Section 15 – the small finds recording system explained

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Finds collection policy

The policy on the collection of artefacts throughout the excavation (1966-90) remained largely unchanged: all artefacts were collected with the sole exception of ceramic building materials and roofing slates which were largely discarded without record unless complete or having some distinguishing feature (e.g. graffiti). (This policy did change in the last decade of the excavation when CBM were collected but processed on site.) Bulk finds (pottery, nails and animal bone) were collected by hand and placed in plastic finds trays, each identified by labels recording site name and year, grid and sub-grid letter, and context number (Figure 1). Occasionally, pottery or bone would be taken into the small finds system if they exhibited unusual aspects (e.g. potter's stamps, graffiti, human bone). The precise and changing details of labelling will be outlined in more detail below.

From 1970 all spoil was sieved to identify smaller objects that may have escaped notice during excavation, a policy adopted following research carried out by Sebastian Payne demonstrating the much enhanced rates of recovery for smaller animal bones as well as smaller objects such as beads, intaglii and coins (Barker *et al.* 1997, 192; Figures 2, 3). Some objects were also recovered in the bulk soil samples taken for environmental processing and these were fed back into the system retrospectively. According to category, finds discovered while sieving would either be deposited in the appropriate tray or taken to be entered into the small finds system.

Figure 1: A labelled finds tray from the annexe. The label reads WP87 (20F) B521.

Figure 2: Sieving excavated spoil by hand.

Figure 3: Typical dry-sieved spoil residue.

Figure 4: High level image of excavations in 1987 on Site A showing a trowelling line in operation. Note the regularly placed finds trays indicating the next two rows of 2.5m square finds grids.

Finds labelling

Pre-1973 system

It is important to realise that the excavations on the baths basilica site came about by accident – there was no plan to carry out an open-area excavation of the baths basilica and its surrounds. It was the fortuitous coincidence of two events that precipitated the work.

Figure 5: The Wroxeter site captured just before Philip Barker's excavations got fully underway. Clearance of the baths has largely been completed and the *natatio* and heated rooms show prominently having just been consolidated. On the baths basilica site, the pale rectangle is site WB71. A narrow trench extends north from it heading towards the spoil heaps piled where the site museum is now located. At the top of the image, the pale pentangular area is WB68, later Site A. At this date, topsoil clearance has not yet begun.
Extracted from an Arnold Baker photograph (WAB140/92 1st July 1969 SJ 5608/242)

The initial Ministry of Works plan in 1947 when they acquired the monument had been to consolidate the baths and display these to the public (Anon 1948, v). As work proceeded on achieving this, the University of Birmingham training excavation run by Kathleen Kenyon and Graham Webster on a town house on *insula* IX, south of the baths, took place (Kenyon 1980) and on the back of this, Graham managed to negotiate a training excavation on the baths themselves, these running annually from 1955-85 (White 2006, 166-7). In the early 1960s he was assisted in the field by Charles Daniels and then by Philip Barker, who joined the excavation in 1966. Charles Daniels and Graham Webster had carried out exploratory trenching of the baths basilica, which was still under the plough, in 1962 (Webster and Daniels 1973) and they began large-scale clearance of the (presumed disturbed levels) of the baths basilica itself in 1967, excavating a large trench with prison labour (Wroxeter Baths Site 71; WB71). In 1966, Philip Barker had been asked to excavate the site of a proposed bungalow, which became Site A but was initially numbered in sequence with the Baths excavations – WB68. Finding the remains of an ephemeral building on WB68, and seeing features apparently cut into the floor of the basilica in the base of trench WB71, Philip put forward the proposal that the whole of the baths basilica area be cleared by hand (Barker et al. 1997, 2-6; White 2006, 168). In practice, this proved impractical since the ploughsoil was in places 1m thick so instead the ploughsoil was machined off to a trowelable depth, the remaining soil being labelled Layer I. This was taken off in spits with the interface between the base of the ploughsoil and the underlying archaeology being labelled Layer I/II. A huge number of finds was recovered from this level – 16,200 – which in the initial publication were argued to be largely residual (Barker *et al.* 1997, 193). It is argued here that this is now not thought to be the case (see Section 2).

Finds were collected by 10m grid at this stage but small finds were individually plotted. As the archaeology was revealed, the surface was planned and given Layer and Feature numbers, with a separate sequence for each Grid Square, the contexts being recorded in a site notebook, one for each grid. The inadequacies of this system were soon realised and from 1973 a new system was adopted. A typical label from this period might thus be as simple as WP70, 4 LI/II, representing the site (Wroxeter Palaestra) with year, Grid Square and Layer number. Small finds were recorded in a running sequence for each grid, the number being written in a triangle on the finds bag along with the context number and grid. This policy continued after the change in context recording came into operation. Finds from WB68 and WB71 were taken into the WP registers but were not assigned context numbers within the WP system.

