

# I

## EXCAVATIONS AT CASTLE GARTH, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, 1976–92 AND 1995–96

### THE EXCAVATION OF THE ROMAN FORT

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#### PREFACE

Few archaeological sites in British cities can rival the scientific interest and symbolic importance of the Castle at Newcastle upon Tyne. From the towers and walls of the Roman fort, soldiers looked down on the *Pons Aelius*, a bridge that marked the original starting point of Hadrian's Wall and served as a monument to the originator of those uniquely elaborate frontier works. Later, the ruins of the fort were cleared away to make space for a cemetery. Then the Castle was built, although for a while burial continued. The new royal stronghold gave its name to the town that grew up around it. Gradually, the importance of the Castle declined. In the nineteenth century the Keep and Black Gate were severed by a viaduct for the main railway line to Edinburgh but what survived of the Castle was made safe for the future by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Some eighteen centuries of human occupation have left remains of great complexity above and below ground. The recent cycle of excavations began in 1960 on the south curtain

wall of the Castle. The work was directed by Barbara Harbottle, who has continued to play a leading part in research and excavation on the Castle site down to the present day. The excavations which are the subject of this report began late in 1976 and were directed by Barbara Harbottle and Margaret Ellison. In 1984–5 they were directed jointly by Barbara Harbottle and John Nolan, the latter assuming sole responsibility from 1987–92. Following the completion of the excavations, valuable work was done on the archives and finds: the phasing of the sites began and specialist reports were commissioned. Barbara Harbottle retired from her post as County Archaeologist in August 1996 and in the following year John Nolan went into private practice.

Much still remained to be done when the Newcastle City Archaeology Unit was merged with Tyne and Wear Museums Archaeology Department in 1997. The involvement of Barbara Harbottle and John Nolan in the preparation of the final excavation reports on the post-Roman deposits is continuing, for publication in future volumes of *Archaeologia Aeliana*. At the request of the City Council, and as part of

a wider re-organisation of archaeological provision, Tyne and Wear Museums Archaeology Department took over responsibility for producing the report on the Roman fort, including the rescue excavations carried out in the cellars of the Bridge Hotel in 1995–6.

The Newcastle excavations which began in 1976 belong to the modern era of excavation on Hadrian's Wall. They were started at about the same time as major campaigns at Housesteads (1974), Wallsend (1975) and South Shields (1977). All these excavations involved better techniques of recording and stratigraphical analysis, the introduction of environmental sampling and new methods of studying finds. Some of these innovations were of course evident in the preceding work on the Castle deposits, for they originated in the large programmes of urban excavations in the 1950s and 1960s which were largely concerned with the medieval period. The fruits of these changes should be evident in this report and have made its compilation a much more rewarding task than is usual in the publication of older excavations. In dealing with the written records we have in almost all instances followed the accompanying interpretations of detail, for example, the sequences of contexts and the allocation of features to building periods. In many areas, however, the previous post-excavation analysis had not reached the stage of a definitive account of the overall sequence of occupation. These we have supplied on the basis of the more detailed interpretations, although inevitably many elements of the larger picture result from our own deductions. Only where existing interpretations of detailed matters seemed unduly influenced by conventions current in the 1970s and 1980s and now discounted have we departed radically from the opinions of the excavators. A particular example is the notion of a widespread abandonment of forts in the second half of the third century, not substantiated by recent excavations (Bidwell 1999, 26–7). This was reflected at Newcastle by the interpretation of several layers of rubble and silt as evidence for desertion. Scientific analysis is the only possible

method of determining the true nature of such deposits.

The project was funded by the City of Newcastle upon Tyne, the owner of all the visible remains of the Castle. It was part of a wider programme to improve the presentation of the Castle which is still continuing, signalling the enduring commitment of the City to the understanding, interpretation and safeguarding of one of its most important cultural assets. The Roman remains were too far below the modern surface to display, but the plans of the *principia* and two granaries have been laid out at modern ground level.

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