

II: The Exploration of Roman Chester 1962–1999

Retrospect and Prospect

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Introduction

This paper covers a period of almost forty years. In this time approximately fifty interventions have been carried out inside the Roman fortress and slightly fewer outside. They have ranged from small (including evaluations) to large. Even in those cases where the main purpose has not been to learn about the Romans, information about that period has generally been recovered

As well as reviewing the major interventions and the reasons for them, the objects of this paper are to review what we have learnt (ie advances in understanding as well as data) and, in particular, to suggest some topics that seem to be deserving of research in the future. References to some works that have appeared since the conference have been included.

Retrospect

The 1950s and the Richmond research agenda

There are two starting points for understanding post-war excavation in Chester. One is Sir Ian Richmond's research agenda; the other is the City Council's redevelopment schemes. In 1949, at the invitation of the Chester Archaeological Society, Richmond set out the following research priorities (Crosby 1999, 84–5):

- establish the precise line of the west wall of the fortress
- determine whether there was Roman occupation at Chester before the foundation of the Flavian legionary fortress
- establish whether turf and timber defences had preceded the stone defensive walls
- investigate crucial sites west of the Town Hall (then vacant as a result of slum clearance)
- establish the south-west corner of the fortress
- obtain information about Roman lifestyle in Chester, military and civilian
- opportunistic emergency excavation

These priorities may now seem very modest, but they were essentially practical ones, related to what was firmly known about Roman Chester at that time. For that, we may refer

to Newstead's plan of 1948 (pl 1; here III II.1): the line of the fortress wall was accurately located in the north and east parts of the walled city, but that of the south and west defences was still conjectural; a number of barracks had been excavated in the Deanery Field; the outline of the *principia* had been roughly plotted but little was actually known about the building; the southern half of the 'Elliptical Building' had been uncovered, but its structural form was not understood, let alone its purpose; part of the *basilica* of the fortress baths was known, but not recognised for what it was; and there were a few minor structures.

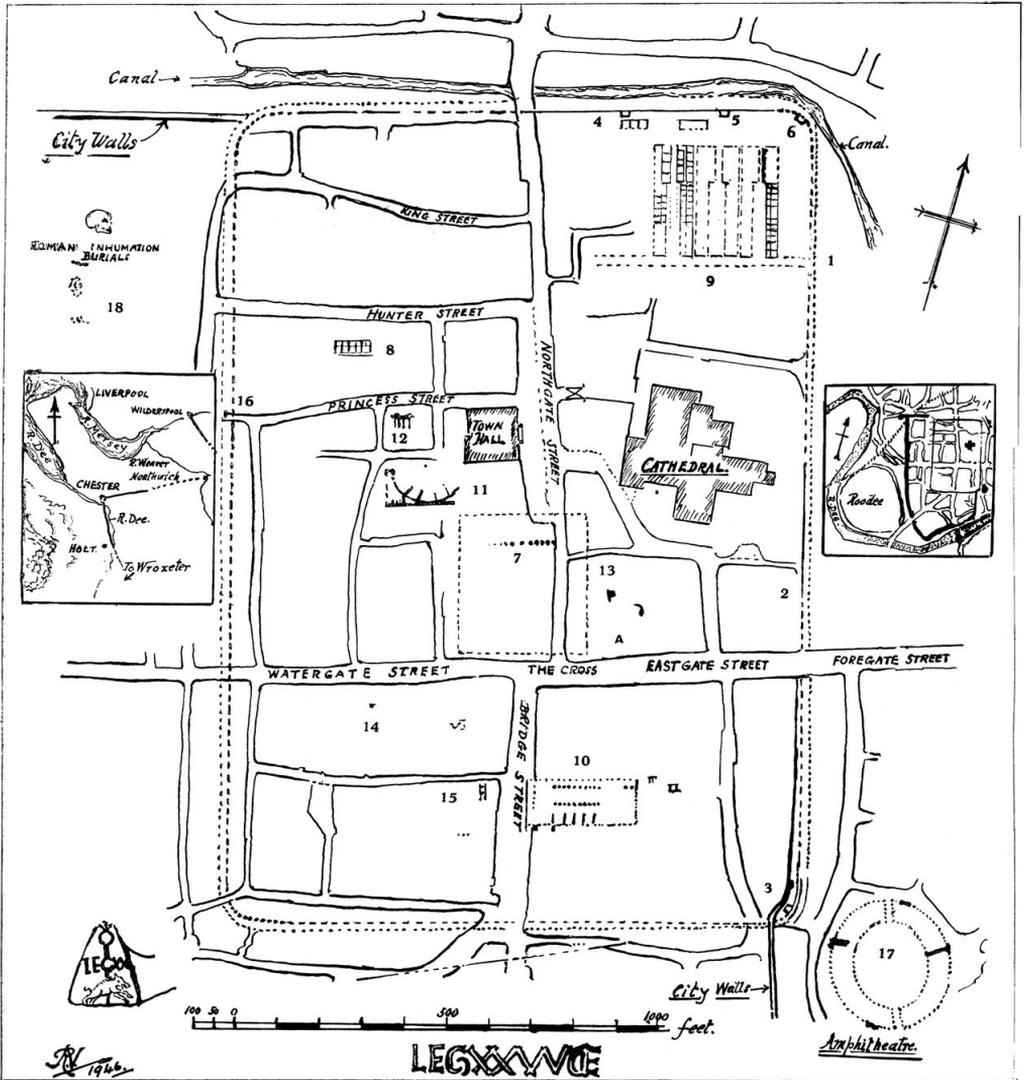
Richmond's agenda was pursued so far as possible through the 1950s, first by Graham Webster and then by Hugh Thompson. Unfortunately, resources were never available for more than small-scale excavation, so although much was learnt about the defences little was done in the Town Hall area, where area excavation was required. By contrast, some 'rescue' opportunities were seized upon, for example to learn about the granaries. The fruits of this phase of research can be seen in the fortress plan in Thompson's *Roman Cheshire* (1965, plan facing 25; here III II.2): the lines of the defences had been firmed up; the *principia* more firmly delineated as a result of Webster and Richmond's Goss Street excavation of 1948/9; the *basilica* of the baths more accurately plotted, and the granaries and a few more barracks added. In addition, controlled extra-mural excavation had started, including the beginning of what was to be a ten-year programme on the northern half of the amphitheatre, and further afield there were a number of seasons on the neighbouring civilian site at Heronbridge. (For a summary of work in these years, see Crosby 1999, 84–7; Webster 1992–3; Thompson 1992–3, 50–3).

