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30/9/71

REPORT ON ST. MARY MAJOR EXCAVATIONS,
CATHEDRAL YARD, EXETER

A request was placed before the Archaeological Advisory Committee at its first meeting, that exploratory excavations be carried out on the site of the former parish church of St. Mary Major in the Cathedral Close, to determine the nature and scale of occupation on the site. As a result a six week trial excavation was initiated in the latter half of June this year.

The first phase was restricted to a four metre wide trench through the centre of the Mediaeval Church from north to south and the clearing of the whole Nave of rubble and Victorian deposits. It soon became clear that the area had been used intensively for burials, especially in the Nave, during the period from the mid 17th to early 19th Century. However, the exploratory trench revealed that despite the considerable disturbance remains of a Roman building still survived to a degree which was totally unexpected.

The limits were therefore soon altered to encompass the whole of the Nave and an area immediately north of the church. As work continued it became obvious that we were dealing with a Roman building complex of large proportions and a site which possessed a long and complicated history through and after the Roman occupation of the City.

Thanks to an extra Grant of £1,250 from the Department of the Environment it was possible to continue the work beyond the planned six weeks and open up the area to the south, formerly occupied by the Victorian Aisle.

Work is still in progress today and the Nave and Aisle area should be completed within the next few weeks. The results to date emphasise that we are dealing with an extremely large Roman building and site which has raised many questions though no definite answers.

The Victorian Church foundations, the large and numerous family burial vaults and complex of Roman and possibly later walls render it impossible to offer any definite conclusions at present. The interpretations offered below are based on results obtained to date and are open to considerable debate and will no doubt require drastic revision later.

ROMAN OCCUPATION

Phase I

The first occupation of the site takes the form of a large stone building with substantial concrete foundations and laid out on a north-east to south-west axis. At present this first phase building has been traced for a distance of approximately 25 metres (80 feet) but continues both to north-east and south-west beyond the present limits of the excavation. This wall still survives over a

a considerable distance to a height of 1.50 metres (5 feet) and in one it exceeds 2 metres (6 feet 6 inches).

The south-eastern limits of the building are formed by walls (1) and (2) and it is separated from a main street by a courtyard, with a surface of crushed volcanic stone and some gravel. The boundary may, at one time, have been demarcated by a timber structure though a later stone boundary wall has obscured the arrangement. Midway between this boundary and wall (1) is a definite 1 metre wide, clay packed trench, also probably to carry some timber arrangement running parallel to wall (1).

The building lies mainly outside the area of the present excavations and as a result, little work has been done in this area until a much greater area is available. The initial trial trench did reveal that the building in its first phase contained a hypocausted room bounded by walls (2) and (4).

The walls are faced with well cut ashlar blocks and the core is of very tough concrete. At a height of approximately 1.40 metres a double course of tiles runs along the length of wall (1).

The road to the south-east is constructed of pounded and rolled river gravel with some cobbles and is on the line drawn between the East and West Gates of the later Roman town. Its earliest construction seems to pre-date the suggested timber boundary line so that the building complex appears to have been established alongside an existing main road.

As to the date and purpose of this building, I can only offer a working hypothesis.

- i) No buildings existed on the site before the stone structure with its timber features was erected.
- ii) Work done by Lady Fox, and the work at present being carried out on the Guildhall, show settlement was developing in Exeter in the 1st. Century A.D.
- iii) The second phase of the building complex must be occurring in the first half of the 2nd Century.

I would offer as a suggestion that the initial phase of building may well be equated with the military presence in Exeter, and this is a building outside that establishment. Bath-house?

Phase II

This period, probably to the first half of the 2nd Century, sees a dramatic alteration to the layout of the site. Though wall (1) remains standing to its junction with wall (2), all the others are swept away. The hypocaust is broken down and backfilled with rubble and debris including large chunks of an opus signinum floor and large quantities of window glass. Walls (2), (3) and (4) are systematically demolished to leave only one course standing and in the Nave this destruction goes

to the extent of tearing out the concrete foundations.

The north-east east-west layout has a cross wall (5) added to wall (1) running north-west, and an approach flight of four steps of large red sandstone blocks. The area bounded by walls (1) and (5) is filled with rubble and packed clay and capped with a floor (base) of relatively poor crumbly white concrete. The result is a building, the floor level of which is 1.20 metres above the surrounding area and approached through a wide entry by a monumental flight of steps.

To the south-west another cross wall (6) is added; wall (7) which does seem to go beyond the line of wall (1) and at this time the stone boundary wall is inserted and linked to wall (1) by a cross wall (8).