Post-1973 system

As is explained in the final report (Barker *et al.* 1997, 7) because the excavation began at the eastern end of the site, well away from the baths ruins, the site grid numbering runs from east – west, starting at Grid 1 in the south-east corner and ending at Grid 56 in the north-west corner (Figure 6). There were four rows: squares 1-14; 15-28; 29-42; 43-56 but squares 15, 29-30 and 43-46 were notional, lying as they did beyond the limits of excavation. Other anomalies include parts of two grid squares that lie south of the baseline (taken as the line of the south wall of the basilica – including the Old Work) at the extreme east end of the site which were numbered 1α and 2α. A third grid square, established to the north of the northern limit of excavation, was labelled 48α.

Within each 10m grid square, finds were obviously collected by context but in order to more closely tie down the location of finds within the larger grid square, each was sub-divided into 2.5m squares lettered A-R (omitting I and O for obvious reasons), starting in the top right hand corner and ending in the bottom left corner (Figures 4, 5). In practice, many contexts were smaller than 2.5m square so locating finds with some precision is achievable even though 3-D plotting was not undertaken. A typical finds label will thus contain the year, distinguished by the final two digits prefaced by WP, eg. WP82. Then the grid square and sub-square as appropriate, written in a circle, e.g. (12R), followed by the context number: D976. Each context number is prefaced by a capital letter, A-E. These denote different parts of the baths basilica site, each with their own sequence of context numbers, these divisions being created in 1973 when the context numbering system was adopted. The numbering system between 1966-1972 is discussed above.

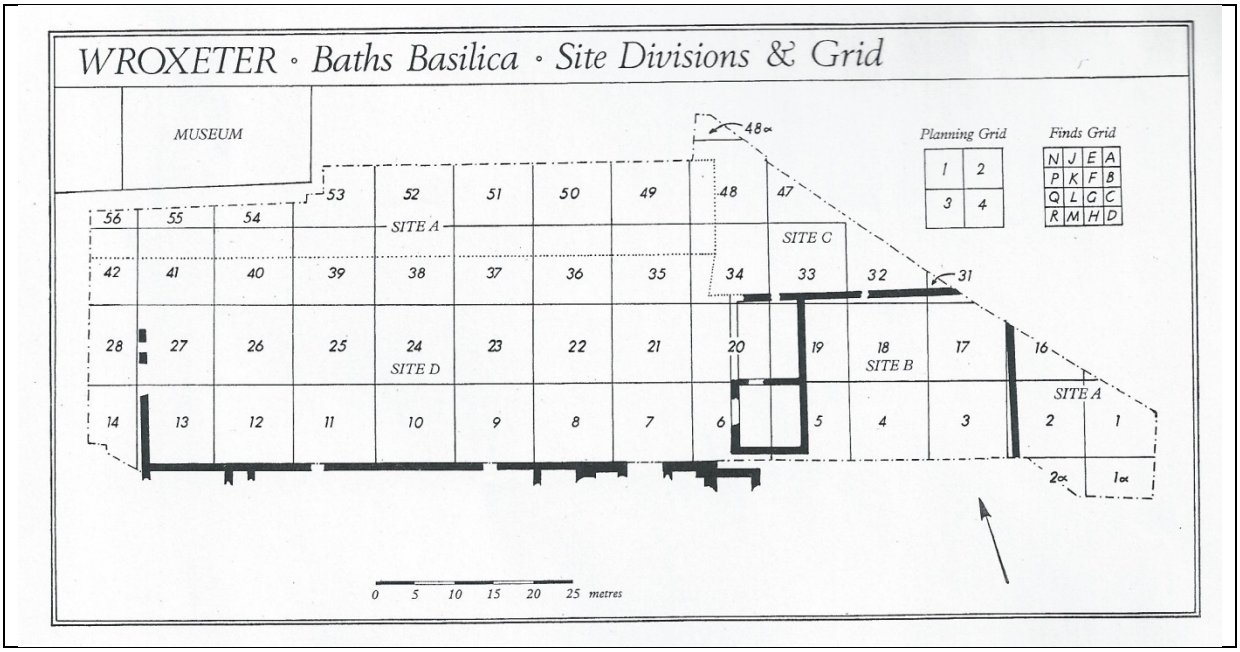

Figure 6: The Wroxeter Palaestra site grid and finds sub-grid (top right). Note Site E (above Site D) is mis-labelled Site A; the actual Site A can be seen extreme right (after Baker *et al.* 1997, Fig. 9).

