An Early Date For Ogham: The Silchester Ogham Stone Rehabilitated

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IN the light of dating evidence recovered from new excavation in and around the original findspot, the context, date and provenance of the baluster column with an inscription in ogham, which was recovered in 1893 during the excavations of the Roman town at Silchester, Hampshire, are reconsidered.

In 1893, the fourth year of the Society of Antiquaries' programme of excavations to explore the entire walled area of the Roman town at Silchester, the northern part of insula IX, immediately to the north-west of the forum basilica, was excavated (Fig. 1).[1] In the course of revealing the plan of a large town house which was oriented at some 45 degrees to the street grid 'a shallow well of the usual construction, about 8 feet deep'[2] was found which cut through the line of the external wall of the west end of the southern corridor. 'In it, about 5 or 6 feet from the surface, lay, point downwards, the fragment of the sandstone pillar with the Ogam inscription'.[3] 'Beneath the stone, and completely flattened by it, lay a vessel of peculiar form, of white metal or pewter; but no other objects of interest were brought up, and it was evident that the well was disused and partly filled up when this vessel, and the stele which crushed it, had been flung into it'.[4] The excavators correctly observed that the well was secondary to the house and 'could only have been sunk . . . somewhat late in the Roman period'.[5] The significance of the find as

[1] Insula IX was excavated over two seasons, 1893–4. While the ogham stone was reported by John Rhys at the end of the 1893 season in G. E. Fox and W. H. St John Hope, 'Excavations on the site of the Roman city at Silchester, in 1893', *Archaeologia*, 54(1) (1894), 233–7, the account of the fieldwork awaited the completion of the excavation of the insula in 1894: G. E. Fox, 'Excavations on the site of the Roman city at Silchester, Hants, in 1894', *Archaeologia*, 54(2) (1895), 439–50.

[2] Ibid., 441.

[3] Ibid. The depth is also reported as 'at a depth of nine feet from the present level', in Fox and St John Hope, op. cit. in note 1, 233. It is not clear whether this measurement refers to the depth from the surface of the field, while the depth of eight feet refers to that below the Roman ground surface. Nor is it clear whether the stone (i.e. the base of the column) was encountered first at the depth of 'about five or six feet', or whether this figure refers to the lowest point of the stone. If the former then, given the dimensions of the stone, the point rested between one and two feet from the bottom of the well; if the latter the lowest point of the stone was two to three feet above the base of the well.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

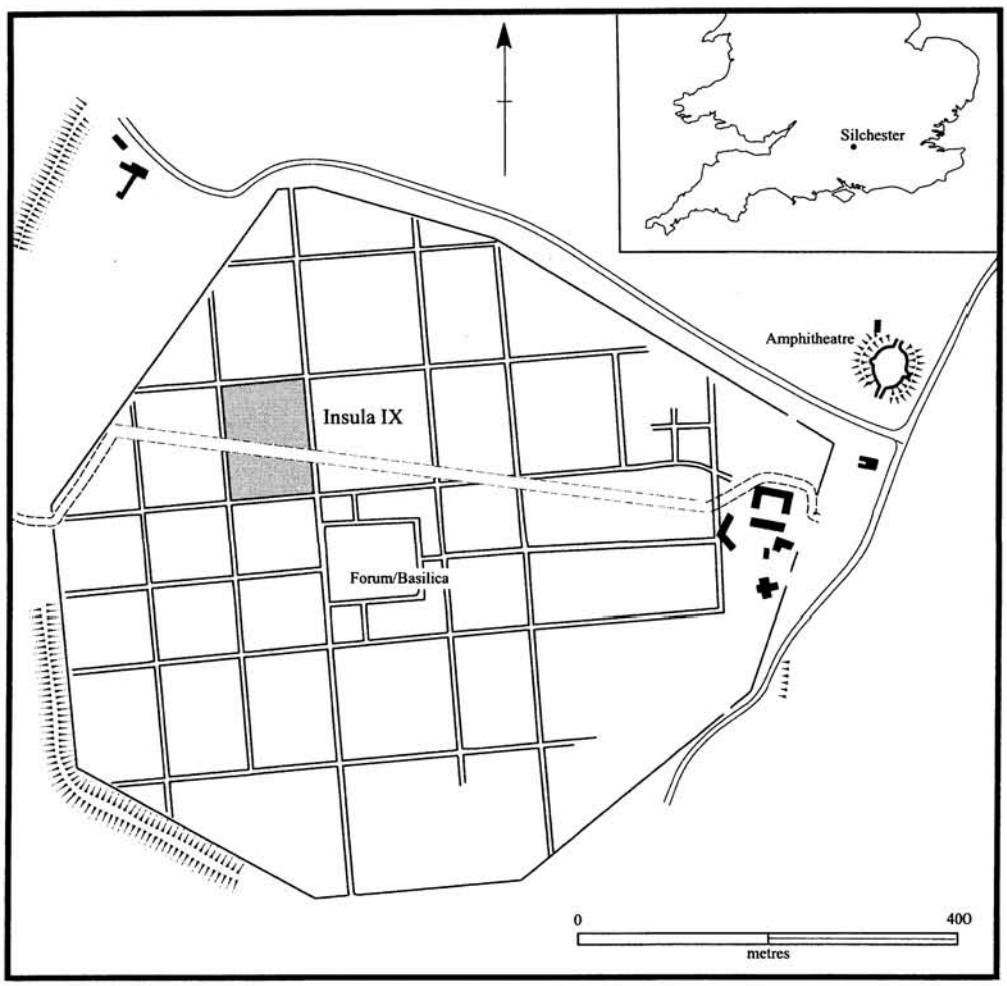

FIG. 1
Location of Silchester and insula IX within the walled Roman town.

an isolated example of ogham some distance from the main British distribution in Devon and Cornwall and west of the Severn was certainly appreciated at the time of the discovery.[6] As we have noted the stone and its inscription were reported on separately from the account of the excavation itself by Sir John Rhys in the year of the discovery.[7] His reading, **EBICATO[S]/[MAQ]I MUCO[I--]**, 'of Ebicatus, son of the tribe of', has been accepted up to now (cf. below, p. 10). The inscription has been interpreted as an epitaph and it has been variously dated to the 5th and 6th centuries.

[6] Rhys, in Fox and St John Hope, op. cit. note 1, 236–7.
[7] Ibid. 234–5.

For Silchester the stone is of enormous significance as it represents the latest datable object with a precise location from within the town; indeed it is the only object conceivably later than c. 400 from the Society of Antiquaries' excavations with such a provenance. For George Boon it represented 'intrinsic proof of the presence of Irish elements at Calleva about the year 500'[8] and evidence 'that by 500 little if anything can have remained of the Romanised local authority which had for centuries maintained the wholesome legality of extramural burial'.[9] As the most easterly known example of ogham, Boon noted that its presence at Silchester contrasted with the evidence of Germanic occupation at Dorchester-upon-Thames and Winchester.[10] In 1980 it was argued that the stone was so unusual both in terms of the lithology, as far as it could be determined then, and as a baluster column, that it should be regarded as a fake.[11] No other example of the same lithology or of a similar dwarf column appeared to be represented among the architectural or other stone fragments recovered from the town. The suggestion that the stone was a fake was strongly rebutted by Boon.[12] A further consideration of the petrology of the ogham stone is given by Sellwood below (Appendix 1).

In 1997 a new programme of excavations was commenced at Silchester (Fig. 2). Its chief objective was to examine the development of a large sample of a residential insula from the earliest occupation in the late Iron Age through to abandonment in the post-Roman period.[13] One of a number of reasons for selecting the northern part of insula IX was to reinvestigate the context of the Silchester ogham. If there was new evidence to support the integrity of the original find, it was believed that excavation of the environs of the well which contained the ogham stone might have a greater chance of shedding more light on the post-Roman history of the town. While the first season concentrated on establishing the extent of the intervention of 1893, the second and third years have seen the re-excavation of the ogham well and of a number of adjacent pits.[14] In 1999 a *terminus ante quem* of the mid-to-late 3rd century has been established for the abandonment of the town house through which the well. This is based on the date of pottery and coins from several other pits cut through its remains.