In the space between walls (6) and (7) a series of layers of road metalling type material are laid down possibly to serve as a side entry into the complex from the main road to the south-east.

The changes are dramatic, the reasons obscure. If the building complex did start life as a military building, these changes may reflect its adaptation by the civil population of the developing town of Exeter, to serve as a civic building. Temple/Forum?

Phase III

This sees the last major alteration to the site. This time wall (6) is demolished and obliterated by a thick deposit of puddled clay. Wall (8) has a new and wider wall superimposed upon it of greater width, which is pierced by a wide arch/door. Wall (9) certainly survives, though with some possible alterations. Wall (7) history is confused by the fact that it lay directly beneath large 2nd Century foundations and the deposits are too disturbed to allow positive identification. A new cross wall (11) is added running south-west from (10) and may also have been pierced by arches or doorways. The levelling is then sealed with a deposit of crushed red tile which does not go beyond the line of wall (10) but covers the lower step of the entry into the main building, so that an open forecourt flanked to the south-east by an arcade appears on the site.

The site then undergoes a series of rises in level largely composed of gravel; the steps gradually disappear; further cross walls on the south-west north-east alignment appear, each less well built, and finally a series of rubble founds are inserted at the east end of the Nave within the area bounded by walls (1), (9) and (10). These changes appear to be occurring in the 3rd and 4th Centuries. Unfortunately, the later deposits often as little more than columns less than 10 cms wide between the brick vaults.

POST ROMAN

Here the record is least complete. If any such occupation does occur on the site all traces have been removed by later disturbances. It is becoming obvious

in other Roman towns that the end of direct Roman control did not mean the end of urban life as Exeter was not subjected to Saxon control until late in the 7th Century it is possible a sub-Roman population could exist for a number of centuries.

SAXON

The dedication of the Church, St. Mary Major, has been taken to indicate a Saxon date for its foundation. Though no physical remains exist of such a Church, there is strong evidence one stood where the later Mediaeval Church and Victorian Naves were located.

The proof is offered by a series of fifteen "charcoal" burials laid out on the same axis as the later churches. This type of burial, i.e. the body is laid upon a bed of charcoal, which is cold when placed at the bottom of the grave, has been found in the areas of Danish settlement in England at the two centres of Winchester and York, and appears to be of late 10th Century to mid 11th Century date, not obviously continuing after the Norman conquest.

The burials at St. Mary Major have not yielded any dateable material and so it is hoped that chemical analysis (C14) may offer some more definite proof. Also, it is obvious that this type of burial extends north beyond the excavation limits so that it is possible that more positive evidence may be forthcoming.

This was not, however, the first use of the site as a graveyard. Two earlier phases of burial appear to be present. The earliest is at present only represented by two rather badly disturbed graves. The remarkable fact about them is that they are lying on the Roman axis (north-west to south-east) and may indicate an early Church whose layout was determined by Roman buildings. The burials are certainly post Roman, cutting as they do into the very latest Roman deposits. It will only be proven, however, if a larger number of burials on this alignment are revealed.

The next phase does deserve the title graveyard as the number of burials is now running into double figures. These burials are predominantly extended inhumations but include two definite charcoal burials and two others of this type whose line is not too well defined due to later disturbances. Again this cemetery suggests a Church on a different orientation to the Mediaeval structure, this time the line being that of the present Cathedral Church of St. Peter.

Thus, there are two certain graveyards and a possible third. Each indicating a shifting axis for a Church series on or near to the present site.

There are a number of historic facts which may cast light on the archaeological material of the Saxon period.

1. By the end of the 7th Century there was apparently a monastery in Exeter where St. Boniface was schooled.

2. The earliest known record of the dedication of this monastery is from the early 10th Century when Aethelstan dedicated it to Saint Mary and St. Peter.
3. When the Bishop's Throne was transferred to Exeter in 1050 by Leoforic, he established it in the Monastery Church dedicated to St. Peter. There is no mention of St. Mary.

Two Churches and more are not uncommon on Saxon monastic sites. Is it possible that the St. Mary Major which appears on the present site sometime probably in the 11th Century, was one of the monastery churches? Much more investigation is required to answer these obvious questions.

One feature has survived which may indicate either a very late or post Roman building on the site which survived into the Saxon period. At the east end of the Nave where the robbed out foundations of a building limited to the north-west by wall (1) and to the south-east by wall (9). The robbing was thorough, and only fragments have survived. These are a bottom Layer of pitched river cobbles with an upper foundation of grouted Roman tile and rubble. The robbing trench was backfilled with soils, mortar and rubble and as well as producing quantities of Roman pottery sherds, it produced a fragment of late Saxon glazed pot (Stamford Ware?). The Robbing is certainly a late Saxon feature; the construction date is unknown.

