



Excavations at the Old Methodist Chapel and Greyhound Yard, Dorchester, 1981-1984 by P. J. Woodward; S. M. Davies; A. H. Graham

Review by: Dominic Perring

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Excavations at the Old Methodist Chapel and Greyhound Yard, Dorchester, 1981–1984. By P.J. Woodward, S.M. Davies, and A.H. Graham. Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Monograph Series 12. Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Dorchester, 1993. Pp. viii + 392, pls 60, figs 176, fiches 8. Price: £29.00. ISBN 0 900341 36 X.

This is a comprehensive report on the excavation by Wessex Archaeology of a substantial part of the Roman town of Dorchester (*Durnovaria*). Few British sites can have so justified the term 'multi-period': at the base of the sequence was a Neolithic henge monument, the sheer ambition of which was never matched by the later urban structures.

Well over half of the report is, however, taken up by the Roman discoveries. Parts of two Roman streets with associated buildings and extensive tracts of open backyards were examined in an insula south of that believed to have contained the forum and west of the baths complex. The development of this area was charted from its first-century origins down to the end of the Roman period and beyond. This represents a considerable achievement, and congratulations are in order for the prompt publication of this important report.

The evidence is presented in traditional fashion. Introductory comments describing where, how, and why the sites were dug give way to exhaustive period-based descriptions of the structures and features. These are in turn followed by detailed finds reports, including illustrated pottery fabric and type series, which occupy the greater part of the volume. The work is concluded with a series of brief essays of interpretation and explanation. Further catalogues are relegated to the fiche, properly so for the most part, although the useful dating tables (fiche 7) deserved better.

Some of the most significant findings concern the origins of the Roman town. It is convincingly demonstrated that an ordered layout of streets, properties, and buildings was built on land which had previously been open pasture sometime before c. A.D. 70. It is now clear that the previous orthodoxy that the town was of Flavian origin is no longer tenable. The suggestion that a Conquest-phase military establishment gave way to a civilian settlement c. A.D. 65 is favoured (a foundation date in the late 50s is considered unlikely but not entirely discounted), and passing reference is also made to the possibility that a Celtic shrine in the area might also have influenced the early Roman settlement (361). No complete building plans were recovered, but the modest timber structures here add usefully to our knowledge of early Romano-British town-houses.

Few good stratigraphic sequences were preserved on these sites, and at several points interpretations are uncomfortably dependent on the evidence of a small number of insecurely dated features. The excavators have made the best of this evidence, and have come forward with an account that is both plausible and internally consistent. There are times, however, when statements are advanced with a little too much certainty, and where alternative explanations might usefully have been explored. This becomes irritating when slight evidence appears to be converted into hard fact on the voyage from descriptive text to summarising overview. The following divergent thoughts are by way of an attempt to restore balance, but are not intended to imply that the authors are necessarily wrong in their interpretation of the sequence.

The excavators propose a progressive change from second-century timber structures to fourth-century stone-founded ones. In support of this it is argued that one of the earliest timber buildings survived into the late second century (Building 5452, fig. 28). There seems to be no direct evidence that this was the case. The latest structural alterations to this building are dated c. A.D. 100, and it would be a matter of some surprise if a timber structure of this character remained structurally sound for more than a few decades without needing substantial rebuilding.

The dating of the earliest (Period 8) stone-founded buildings is also open to question; New Forest Ware was found in construction levels of three out of six of these. A late third- to early fourth-century date might therefore be preferred to the late second-century date proposed on the basis of Samian found in other foundation trenches (364–5, fiche 7). This leaves open the possibility that there was a period of comparative inactivity on the site sandwiched between periods of frequent change and repair in the late first/early second centuries and the fourth century. This would fit with Reece's coin report, which suggests that this was 'a rather unsuccessful site in the town from c. A.D. 160 to c. A.D. 260' (115), and with the scarcity of later second- to third-century types of glass vessel (157).

By the early fourth century several stone-founded houses with painted wall-plaster and tessellated floors had been built. Floor levels generally survived poorly, and there was little to indicate how the buildings looked and functioned above ground, although plaster debris showed that some parts of the superstructure were half-timbered. It would have been useful to have had some information on the burnt timber beams reported to have been found in the destruction levels (66).

