. Porter 'Two Saxon tiles from London' *Med Archaeol*, forthcoming.
2. D. Perring and S. Roskams with P. Allen *Early development west of the Walbrook* CBA Res. Rep. 70 (1990) 114.
3. Road numbers used are those in Roskams, Perring and Allen *op cit*, Fig 93; for dating see p113; see also I. Blair 'The Finding

4. Other areas in the Upper Walbrook are known to have had problems with drainage. At sites to the north and east canalisation may have had negative effects leading to cyclical patterns of erosion, silting and rebuilding. C. Maloney *The Upper Walbrook valley in the Roman period* CBA Res. Rep. 69 (1990) 120.



Fig. 1: some of nearly 100,000 fragments of glass recovered from the one deposit; in this instance bottle handles.

assessment of these provides a fairly tight Trajanic date (AD 100-120). One of the obvious questions we will have to address is whether this process of

5. I am grateful for this and all other pottery dates to Jo Groves; however, all dating is only provisional and incomplete.
6. The next largest is from Saintes. Similar dumps are known from Nijmegen and Lausanne. I am indebted for all of the information about the glass deposit to John Shepherd of

backfilling with rubbish took place slowly or quickly. If the latter, it might represent the point of transition when the old landscape was substantially remodelled for the construction of the new masonry amphitheatre. One of the largest of these dumped deposits produced one of the least expected discoveries of the site.

Roman glass working

This was the largest single deposit of Roman glass ever found in the north-western provinces of the Empire⁶. The glass is all cullet: fragments of up to 1000 vessels (Fig. 1), as well as glass-blowing waste and window glass. It was collected by the Romans for a re-working which never happened⁷. Most fragments are small, and the waste contained filaments as fine as hair. All the deposits containing the glass were therefore painstakingly sieved to maximise retrieval: more than 60 kg were collected.

the Museum of London.

7. It is important to maintain the distinction between glass-working, which is essentially fabrication of vessels, and glass-making, which involves the use of raw materials. No evidence for the latter exists in Roman London.



Fig. 2: the brickearth floor of the timber-framed building; several phases of robbed-out wall slot can be seen crossing the surface.

