CHAPTER 16
PUBLIC ENTERTAINMENT

A PECULIARLY CIRCULAR AMPHITHEATRE

One of the remarkable aspects of Silchester is how early public spectacle and entertainment were established here. The Amphitheatre was constructed around A.D. 55–77, so probably within the era of the Cogidubnian kingdom. This makes it one of the earliest examples in Britain, alongside London c. A.D. 74 and Caerleon c. A.D. 80; Chester was perhaps a decade later, while Dorchester (Dorset) might be mid-Flavian, but could also be earlier (Wilmott 2008; 2009; Bradley 1976, 74–6; Bateman et al. 2008).

One curiosity about the early Timber Amphitheatre is its circular nature, so different from many elliptical examples (later rebuilds made it more elliptical as time went on). In his broad survey of these structures, Wilmott saw a significant division between the legionary constructions, with monumental exterior stone walls, and their civilian counterparts. For him, the amphitheatres were places in which the soldiers saw military virtue enacted, observing ‘the ability to fight well, and die well’ (Wilmott 2009, 141). These were proper amphitheatres reflecting the attitudes and tastes of the legionaries who were, after all, the largest community of Roman citizens in the early province. London was similar, with its mixed metropolitan population, so it was not surprising that it, too, had an exterior stone-built wall. By way of contrast, he saw the simple circular construction at Silchester, built by the inhabitants of this ‘precocious’ town, as showing that they understood the nature and purpose of the building, but did not have enough knowledge to build it in the correct shape. ‘It reinforces the notion that this was a rapid construction, using well understood communal methods, by a society anxious to adopt the appearance of Roman ways, but not yet fully equipped to do so’ (Wilmott 2009, 151).

Rather than educational deficiency, Fulford had constructed a different argument for the population of Silchester, one based on alternative values and interests that might exist within this particular community. He associated the circular shape with animal training arenas, noting its similarity to the much smaller gyrus at the Lunt fort (Baginton, Warwicks.), and the predominance of horse bones amongst the faunal assemblage, though these mainly occurred in the later phases (Fulford 1989c, 187). He envisaged riding displays, animal hunts (venationes) and beast fighting as plausible entertainments as well as the traditional games (munera) and executions, particularly as ways of channelling energies ‘in a diverting and constructive way during the post-conquest period in Britain’ (Fulford 1989c, 189). The horse associations with the Amphitheatre made Fulford wonder if it did not serve as an alternative to a circus, without the chariots. He was musing this at a date when no circuses had hitherto been securely identified in Britain. In a review Bomgardner picked up on the theme, mentioning various types of gladiator who used horses, including equites fighting from horseback, and essedarii fighting each other from Celtic war-chariots. The latter sport was thought to have been introduced to Rome by Julius Caesar shortly after his conquest of Britain. He considered both might have formed part of the programme in Silchester’s Amphitheatre, even though the space available was small (Bomgardner 1991; for evidence of essedarii in Gaul see Bomgardner 2000, 115). Here debate ended.

A THEATRE OR A CIRCUS?

There was no obvious sign of a theatre or of a circus outside the Town Wall. The curious isolated building built on the slope to the south-east of the town in LP 3000 (Exterior 22, FIGS 6.65-
67; see p. 254) has occasionally been mooted as a possible theatre, perhaps making use of the gentle slope, but no semi-circular aspect to the building has ever been visible in cropmarks or the geophysics. Alas this structure is off the gravel ridge and onto the clay, so did not show up particularly well in the fluxgate gradiometry, and the aerated ploughed soil was not suitable for additional resistance survey work at the time; but the complex is certainly worth further study. As for a circus none had been found in Britain at that stage.

As Humphrey (1984) noted in his magisterial survey of circuses in the Empire, a chariot race did not necessarily need much infrastructure, though the effort was thought worth expending on them elsewhere in the Empire. However, during the digitisation of the geophysics an intriguing possibility emerged. To the north-west of the walled town, just outside the Outer Earthwork, there were two major parcels of land surveyed where there did not appear to be anything much showing, despite being close to the town (LP 3700 and 6200, Exteriors 5, 8 and 9). This in itself was curious; paddocks at least might have been expected. Each parcel was digitised and interpreted separately. Both had several long linears running across the entire fields, but these were assumed at first to be old field-boundaries or drainage ditches. However, on comparing the results with earlier cartography they did not correlate with any earlier field-boundaries. Also the linears in each field were perfectly aligned with each other, despite being bisected by a sunken trackway cutting downhill from Wall Lane through Stone Hill Copse to the north, which was probably later medieval in origin. This means these linears were in all probability Roman or early medieval.

The three lines mark out a broad strip at least 360 m long and perhaps 95 m wide on the edge of the gravel terrace, with the eastern end starting just off the main road north to Dorchester-on-Thames, and the other end stopping just before the ground level dipped away (Fig. 16.1). The gravel terrace is in the main flat, but dipping in one area as the terrace falls away. And the area is largely devoid of any other features. Could this be a circus?