The 1960s onwards: city-centre redevelopment and large-scale rescue excavation

This comparatively leisurely advance changed in the 1960s with a number of development schemes: first the Inner Ring Road, which ran immediately alongside the western defences, then the Central Area Development Scheme, which encompassed the area around the Town Hall. Both of these schemes were Council-led. In addition the Grosvenor Shopping Centre was built over the south-eastern quarter of the fortress.

It was Dennis Petch, Curator of the Grosvenor Museum from 1963 to 1974, who had this challenge to face (see Petch 1992–3, 59–60, 63–4), and a preliminary attempt at plotting and interpreting the discoveries made in these years can be seen in his contribution to Jarrett's revision of Nash-Williams' *Roman Frontier in Wales* (Petch 1969, plan facing 36; here III II.3). Major advances can be seen in the area west and north of the *principia*: the First Cohort barracks, courtyard *fabrica*, Elliptical Building and '*praetorium*'; likewise in the south-eastern corner of the fortress the plan of the baths and the barracks to their east was recovered. As was the case elsewhere in the country, the pressures faced during this decade led to the establishment in 1972 of a dedicated field unit, initially constituted as the Excavations Section of the Grosvenor Museum and latterly as Chester Archaeology.

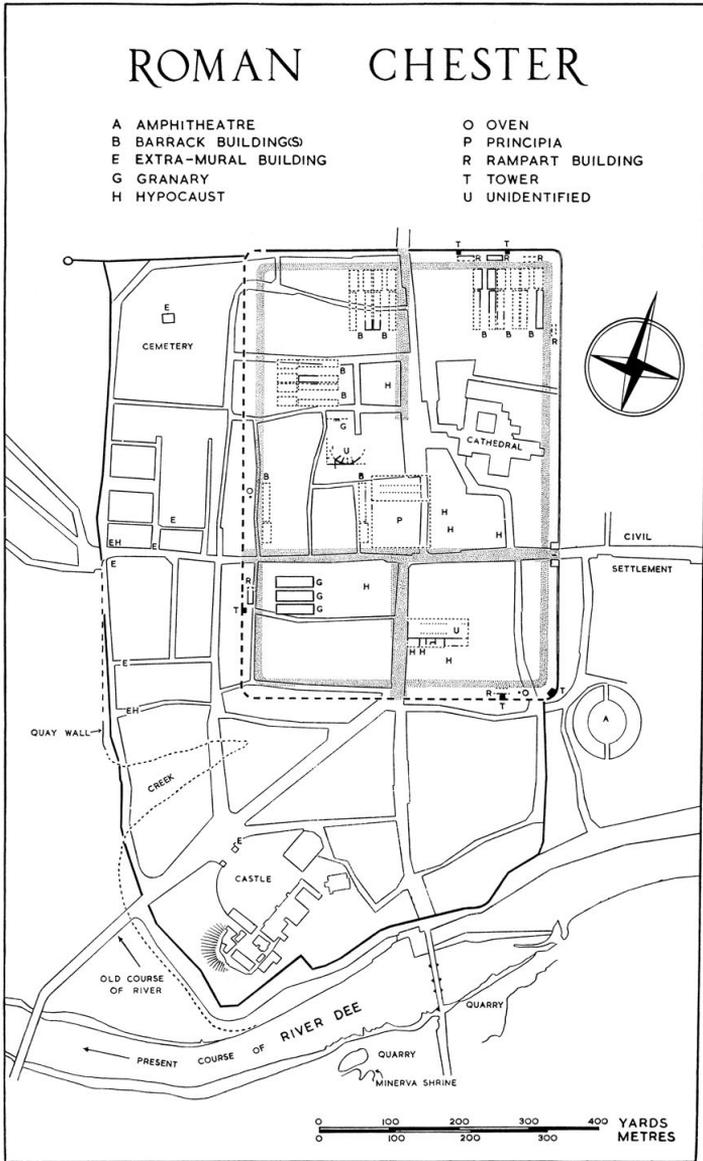
Large-scale excavation continued through the 1970s and early 1980s, although at a rather less hectic pace and far better resourced. The main gains of these years were in detailed knowledge of the barracks in the *retentura* and First Cohort areas and in the buildings