Let us now consider the evidence derived from the examination of the well (1170) which contained the ogham stone. It was clearly cut through the remains of the house and its fill consisted of large quantities of flint and ceramic building material. In addition to 3rd- or 4th-century pottery and animal bone, there were several iron nails, an iron hook, some fragments of glass, a copper-alloy pin and an irregular copper-alloy coin of the 350s (FEL TEMP of falling horseman type). It is a fair assumption that the original excavators backfilled the well with more or less

[8] G. C. Boon, *Silchester: The Roman Town of Calleva* (Newton Abbot, 1974), 77.
[9] Ibid., 78.
[10] Ibid.
[11] M. Fulford and B. Sellwood, 'The Silchester ogham stone: a reconsideration', *Antiquity*, 54 (1980), 95–9.
[12] G. C. Boon, 'The Silchester ogham stone: a reply', *Antiquity*, 55 (1981), 122–3.
[13] A. Clarke and M. Fulford, *Silchester Roman Town. The Insula IX 'Town Life' Project: Interim Report on the 1997 Season* (Reading, 1997).
[14] A. Clarke and M. Fulford, *Silchester Roman Town. The Insula IX 'Town Life' Project: Interim Report on the 1998 Season* (Reading, 1998); M. Fulford and A. Clarke, 'Silchester and the end of Roman towns', *Current Archaeol*, 161 (1999), 176–80.

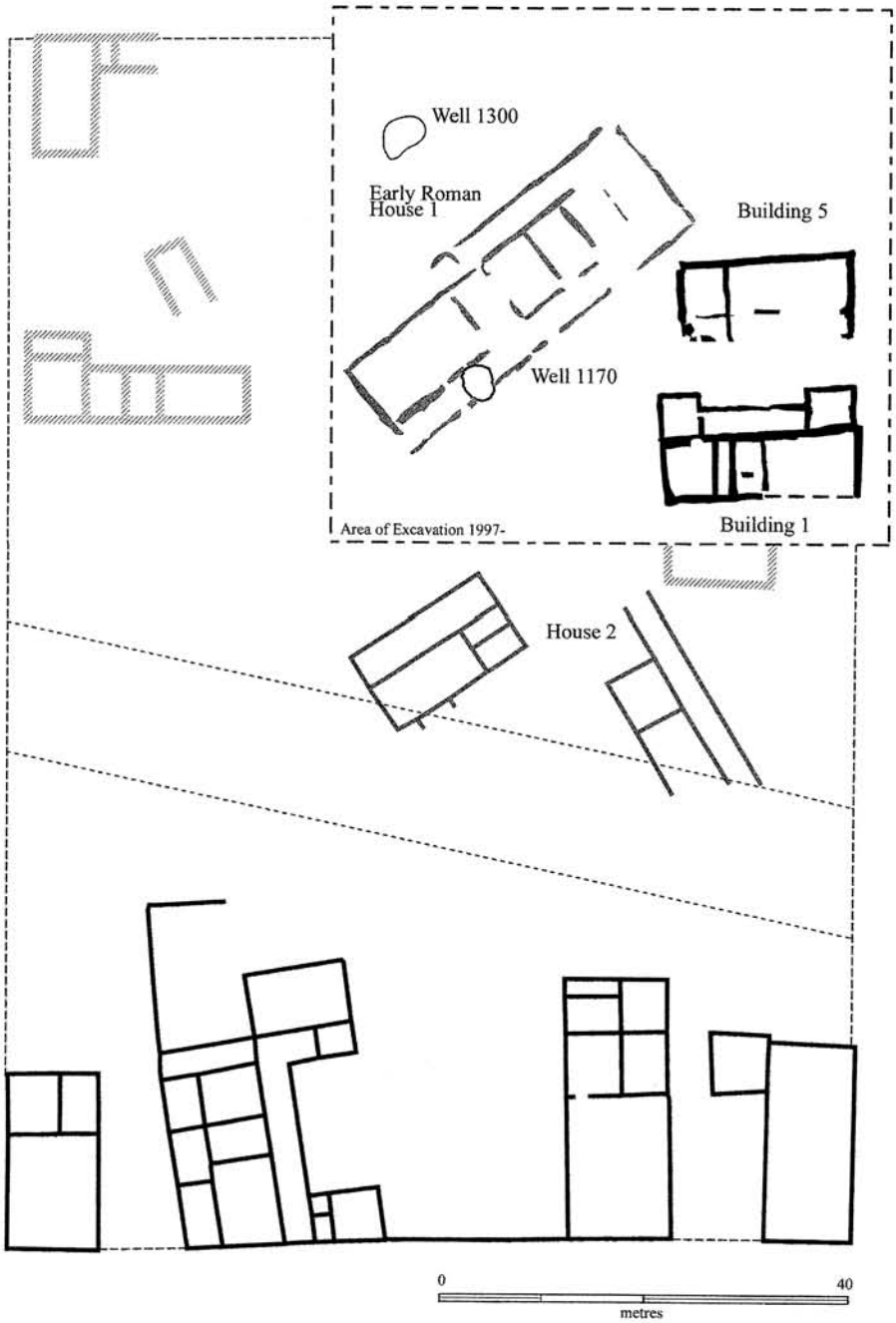

FIG. 2

Insula IX: plan of late Roman stone buildings and the location of the well (1170) which contained the ogham stone. Building plans established by excavation are outlined in black, while those revealed only by aerial photography are defined by shaded lines. The plans of the early Roman house 1 and its probably contemporary and associated house 2 are shown lightly shaded.

the same material that was originally excavated. When completely excavated the pit measured c. 3 m in diameter and 2.65 m in depth from the Roman floor surface of House 1. The modern water table was encountered at a depth of about 2.2 m. The depth measurement of 2.65 m (= 8 feet 10 inches) compares with the two figures of 8 feet and 'nine feet from the present level' from the accounts of the 1893 excavation.[15] If we assume that the former corresponds with our depth measurement from the surface of House 1, and that the latter relates to a measurement from the surface of the field, it leaves the possibility of incomplete excavation of the basal layer. Thus the discovery, at the very bottom of the well, of two pieces of poorly preserved oak is potentially of the greatest significance. The deposit associated with the wood, consisting of a mottled grey/mid-brown silty clay with flecks of red, ?burnt material and charcoal flecks, appeared not to have been disturbed by the Victorian excavators. The two fragments of wood have now been subjected to AMS dating with the following results: 1630 ± 45BP (OxA 8570) and 1780 ± 40BP (OxA 8626) (Fig. 3). The latter calibrates to A.D. 130–380 at two standard deviations, the former to A.D. 320–540.[16] At one standard deviation the younger date calibrates between A.D. 360 and 530. This date indicates a mid-4th- to 5th-century *terminus post quem* for the filling of the well, and the presence of the slightly older piece of wood might suggest an earlier date within that range, perhaps nearer 400 than 500. A 6th-century *terminus* seems to be precluded. The pewter vessel mentioned in the account of the 1893 excavation survives in the Silchester Collection in Reading Museum (below, p. 23; Fig. 4). It is a simple, biconical flagon similar to a few other examples found in southern Britain which can be dated broadly to the 4th and no earlier than the late 3rd century (Appendix 2). However, even if manufactured in the late 3rd or 4th century, a vessel such as this could have survived for a considerable period before deposition. The date at which the ogham stone was introduced into the fill of the well is considered below.

Besides its dating value, one aspect of the condition of the pewter flagon deserves our consideration since it is relevant to the interpretation of the original function of the feature. The body of the vessel has clearly been deliberately pierced (below, p. 23). It also appears to have reached its present, badly crushed state in two stages.

Although in 1893 the pit was interpreted as a 'well of the usual construction'[17] with the accompanying plan marked as if a rectangular wooden-frame structure was recovered from the bottom, the shallow depth just below the modern water table leads us to question whether substantial wooden remains would have been preserved. Elsewhere at Silchester regular preservation of well structures occurs only at a depth of 4–5 m below the Roman ground surface. This throws into doubt whether the pit was indeed a well. However, excavation of a second pit (1300) to

[15] Op. cit. in note 1.

[16] Calibrated calendar date ranges have been determined using the OxCal computer programme of C. B. Ramsey, 'Radiocarbon calibration and analysis of stratigraphy: the OxCal program', *Radiocarbon*, 37 (1995), 425–30, and the INTCAL98 calibration dataset of M. Stuiver, P. J. Reimer, E. Bard, J. W. Beck, G. S. Burr, K. A. Hughen, B. Kromer, G. McCormac, J. van der Plicht and M. Spurk, 'INTCAL98 radiocarbon age calibration, 24,000–0 cal BP', *Radiocarbon*, 40 (1998), 1041–83.

[17] Fox, op. cit. in note 1, 441.