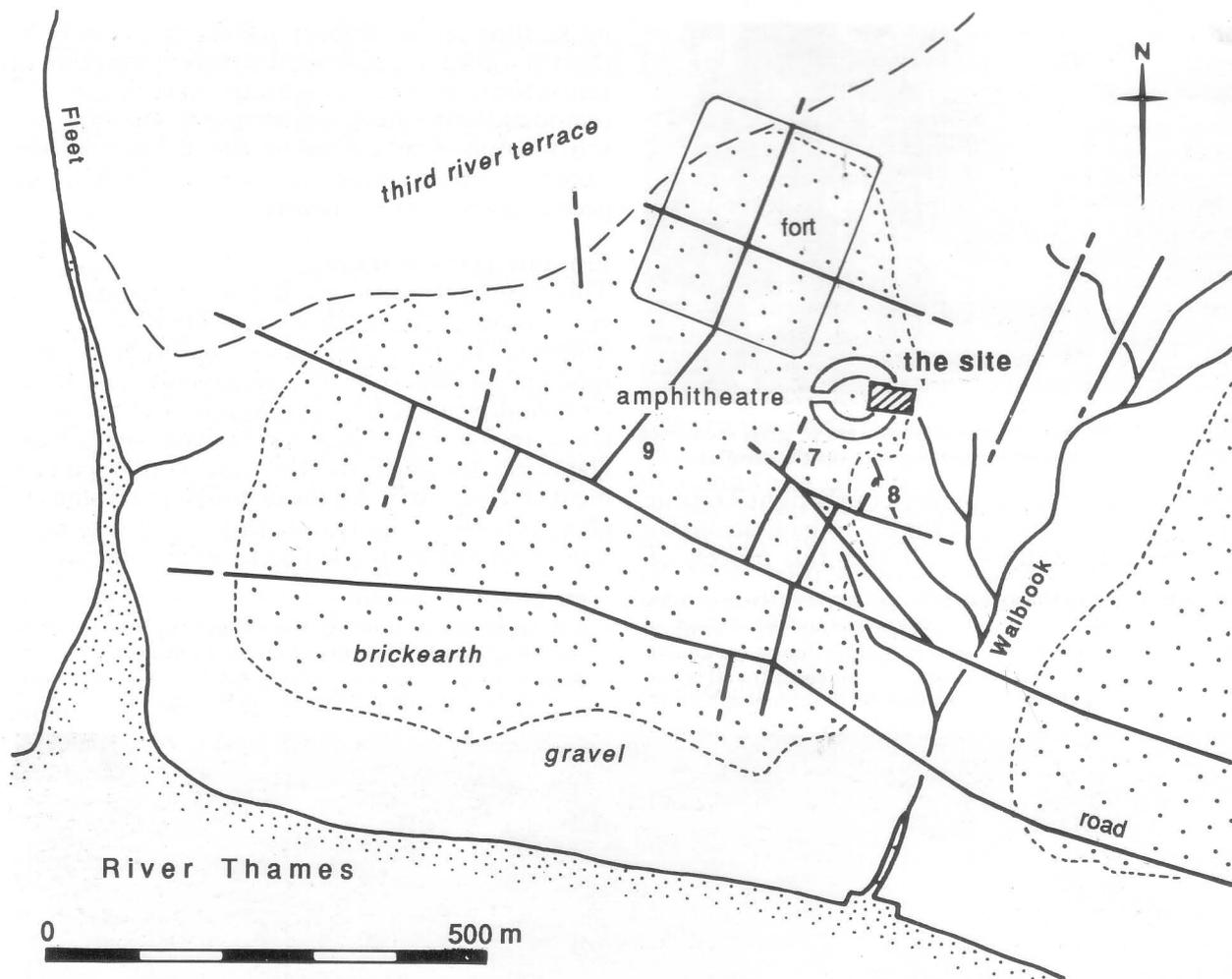


Fig. 3: map showing the amphitheatre and the site with known Roman roads in the west of the city, especially Roads 7, 8 and 9.

The deposits do not appear to represent activity *in situ*: there was no evidence for glass-working in this precise location, though there was plenty of redeposited associated material including furnace fragments. It is not likely, however, that the deposits had come from far, and glass-working in the upper Walbrook valley is well known⁸.

The deposit has been described by John Shepherd as 'the most valuable resource ever found in the west for study of the early second century glass industry'. Clearly there is enormous potential for future research into vessel typology and glass-working techniques.

Buildings and roads

With the backfilling of the drainage systems came a remodelling. New drains were built, and the area was levelled. Over the previous derelict ground a timber-framed building was constructed,

8. See Maloney *op cit* fn 4, 124.

ably in the early Hadrianic period. It had brick-earthen floors, but very little of its structure survived apart from linear robber trenches and post-holes (Fig. 2). The building faced west onto the amphitheatre and across a gravel-metalled road which entered the site from the south west. It is not clear at the moment whether this road pre-dated the establishment of the brick-earthen building, though there is no dating evidence associated with it which is earlier than AD 70.

It may represent the northern continuation of the road identified at King St to the south (Road 8, see Fig. 3)⁹, but it is unclear whether the road then continued to the north of the Guildhall site, or was specifically heading for the entrance to the amphitheatre and the timber-framed building. It certainly connected with a gravel-metalled path which sloped down and into the arena to the west, flanked by the walls of the amphitheatre. The road was 9. See Perring, Roskams and Allen *op cit* fn 2, Fig. 93.

provided with shallow ditches on both sides and appears not to have been very wide for much of its life. Where identified to the south in previous excavations this road (Road 8), and the road to the west (Road 7), have been interpreted as early to mid 2nd century extensions of what was essentially a Flavian grid¹⁰. This leaves access to the Flavian timber amphitheatre unclear.

The building went through several periods of alteration and was eventually remade on a completely new alignment. Successive occupation layers and robbed structural features have abundant 2nd century pottery in them. The highest floor that was identified was buried beneath a thick layer of painted plaster which had evidently collapsed *in situ*. The plaster was bedded in substantial sheets, lying at an angle one on top of the other just as they had come to rest (Fig. 4). Although upside down, it was clear that there were patterns on the plaster fragments, and they were removed piece by piece with the hope that one day they can be reassembled in the new Museum. There was probably at least one more phase of rebuilding after AD 180, but the later history of the building beyond the end of the 2nd century is less certain. This is partly because horizontal stratigraphy was severely truncated in this part of the site. In several small areas of the building, however, further make-up layers containing pottery apparently later than AD 350 were cut by new post-holes before being sealed by dark earth and other deposits representing final abandonment. Whether this phase of post-holes had any connection with the previous building is uncertain; as indeed is the length of the hiatus between the two phases.