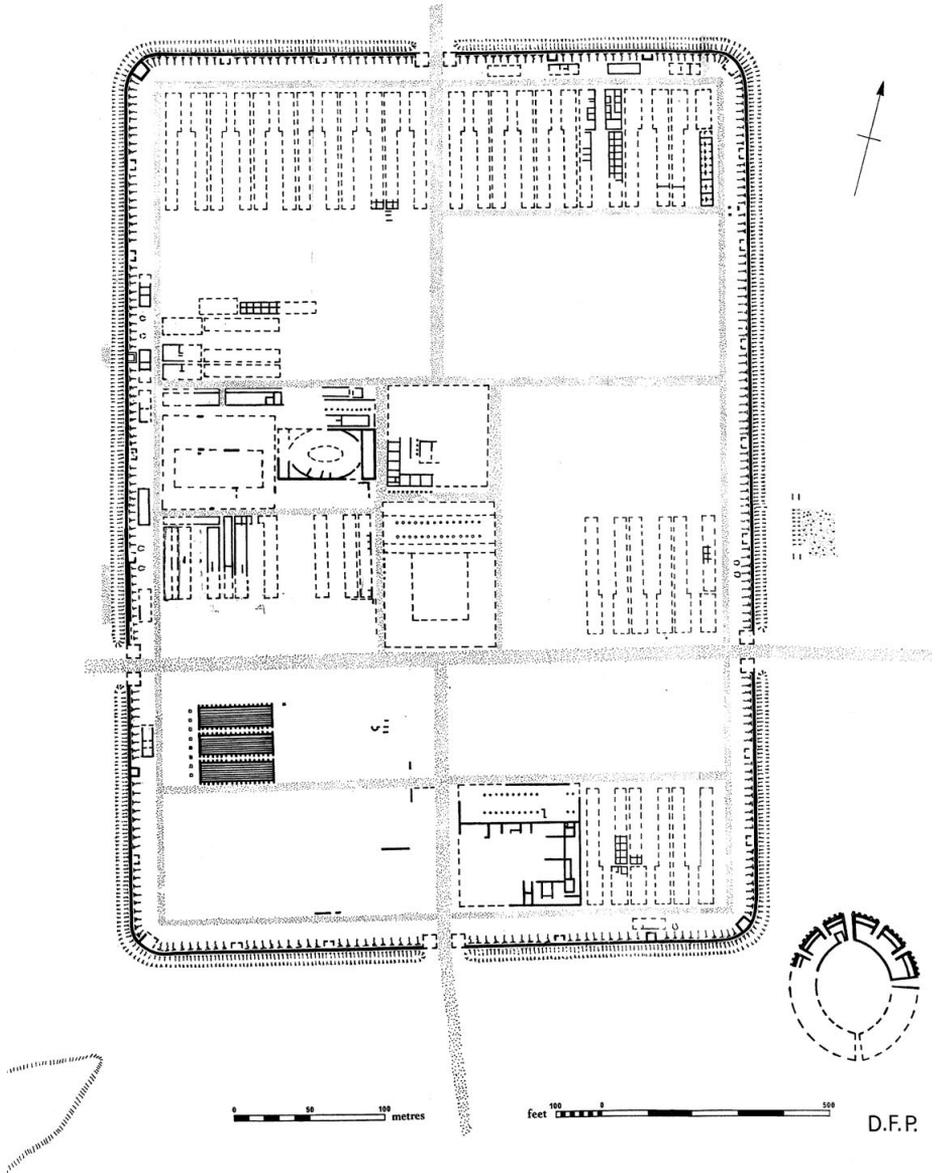
CHESTER (Deva)—Plan of Fortress. Dimensions c. 1,930 × 1,400 feet.
Red:—definite; . . . conjectural.