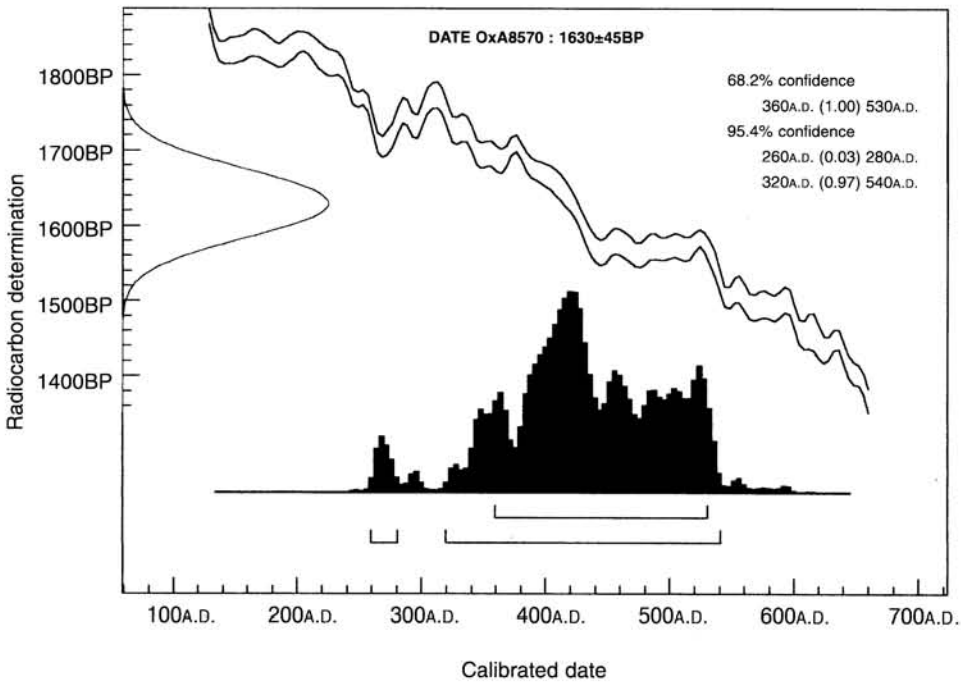

FIG. 3
Radiocarbon calibration curve for the younger wood from the well 1170.

the north of the remains of the house revealed a structure of similar dimensions with small amounts of waterlogged material at the base but, equally, no trace of a wooden lining (Figs. 2 and 5).[18] Coins of Valentinian II (388–92) and Theodosius I (388–95) were recovered from silts some 0.6–0.8 m above the bottom. This feature had not been previously excavated and at the very bottom beneath the layer containing the coins were the broken remains of a complete pottery flagon whose body, like that of the pewter vessel, had been deliberately pierced. The occurrence of deliberately pierced pottery vessels can be paralleled more widely among the complete examples recovered from the 1890–1909 excavations and now conserved in the Silchester Collection at Reading Museum. These vessels range in date from the 1st to the 4th century A.D. Although the precise provenance of individual pots can seldom be established, it is clear from the accounts of the excavations published *passim* in *Archaeologia* between 1890 and 1910 that it was the excavation of deep pits and wells which produced these specimens. The deliberate piercing was not observed at the time of recovery but has been noted in the recent cataloguing of the collection. We would suggest that the act of deliberate piercing and deposition at the base of pits such as the two described here was a ritual 'killing' of a vessel capable of holding water: a non-returnable gift to the gods to ensure the availability

[18] Clarke and Fulford, op. cit. in note 14, 19, fig. 1.

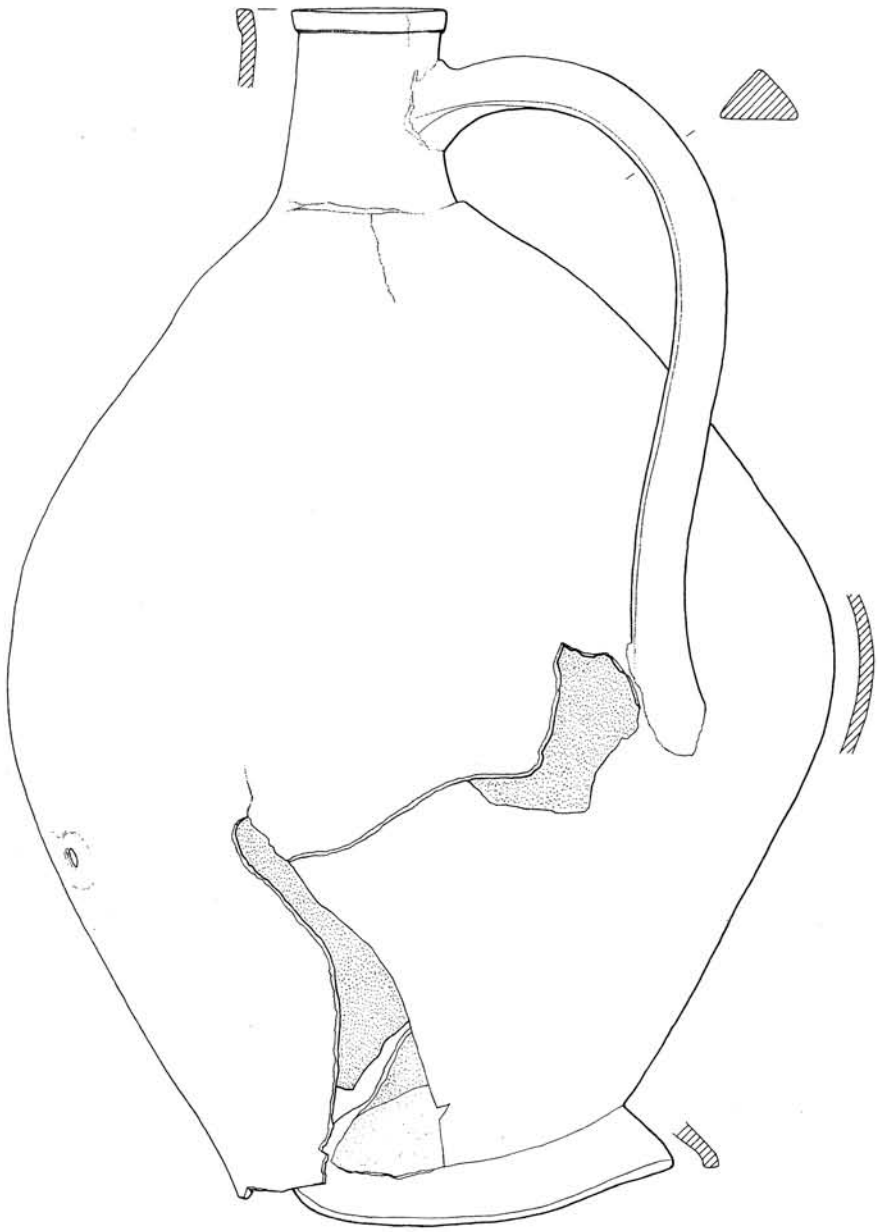

FIG. 4
The pewter flagon. The pierced hole is visible on the left of the vessel. Scale 1:2.

of water from the freshly dug pit. Given the uncertainty about the wooden structure claimed by the original excavators this second piece of evidence reinforces the argument that this pit was indeed intended as a well. Although no other example of a pewter flagon is recorded from Silchester from such a context, it is reasonable

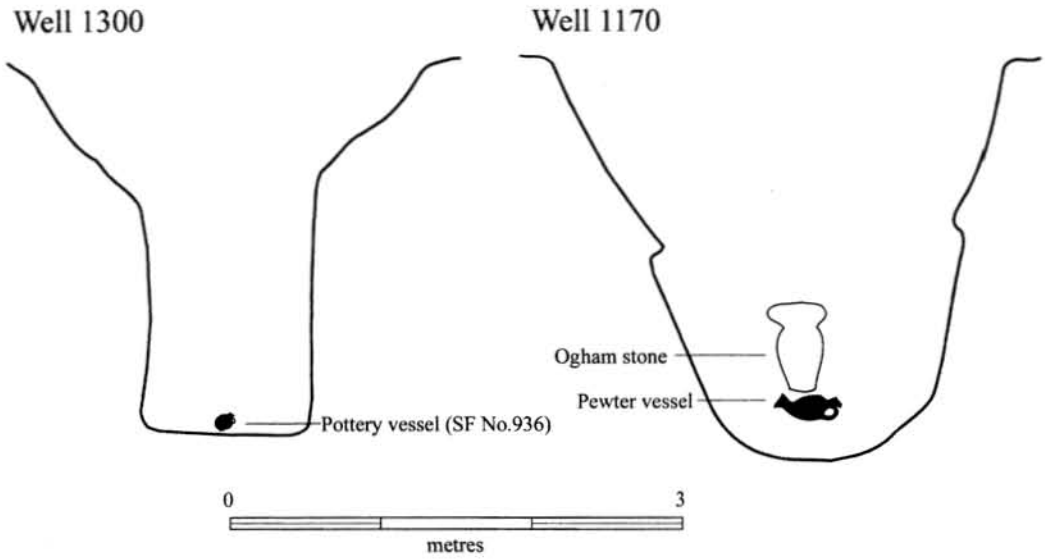

FIG. 5

Profiles of wells 1300 and 1170; the latter showing the approximate location of the pewter flagon and the ogham stone.

to disassociate the pierced flagon from the presumably secondary deposition of the ogham stone above it. However, the report that the stone lay directly on top of the pewter vessel implies that its burial took place when the well was still in good condition. With the burial of the ogham stone, however, the pit could not have continued to serve as a well.