**CHARIOTS AND CIRCUSES IN BRITAIN**

The existence of chariots and chariot fighting was a major literary theme in descriptions of warfare in Britain; Caesar repeatedly mentioned them (BG 4.24, 32, 33; 5.9, 15–17, 19). While there will be elements of literary topoi in these descriptions of Britain, Cunliffe has pointed to the evidence from fixtures and fittings for a warrior elite, well-trained in the art of chariot warfare (Cunliffe 1995, 33); Cassivellaunus, even after having disbanded most of his forces, supposedly had 4,000 of them left (BG 5.19). It was probably after these encounters that essedarii became a feature of gladiatorial shows in Rome, and then later in other cities, such as Pompeii, where they appear in graffiti (Bomgardner 1991; 2000, 70). In the Augustan era Strabo (4.5.2) reminded the Roman audience that chariots were a feature of Britain, just as they had been in parts of Gaul. This notion was reinforced a generation or two later by tales from the Claudian invasion, when Plautius was reported to have sent a German detachment across a river to wound horses that were meant to pull chariots (Dio 60.20). Topoi of this method of warfare were repeated in descriptions of the Boudican revolt (Dio 62.8, Tacitus, Ann. 14.35) and the Mons Graupius engagement (Tacitus, Agric. 36). In this context it would be extraordinary if the tradition of chariot riding, let alone racing, were not to have been embraced and continued as an outlet of energy and demonstration of prowess in the Cogidubnian kingdom, let alone the post-disarmament phase of Roman submission.

Archaeologically Cunliffe reviewed vehicle fittings and horse gear in Central-Southern England from the Late Iron Age. He viewed this as a critical period in the development of chariots and chariot warfare. He saw the immediate pre-Caesarean period as one of stress in Central-Southern England, where the technology of chariot warfare might have been honed and developed. Supporting this idea, he cited the deposits of chariot fittings from Bury Hill and Gussage All Saints (Cunliffe 1995). Silchester also has traces of comparable activity. A large number of ceramic investment moulds and linch-pins come from Silchester itself, all found on the Basilica site in the backfill of a Period 2 burial (F1297) together with Tiberio-Claudian samian from Lezoux (Fulford and Timby 2000, 31–2, 406–13). Additional potentially chariot-
related finds have come from Boon’s excavations hunting for the Inner Earthwork, where he found a linch-pin under the Roman street levels in Trench K (Boon 1969, 10, 50–1). Silchester in the Late Iron Age was almost certainly a centre of equestrian prowess if it was the residence of the likes of Commios, his descendants and entourage, and this would have included charioteering judging by descriptions of warfare at the time (though not necessarily chariot racing).

As we move into the Roman era there is plenty of indirect evidence for a continued interest in charioteers in Roman Britain. The sources are disparate both geographically and chronologically; they were collated by Humphrey (1984, 431–7) and have been updated here. Surveying from north to south: there is an inscription on a small bone plaque from York: ‘Lord Victor, may you have luck and win!’, an expression usually pertaining to gladiators or charioteers (RIB II 2441.7: RCHME 1962, 135). From Lincolnshire there is the famous mosaic scene showing a chariot race in a full circus scene, replete with architectural details of the spina and metae, from the Roman villa at Horkstow (Lincs.), considered to be mid-fourth century (Toynbee 1962, 202; Mosaic 53.1: Neal and Cosh 2002, 153). This is complemented by other mosaics from Rudston (E.Yorks.) (Mosaic 143.7: Neal and Cosh 2002, 348) and Colerne (Wilts.) (Mosaic 240.1: Neal and Cosh 2005, 342). From Lincoln there is a second- to third-century tomb relief showing a boy charioteer (Toynbee 1962, 159–60; Huskinson 1994, 15–16), as well as fragments of a man holding whips which may represent hunters or charioteers from Bedford Purlieus (Northants.) (Huskinson 1994, 18). From Old Penrith comes an image on a child’s tombstone representing him as a victorious charioteer holding a whip and palm branch (RIB 932). Charioteers were represented on pottery from the Nene Valley and Colchester wares; and finally from Chedworth...
(Glos.) comes a fragmentary inscription citing ‘Prasi[,]a’ or ‘the green company’, the *Prasina factio* being one of the famous colours of Roman chariot-racing (*RIB* 127). Mosaic images alone might simply represent stock images used across the Roman world, but once associated with other material culture, the cumulative evidence suggests a genuine awareness if not engagement with chariot racing.

With the Iron Age cultural background it was always surprising that a circus had not been found until, in 2004, one was discovered at Colchester (Crummy 2008). The remains of this example are fairly ephemeral, with the *stadia* comprised of two parallel walls 5.8–6.0 m apart, the inner being only 0.7 m wide and the outer 1.0 m with regular buttresses. The whole layout was unusually narrow and had only eight starting gates rather than the more common twelve; but it did have many of the architectural embellishments expected, including a central barrier (*spina*) complete with monuments at its centre and the turning-posts or *metae*.

In conclusion, there is no *a priori* reason why more circuses should not be found in Britain. The possibility that these ditches might indicate the presence of one was therefore worthy of further investigation.