KEY TO PLAN		KEY TO PLAN	
SITE NO.	PAGE	SITE NO.	PAGE
1. Extra gateway to road in <i>Retentura</i> (Barrack blocks) Deanery Field (1935)**	- - - 2	13. Hypocaust, Northgate Street (1892) C.	- - - 14
2. Section of Fortress Wall (East) (1928)*	- - - 3	A. Leaden Waterpipes, dated A.D. 79. Discovered 1899*	- - - 1
3. S.E. Angle of Fortress Wall and Angle Tower, etc. (1908, 1930)*	- - - 4	14. Column base, Watergate Street (1890) C.	- - - 14
4-6. Defensive Towers and buildings in <i>Intervallum</i> (1923—1935)**	- - - 4	15. Column bases, Bridge Street (1899)*	- - - 14
7. Column Bases <i>Praetorium</i> , Northgate Street (1897) †	- - - 7	16. Section of Defensive Ditch (W.) (1945)* and G.	3
8. Barrack Buildings, Hunter Street (1909, 1914)*	- - - 8	17. Amphitheatre (1929—1934)**	- - - 14
9. Barrack Buildings, Deanery Field (1923—1935)**	- - - 9	18. Burial Ground (Second century interments) (1912—1917)*	- - - 23
10. Colonaded Building (<i>Schola</i>) St. Michael's Row (1863, 1908, 1926—7) †	- - - 11	Those marked * explored by Professor R. Newstead. by Professor R. Newstead. (East and West portions only).	
11. Theatre-like Building (1939)**	- - - 13	" " ** " by Professors R. Newstead and J.P. Droop.	
12. Portion of Granary (1889)**	- - - 13	" " * G. " by Professor R. Newstead	
		" " † " by Mr. H. Beswick.	
		" " C. " Casual.	

III II.1 Roman Chester: plan (after Newstead 1948, pl 1). (Not to scale)



III II.2 Roman Chester: plan (after Thompson 1965, plan facing 25). (Scale 1/10,000).
(Copyright estate of F H Thompson)



III II.3 Roman Chester: plan (after Petch 1969, plan facing 36). (Scale 1/5000).
(Copyright Chester City Council)

which lay to the north and north-west of the *principia*. These advances are shown in the fortress plan by David Mason (Ill II.4). The 1970s and 1980s also saw the first major excavations — with the exception of the amphitheatre — in the civilian settlement outside the fortress. Finally, closer links with the City's Conservation section were manifested in research on the City Walls (Strickland 1992–3, 87).

A number of major changes occurred in the 1990s. First, the study of the archaeology of periods other than Roman, which had been developing in Chester from the 1950s but particularly from the 1970s, gained much greater recognition. Secondly, the preservation ethic clearly expressed in PPG 16 drastically reduced the need for deep excavation in the city centre. Finally, the curator/contractor split led to Chester Archaeology withdrawing from most 'rescue' excavation in the city and district.

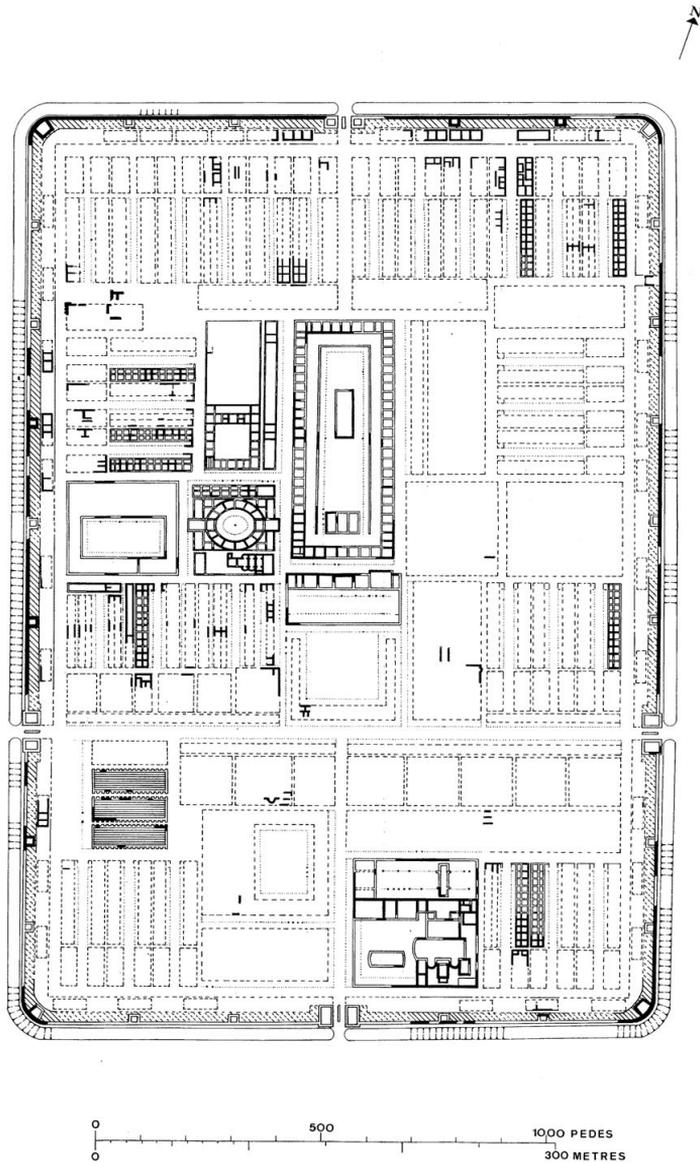
Thus, most fieldwork over the past forty years has been a logical continuation of the original Richmond agenda, seeking to plug basic gaps in the fortress plan and to start to fill the void outside it. A more selective approach, just looking for evidence to answer specific, sophisticated questions, as is now fashionable, would have been irresponsible. As a result we now have a fairly comprehensively excavated fortress and enough data of all sorts to allow us to pose, and at least begin to answer, a very wide range of questions.