We can, therefore, be reasonably confident that the ogham was deposited in a functioning well which was dug no earlier than the mid-4th, but possibly in the 5th century. In the immediate vicinity and to the west is a group of smaller rubbish pits (Fig. 6), also cutting through the remains of the town house (1246, 1384, 1571, 1463, 1571, 1358).[19] These contained small assemblages of 4th-century pottery, animal bone and fragments of ceramic building material. At the base of one pit (1463) were deposited two complete pottery vessels: a 4th-century New Forest indented beaker and a New Forest grey ware flagon. An articulated cattle tarsal joint also rested on the bottom of the pit. This produced a radiocarbon date of 1725 ± 40BP (OxA 8736), which calibrates to A.D. 250–390 at one standard deviation, and is consistent with the date of the pottery. A coin of the 340s was recovered from an adjacent pit (1571), which was capped by large, irregular-shaped blocks of concreted ironstone. Pit 1246 also contained a complete vessel, a small jar of Alice Holt ware. In terms of the layout of the insula as a whole we can now see the ogham well and its associated pits as lying almost midway between the remains of our Building 1, which aligns with the main N.–S. street of the town, and a second building opposite which fronts on to the street flanking the west side of the insula (Fig. 2). While the latter was not recognized in the 1893 excavation and

[19] Clarke and Fulford, op. cit. in note 14, 22, fig. 6.

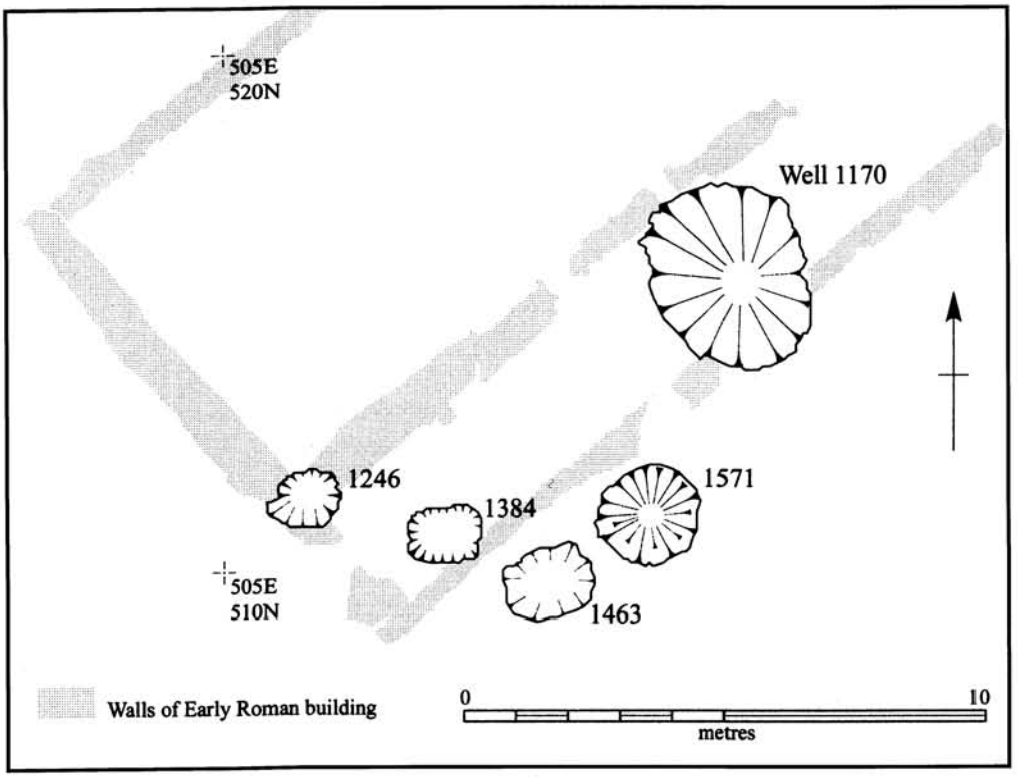

FIG. 6
The immediate context of the well 1170.

has only subsequently been identified through aerial photography, Building 1 can be dated to after c. 325. Given that the new excavation of insula IX has now revealed a continuous series of buildings along the N.–S. street which were occupied in the 4th century, it is a reasonable assumption that the remaining unexcavated buildings aligned with the streets in the northern part of the insula are also of 4th-century date. While it is conceivable that the well and the group of pits could be associated with a third property immediately outside the area of the current excavation, this seems unlikely. To the south lie the remains of House 2, comprising two separate buildings, from the excavation of 1893 (Fig. 2). Although situated outside the present area of excavation, it is assumed from their orientation that there is a connection with House 1; perhaps all three are elements of a single, palatial town house. Thus, while it is possible that the well could relate to House 2, we assume a common date in the 3rd century for the abandonment of both Houses 1 and 2. Equally, distance from the properties at the south end of the insula which front on to the main E.–W. street suggests that a relationship with one of them is also unlikely. We would suggest, therefore, that the ogham well and the associated pits relate to a phase of occupation associated with one of the two properties to east and west of it. At present (and excavation in the vicinity of these two properties is

not complete) it represents the only well which might reasonably be associated with the occupation of either of these houses.

THE OGHAM STONE: DEVELOPMENTS IN OGHAM STUDIES

For the purposes of the study of the Silchester ogham (Figs. 7–8) there have been three main developments in ogham studies since 1980. The first of these is the massive amount of work that has been done clarifying the linguistics of ogham and the development of a relative chronology.[20] The second, which has largely grown out of the first, is the increasing tendency to suggest a possibly 4th-century start-date for the earliest ogham inscriptions.[21] The third is the discovery in northern Scotland of a pre-6th-century ogham inscription carved on a stem-line.[22]

THE INSCRIPTION: READING AND TRANSLATION

Macalister, and all previous authorities, agreed that the inscription was carved on two near vertical stem-lines and read **EBICATO[S] / [MAQ]I MUCO[I--]**.[23] Macalister, however, had probably never seen the inscription himself; rather he thanked W. J. Hemp for providing him with a photograph which he then included within his volume. It was probably upon the basis of this photograph that Macalister provided the above reading. After close inspection of the stone it is possible to agree almost completely with Macalister in that only one stroke of the S survives, two strokes of the Q, and none of the expected I in *mucoi*, or of the MA in *maqi*, while the other letters are as he gives them. Moreover, there is no trace of the expected second name, and indeed there appears little room on the stone for such a name. In one respect, however, it was possible to improve upon Macalister's reading.

The stone itself is a miniature column base and is only c. 0.6 m high, with a pronounced lip or shoulder below which it tapers inwards. Given the stone's height, it would be extremely difficult to see any marks on the under side of this shoulder unless one was lying on the ground. To do so from a photograph showing the stone as upright would have been impossible. Thankfully, therefore, within the Reading Museum store the stone was kept lying flat rather than upright. This allowed three previously unseen, but perfectly clear, strokes of the H-series positioned below the shoulder of the first line to become visible.[24] In the ogham script the H-series consists of the letters H, D, T, C and Q, indicating that these strokes could signify HD, DH, or T. The first two are extremely unlikely, thus the

[20] D. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991); P. Sims-Williams, 'The additional letters of the Ogam alphabet', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Stud.*, 23 (Summer, 1992), 29–75; P. Sims-Williams, 'Some problems in deciphering the Early Irish ogam alphabet', *Trans. Philological Soc.*, 91:2 (1993), 133–80; S. Ziegler, *Die Sprache der altirische Ogam-Inschriften* (Göttingen, 1994); K. McCone, *Towards a Relative Chronology of Ancient and Medieval Celtic Sound-Change* (Maynooth, 1996).

[21] A. Harvey, 'The significance of *Cothraige*', *Ériu*, 36 (1985), 1–9; McManus, op. cit. in note 20, 93, 97; C. Swift, *Ogam Stones and the Earliest Irish Christians* (Maynooth, 1997), 69; A. Harvey, 'Dating the origin of the Ogam script', in K. Forsyth et al. (ed.), *Roman, Runes, Ogham: Proceedings of the International Medieval Epigraphy Conference* (Stamford, forthcoming).

[22] J. Hunter, *A Persona for the Northern Picts* (Rosemarkie, 1997).

[23] R. A. S. Macalister (ed.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, vol. 1 (Dublin, 1945), no. 496.

[24] Cf. Rhys's observations in Fox and St John Hope, op. cit. in note 1, 234.