**A POSSIBLE CIRCUS: FURTHER INVESTIGATION**

Fluxgate gradiometry had been conducted north-west of the town showing a series of parallel linear features, longer than 360 m, with one end pointing towards to the road leading north from the town in LP 6200, and the other ending in LP 3700. These features ran along the northernmost edge of the gravel plateau that the Roman town sits astride, so the potential course would have been only slightly undulating, though not perfectly flat. In this survey there were no other diagnostic features visible of *stadia*, starting gates or a curved end.

The area of interest was within two parcels divided by the trackway, both part of the same estate but managed by different tenant farmers. To the east the land was divided by electric fences and had a number of horses on it all with different owners, to the east sheep grazed the pasture. The western portion was selected as being most accessible for further investigation. If this was a circus then it would be more likely the starting gates would be by a main road, i.e. at the eastern end, and therefore at the other end, in LP 3700, a curved end to the circus might be expected. The objectives were, therefore, to see if potential *stadia* and a central barrier or *spina* could be revealed, perhaps like the Colchester example, and to see if there was evidence for a semi-circular end to secure identification.

An earth resistance survey was carried out using a Geoscan MSP40 mobile square array taking readings each 0.25 m on 1.0 m transects. The survey was deliberately set at an angle in the field so that the major linear features under investigation were not on alignment with the survey grid. Because the field included both areas of the flat top of the plateau and also the even better draining slopes off to the north, there was a significant differential in background resistance across the site (fig. 16.2c). This meant that the variation in the overall background level was greater than that caused by any archaeology. So the data were significantly smoothed to create an image to represent the general background resistance readings of the field (fig. 16.2d), and then this was subtracted from the raw data to look at the residual readings. This immediately revealed a large number of linear features on the same alignment as the geomagnetic ones (fig. 16.2e). There were also hints of additional alignments at right-angles to these.

What the survey did not reveal was a clear unambiguous image of a circus with a curved end, but it did reveal a large number of linears that require some form of explanation; and there are not many features in the Roman world that have parallel lines hundreds of metres long.

The multiple parallel lines seen crossing the centre of the field *could* represent one set of *stadia*, but if so they would be far more substantial and complicated than the 6 m-wide *stadia* at Colchester, even more so than at Merida which are c. 10 m wide.

For a circus to be proven a complementary set of *stadia* to the south needs to be found, as well as a central barrier (*spina*) with substantial turning-posts (the *metae*) at both ends. Traditionally these turning-posts had a solid base, with three wooden cylinders on them, conical in shape, supposedly imitating cypress trees (Ovid., *Met.* 10.106; Pliny, *NH* 16.60). Within the field there
FIG. 16.2. Geophysical investigations of LP 3700.
is a dry patch of earth which shows up in a number of seasons of aerial images and as a high-resistance feature, suggesting an even thinner soil than normal. In an optimistic interpretation this could be the foundation of a substantive base of a meta, in which case the complementary stadia on the southern side would be along the line of Wall Lane (FIG. 16.2f).

It would also mean that the water main would probably have cut the speculated stadia when it was excavated; unfortunately no watching-brief took place along this segment as it was outside the scheduled area. In terms of size it is well within the range of the size of other examples (see FIG. 16.3 for a visual comparison).

On the negative side of the argument, when the field was under plough little obvious material appeared to be reported by Corney who walked it three to five times, nor did material turn up according to the recollection of the farmer (Richard Massey pers. comm.); but if there was little day-to-day occupation of the area this would make sense. On the other hand it would count out the use of anything other than flint, earth and timber in the construction as no CBM was observed. Nothing has appeared in the aerial photography in terms of parchmarks.

So, is it a circus? First, it has always been curious that Wall Lane coming out from circling the town to the east just north of the Town Wall, breaks through the Outer Earthwork and immediately does a sharp turn west. This would be explained if it was built over the semi-hard surface of a ruined stadium. Secondly, there are no other archaeological features here, no paddocks, no cemetery observed, nothing; while around most of the rest of the town all sorts of features are present. A circus would explain the absence of features. Thirdly, the prospective entrance to the circus starting gates would be just off the road to the north, which is a sensible location to draw in a chariot from. Fourthly, aerial photography showed a major circular feature c. 28 m in diameter just on the other side of the road from here. This is not a complete circle but slightly open at the southern end (in LP 8100, Exterior 5). It is too large to be a roundhouse, and it looks very similar to the size and shape of the 34 m-diameter gyrus at the Lunt (Baginton fort, near Coventry, Warwicks.) for horse-training, which in co-proximity to a circus would make great sense (Hobley 1982; Hobley and Charlesworth 1974). But none of this is proof, it is just putting into place the elements of a speculative idea that requires further testing.

Are there alternative explanations? Could the geomagnetic linears have just been two very long thin field-boundaries on the edge of town? Possibly, though that does not explain the multiple linears in the earth resistance survey. Could the linears simply be showing later ridge-and-furrow? Possibly but the readings lack the regularity that this often shows in such data.
CONCLUSION

Silchester does not yet have Britain’s second confirmed circus, though there is something there north-west of the town. The absence of other material culture means that the linears need to be explained by some kind of activity that left little material cultural trace to be discovered in fieldwalking.