The road and its associated ditches (see Fig. 5), like the building(s), had plenty of associated 2nd century material, but evidence after that is somewhat scarcer. In its latest manifestation it, like the building, had shifted alignment to the north east. At this stage there seems clearer evidence that the road actually continued away from (or north of) the site. The backfill of one of the highest roadside gullies contained pottery provisionally dated to after AD 350, which presumably indicates that they were at least open up to that date; however there is as yet no clear dating evidence for re-metallings or recuttings within the 3rd century¹¹. It should be noted, though, that a dendro date of AD 243 has been obtained for one of the latest recuts of the



Fig. 4: a detail showing careful removal of the bedded fragments of collapsed wall plaster. Each one was encased in plaster of Paris before lifting.

amphitheatre timber drains where it passed just to the west of the road. Furthermore a coin of c AD 270-280 has recently been identified as coming from one of the later (but significantly not the latest) amphitheatre drain recuts in this area. There is, therefore, some evidence for continued activity in the immediate vicinity.

So what was this building directly opposite the entrance way? Indeed what was the road for? We must remember that the entrance-way found at the Guildhall amphitheatre was not the principal point of access for spectators¹². It is likely that the ramp led down straight to the gateway which gave out onto the arena. The only other doorways identified off it led to the two small antechambers which also gave onto the arena and may have been used by animals or performers. If the road did not,

10. Perring, Roskams and Allen *op cit* 114. See also J. Shepherd 'The Pre-Urban and Roman topography in the King Street and Cheapside areas of the City of London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 38 (1987) 22. The longevity of this road is somewhat in doubt. There is evidence to suggest that it was not in use beyond the middle of the 2nd century!

11. Compare this with fn 10 on the period of use of Road 8.

12. At one end of the principal axis lay the *Porta Pompa*, the gate through which gladiators entered. At the other lay the *Porta Libitinaria*, named for Libitina, the goddess of corpses. See R. Augé *Cruelty and Civilisation* (1972) 55.



Fig. 5: the Roman road: the scale rests on one of several small patches of metalling; to its left is a roadside gully.

at least in origin, extend north of the amphitheatre, is it possible that it should be seen as a kind of service road, and the modest building which flanked it as some ancillary building related to the management and working of the amphitheatre? This should be contrasted with the much more substantial masonry aisled buildings which were located against the outer wall of the amphitheatre near what may have been a southern entrance¹³. Interestingly, provisional assessment of these indicated that they were built in the 2nd century and not robbed till the 4th. It must also be significant that by this hypothetical southern entrance way there was evidence that the outer wall of the amphitheatre was founded in masonry, whereas in the Guildhall site it most clearly was not¹⁴. It is worth remembering that the area to the north of the amphitheatre may have been more prestigious as well: excavations in 1861 for the Sewers Office

13. K. Steadman, DUA Archive Report: GDH85 (unpub).

14. A possible parallel for this may be the early 2nd century amphitheatre at Trier. There the amphitheatre was partially built into the hillside; only the main southern entrance for the public extended for its full elevation in masonry. The entrances on the long axes were for access to the arena. P.

produced a tessellated pavement in a building just south of a road leading east from the fort¹⁵. Does the principal civilian (monumental?) entrance to the amphitheatre lie underneath St Lawrence Jewry¹⁶, and a secondary entrance, serving the military, lie under the Guildhall?

Wherever future research and analysis leads us, it is at least clear that the site is going to provide not just a picture of a single monument, the Roman Amphitheatre, but a picture of how that building related to and functioned within its surrounding topography, and that evidence derived from adjacent excavations of the last hundred years will be critical to this.

Acknowledgements

Thanks, as ever, to Tony Dyson for commenting on the text; thanks also to Maggie Cox for the photos and Hester White for the drawing.

von Zabern *Trier: Kaiserpresidenz und Bischofssitz* (1984) Fig 66 et al.15. R. Merrifield 'Gazetteer' *The Roman City of London* (1965) site 126.

16. Notice, however, the masonry building which lies right across the width of King St due south. See sites 45 and 48 in R. Merrifield 'Gazetteer' *The Roman City of London* (1965).