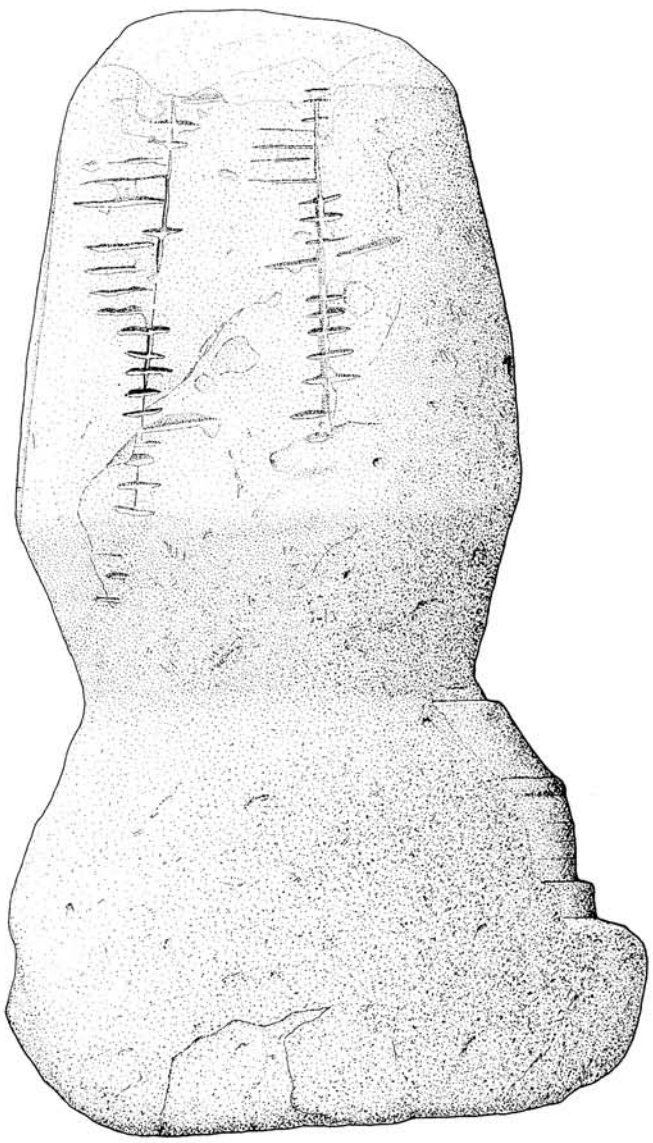

FIG. 7
The ogham stone. Scale 1:4.

first letter of the inscription should be read as a T. The inscription as a whole now reads **TEBICATO[S] / [MAQ]I MUCO[I--]**. This can be translated as *(The something) of Tebicatus, son of the tribe of N.* The reason for the 'something' is that the name, as was usual, is in the genitive case, implying ownership. The missing word is usually taken to be 'memorial' or 'stone', but 'land' is also possible given that in an Irish context ogham inscriptions were used to denote familial title to land.[25]

[25] G. Mac Niocaill, 'Admissible and inadmissible evidence in Early Irish Law', *The Irish Jurist*, 4 (1969), 332–7; McManus, op. cit. in note 20, 163–6; T. Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish Law', 83–7 in P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval Settlement: Continuity and Change* (London, 1976).

FIG. 8 (*above and facing*)
The ogham stone: a, showing the V-shaped sharpening grooves and one of the ogham stem-lines; and b, showing the complete ogham inscription.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE OF DATE

There are three aspects of the inscription which not only have a bearing on the stone's authenticity, but which can also provide us with clues as to date. These are the text, the linguistics and the palaeography. Taking them in order we can first state that the formula *N maqi mucoi N*, with the names in the genitive, is perfectly standard and is found on three other inscriptions from western Britain.[26] The formula is especially common in Ireland, the centre of the distribution of ogham inscriptions.

Linguistically the words **MAQI MUCOI** provide us with no problems. They are perfectly standard spellings. The use of *maqi*, rather than *maq*, *maci*, *macci*, or

[26] Macalister, op. cit. note 23, no. 504; V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff, 1950), nos. 150, 300.

b

mac, could indicate a date range throughout the use of the ogham script.[27] We can say that the formula words of the inscription do not betray late linguistic forms, but this is very different from being able to date them 'early'. Turning to **TEBICATOS** we must note that this is the first attestation of this name. The element *Teb-*, although unparalleled among the Insular inscriptions, is found in earlier Ancient Celtic names.[28] The element *-catos*, on the other hand, is both correctly placed in the genitive and well attested, meaning something like 'battle'.[29] The orthography of the name is also significant with no sign of the loss of the final syllable, or of the unstressed medial vowel (*-i-*), or of vowel affection. For instance if our name *Tebicatos*, had been changed by vowel affection, the *e*, followed as it is by an *i*, would itself have changed to an *i*. Lenition, or the softening of consonants (i.e. /t/ > /θ/) does not appear in the inscription, but this is a development that ogham as a script fails to portray. Of these linguistic features perhaps the most significant is the lack of vowel affection, as this is often seen as the earliest of the linguistic changes visible in ogham.

The language of the inscription, therefore, is not only unproblematic, but also consistently shows early features. Damian McManus has stated that 'an inscription bearing no late linguistic feature need not necessarily be old, though the probability is that it is'.[30] The problem is whether the written form of the name is an accurate reflection of the spoken form and the extent to which it may merely reflect conservative spelling. As McManus points out, we are dealing only with probabilities. Nonetheless we can note that the inscription contains no linguistic feature that could rule out an early date within the ogham series.

Given that the linguistics of the Silchester ogham place it within the earliest phases of the ogham script, if we wish to assign a date to the Silchester ogham we must first assign a date to the beginnings of ogham itself. This is a very difficult task. Ogham is almost our sole direct evidence for the Irish language in this period, and thus any chronology that is devised can only be relative. There are no fixed points. As McManus has stated, there is 'no mechanism for establishing a lower limit'.[31] It is largely two factors which have tied the beginnings of ogham to the 5th century. The first is the argument that the grouping of the ogham letters, and ogham spelling, in particular the lack of doubled consonants at the beginning of words, reflect a knowledge of Latin grammar and orthography. Thus the ogham script must post-date a period in which Latin was available in Ireland.[32] Coupled with the evidence for a 5th-century St Patrick, and assumptions about an isolated Iron-age Ireland, the period in which Latin first becomes accessible in Ireland is often placed post-400. Against this it must be noted that Prosper of Aquitaine states that there was a Christian community in Ireland in contact with Rome by 432.[33] If

[27] McManus, op. cit. in note 20, 81, 83.
[28] A. Holder, *Alt-Celtischer Sprachsatz*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1904), col. 1179.
[29] McManus, op. cit. in note 20, 102.
[30] Op. cit. in note 20, 83.
[31] Op. cit. in note 20, 97.
[32] McManus, op. cit. note 20, 19–43; A. Harvey, 'The ogam inscriptions and their geminate consonant symbols', *Ériu*, 38 (1987), 45–71; A. Harvey, 'Early literacy in Ireland: the evidence of ogam', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Stud.*, 14 (Winter, 1987), 1–15.
[33] T. Charles-Edwards, 'Palladius, Prosper, and Leo the Great: mission and primatial authority', 1–12 in D. N. Dumville (ed.), *Saint Patrick A.D. 493–1993* (Woodbridge, 1993).

we accept this and also understand that the Irish Sea did not provide an impregnable barrier to cultural and linguistic interchange during the period of the Roman control of Britain (A.D. 43–410), then a date before A.D. 400 for Irish knowledge of Latin, and thus the Irish invention of ogham, becomes perfectly possible.[34]

The second argument associating the dating of the ogham inscriptions to the 5th and 6th centuries is the analogy with the ogham inscriptions of Britain and the Latin inscriptions that often accompany them. The Latin inscriptions are usually dated to the 5th or 6th century, and it would therefore take special pleading to have a date different from this for ogham. It has been argued elsewhere, however, that a more likely start-date for the Christian-Latin inscriptions of western Britain is the late 4th century.[35] If this is accepted then there is little to stop the earliest ogham inscriptions being dated to the 4th century.[36] A tentative date for the Silchester ogham, therefore, might be late 4th to 5th century.

Turning to the palaeography of the inscription we find two features of note. The first is the possible use of letter division. In the second line of the inscription the five strokes of the letter **I** grow progressively smaller as they move up the stem line, much like the shape of a pine tree. This is an unusual feature, but it would seem to indicate the role of someone very comfortable with the ogham script in the creation of this inscription. The second feature is that the inscription, as has already been stated, was carved on two stem-lines, a lay-out usually seen as symptomatic of later ogham inscriptions. The perceived dichotomy between early linguistic form and late palaeographic form was one of the reasons for doubting the authenticity of the inscription.[37] Based on the presence of stem-line ogham in manuscripts it has usually been assumed that the stem-line is a later development, with ogham carved on the edge, or arris, of a stone being the earlier form. Recent excavations in Scotland, however, have made such a scheme difficult. The site of Pool in Orkney has produced a stone with an ogham inscription carved on stem-lines and re-used face down within a probably 6th-century pavement.[38] On the basis of this find we are no longer in a position where we have to see stem-line ogham inscriptions as late. This removes one of the principal epigraphic reasons for doubting the authenticity of the Silchester ogham. It does, however, still leave the Silchester ogham as the sole example of a stem-line ogham inscription in southern Britain. Yet when we recall the shape of the stone — rounded with no edges — we can begin to see that the use of stem-lines may simply have been the result of the shape of the stone. No arris was available: the lapidary had to use stem-lines for the delineation of the ogham script.