Plans were better preserved, and extensive parts of two building groups were recorded. The building types find parallels in the houses at Silchester and Caerwent (referred to here by secondary sources rather than the original reports in *Archaeologia*). A courtyard-building and aisled-hall complex is described as an 'urban farmstead', but there is no direct evidence that this was the case (369). The view, confidently advanced, that 'at the very end of the Roman period' this courtyard-house 'was sub-divided to form a series of separate and smaller accommodation units' (vii), seems to be based exclusively on the evidence of a single foundation which may have divided a courtyard in two (67). Unless this reviewer has completely misunderstood the evidence, the foundation might alternatively have been associated with the provision of a new wing to the building (and therefore witness a property enlarged not sub-divided), and could have been built at almost any point in the fourth century.

Several square vertical shafts were found behind the buildings, and these are generally interpreted as cess-pits (cess was found in the upper fills of at least one), although at one point it is suggested that they may initially have functioned as storage shafts (349). Many dogs (some decapitated), as well as frogs, cats, birds, and pots were buried in the fills of these features, and the possibility that some may have functioned as ritual shafts would have been worth exploring. Perhaps the most interesting shaft filled an entire room of the courtyard-building, but this was not excavated in full. It is a pity that a collapsed vaulted roof found in this feature during machine clearance was not more fully recorded and reported.

Deep soils formed above the stone buildings, which were eventually robbed, and there is an interesting possibility that some Roman property boundaries continued to mark field boundaries well into the medieval period.

The finds material is divided into specialist reports in such a way that particular assemblages cannot be reconstructed; and the approach to quantification and analysis is unambitious (no EVEs, inconsistent reporting of weight/count totals, Samian unquantified). It is useful to have site and finds presented under the same cover, but a shame to see so little constructive dialogue between the two sets of data.

The discussion of the animal bone by Mark Maltby deserves particular mention. The large bone assemblage illustrated dietary preferences indicative of a more Romanised and urban community. Cattle had perhaps been butchered on site and the waste dumped in the open midden area at the centre of the insula, where the bones were gnawed by foraging dogs and pigs. There is also a useful report on the comparatively large assemblage of Roman glass (H.E.M. Cool and J. Price), and a valuable 'Dorchester' type series of BBI is set out at length.

Throughout the report the standard of presentation is high, and the authors deserve particular credit for the way in which they have structured and explained the phasing and grouping evidence. Despite this the report can be difficult to follow, and to study the date and character of some structures it is necessary to jump between six or more text locations (without the benefit of cross-referencing). It is also a shame that such exciting discoveries make for such dull reading. But these problems hold true for most recent urban site reports (including this reviewer's own!). The absence of keys to aid interpretation of some sections and plans is less easily forgiven (some sections are drawn using conventions not explained by the key on p. 26). It is also a pity that OD levels are not more widely given; in the absence of which it will be difficult to exploit the evidence of the roadside water-pipe and drainage features in any reconstruction of the urban water regime.

Editing errors are few and generally insignificant, the main inconsistencies occur where individual contributors do not seem to have made full use of the specialist reports. An example of this is the

suggestion that a pair of footprints in a concrete floor were made by a running child (65), when elsewhere it is explained that these prints were made by separate individuals (117).

The Greyhound Yard excavations typify the large urban sites that characterised British archaeology during the 1970s and 1980s. Histories of the rescue era are already being written, and the present fashion is to dismiss urban rescue archaeology on this scale as an ill-considered exercise in data gathering for its own sake (cf. M. Carver, *Arguments in Stone*, (1993)). This volume can be used to illustrate some of the shortcomings of our past approaches to urban archaeology, and it is tempting to use this review to that end. This would, however, be unkind and unfair. Seen in context these excavations must be ranked a considerable success. The pity for archaeology is that the adjacent Acland Road site might not get the same level of attention should destructive development proceed here (see *Britannia* xxi (1990), 350–2; *Britannia* xxii (1991), 284–6).

For all that one can take issue with points of detail, and even some of substance, the net result is impressive and deserves welcome. The excavation and publication of this important site was a demanding and necessary task, and we have been rewarded with a report which both advances our understanding of Romano-British archaeology and is good value for money.

English Heritage, London.

DOMINIC PERRING