II 'AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN': EXCAVATIONS ADJACENT TO THE CITY WALLS IN ST JOHN STREET 1988/9

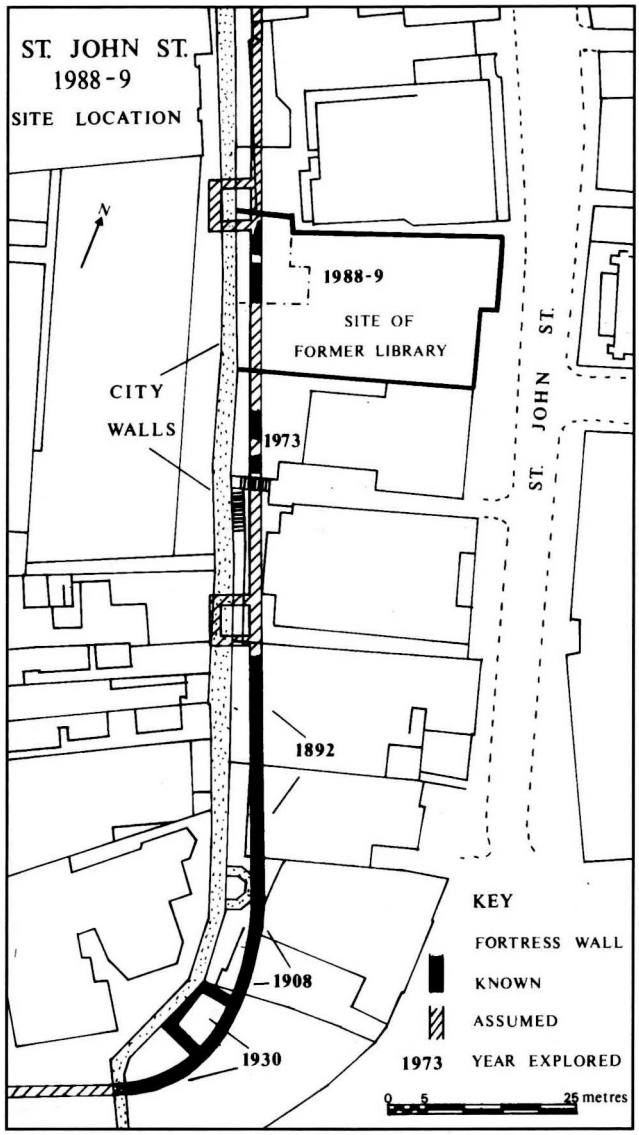
by D J P Mason BA, PhD, FSA, MIFA

Introduction

As a result of the excavations carried out at the south-east angle of the Roman fortress in the early years of this century, it became clear that the alignments of the fortress wall and medieval City Walls running northward to the East Gate did not coincide (Newstead 1909). Unlike the situation prevailing north of the East Gate and also along long stretches of the North Wall, where the medieval wall either sits directly on top the fortress wall or very nearly so, south of the East Gate the medieval wall is set back behind the line of its Roman predecessor by a distance of three to four metres (Ill II.1). That this was in some way connected with the fact that sections of the Roman wall surviving above ground level are entirely absent from this section of the City Walls, seemed a strong probability.[1] However, owing to the densely packed arrangement of modern buildings and associated facilities immediately in front of this sector of the City Walls, opportunities to investigate the process which led to this divergence of the Roman and medieval defensive lines have been and will continue to be extremely rare. Fortunately, such an opportunity arose in 1988 with the demolition of the former public library buildings to make way for the erection of a new branch of the Trustee Savings Bank. An excavation of an area extending out from the foot of the walls, funded largely by the TSB, was undertaken during late 1988 and early 1989. As well as answering specific research questions, this excavation had the very practical objective of establishing the exact line of the Roman wall so that the rear wall of the building could be positioned to avoid damaging it. This proved to be an extremely rewarding exercise in terms of evidence recovered, producing much new information about the history and development of the eastern defences of the city both in their Roman and later guises.