[34] See also the works cited in note 21.
[35] M. A. Handley, 'The origins of Christian commemoration in Late Antique Britain', *Early Medieval Europe*, forthcoming.
[36] Cf. McManus, op. cit. in note 20, 93, 97.
[37] Fulford and Sellwood, op. cit. in note 11.
[38] Hunter, op. cit. in note 22.

DISCUSSION

The publication some 20 years ago of doubts over the authenticity of the Silchester ogham has resulted in many scholars distancing themselves from this inscription.[39] Before this the stone had been treated as genuine and was included within the still standard *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*.[40] It should be noted, however, that in the 1890s, when the stone was discovered, the name *Ebicatos*, as it was then read, was unknown — the ogham from the Isle of Man which may contain that name was not published until 1911.[41] Moreover, while publications by Hübner[42] and Westwood[43] would have made knowledge of the British oghams widely available, there are no known fakes of ogham in Britain. Neither the text, nor the linguistics or even the palaeography of the inscription indicate that the stone is anything other than genuine.

Inscriptions of any sort in this area during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages are extremely rare. There are Roman inscriptions from Silchester[44] and two nearby Anglo-Saxon inscriptions from Whitchurch and Stratfield Mortimer which are dated to the 9th–11th and 11th centuries respectively.[45] The closest British inscriptions are the 7th- to 9th-century stones from Wareham St Mary in Dorset,[46] while the closest oghams are in South Wales. While remembering that some contemporary Gallic cities such as Auxerre can also only boast one inscription,[47] it remains true that the Silchester ogham is isolated in both time and space.

Much of the context for the inscription must, therefore, be provided by the inscription itself. Firstly it is probably safe, unless we wish to see Tebicatus as overseeing the construction of his own epitaph (if such it was), to assume the presence of more than one person familiar with the ogham script and the Irish language in late Roman Silchester. In another late Roman town, Wroxeter, one Cunorix was commemorated with an Irish language epitaph, yet the Roman capital script was used.[48] In other words it would seem that, in Wroxeter, ogham was either not known or deemed inappropriate and this has important implications for both the audience and the milieu of the inscription. Returning to Silchester, that ogham was chosen as the script, Primitive Irish as the language and *maqi mucoi* as the formula of commemoration, and that the inscription appears to have been skilfully produced, perhaps with letter division, should be taken to indicate an Irish audience and milieu of some kind. Whether this is also evidence for an Irish

[39] McManus, op. cit. in note 20, 44; K. R. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300–800* (Leicester, 1992), 150; although cf. Ziegler, op. cit. in note 20, 176, 281.
[40] Macalister, op. cit. in note 23.
[41] P. M. C. Kermode, 'Notes on the Ogham and Latin inscriptions from the Isle of Man and a recently found bilingual in Celtic and Latin', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotland*, 45 (1910–11), 437–50.
[42] E. Hübner (ed), *Inscriptiones Britanniae Christianae* (Berlin and London, 1876).
[43] J. O. Westwood (ed.), *Lapidarium Walliae: The Early Inscribed and Sculptured Stones of Wales* (Oxford, 1879).
[44] R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright (ed.), *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, 1: Inscriptions on Stone* (Oxford, 1968), nos. 67–87.
[45] E. Okasha (ed.), *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), nos. 135, 111.
[46] K. H. Jackson and C. A. R. Radford, 'Early Christian inscriptions', in RCHM, *An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset, II: South-East* (London, 1970), 304–12.
[47] E. Le Blant (ed.), *Nouveau Recueil des Inscriptions Chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures au VIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1892), no. 33.
[48] K. H. Jackson and R. P. Wright, 'A Latin inscription from Wroxeter', *Antiq. J.*, 48 (1968), 296–300.

community is uncertain, although of course such a community could simply have consisted of Tebicatus and his family. Indeed exactly who Tebicatus was and what role he played in Silchester cannot be known for certain, although it is difficult to see him as an Irish raider. What we do know is that he sought, or at least attained, epigraphic commemoration, with all that this implies for the knowledge, and use, of the written word, the courting of permanency, and the public display of, or claim for, status.

The Silchester ogham is not a fake. Rather it is the 4th- or 5th-century epitaph of one Tebicatus, son of an unknown tribe, an Irishman deep in Britain, and a rich vein of invaluable evidence. We have a new early Celtic name; important support for the early use of stem-lines in ogham; 'new' information on the role of the Irish in late Roman Britain; as well as unique evidence for life and death in late Roman Silchester.

CONCLUSIONS

We may now consider the significance of the Silchester ogham stone for our understanding of late or post-Roman Silchester. It would seem that the ogham stone was deposited in a shallow, but functioning well in the later 4th or 5th century. The ritual associated with the commissioning of the well can be related to long-established practice in the Roman town. The burial of the stone certainly closed the well and, in the absence of evidence for a later well, this event may be associated with the end of occupation of one or both of the buildings to east and west. Adjacent to the well were several rubbish pits with material dating to the 4th century. The proximity of the well to these 4th-century features suggests that it, too, was part of the group and broadly contemporary. While an extended life for a soundly structured well over many decades is possible, this was a shallow construction with no certain evidence of an inner lining. We are told that the ogham stone lay directly on top of the pewter flagon whose deposition can be regarded as part of the ritual associated with the commissioning of the well. Without indication of intervening silts between the stone and the flagon it seems unlikely that the closure of the well would have occurred later than the early decades of the 5th century. The act of closure in this manner remains remarkable. It may indeed symbolize a deliberate abandonment of one, or both, of the two properties either side of it. Whether similar acts took place in association with the abandonment of other houses in the city remains to be established.

The location of the ogham pit, in the heavily robbed ruins of a long-abandoned town house, is in the northern half of insula IX, just to the east of the midpoint between two buildings fronting on to, respectively, the east and west streets of the block. Building 1 on the eastern side of the insula has a corridor or portico linking two projecting rooms on its north side, all of which seem to be secondary to the rest of the house. While the building as a whole has a late 3rd-/early 4th-century *terminus post quem,* make-up from the eastern projecting room suggests a date for construction of the northern range after about 325.[49] It is quite

[49] Clarke and Fulford, op. cit. in note 14, 12–13.

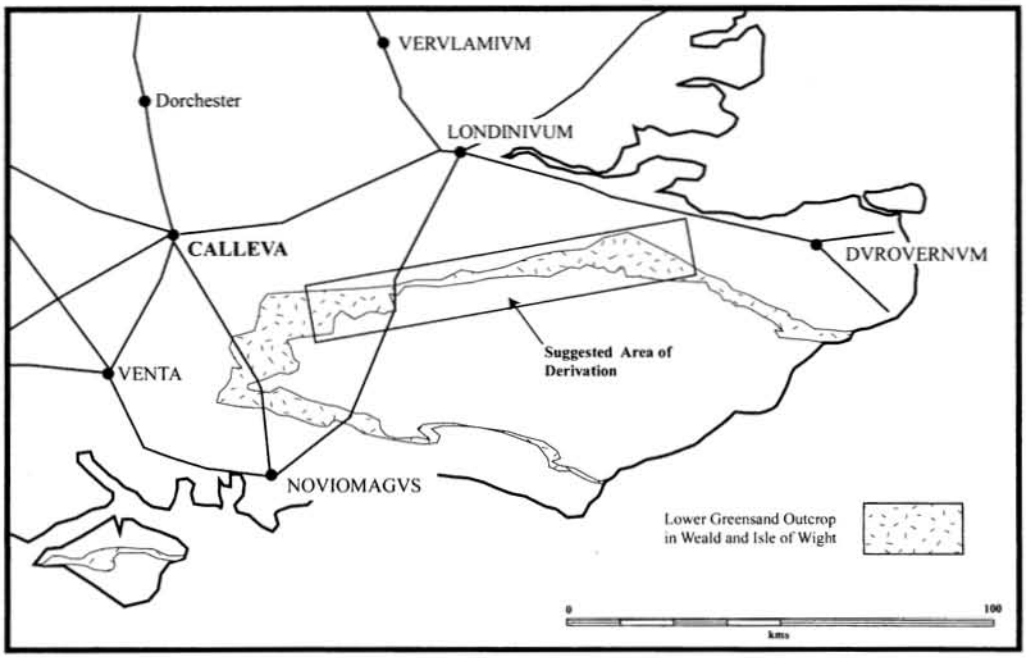

FIG. 9

Outline map showing the distribution of the Lower Greensand in the Weald and Isle of Wight, and the area from which the ogham stone lithology most probably originated.

possible for a series of dwarf columns to have supported a lean-to roof over this corridor, as has been proposed in the case of the late Roman town house (Building 1) in Colliton Park, Dorchester, Dorset.[50] Thus the column could have originated from a building within the insula. In this context the stone could have been carved while it was *in situ* in which case the missing word at the beginning of the inscription could, as has been suggested above, have been 'land' [of Tebicatus].