Publication

The excavations of the 1950s were small and few enough to be reported promptly in the Society's *Journal*, although not in the detail that one would now wish. This system collapsed under the weight of continuous, large-scale excavation in the 1960s. An English Heritage-funded 'backlog' post in the 1980s (occupied by David Mason) prepared the ground for eventual full publication but was not adequate in itself to secure that objective. Fortunately the City Council has continued to accept the prime responsibility for post-excavation and publication, and a series of reports is now heading towards publication (Morris 1992–3, 98).

Because of the increasingly varied demands on staff time, especially for outreach work, the rate of publication remains frustratingly slow, despite contracting out large pieces of work, and much information is still only available in archive. In addition, it has to be remembered that there have been many post-Roman discoveries which have been equally worthy of seeing the light. We could have produced summary reports of many excavations a decade ago: indeed, some urged us to do so. However, it is likely that the result would have been that detailed publication would effectively have dropped off the agenda for the foreseeable future, and the full value would consequently not have been gained from the fieldwork that was carried out against such odds in the 1960s.

The approach taken to publication has been flexible. All recent reports have been monographs: some have combined the results of a number of related investigations; others have focussed on a single large site. The first part of a two-part report on the defences, focussing on the conservation-led research of the 1980s, has now been published in partnership with Gifford & Partners (LeQuesne *et al* 1999). This will be followed by David Mason's report on the Elliptical Building, scheduled for winter 2000, then by his report on



III II.4 Roman Chester c AD 230: plan (Mason 2000, 141, ill 98). (Scale 1/5000).
(Copyright D. Mason and Chester City Council)

the fortress baths (Mason 2000; *forthcoming*). A first report on the extra-mural area is at the editorial stage.

Review

Turning points

Over the past forty years we have unearthed much that we now know is fairly normal about Roman fortresses. What have we learned that is important or distinctive?

Chronological complexity and the ‘military hiatus’

A multiplicity of timber phases was discovered during the excavation of a centurion’s quarters at Northgate Brewery in 1974/5. The same site also produced evidence for a hiatus in occupation roughly corresponding to the building of the Hadrianic and Antonine walls and the Antonine occupation of Scotland, in all of which Legion XX VV was heavily involved (Ward & Strickland 1978, 19, 27). These discoveries introduced a degree of structural complexity and fluidity into the picture which, in retrospect, should always have been expected and which has been found on subsequent excavations and during re-examination of the archives of earlier ones.

The fortress plan

It is now accepted that the *praetorium* was not in its ‘usual’ place behind the *principia*. The building in that position was first uncovered by Dennis Petch in 1967–9. In his interim report (Petch 1968) he argued that the building he had excavated was the *praetorium*, but without much conviction. When more of what must be the same building came to light in 1979–82, the issue was settled (Strickland 1982, 16–22).

The fortress defences

Conservation work on the northern and eastern sectors of the City Walls from 1978 onwards gave opportunities to examine the stone defences. Until that time most archaeological research was directed at the southern and western defences, and thus at the rampart, given that most of the stonework there had been robbed centuries ago. LeQuesne’s recent publication makes it clear that the stone ‘wall’ was, in fact, merely a facing supported by the rampart behind. The northern and western stone walls are thought to have been built at about the end of the first century, while a different foundation technique in the eastern and southern walls, backed up by a little artefactual dating, suggests third-century construction for those sectors. The availability of easily cut sandstone made it possible to build the wall in a monumental style from large blocks — an effect that elsewhere could often only be reproduced by covering a structure of small blockwork in stucco and painting on the ‘joints’.

The Roman-Saxon interface

Although we had been routinely recognising late Saxon ‘Chester ware’ pottery in excavations since the early 1970s, understanding the accompanying stratigraphy was a problem until 1980. Then, in the Hunter’s Walk excavation, we realised that this stratigraphy was represented by the post holes, other cut features and patchy surfaces immediately over the Roman; ie there was no intervening stratigraphy and no depth of late Saxon stratigraphy was to be expected. This discovery led to a general redating of features

assumed to be immediately post-Roman and enabled us to build up the picture of late Saxon Chester we have today (Ward *et al* 1994).

Parallel studies

Expanding knowledge of the fortress, coupled with research elsewhere, triggered a number of other debates:

The beginning and end of Roman occupation

The fairly complete stratigraphic sequence inside the defences at Abbey Green prompted thoughts about the beginning and end of the fortress: the former in the light of ‘Steven’s Urn’ (Stevens 1942); the latter given the presence of obviously ancient roads and other features immediately over the Roman remains. Initial thoughts on these subjects were put forward in *New Evidence for Roman Chester* (McPeake 1978a; 1978b). These ideas have now been largely superseded but are still repeated. The strategic arguments relating to the foundation date for the Chester fortress in the context of the conquest of North Wales were reviewed by Carrington (1985a) and have stood the test of time better.