Summary of the excavated remains

Although it is not the purpose of the present article to give a detailed account of the defences of the legionary fortress,[2] an outline of their development is crucial to a full understanding of later events in this area. The turf rampart of the original Flavian defences

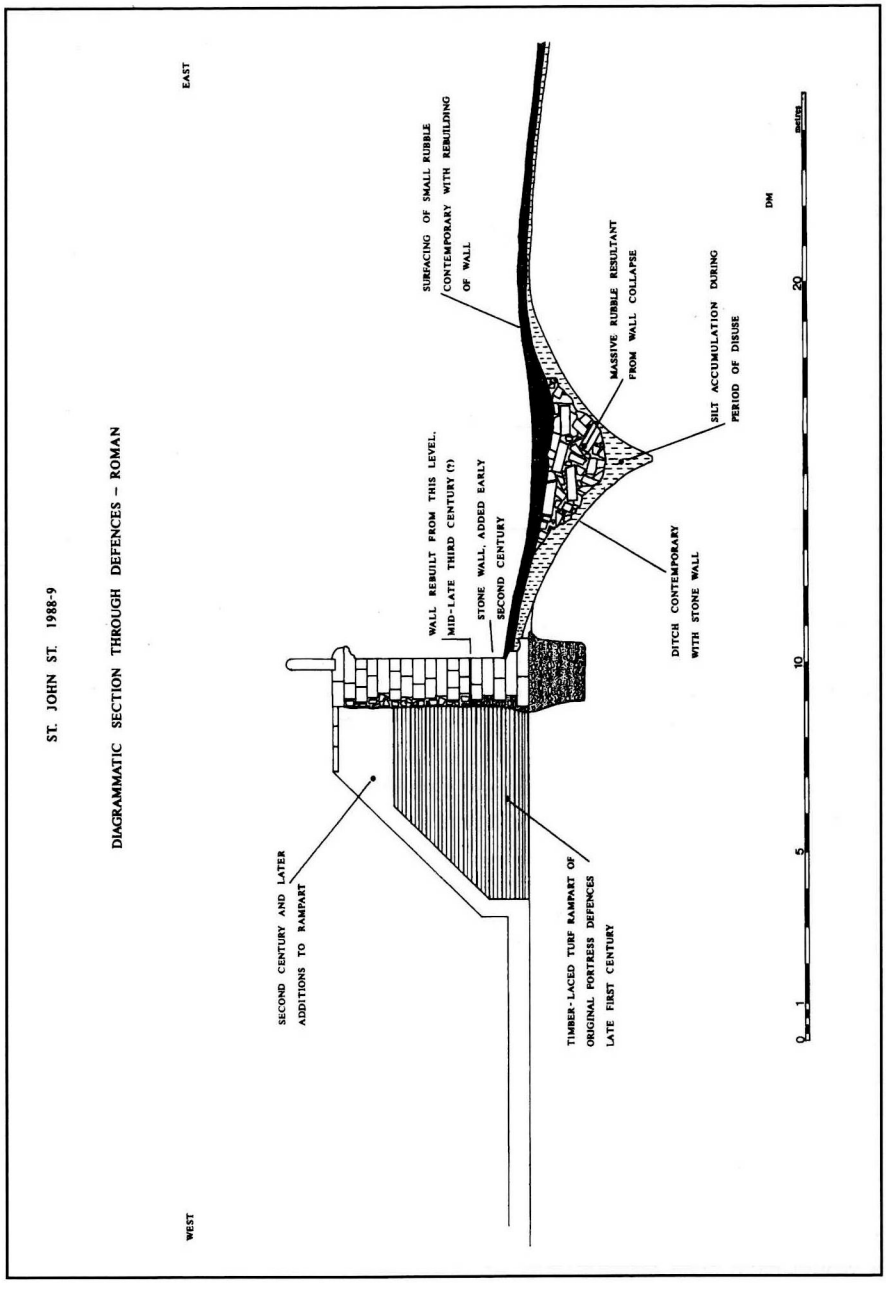


II.1 St John Street 1988/9 excavation: location map (Scale 1/1000)