Alternatively, if the ogham stone had served as an epitaph for a burial, it interposes a secondary phase of re-use after the removal of the stone from its primary, building context. There is, as yet, no evidence of human burial from within the insula and, if a dating to nearer 400 than 500 for deposition proves acceptable, this coincides with evidence from other towns, as at nearby Winchester, for continued orderly burial outside the town walls up to and beyond 400.[51] If the stone had been brought in from an extra-mural cemetery, it widens considerably the range of its possible primary contexts within the town. It is simpler to suppose that, like the Colliton Park balusters, the Silchester stone had not moved far from its original location.

Whatever the precise provenance of the stone itself in the Lower Greensands of south-eastern England to the east and south-east of Silchester (below, Appendix 1; Fig. 9), the petrological study rules out a source for the stone from any locality

[50] RCHM(E), *An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset, II: South-East* (London, 1970), 556–7.
[51] G. Clarke, *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills* (Winchester Studies 3(2), Oxford, 1979).

closer to the main distribution area of ogham in Wales and south-western England. At the same time, like other building stone used in the Roman town, it cannot have originated from the immediate locality of the town. While it remains conceivable that the stone could have been robbed from a villa or settlement other than Silchester, the recognition of similar greensands elsewhere in Calleva makes it more likely that the stone had originally been used architecturally in the town, probably in a 3rd- or 4th-century town house, as we have suggested above. The fact that, despite its soft and friable character, the stone type can now be paralleled in other contexts at Calleva also removes a significant objection to its identification as a late Roman artefact.[52] Although the possibility cannot be entirely excluded, it is *unlikely* that the dwarf column was imported *already inscribed* into the town.

To conclude, the stone may have been inscribed to mark the ownership of a town house (and associated estate) by an immigrant from Ireland sometime in the 4th or early 5th century and, arguably, after c. 325. Its final deposition in the well 1170 served to neutralize the use of a nearby well as a source of water. The *terminus post quem* for the filling of the well in the late 4th or 5th century offers further support for an early date for the development of ogham.

APPENDIX 1: THE PETROLOGY OF THE OGHAM STONE
By BRUCE SELLWOOD

BACKGROUND TO METHODS AND GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The stone was re-examined in the Reading Museum store in January 2000.[53] It is deep brown in colour and has a soapy feel, being very friable to the touch. The soapy feel is due to the fact that the rock has been heavily impregnated with wax (probably beeswax), as a preservative. This makes it difficult to observe features directly in the rock itself and was the reason why direct interpretation of the lithology was so difficult in our earlier work.[54] In that study we were permitted only to take a small flake ($<$ 1 centimetre across and a few millimetres thick) from the outer surface of the stone, so our single, scrappy thin-section was of a very limited amount of material, which may not have been representative of the fresh material within. Our earlier evaluation should be regarded as somewhat fragile.

The stone was at that time housed in a case in the Museum and could not be rotated. On its trolley in the store we could examine more of its surface and, as well as the ogham inscription, the body of the stone can be seen to exhibit fossil bioturbation structures. These occur as 1 cm-diameter cylindrical structures representing invertebrate burrows that were produced when the present rock was a soft sediment, and probably upon the sea floor. In the present study we were permitted to drill carefully into the base of the stone to attempt to obtain some unimpregnated material. A hand-corer was used with a 2 cm diameter bit. We penetrated approximately 1 cm into the stone and produced core pieces 0.5 cm in

[52] Fulford and Sellwood, op. cit. in note 11.

[53] Examination of the stone revealed two deep, parallel grooves with a V-profile running up the shaft of the stone to one side of the inscription (Fig. 8a). These may have resulted from the sharpening of knives or similar implements on the stone.

[54] Fulford and Sellwod, op. cit. in note 11.

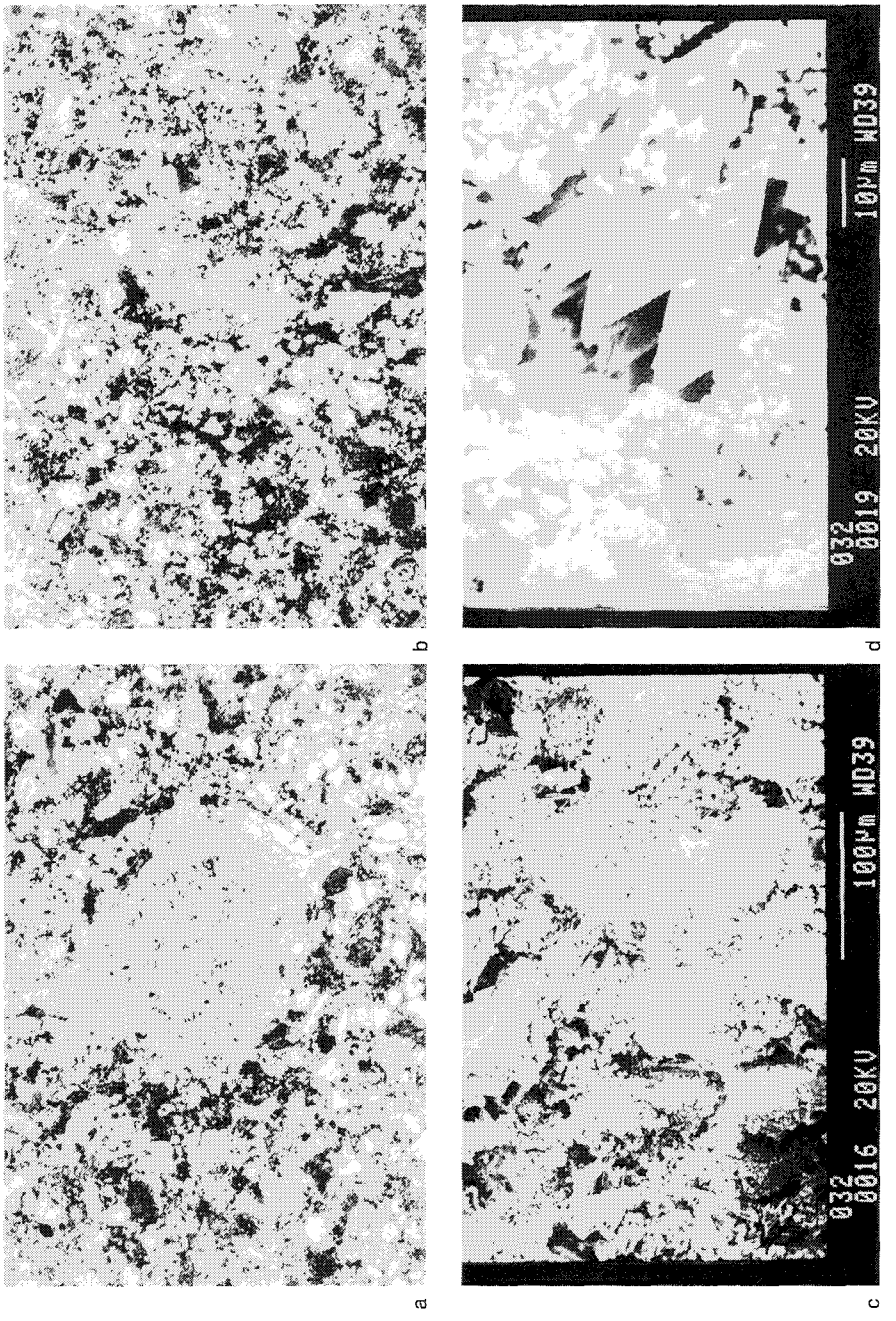

FIG. 10

Photomicrographs of a thin-section of ogham stone material: a, showing fine quartz grains and dark grains (including glauconites) surrounding a much coarser echinoderm fragment (centre of field of view), plane polarized light, field of view 1.5 mm in width; b, showing a calcitized sponge spicule close to the centre of the picture, plane polarized light, field of view 1.5 mm in diameter; c, showing general view of grains, cement and matrix between grains; the micro-crystalline coating on most material illustrated consists of silica, scale bar 100µm; d, showing in close-up the form of the calcite crystal cement and ubiquitous microcrystals of silica, scale bar 10µm.

thickness. Even so, the sandstone still has appreciable amounts of wax. Because of this the samples obtained were treated with dichloromethane prior to analysis with Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) and Whole-rock X-ray diffraction (XRD) techniques. Samples subjected to XRD investigation were disaggregated in an ultra-sonic bath at 40°C, also to attempt to free the grains from their wax coatings, prior to grinding and standard analysis. In addition, the drill chips were investigated under the binocular microscope and a thin-section was cut from the new material.

