

Books

Roman defences and medieval industry Excavations at Baltic House, City of London

Elizabeth Howe

Museum of London Archaeology Service, 2002

134 pages, with black and white photographs and drawings, bibliography and index. £12.95 paperback.

The Baltic House site is in St Mary Axe, just north of the church of St Andrew Undershaft, in the north-eastern quadrant of what were the Roman and medieval cities of London. This is the report of the watching brief carried out by MoLAS from 2001, during the demolition, ground clearance and subsequent ground reduction needed for the redevelopment of the site. It also incorporates and synthesises the results of previous investigations between 1992 and 1996.

The Introduction sets the site in its archaeological and historical context, gives details of the circumstances surrounding the various past investigations, and makes reference to the IRA bombing that destabilised the Baltic Exchange and led to the redevelopment of the site.

In what is now becoming a standard format for MoLAS Monographs, evidence is presented stratigraphically: successive periods are identified, in this case commencing with the pre-Roman landscape, geology and topography. This is followed by the early Roman period, in which evidence for a cellared building has been found, together with remains of a major north-west/south-east boundary ditch with ankle-breaker, which may have run from Aldgate across the line of Bishopsgate as far as a tributary of the Walbrook.

The area became disused in the later Roman period and may have been cleared. It is suggested that a human burial, which had been cut into the backfill of a later period ditch, would have had to have been outside the walls, and that this is evidence of the contraction of the Roman city. After the inevitable gap in evidence from the post-Roman period, the report continues into the early medieval, in which the site appears to have been largely open ground used for the disposal of waste. In the later medieval period however, there is evidence of metalworking in the southern part of the site, especially the manufacture of cooking vessels and bells (the latter almost certainly for ecclesiastical use by churches surrounding the site). Following the end of the

medieval period evidence indicates intensive occupation, with the character of the area changing from industrial workshops to wealthy residences, and eventually to City financial institutions.

Having described the archaeological and historical sequence the report continues with a section on medieval industry, with a comprehensive record of evidence for the 14th and 15th centuries. This includes specialist coverage of copper-alloy founding and industrial ceramics, and it is suggested that the site has produced evidence of perhaps the earliest distillation of nitric acid in London. The balance of the report is made up of specialist appendices, which give full details of all of the excavated finds including pottery, building material, wall plaster, window glass, metals, bone and plant remains.

The report is a comprehensive synthesis of archaeological investigations of this multi-period site, and as readers will expect from the MoLAS team it is well presented and produced; one can only wish that finances could have stretched to colour reproduction for the photographs of fragments of wall plaster and of the ceramic evidence. In all though, another excellent production, adding another piece to the archaeological jigsaw that is London.

Richard Gilpin

Roman Dress Accessories

Ellen Swift

Shire Archaeology, 2003

56 pages, 36 figs, bibliography and index. £5.99

In describing this as a book of 'accessories rather than jewellery', the author gives us the clue to the it's content, and allows us to appreciate Roman costume jewellery.

Until the early part of the 20th century, such artefacts were usually made from metals or stones of little monetary value. But these ornaments or accessories can give us a wider knowledge or understanding of ordinary people from Roman Britain and the wider Empire. Many of the objects now come from well-excavated and -recorded sites, and are being regarded as significant in their own right, and thus worthy of detailed academic study.

New objects, and materials from which the ornaments were manufactured, were introduced by the Romans and spread rapidly in each part of