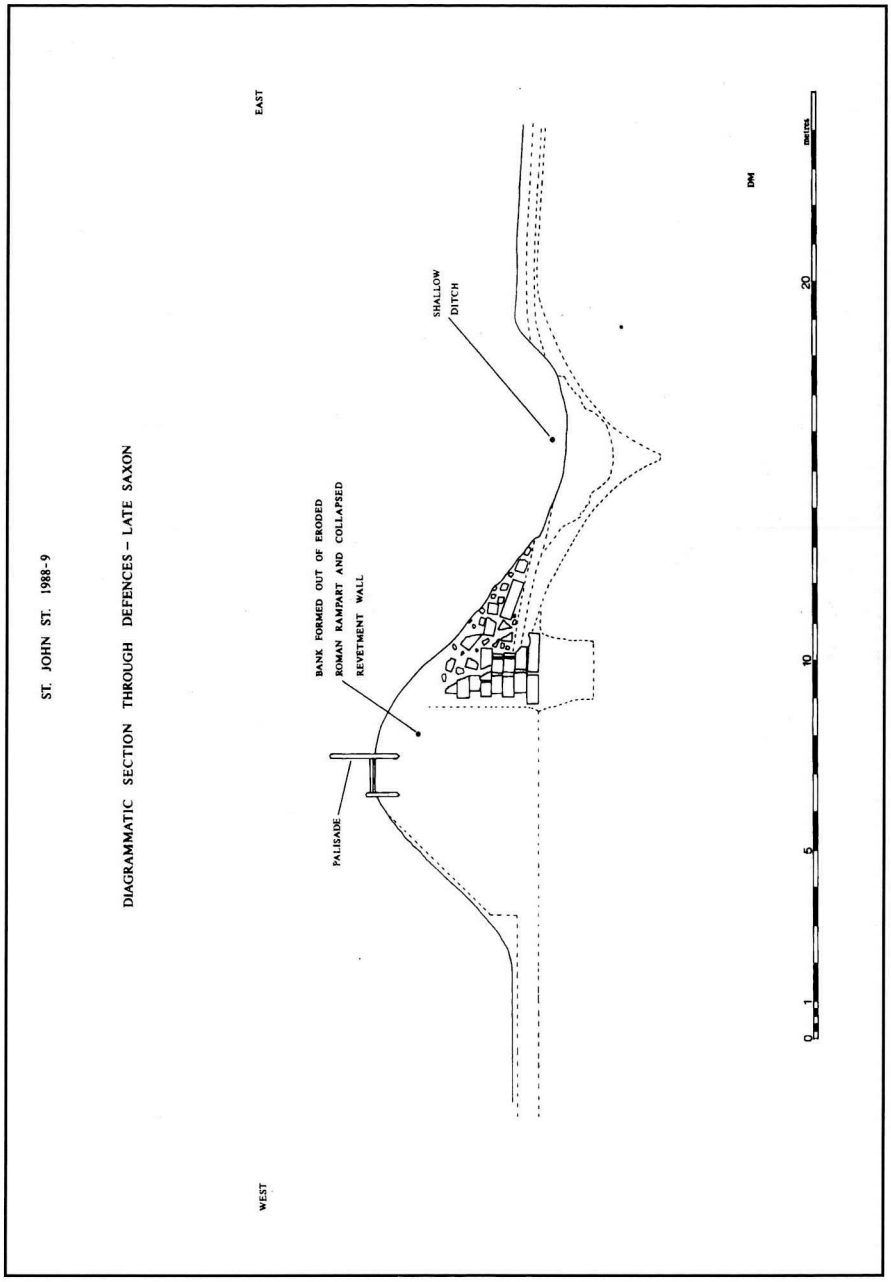
had, in accordance with the sequence normally encountered, been supplemented by the construction of a revetment wall built of massive facing blocks of local sandstone with a rubble backing. Judging from the evidence obtained from this particular site, this event seems most likely to have occurred at some time during the opening decades of the second century. Subsequently, maintenance of the ditch in front of the wall was allowed to lapse with the result that the ditch became progressively choked with silt and organic matter until the point was reached where this fill came up almost to ground level. This was not the only element of the defences to suffer from neglect, for the process of ditch silting was found to have been brought to an abrupt end by the outward collapse of the fortress wall itself. This was represented in the archaeological record by a jumbled mass of intact and fragmented facing blocks which not only sealed the ditch fill but also, because of its composition, had subsided into it (Il II.2).

Whether any significant interval passed between this catastrophic event and the refurbishment of the defences which followed is impossible to determine from the available evidence. For the present, it can only be said that both events occurred within the period AD 250–350. Unlike the rebuilt section of the fortress wall encountered north of the west gate in the 1960s (Thompson 1969, 6, 10, fig 3), which had been almost doubled in thickness, the St John Street stretch had been reconstructed keeping to the original thickness of *c* 1.50 m. In both cases, however, the rebuilding incorporated reused elements of funerary monuments and/or architectural stonework.[3] The refurbished defences at St John Street either did not include a ditch at all or provided one at a distance much further in advance of the wall than the second-century example, because most of the rubble from the wall collapse was left where it had subsided into the soft ditch fill and was sealed with a layer consisting of sandstone brash and puddled clay. This formed an area of hard standing in front of the wall extending right up to the face of the latter and covering the previously exposed chamfered plinth.