Mediaeval Church

The only portions of this structure to survive the Victorian rebuilding, were fragments of an external buttress on the north side and the foundations of the tower arch and external buttress at the west end.

The tower arch founds were largely Romanesque in date but included a 13th Century extension. The Demolition in 1865 revealed that the early English tower arch had been superimposed over an early 12th Century arch, much of which still survived.

The Chancel appears to remain intact as far as its foundations are concerned merely being widened by the Victorians. The Nave and tower founds did not, unfortunately, escape in the same way being completely removed and rebuilt.

The interior of the Nave and also the Chancel suffered a similar massive disturbance which removed all the floor levels. This disturbance took the form of the construction of large brick-built family vaults of the period between the late 17th and early 18th Century.

One major mediaeval feature did survive, though suffering at the hands of the gravediggers. This was a bell founding pit, probably dating to the mid or late 12th Century. Approximately 5 metres in length, the bell pit had been sunk almost 2 metres below the floor. Fragments of the mould were still in position at the base of the pit and many more occurred in the backfill along with bell metal, slag, fired clay and several large shattered pots.

This pit, in which more than one bell had been cast, is probably associated with the making of the bells for the late Romanesque Tower.

CONCLUSIONS

The site shows a long and continual occupation and emphasises that this is one of the most promising areas for archaeological investigation within the City. Once outside the Nave, the disturbance is slight and there is nearly 2.00 metres of relatively secure stratified deposits. The depth of accumulation in the area far exceeds any other investigated to date within the City and offers a strong likelihood of solving many outstanding questions about the development of Exeter, especially in the sub Roman period. The degree of preservation of the main Roman building is also remarkable for a town site where destruction through terracing seems to be the natural order.

I am unable to draw any definite conclusion as to dates and purpose of many of the structures so far revealed, as only a tiny fraction of the potential area has been investigated (400 sq. metres). Further work is obviously necessary and will undoubtedly demolish many of the working hypotheses offered in this report.

St. Nicholas Priory

Of the late 11th Century Benedictine Priory of St. Nicholas, only the Guest House to the west of the cloister remains in any substantial form. Later buildings have encroached upon the site formerly occupied by the Church, dormitories and ancillary buildings. As plans exist to re-model this area and carry out restoration work, I was requested to make a preliminary investigation in the area to the south of the Guest House, formerly occupied by a series of post Mediaeval cottages. Financial and time considerations made it necessary to carry out a restricted test excavation to attempt to de-limit the area once occupied by the Priory Church and no more.

A 2 metre strip was opened north to south across the supposed line of the Church, and this revealed two parallel robbing trenches running east-west. These were emptied of the rubble backfill and produced quantities of 16th Century pottery. None of the associated and early stratified deposits were removed so as to leave the site available for a large scale area excavation at a later date.

The more northerly robbing trench still retained its foundations, which consisted of small rubble in a hard beige mortar with a rough face against the sides of the trench. These were similar to foundations still existing below the south wall of the Guest House (regretably restored but not recorded adequately in the early 20th Century) and probably date to the original construction of the Priory Church in the late 11th Century. It appears to have been an aisleless Nave, no more than 8 metres in width.

The second robbing trench had removed all traces of foundations on this line and without extensive investigation no exact date can be offered.

It is possible this is the line of a later south wall to the Church which produced an aisled building and might be associated with a remodelling sometime in the 13th Century.

The west front of the Church was either on a line with that of the Guest House or projected slightly beyond in the form of corner buttresses/turrets. A portion of a buttress with its chamfered weathering course can be seen in the undercroft, masked by 13th Century masonry.

Though finances and time placed severe restrictions on the amount of work possible, the results indicate the need for an area excavation to reveal and clarify the development of the Priory Church which could then be marked out in a garden area.

M. Griffiths

September 30th, 1971.

GUILDHALL EXCAVATIONS 1971

REPORT FOR THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE BY JOHN COLLIS
- 30th Sept. 1971

THE AIMS OF THE EXCAVATIONS WERE AS FOLLOWS:-

General

- 1) To Ascertain the archaeological potential
- 2) Study the topographical development.

Roman

- 3) Look for evidence of military occupation.
- 4) Establish the scope and nature of early civil occupation.
- 5) Establish the street layout and nature of later occupation.
- 6) Test for continuity of Roman to Medieval.