The Sites

Site A
Extreme east end of excavation, adjacent to the fence defining the Scheduled area and limit of English Heritage property. Defined to the east by the Roman street dividing *insulae* V and VI and to the west by the wall defining the baths complex ('baths precinct wall'). The northern and southern limits were artificial. Site A comprises Grid Squares 1α, 2α, 1, 2, 15 (notional), 16. The context sequence runs from A1 – A453.

Site B
Between Site and the baths basilica proper. It was divided into two areas: an apparent courtyard defined by walls on all but the south side and called in the excavation record the 'baths precinct'. It was interpreted that this might have been a storage and working area for those maintaining the baths buildings. A second area, the 'annexe' comprised two rooms that formed a lean-to structure at the east end of the baths basilica. Its original function may have been changing rooms, or rooms / offices provided for those running the baths complex. It later functioned as a builder's yard for those carrying out active maintenance of the baths buildings. Site B comprises Grid Squares 3-6 and 17-20, with the annexe occupying half of grids 5-6 and 19-20. The context sequence runs from B1-B680.

Site C
A triangular area to the north of site B, its southern limit being defined by the north wall of the baths precinct. The other boundaries were artificial with that to the north being the modern hedge alongside the B4380 Ironbridge road and the western limit being an archaeological trench cut across the north portico of the baths and the full width of the street between *insulae* V and II. This line was notionally extended north across the exposed area of the southern frontage of *insula* II dividing Site E to the west and Site C to the east. Site C comprises Grid Squares 31-34 and 47-48, along with 48α. The context sequence runs from C1-C564.

Site D
Formed the bulk of the site. It comprised the footprint of the baths basilica and was thus defined to the south by its southern wall, incorporating the Old Work and to the east by the party wall with the annexe. The northern limit was the robber trench for the north portico stylobate wall (D81) while the western limit was the modern road overlying the robber trench of the western portico colonnade, itself only partly exposed. Within this extensive area were the major internal divisions of the baths basilica, its nave and north and south aisles and the north and west porticos. The latter extended beneath the area of excavation to re-emerge in Graham Webster's area of excavation on the baths proper (site code WB). Site D comprises Grid Squares 6-14, 20-28 and 34-42. The context sequence runs from D1-D2539.

Site E
On the northern edge of the excavation, representing the southern frontage of *insula* II and the adjacent street. Its eastern limit was arbitrary with Site C as discussed above while the other limits were all defined by the edges of excavation. Site E comprises Grid Squares 34-42 and 48-56. The context sequence runs from E1-E364.

Finds processing

All finds other than CBM, pottery, nails and unworked animal bone were taken to the finds hut for entry into the system. Finds were recorded by grid, each find being given a unique number written in the register and bagged. At the end of the day / session, finds were taken for initial processing by the Deputy Director, Dr Kate Pretty. She logged the finds by grid and individual number, checking that the context number was also present and creating an individual record card for each recording metrics, a description and sketch. Occasionally finds would be discarded at this stage if necessary, for example if they were too fragmented to process or were mis-identified for example.

The excavation had access to two conservators and a laboratory on site and if necessary, conservation measures for some of the more sensitive finds (such as shale, for instance) could be dealt with immediately. Coins were often taken for immediate cleaning and processing to discover their date and to ensure good survival. Finds in a more delicate condition in need of greater conservation time would be stabilised and sent direct to the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, as was all ironwork which was sent for stabilisation and x-ray. Any object sent to the AML will have acquired its own AML number in addition to the site numbers.

Finds were also drawn on site during the excavation period, mostly co-ordinated by Jean Renow using supervised volunteers from among the digging staff who wished training in this area. These are the images that are published with this archive. Jean's husband, Sidney, was the site photographer and he took photographs (black and white prints and slides) of key finds too. The slides have been scanned and are also published here.

Phasing links

It did not prove possible to phase all areas of the site to form a uniform whole. The exception to this rule was Phase Z which formed a linked surface across the whole site, with the possible exception of Site A. It cannot be assumed that earlier phases of activity are the same in different parts of the site, even if they use the same phasing letter, i.e. phase W in Site C is not *necessarily* the same as Phase W on Site D, although equally the possibility that they are the same phase cannot be ruled out either. For convenience the phasing table from the final report is reproduced here. For a brief description of the phases, refer to the original report (Barker *et al.* 1997, 13-14).