Metrology

Study of the metrology of the fortress, ie the units of measurement used in its surveying, began with trying to extrapolate the fragmentary remains found on the Northgate Brewery site and led to extensive comparisons with the overall plans of other fortresses throughout the empire (Ward & Strickland 1978, 27–8; Carrington 1985b; 1986). This is a subject where it is difficult to get clear-cut results at the best of times, and especially so without the use of large-scale plans.

The same comparison of fortress plans made it clear that there may have been an additional *scamnum* (building strip) in the *praetentura* between the tribunes’ houses and the baths which, on the analogy of Neuss, might have been occupied by auxiliaries (Carrington 1985b, 38).

Artefactual studies

The outline of the pattern of pottery supply to the fortress was characterised (Carrington 1977, 147–8, 158–9; Ward & Carrington 1981).

The *canabae* and *prata legionis*

The relationship between the fortress and its immediate hinterland has received little study. One exception is David Mason’s study of the legionary *prata* — the territory assigned to the legion so that it could feed itself — as a spin-off from his doctoral thesis (Mason 1986).

Current and future research

The strengthening of the ‘preservation ethic’ has led to a decline in large-scale excavation in the city centre. Conversely the potential for reassessment of old discoveries has been appreciated (Morris 1992–3, 102), sometimes in association with improved interpretation of sites or with fresh, small-scale fieldwork. Even so, large-scale excavation still has a contribution to make. Below are some examples of major outstanding questions which could be tackled using various of these techniques. Some of these questions are traditional,

‘factual’ ones; others concern the interpretation of data to shed light on behavioural issues (see James & Millett eds 2001, *passim*).

The fortress

The beginning and end of Roman occupation

As indicated above, the start of military occupation at Chester is still uncertain. In addition to the arguments about Chester in the context of North Wales, new ideas have emerged concerning early Roman contacts overland with the western Brigantes in the 50 and 60s of the first century AD (see especially Rogers 1996). Theories about operations in the two theatres — North Wales and Lancashire — need to be reconciled. In both cases a base at Chester for naval operations in support of land campaigns remains possible (eg Shotter 1993, 4; 1994, 26; 2000, 36–8). In addition, a possible vexillation fortress founded in the early 70s was suggested by Hartley (1981, 245). Hints of two phases of ‘pre-fortress’ occupation have been now been detected by David Mason during his re-examination of the archive of the Elliptical Building and other structures in the central area (Mason 2000, 8–12). The end of occupation at Chester is also unclear. Coins virtually cease by 360–370. But was fourth-century occupation military or, as some have suggested, civilian? We also need to be on the look out for the effects of the reduction in the strength of the legions (see Manning and Hoffmann, *this volume*). At both ends of the chronological spectrum useful progress could probably be made by the detailed re-study of existing material, especially coins, pottery and small finds, the re-examination of stratigraphic records and a consideration of Chester in its regional context.

The fortress plan

Which buildings occupied the blank spaces on the fortress plan? It is a reasonable conjecture that the *praetorium* lay in the *insula* east of the *principia* (Carrington 1985b, 44; Matthews *et al* 1995, 5–6). Where, then, was the hospital — behind the *praetorium* (under the Cathedral), as at Inchtuthil, or on the *via praetoria* opposite the baths (Carrington 1986, 10–16)? Part of the latter site has already been excavated and it is possible that more will ultimately become available as a result of redevelopment. Was there indeed an additional narrow *scamnum* in the *praetentura*; if so, was it occupied by auxiliary barracks, as has been conjectured? Finally, which buildings occupied the *insula* on the east side of the present Town Hall Square? These are examples of important questions to which the answer is most likely to come from large-scale excavation.

Chronology of the fortress defences

Is the chronology of the stone defences put forward by LeQuesne correct? Mason (2000, 87) has argued interestingly that the foundation technique found in the eastern and southern defences is typical of Flavian work in Chester and that the rebuilding of this sector in stone therefore precedes that of the northern and western defences. This is not simply a chronological question but affects how one sees the intended status of the fortress (see *below*, ‘Strategic function’).

Architectural decoration

The ‘Roman Gardens’ were laid out just after the Second World War. Over the years many architectural fragments from the fortress have been deposited there, but documentation of

their origins is often lacking. In advance of redisplay and improved access by the City Council in 2000, the Chester Archaeological Society systematically recorded all the stones. Subsequent steps would be to work out which buildings they came from and their dates and analyse their stylistic affinities.

The canabae

Our data about the civilian settlement immediately outside the fortress has increased considerably as a result of fresh excavation since it was last summarised by Mason (1987; but *see* now this volume). One detailed report, dealing with discoveries to the west of the fortress, is at the editorial stage as a Chester Archaeology monograph, and there is material for another two volumes. However, at the moment these are merely descriptive accounts: what is needed to supplement them is a well founded synthesis dealing with wider questions of overall plan, chronology and function.