The rebuilt fortress wall continued to stand without further remedial work down to the end of the Roman period and beyond. Although it proved impossible to establish exactly how late it had survived intact, it was abundantly clear that its ultimate demise was a repeat of earlier events, for the wall had developed an outward tilt which gradually increased until the point was reached where the integrity of the structure failed and the wall crashed to the ground, leaving less than 1.50 m still upstanding. This process and its dramatic culmination was represented in the excavated area by a very substantial accumulation of sandy soil at the foot of and sloping back towards the wall stub. This contained intact examples of wall facing blocks, a number of the reused items of stonework from elsewhere which had been employed in the earlier reconstruction, as well as numerous jagged pieces of sandstone which had split off the faces of the blocks in the lower part of the wall owing to the tremendous pressure exerted upon them by the masonry above as the wall had gradually tilted forwards (Ills II.3 and 4). The collapse of the wall would have been accompanied or followed soon afterwards by the slumping forwards of the front of the rampart which it had revetted, and within a short period of time, with the help of the elements, the tumbled masonry, collapsed rampart and *in situ* rampart would in combination have come to form a wide bank of rounded cross-section in which the precise line of the fortress wall would no longer have been easily detectable.



II.2 St John Street 1988/9: section through the Roman defences (Scale 1/200)



II.3 St John Street 1988/9: section through the late Saxon defences (Scale 1/200)

II.4 St John Street 1988/9: fracturing of the Roman wall face caused by forward collapse

As a similar post-Roman sequence was identified during a rescue excavation in 1973 behind the Royal Insurance building immediately to the south, it is clear that the stretch of fortress wall involved in this collapse was at least 30 m in length.

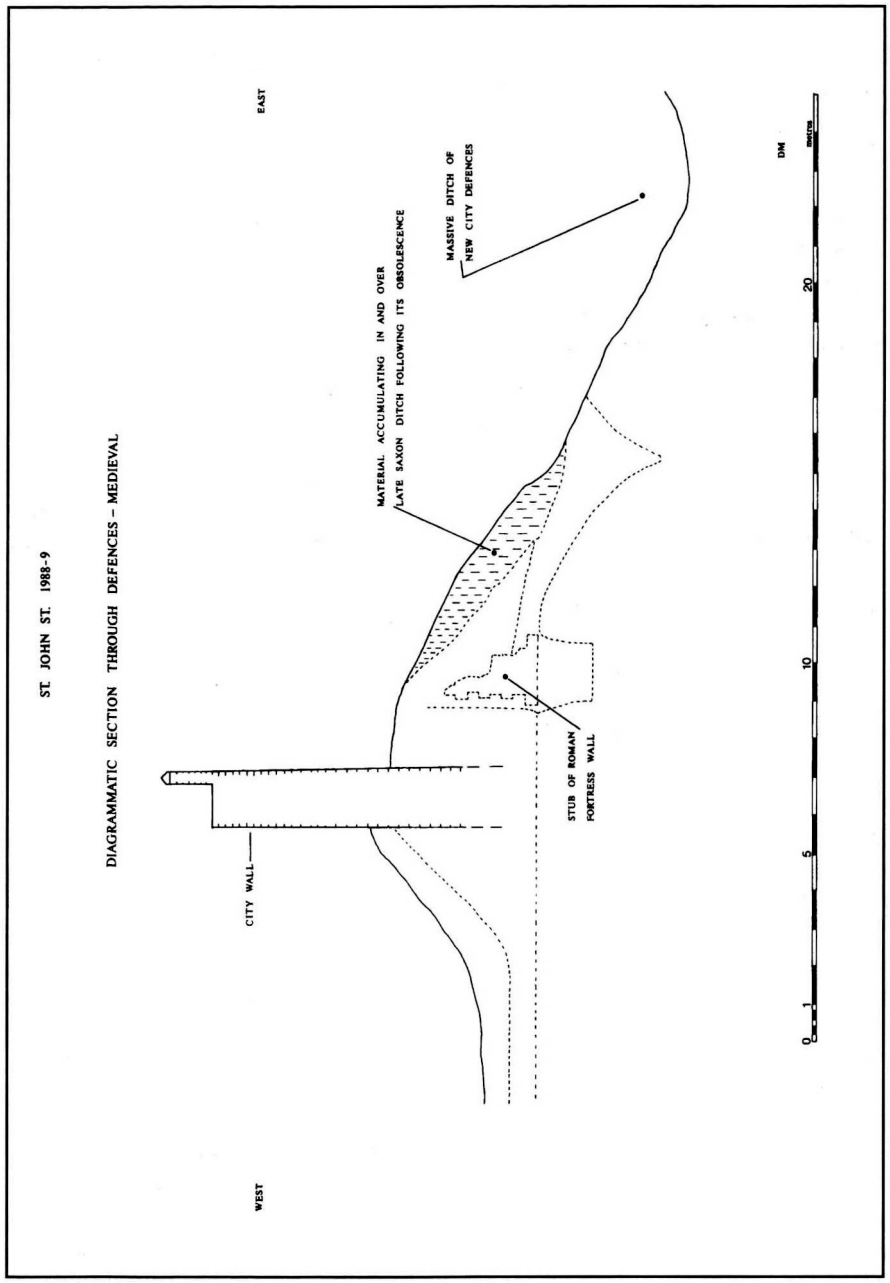
The next detectable event on the site was the cutting of a new defensive ditch slightly in advance of the Roman wall line which entailed the removal of the majority of the tumbled masonry. The dimensions of this feature could not be determined precisely because it had been all but totally removed by later features, but from what remained it would seem to have been approximately 12 m wide and about 3 m deep. The ditch was clearly part of a programme of works designed to re-establish the effectiveness of this sector of the ancient defences. The date at which it was cut is obviously a very important question but one which it is thought best to reserve for discussion below. Eventually, the ditch was allowed to silt up almost to ground level, a phase of inactivity which was brought to an end by the excavation of a hollow into the bank remaining against the face of the buried Roman wall, in order to accommodate the construction of a kiln used for lime-burning. In view of its position and function it is almost certain that its provision was connected with the building of the City Walls, an undertaking which would have required large quantities of lime for the production of the vast amounts of mortar employed in its construction. What little ceramic evidence there was in the demolition fill of the kiln is compatible with the conventional view that the City Walls were erected at some time in the twelfth century. (Dodgson 1968, 48–52). Upon becoming obsolete, the kiln was