Medieval

- 7) Date the layout of the street system and property boundaries.
- 8) Establish a chronological sequence of medieval pottery.
- 9) Study the extent and nature of early medieval occupation and study the origin of Exeter house types.

Post medieval

- 10) To establish a chronological sequence of pottery, especially of the Donyatt and Barnstaple potteries, and of any more local potteries.

Procedure

From the start it was decided not to trial trench, but to excavate in area - my previous experience in Winchester advised this course, and here in Exeter we would certainly not have picked up the early Roman timber buildings or realised the complexity and potential of the later features. A grid based on 100m squares has been worked out for the whole of the Guildhall area, and this is capable of expansion in any direction, though problems have been encountered in laying out the grid and maintaining its accuracy during excavations. All plans are in colour on plastic film. Procedure has been to start on areas threatened with total destruction (Paul Street) and then areas where there will be partial destruction from footings and leaving areas not badly threatened. Thus work started on the Paul Street frontage and moved to the North Street and Goldsmith Street frontages and we hope to leave Waterbeer Street until next year. At present it is not planned to touch areas such as that around Pancras Church.

Five areas have been investigated -

- Area
- (1) Paul Street/Pancras Lane corner - negative results 50 sq m
 - (2) Pancras Lane just S. of (1) Scrappy early Roman timber buildings, Medieval gardens and property/parish boundaries, post-medieval houses 360 sq m.
 - (3) Goldsmith Street, just E of (2) - Extensive early Roman timber buildings. Late Roman enclosure 350 sq m.
 - (4) Goldsmith Street, just S of (3). Sequence of Roman timber and stone buildings. Medieval and post-medieval pits (some industrial) post-medieval/houses 350 sq m.
 - (5) 36 North Street. Medieval pits and gullies 120 sq m.

Potential and topography

Very quickly it was realised that Paul Street and the adjoining street are virtually 'hollow-ways' which have cut deep into the natural surface, destroying all archaeological deposits. Terracing in post-medieval and modern times along the streets has caused similar destruction, so the whole of the Paul Street frontage can be written off, and along much of North Street only the bases of pits, gullies etc. survive. A similar process has occurred on the rest of the site, but is not so drastic. Almost all medieval and late Roman levels have been destroyed, and earlier deposits are heavily disturbed, by medieval pits, sewers, cellars etc. However, it is proving possible to reconstruct plans of buildings and to date them.

Early Roman

The nature of the early Roman buildings in areas 2-4 is still unclear - initially they look like barrack blocks, but no judgement can be made till we have more plan (area 4 is not yet completed). There were associated cobbled surfaces but floor levels have been totally removed, probably due to later Roman cultivation. The finds are all first century, including samian stamps etc. and there was also a stone pilaster base of fine quality. A pit in North Street also belongs to this phase, and produced several coins, samian and a bronze ladle.

Second-Third Century

The first century buildings were systematically demolished, and most of the area remained open. A single boundary wall crossed area 3 and there were a number of pits. Only in area 4 was there continued building, with a sequence of timber building (one was burnt) with clay or concrete floors, and finally a stone building with a tessellated pavement. These still remain to be excavated. There was also a stone building just South of area 2 - a corner of a wall was located and there was extensive building rubbish, including many small black and white tesserae.

Fourth Century

The building near area 2 was apparently demolished and a number of drainage channels constructed, one of which produced a first century marble head. Running across areas 2 and 3 were ditches which formed two side of a rectangular enclosure. At one point there were several horse and cow skulls, suggesting butchering.

Post Roman to Saxon

No trace of occupation was found. One of the drainage gullies contained little Roman pottery, and could be later than the fourth century. There are certainly no Saxon pits, and most, if not all, the area was uninhabited, though there is a hint of late Saxon cultivation in area 2, where a spread of Roman mortar overlay a possible late Saxon sherd.

Medieval

The street layout has not been dated yet. It appears that later medieval streets were not properly surfaced - hence the extensive erosion, and it is unlikely that street surfaces will survive, except perhaps on Trickhay Street and the upper part of Pancras Lane. Pancras Church, lying skew to the street pattern, presumably predates it, but other churches (St. Paul's and St. Kerrian's) are aligned to it. These existed in the later twelfth century, and perhaps earlier. The earliest medieval pits are perhaps late eleventh century, and are confined to area 4. Only in the twelfth do they spread north to areas 2 and 3. The pits also define some negative areas along the street frontages where presumably buildings stood, and also at one point follow a later property and parish boundary, suggesting some boundaries at least, already existed, though no physical trace (wall or fence) was located.