Watergate Street baths

Even on the level of individual buildings there are still major gaps to be filled. Remains of the Watergate Street baths, seen on a number occasions and tentatively suggested to be part of a legate's palace, could profit from a detailed report (Mason 1987, 146–9; 2000, 95 and 97, note 19).

The amphitheatre

The excavation of half of the amphitheatre in the 1960s was a major achievement. However, a rapid survey of the exposed structure, together with the excavation records and finds archive, has suggested that major re-interpretation of the building, its chronology and function may be necessary. For example: were the 'timber' and 'stone' phases at least partly contemporary? Is the masonry associated with the 'box' over the east entrance Roman at all? Does the recognition of occasional human remains affect the 'sanitised' view that the main function of the amphitheatre was for military training and display? On a more theoretical level, what was the role of the amphitheatre in social relations in Roman Chester as a whole? Chester Archaeology have drawn up a detailed research design covering these and other questions and in summer 2000 carried out small-scale excavations with the support of English Heritage which confirmed that even the excavated part of the site still had research potential.

The port and trade

The harbour installations are poorly known and are an example of a topic where archive re-assessment, in this case of nineteenth-century discoveries in the vicinity of the so-called 'Roman quay wall', could be profitably combined with small-scale excavation to explore the structure (Mason, *this volume*).

The contents and nature of the 'trade' that must have gone on through Chester's port in Roman times has received little attention. We may safely infer that, after coming up the estuary, lead ingots from Halkyn were transhipped at Chester (where one appears to have fallen overboard) for forwarding by road (Carrington 1984/5, 103). Some types of pottery vessels (or, more accurately, their contents) were almost certainly imported by sea, for example amphorae. On the other hand, some ubiquitous wares, eg Black-burnished I from

Dorset, could have arrived by sea or land, and it may not be possible to decide which. With others, such as Severn Valley ware, both modes of transport may have been employed (Carrington 1977, 153–5). Conversely, there will have been exports to coastal or estuarine military sites in North Wales and north-west England (for example the Cheshire sandstone reported by Wheeler (1923, 102–3) from Caernarfon (Segontium). Further afield Roman objects have been reported from the promontory site at Drumanagh, north of Dublin (*Sunday Times* 21 January 1996), and it would be surprising if Chester were not involved in any trade between Britain and Ireland. It would be fascinating to see these finds published in detail to allow a search for parallels with Chester and Cheshire material. Of course, we know even less about the ‘invisible’ exports and imports that must have passed through the port. Working from both earlier and later periods, it would be reasonable to expect imports of cattle and slaves and the export of salt (Griffiths in Ward *et al* 1994, 124). The problem would be finding archaeological correlates to confirm or deny these ideas. Although the port of Deva would certainly have been the most important on the Dee, we must remember that in the pre-Roman Iron Age Meols seems to have had a role in international trade (Matthews 1996, 12–14) and continued to function through the Roman period: what was the relationship between the two sites? Finally we must discard fixed notions of modern mercantile trade in favour of a variety of exchange mechanisms (Matthews 1996, 18–19).

Artefactual and environmental studies

Pottery

The scope for major advances in artefactual and environmental studies is vast and their implications possibly far-reaching, especially in understanding personal and group identities and processes of acculturation (eg Allason-Jones 2001; Hill 2001), as well as manufacture and trade.

To take just a few examples. In broad terms the earliest Roman pottery from Chester is typically Flavian in its forms and fabrics. However, one gets the impressions of numerous detailed variations in these characteristics, suggesting a number of small-scale suppliers with diverse backgrounds rather than the fairly uniform ‘in-house’ production one might expect of a long-established legion stationed in a ceramically backward area. Is this a result of the first garrison having been Legion II *Adiutrix*, newly raised from the Ravenna fleet and lacking any potters amongst its tradesmen? Or is the answer more radical? Shotter (1998–9, 46–8) has pointed to the relatively low value of coin losses at Chester at this time (in terms of *as*-value per coin). Is the answer that a significant part of the Chester garrison was actually made up of auxiliaries during these years? A first stage in studying this question would be to characterise the forms and fabrics in question in detail on an inter-site basis to confirm the apparent variety and then to consider parallels both for the forms and the overall phenomenon.

Holt

This leads on to the subject of Holt. Apart from the puzzle of its siting (a river-crossing on an early invasion route into North Wales?), the accepted dating for its main phase of operation — late 80s to 130s in broad terms — leaves a number of questions unanswered. What was the source of the ceramic materials for the earliest permanent fortress buildings,

for example the baths? Was there a later phase of pottery production, responsible for the African forms recognised by Mrs Swan? And what of the sources of building materials found at Chester but not so far at Holt, such as the ‘Jupiter Ammon’ antefixes, tiles stamped with consular dates, and *tubuli*? Again, a research design covering these questions has been prepared by Chester Archaeology (Jones & Carrington 1997), and a lot could be achieved by archive study.