demolished and its outer (eastern) half was then removed by the cutting of a new ditch, larger than its predecessor, which completed the improvements to the defences (Ill II.5). This was about 4–5 m deep and at least 14 m wide. In its turn, this too ceased to function as originally intended and instead was used as a giant repository for all types of rubbish. Preliminary assessment of the considerable quantity of artefacts recovered from its filling suggest that it stopped being maintained as an effective defensive feature in the latter part of the fourteenth century.

Subsequently this land was incorporated into the plots belonging to the properties fronting on to St John Street, and by the eighteenth century it had been landscaped to form terraced gardens. Finally, in the 1880s, it was covered over by an extension of the public library buildings; it was at this time that the deposits sealing the stub of the Roman fortress wall together with any surviving element of the rampart above and behind it were removed by site clearance operations.

Dating

It now remains to discuss the possible date of the first post-Roman ditch and the refurbishment of the defences which it implies. On the one hand, the ditch had become almost fully choked with silt and wind-blown material by the time that work began on the construction of the City Walls *c* 1150, while, on the other, it is clear that it did not come into being until a sufficient period of time had elapsed since rebuilding in the early fourth century for the fortress wall to gradually tilt forwards and collapse again. Prior to its initial collapse, the fortress wall had stood for something like 150–200 years, and one might assume the passage of a similar amount of time, or perhaps even slightly longer given that the ditch in front of it had been filled in and the ground compacted, before its second and final structural failure. Thus, judged solely on the physical evidence of the site, the cutting of the ditch seems to have occurred within the very broad period *c* AD 650–1100. Unfortunately, there was no artefactual evidence to allow this date to be refined further. Most of the ditch filling, together with its outer edge, had been removed by its medieval successor, and what remained proved totally devoid of datable material apart from residual sherds of Roman pottery washed out of the remains of the legionary rampart lying to the east. Superficially at least, this would imply that the silting process was more or less complete before the period when ceramic vessels came back into widespread use, a process which in western Mercia began *c* AD 930 (Rutter 1985, 53–4). However, given the minute proportion of the fill which remained for examination it would be unwise to place too much emphasis on the absence of contemporary objects. Acknowledging the dangers inherent in attempting to match archaeological phenomena with known historical events, there are a number of well known contexts to which this refurbishment of the defences could be attributed: the overwintering of a Danish army in the city in 893/4 (A S Chron *sub anno*); the refounding of Chester in 907 by Aethelflaed, daughter of Alfred the Great and wife of Ealdorman Aethelred of Mercia (A S Chron *sub anno*); the occasion of Edgar's visit in 973;[4] or during the immediate aftermath of the Norman Conquest, when the new overlords may have felt the need to improve the protection of the urban centres of their newly acquired domains. Equally, of course, there would have been numerous other occasions within the period 650–1100, unrecorded by history, which could have