OPTICAL PETROLOGY AND SEM RESULTS

Under the binocular microscope the stone appeared as a light brown- to buff-coloured fine- to very fine-grained sandstone, speckled with dark green grains.

Thin-section (Fig. 10a–b) confirmed the rock to be a fine- to very fine-grained glauconitic calcareous sandstone with muddier (micritic) patches representing burrows in cross section. The carbonate is present both as a finely crystalline cement and as skeletal (shell) fragments.

The predominant grains are of quartz ($\sim$60%), accompanied by fresh green glauconite ($>$5%), calcite grains and cement and feldspar grains ($<$5%). The quartz grains are sub-angular to sub-rounded and many are etched in contact with surrounding carbonate. The rare feldspars are similarly etched. Glauconite occurs as pellets and is mostly fresh but some degraded glauconite occurs as brown oxidized grains.

The carbonate grains are diverse. Molluscs are represented by clam (bivalve) fragments, all of which are very small and abraded; echinoderm debris comprises both crinoid and echinoid fragments, often with syntaxial calcite cements (i.e. calcite cements in optical continuity with the host grain). Foraminiferans occur as rare benthics (?nodosariids), rarely with pyrite fillings to their chambers. In addition, peloids are common as indistinct fine grains. Other components include bone and tooth fragments (mostly fish debris), and rarer sponge spicules (calcitized).

Obvious carbonate cements occur as syntaxial overgrowths around shell fragments, particularly echinoderm debris. Mostly, the carbonate cement is indistinct in thin-section, but obvious and ubiquitous under the SEM. The latter also indicates that crustose silica cement appears to be present everywhere as coatings around grains and earlier cements (Fig. 10c–d), a likely source of which may have been from the breakdown of former siliceous sponge spicules.

XRD DATA

Standard whole-rock X-ray diffraction (normalized to quartz) suggests the following minerals are present: quartz (73%), calcite (24%), plagioclase feldspar (trace, $\sim$1%), potassium feldspar (trace, $\sim$2%). In addition there is a broad peak on the X-ray trace representing poorly crystalline clays and probably includes the glauconite observed in thin section, and some smectites. We did not attempt to extract the clay fraction because of the presence of wax in the samples.

POSSIBLE PROVENANCE AND SIMILARITIES

This sediment is certainly a Mesozoic sandstone. It is of relatively 'local' provenance, coming from areas well to the east of the River Severn and at some

distance from sites, and rock types, generally associated with other stones exhibiting ogham script.

The ogham stone sandstone cannot be any older than Late Jurassic, on the basis of its diagenetic history (lack of significant burial features), abundance of glauconite, and its biota. The earliest Jurassic sandstone it could be is Oxfordian (Corallian Sandstone) from Oxfordshire, but this is unlikely because of the abundance of glauconite. It is very unlikely to be Portland sandstone because the Portland, although locally glauconitic, does not contain such an abundance and diversity of skeletal fragments. Also, on the basis of the biota and the diagenesis, it is very unlikely to be a Tertiary sandstone.

The poor lithological data then available caused Fulford and Sellwood to suggest tentatively a Late Jurassic Portland Sandstone origin, with the nearest likely source in the Swindon area.[55] Our re-evaluation, with more, and much less contaminated material, suggests very strongly that the material is a 'greensand' from the Lower Cretaceous, and almost certainly from south-eastern England.

In thin-section, Upper Greensand (Albian Cretaceous) frequently exhibits planktic forams and abundant spicules, and such features have been commonly observed in samples taken from the Silchester town wall and amphitheatre.[56] However, this is not a feature of the ogham stone rock. Instead, the style of the fabric, the general lithological features and the fossil content are more typical of parts of the Lower Greensand (Aptian Cretaceous). Such materials have already been identified from the Silchester amphitheatre[57] and as monumental blocks in the forum basilica. Certainly there is a well-documented record of the use of Lower Greensand, especially Kentish Rag, in Roman defensive walls such as London and the fort of Reculver during the 3rd century.[58]

Although it is difficult to be definitive, because of the wax impregnation of the ogham stone, in thin section the ogham micro-facies is similar to that figured by Higgs from the Sandgate Beds ('Lower Greensand') of Surrey.[59] As a result of Higgs's detailed petrology, and from an investigation of several thin-sections recently provided by Dr T. R. Astin (PRIS, University of Reading) it is clear that both Sandgate and Bargate Beds (also Lower Greensand) sandstones are clearly represented in the Silchester town wall (identified as 'greensands' in earlier work).[60] Thus, there is a clear-cut geological context within which the ogham stone can be placed, as a piece of Lower Greensand (Fig. 9).

[55] Fulford and Sellwood, op. cit. in note 11, 98.

[56] B. W. Sellwood, 'The rock-types represented in the town walls of Silchester', 224–30 in M. Fulford, *Silchester: Excavations on the Defences 1974–80* (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies Britannia Monogr. 5, London, 1984); B. W. Sellwood, 'The rock-types represented in the arena wall', 139–42 in M. Fulford, *The Silchester Amphitheatre. Excavations 1979–85* (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies Britannia Monogr. 10, London, 1989).

[57] Sellwood, op. cit. note 56, 139–42.

[58] T. F. C. Blagg, 'Building stone in Roman Britain', 33–50 in D. Parsons (ed.), *Stone Quarrying and Building in England AD 43–1525* (Chichester, 1990).

[59] K. E. Higgs, A geochemical and diagenetic study of the Lower Greensand, Weald Basin (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, 1993, University of Reading).

[60] Sellwood, op. cit. in note 56.

APPENDIX 2: THE PEWTER FLAGON

By HELLA ECKARDT

This simple biconical pewter flagon (Fig. 4) has a splayed foot, triangular-sectioned plain handle and narrow neck. A small hole was pierced into the lower part of the body, perhaps to ritually 'kill' the vessel. There is also some, apparently post-depositional, damage to its lower body.

The production and distribution of Romano-British pewter vessels is now well documented[61] and a very close parallel to our flagon comes from the Roman villa at Brislington.[62] Similar flagons are also known from Winchester[63] and Shapwick Heath, Somerset.[64] The latter contained a hoard of late 4th-century coins and a late 3rd- or 4th-century date seems likely for the Silchester flagon as well.[65]

In view of the fact that the Silchester flagon was found in a probable well and in association with the ogham stone, it is interesting to note that the 'ritual' deposition of Romano-British pewter vessels appears to be a common phenomenon. Scott and Poulton first drew attention to the occurrence of pewter vessels in 'watery' contexts such as rivers, bogs and wells and argued that these objects functioned as ritual or votive offerings.[66] It is certainly remarkable that both the Winchester and Brislington flagons were found in wells and that the three flagons from Brislington were also associated with deposits of human and animal bone as well as masonry. The ritual significance of wells and pits in Britain during the prehistoric and Roman periods has been discussed by Ross.[67]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[61] W. J. Wedlake, *Excavations at Camerton, Somerset* (Bath, 1958), 82–93; C. Peal, 'Romano-British pewter plates and dishes', *Proc. Cambridgeshire Ant. Soc.*, 60 (1967), 19–37; D. Brown, 'A Roman pewter hoard from Appleford, Berkshire', *Oxoniensia*, 38 (1973), 184–206; N. Beagrie, 'The Romano-British pewter industry', *Britannia*, 20 (1989), 169–91.

[62] W. R. Barker, 'Remains of a Roman villa, discovered at Brislington, Bristol, December 1899', *Trans. Bristol Gloucestershire Archaeol. Soc.*, 24 (1901), 283–92.

[63] S. Butcher, 'Interim report on excavations in St George's Street, Winchester, 1954', *Proc. Hampshire Field Club Archaeol. Soc.*, 19 (1957), 1–11.

[64] H. St Gray, 'A second hoard of late Roman coins from Shapwick Heath, Somerset', *Proc. Somerset Archaeol. Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 83 (1937), 148–52.

[65] Beagrie, op. cit. in note 61, 175.

[66] E. Scott and R. Poulton, 'The hoarding, deposition and use of pewter in Roman Britain', 115–32 in E. Scott (ed.), *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, 1st Conference Proceedings* (Aldershot, 1993).

[67] A. Ross, 'Shafts, pits and wells — sanctuaries of the Belgic Britons', 255–85 in J. M. Coles and D. D. A. Simpson (eds), *Studies in Ancient Europe: Essays presented to Stuart Piggott* (Leicester, 1968).