Environmental remains

Data on animal bone from the Roman fortress has been accumulating since the late 1970s, but there are as yet few large groups (those from the Abbey Green 1975–8 and Hunter Street School 1979–81 excavations are noteworthy) and none of these have so far been published. We know that remains of the usual domesticated animals (cattle, pig, sheep) are present, but element representation needs further study to determine where animals were butchered. We also know little about kill-off patterns and thus about management for meat, hides, wool, milk and traction. Can we infer distinctive social strata or practices (eg feasting) or the preferences of the different elements of an ethnically diverse community from food debris? Exotica might also tell us about the former distribution of species or importation for a variety of reasons.

The position with other environmental evidence is even worse: as a naturally dry site perched on a sandstone ridge the Chester fortress generally appears to preserve such material poorly, although pollen samples from the northern turf rampart have given an indication of the vegetation cover at the time of the foundation of the fortress (Greig in LeQuesne *et al* 1999, 75–7) and quantities of charred grain were found during the 1989 Priory Place excavation in the eastern *canabae*. In addition, there are waterlogged conditions in parts of the eastern *canabae*. These have high potential for the preservation of plant macrofossils, including species that are unlikely to survive through charring, giving further indications of diet and local vegetation.

Finally, we must remember that Roman Chester as a whole was a quasi-urban ‘consumer’ site, and that to get a picture of the ‘producer’ side we must look further afield at smaller settlements in the area, for example for information on crops, animal husbandry and woodland management. Although this is especially true for environmental information, it is true for artefactual as well.

The prata legionis, Heronbridge and beyond

The first two of these subjects have been exhaustively reviewed by David Mason (1986; 1988b). He has suggested that the *prata* (the land attributed to the legion to meet its agricultural needs, possibly via tenant farmers) were confined to the east of the Dee and extended from Tarvin to encompass some or all of the Wirral. This is a subject for which there is no direct evidence (eg boundary inscriptions) and for which disputable indirect archaeological correlates have to be sought. On the west bank of the Dee, 2 km from the fortress and possibly just outside the *prata*, lay the roadside settlement of Heronbridge. This consisted of typical Roman commercial strip buildings and flourished from the late first to the late third centuries. Metalworking seems to have been a prominent activity. Mason has identified a pattern of ‘civilian settlements’ (*Zivil Dörfer*) near many legionary

fortresses yet distinct from the *canabae* immediately outside the latter and has suggested that they owed their existence to the proximity of a fortress but a different administrative regime from the *canabae* (1988a). The Romanised style of the settlement at Heronbridge suggests that this difference was not a crude distinction between Roman and ‘native’ or citizen and non-citizen. One naturally nowadays thinks in terms of the possibility of less regulated trade. The site has been investigated in a piecemeal fashion since 1929, and the planned excavations by the Society, combined with archive study, would put our knowledge of it on a much firmer footing.

Looking further afield, we need to know far more about all aspects of local rural settlements. Valuable work has been done by Collens (1994), Philpott (2000) and Nevell and others (Nevell ed 1998). However, fresh fieldwork can still spring surprises, as in the discovery of a new site near Tarporley, in advance of the laying of a gas pipeline. In contrast to most other local rural sites, this seems to have been relatively rich in artefacts.

Overview: strategic intention and cultural reality

Was the Chester fortress intended to have a particular function in the province, different in kind from those to be served by Caerleon and York, or were all three fortresses intended to play more or less identical roles in their respective geographical areas? We have now passed the stage of noting the obvious standardisation of Roman military sites and have begun to analyse the detailed differences. For example, in the case of auxiliary forts — partly because we are dealing with a relatively large number of small, extensively excavated sites — we have begun to classify the variations in plan and to infer the type of units that occupied them and can therefore speculate about their precise military role. However, because of their smaller number and greater size — and the consequent difficulty of excavating large parts of their interiors — little comparable progress has been made with the permanent legionary fortresses: a fortress is still just a fortress. David Mason has made a start by suggesting that the Flavian fortress was intended as a quasi-provincial capital (Mason 2000, 91–5; *this volume*), but this idea has yet to be subjected to critical appraisal. Moreover, this leaves the role of the Severan fortress still to be considered, for instance in the light of the function of the large courtyard building behind the *principia* and other buildings in the *latera praetorii*.

Roman military bases, as well as cities and villas, must have served as powerful cultural statements by the occupying power. The fortress at Chester began as a self-aware community of Roman — and at least superficially Romanised — citizens and their dependents among a population on the north-western limits of the empire with very different ways (James 2001). As time went by, the difference between ‘Roman’ and ‘native’ would have become blurred with local recruitment and veteran settlement. In addition, as one of the places where, at least until the mid-third century, a large proportion of imperial taxation was disbursed, it had a key role in the monetary cycle that sustained and unified the society of the ‘High Empire’, while the decline of that cycle was at the heart of subsequent changes (Hopkins 1980). If we look beneath the surface, we will see that the culture of the legionaries would always have been far from uniform, with periodic drafts from different parts of the empire. Perhaps in contrast to this *mischkultur* we can picture a more uniform Mediterranean ‘high culture’ among the legate and tribunes. Thus Chester must have

exemplified the cultural trajectory of the empire in miniature. If we can grasp the essence of the archaeological topics listed above, then perhaps we can begin to appreciate the importance of the place.

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