Thus the pits offer a great potential in providing evidence of the spread of occupation, and likewise of the character of the industrial activity. Several have produced metal slag, and one a copper ingot. Pottery is common in most of them. The local coarse wares which are at present difficult to date, continue until the fifteenth century, when finer glazed wares suddenly replace them. The majority of the fine wares are continental imports (perhaps up to 75%). The twelfth century pits have produced North French white wares decorated with applied strips or red paint, the later have mainly green glazed, though there are other types such as 'Polychrome' ware from the Bordeaux area. An added 'bonus' is that many of the pits are waterlogged, producing leather, and especially wooden objects which would not normally survive. The most exceptional finds include a large barrel (of which the lower half is almost intact) used to line a pit, and the top of a tub incised with a cross and a pentacle - hints of witchcraft!

Post Medieval

The stone walls marking property boundaries were constructed in the fifteenth century. West of the wall, on site 2, fronting Pancras Lane was purely a garden area and not a single cess pit of any date was found in it. Three series of trenches filled with rubble material ran E - W across it, the earliest produced an encaustic tile dated 1556, the latest were 17 - 18th century. Prof. Barley has suggested viticulture and certainly grape pips are common in the waterlogged deposits. In the eighteenth century a small building was constructed in the corner of the property.

East of the wall were two properties divided by a stonewall. Both contained many cess pits and one evidence of garden plots defined by slates. A long narrow building was attached to the boundary wall in the seventeenth century, incorporating masonry probably derived from the rebuilding of St. Pauls Church. When the building went out of use, c 1700 a mass of pottery was left in it, mainly large tripod 'cauldrons' and pointed based vessels apparently of Iberian origin. There are several major pit groups of 17th-18th century date, which have especially produced Donyatt wares, as well as Delft, Bellarmine, Westerwald stonewares etc. In area 3 all that remained of the houses were drains and latrine pits, one of which contained a fine spoon of Exeter silver dated 1680 and a complete North Devon plate.

Little remained of the houses on site 4 excepting a few substantial sixteenth century footings. Sixteenth century finds are particularly common, and there seems to be a kiln in the close vicinity - a waster was found, and slates with glaze which had apparently been incorporated into the kiln structure. A couple of pits at the south end had heavy stone and mortar linings, and are clearly industrial perhaps for tanning or dyeing. Both were left to fill in naturally and contain a mass of sixteenth century finds - almost complete stoneware jugs, glass, many shoes and wooden bowls, furniture, a decorated knife - sheath of leather and wooden shoe lasts with VIII and VIII incised on them, presumably indicating the shoe sizes. Seventeenth and eighteenth century finds are almost entirely absent excepting a late cellar, and a pit dated 1800 - 1820 which produced several barrow loads of china - there was a restaurant here at least in the latter part of the nineteenth century!

Conclusions

As in Lady Fox's excavations, the early Roman levels are well preserved but later levels tend to be levelled away, due, I think mainly to the poor state of maintenance of the medieval streets and the clayey nature of the subsoil; excavation of these early levels is producing comprehensive plans of the early buildings. There then follows a marked contraction perhaps caused by land being made available by the departure of the military garrison. Slowly occupation expanded with the construction of town houses. The late Roman enclosure presumably indicates livestock and is paralleled in other Roman

towns where farming activity appears in late Roman times. The area was again deserted from the fifth century and we can start to document the gradual spread of the medieval town and the build-up of pressure on land which culminated in the dense build up of the nineteenth century.

We are now well on the way to answering several of the aims enumerated on the first page. The biggest disappointment is the lack of medieval levels and houses but this is somewhat compensated by the rich finds from the pits. The medieval and post medieval finds are virtually without rival in the South West, and will greatly enhance the collections in the City Museums.

Future Work

Clearly we would like to make full use of the opportunities to excavate further sites before development. The site of St. Kerrian's is a clear priority and Mr. Griffiths has suggested work should commence on the North Street frontage immediately following demolition. The survival of the deposits indicates our priorities and methods: area excavation to clear medieval pits to gain information about the medieval colonization of the area and to obtain plans of the earlier Roman phases. Excavations across Trickhay Street and Pancras Lane could be informative despite extensive disturbance from modern sewers etc. If time and money are available next summer, we should excavate some areas along and behind the Waterbeer Street frontage.

Rescue work during contractors excavation could be vital, and it might be worthwhile employing someone on a temporary basis to do this. Trenches for sewers etc. could be dug by archaeologists, indeed dug more cheaply than by contractors.