II.5 St John Street 1988/9: section through the medieval defences (Scale 1/200)

prompted this refortification. However, if one were forced to make a choice based on a combination of intuition and balance of probability, then the writer would select as the most likely scenario the events of the opening decade of the tenth century, when the city was first besieged by a force of Norse-Irish settlers dissatisfied with the lands they had been granted in the vicinity and then refounded as a fortified town or *burh* by Aethelflaed (*See* Wainwright 1948).

The renewal of the defences revealed at the St John Street site would undoubtedly have entailed more than simply the cutting of a new ditch. Degraded and abraded as they were, the Roman defences would still have constituted a formidable physical obstacle to anyone approaching from the east and, although there is now no way of testing the point owing to the fact that the construction of the City Walls and later landscaping have destroyed the relevant area, it is very likely that some sort of fortification, most probably of timber,[5] would have been erected upon it to accompany the new ditch. On this point, one is mindful of the series of features found cut into the top of the fortress rampart north of the west gate in the 1960s by Mr F H Thompson which he interpreted as the emplacements for a palisade constructed in the late Saxon period (Thompson 1969, 11–14). The outward collapse of the fortress wall and the subsequent subsidence and erosion of the rampart behind it would have resulted in the formation of a rounded bank whose crest lay some distance to the rear of the Roman wall line. Its highest point would have been the obvious place to erect any sort of fortification and, once established, its line is fairly certain to have been followed by its immediate and subsequent replacements. The writer believes that this was the process which led to the differences in position and alignment between the Roman and medieval defensive walls. To the north of the section examined we know that the east gate of the fortress survived substantially intact for far longer; this explains why the medieval wall, presumably following a late Saxon precursor, bends eastwards to return to the line of the Roman circuit. (Alebon and others 1976) To the south, the medieval walls at no point return to the line of their Roman predecessor but instead continue to diverge from it. Dr Webster's excavations at the south-east angle proved that they ran diagonally across the site of the Roman angle tower, breaking away entirely from the Roman circuit immediately thereafter to run southwards parallel with Souter's Lane (Webster 1952, especially fig 13). The expansion of the Roman circuit to the line followed by the medieval defences is an event still impossible to date, although there is a considerable body of circumstantial and indirect evidence to suggest that, in the case of the area south of the fortress, this had occurred well before the Conquest (*See* most recently Mason 1985, 36–9). Indeed, it is quite possible that the increase in the size of the defended area and the restoration of the defences south of the East Gate were contemporary and parts of a single programme of works designed to completely overhaul the settlement's defences. If so, then the conditions prevailing in 907 seem particularly appropriate for the undertaking of such a task.

NOTES

1 Although William Stukeley states that 'Between Eastgate and the river the Roman wall is pretty perfect for 100 yards together', the results of the excavation at St John Street clearly show him to have been mistaken in his identification of Roman masonry.

2 This will be the subject of a forthcoming volume in the Chester Archaeology Excavation & Survey Report series.

3 A tombstone bearing a relief carving of a funerary banquet scene was discovered in the foundation of the rebuilt fortress wall during rescue excavations in the Linenhall Street sector of the fortress defences in 1963 (*J Roman Stud* **54**,1964,156 n 33). At St. John Street, fragments of reused stonework were found in the topmost surviving course of the wall itself and amongst the tumbled masonry resultant from its post-Roman collapse.

4 The various accounts of this event incorporated in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are discussed at length in Stenton 1971, 369–70.

5 However given the amount of stone in the area resultant from the collapse of the fortress wall this could have been a masonry structure.

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