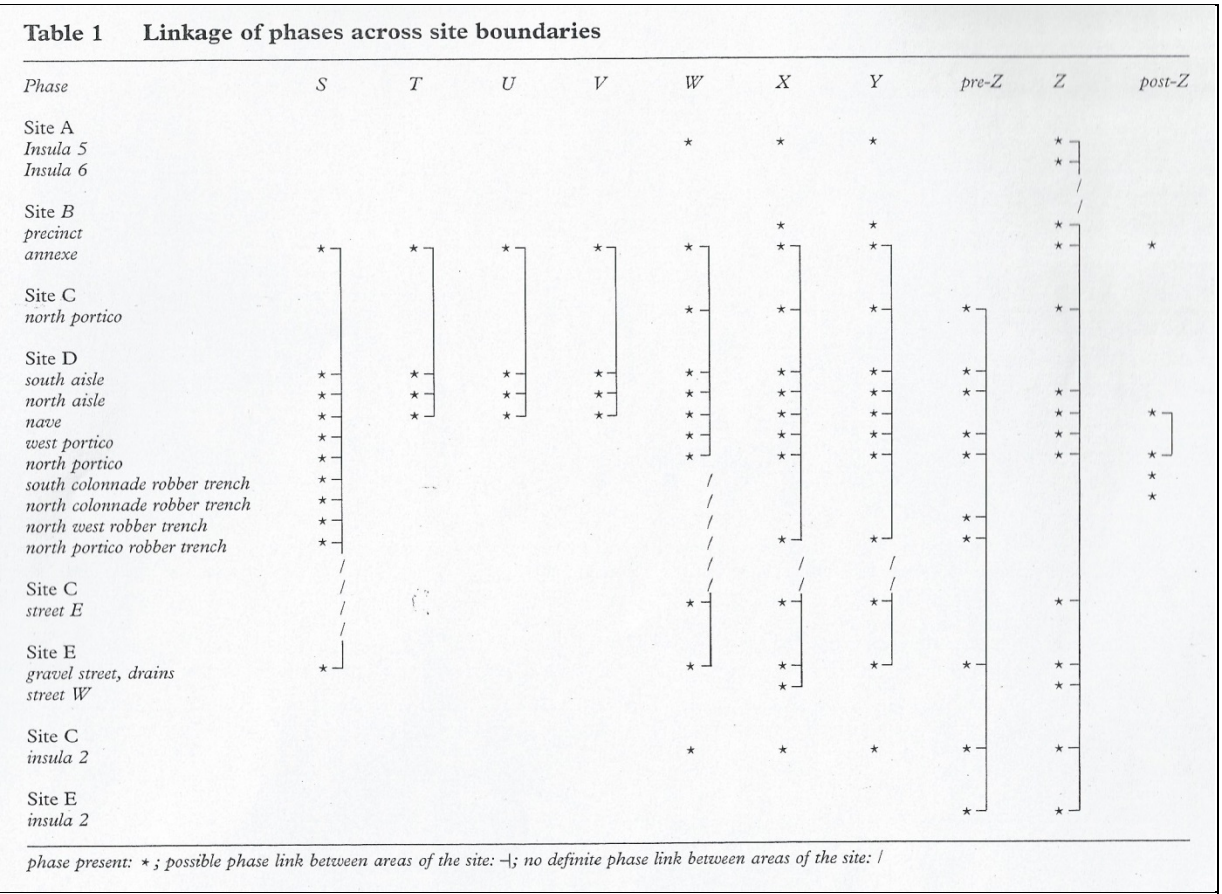

Table 1 Linkage of phases across site boundaries

Phase	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	pre-Z	Z	post-Z
Site A										
Insula 5					⋆	⋆	⋆		⋆	
Insula 6									⋆	
									/	
Site *B*									/	
precinct						⋆	⋆		⋆	
annexe	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆		⋆	⋆
Site C										
north portico					⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	
Site D										
south aisle	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆		
north aisle	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	
nave	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆		⋆	⋆
west portico	⋆				⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	
north portico	⋆				⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆
south colonnade robber trench	⋆				/					⋆
north colonnade robber trench	⋆				/					⋆
north west robber trench	⋆				/			⋆		
north portico robber trench	⋆				/	⋆	⋆	⋆		
	/				/	/	/			
Site C	/				/	/	/			
street E	/				⋆	⋆	⋆		⋆	
	/									
Site E										
gravel street, drains	⋆				⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	
street W						⋆			⋆	
Site C										
insula 2					⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	⋆	
Site E										
insula 2								⋆	⋆	

phase present: ⋆ ; possible phase link between areas of the site: –|; no definite phase link between areas of the site: /

Figure 7: Suggested phasing links. Note that some phasing in the more peripheral areas of the site cannot be tied in to the main sequence. (after Barker et al. 1997, Table 1)