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SILCHESTER INSULA IX: THE EXCAVATIONS IN PERSPECTIVE

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This review article discusses five volumes that provide the final report on the excavations in Insula IX *at Silchester (the 'Town Life Project'), which began in 1997 and were completed in 2014:*

M Fulford, A Clarke and H Eckardt 2006. Life and Labour in Late Roman Silchester: excavations in Insula IX since 1997 *(Britannia Monogr no. 22), Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London [henceforth Vol 1]*

M Fulford and A Clarke 2011. Silchester: city in transition. The mid-Roman occupation of Insula IX *c* AD 125–250/300. A report on excavations undertaken since 1997 *(Britannia Monogr no. 25), Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London [henceforth Vol 2]*

M Fulford, A Clarke, E Durham and N Pankhurst 2018. Late Iron Age Calleva: the pre-conquest occupation at Silchester Insula IX *(Britannia Monogr no. 32), Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London [henceforth Vol 3]*

M Fulford, A Clarke, E Durham and N Pankhurst 2020. Silchester Insula IX. The Claudio-Neronian occupation of the Iron Age oppidum: the early Roman occupation at Silchester Insula IX *(Britannia Monogr no. 33), Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies London [henceforth Vol 4]*

M Fulford, A Clarke and N Pankhurst 2024. Silchester Insula IX: oppidum to Roman city *c* 85–125/150 *(Britannia Monogr no. 37), Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London [henceforth Vol 5]*

Keywords: Silchester; Roman towns; archaeology; urbanism; fieldwork

INTRODUCTION

This review article is concerned with these five major volumes that provide the final report on the excavations in Insula IX at Silchester (the 'Town Life Project'), which began in 1997 and were completed in 2014 (with the post-excavation project continuing until the submission of Vol 5 in 2023).[1] These five volumes alone amount to 2,685 pages of

1. To save space and for clarity, references to the individual volumes in this review will simply use the Vol no (as above) and page references.

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published text and they are complemented by other publications and on-line resources.[2] The completion of this project represents an immense achievement, and all those concerned, especially the main authors Amanda Clarke, FSA and Mike Fulford, FSA, deserve congratulations and our warmest thanks. Like Shepperd Frere's excavations in Verulamium in the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially those in Insula XIV,[3] the excavations in Silchester Insula IX will clearly remain central to discussion of Roman Britain for years to come.

Silchester has long been a key site for understanding of Roman Britain largely because of the extent of past exploration. A detailed summary of antiquarian and later work has recently been published,[4] but large-scale interventions began with the major excavations sponsored by this Society between 1890 and 1909.[5] There was further important work, but on a modest scale, through the mid-twentieth-century. This all formed the basis of George Boon's comprehensive account of the development of the town and its life.[6] Mike Fulford's work at Silchester began on a comparatively small scale in 1974 with work on the defences,[7] but grew into a multi-facetted research programme with excavations at both the amphitheatre[8] and basilica[9] prior to the project in Insula IX discussed here. Subsequently he has led further excavations in Insula III,[10] on the public baths in Insula XXXIIIA,[11] the temples in Insula XXX[12] and tile kilns nearby at Little London.[13] From 2005–10 a parallel project, the Silchester Mapping Project, led by John Creighton, FSA, combined extensive geophysical survey with a full re-evaluation of past work to provide a comprehensive account of the town and its immediate environs.[14] This fundamental study has been complemented with further work by Fulford's team exploring the Silchester Environs.[15] In summary, there is a mass of new information about Silchester, not all of which is as easy to digest as was possible using George Boon's synthesis. Mike Fulford has recently provided a semi-popular account of the town,[16] but by its very nature this does not explore detail or debates in depth.

Even in an extended review focused on the Insula IX excavations alone, it is impossible to evaluate current knowledge of Silchester or even do full justice to the detail of the work presented in these five publications, so I will focus on some key themes. Before doing this, it is helpful to outline the nature and scale of the Insula IX excavations. The rationale for the choice of site and questions address is explained in Vol 1 (pp 3–11) and conveniently revisited and reassessed in Vol 5 (xix–xx). Essentially the aim was to examine the full stratigraphic sequence in a sample area of the town away from major public buildings. Insula IX was selected on the basis of the known presence of buildings recorded by aerial photography that had not been recognised in the Society

2. Clarke *et al* 2007b; Fulford 2012; see below notes 21–23.
3. Frere 1972.
4. Creighton and Fry 2016, 10–36.
5. For these excavations in Insula IX, see Fox and St John Hope 1894, 332–8.
6. Boon 1957, 1974.
7. Fulford 1984.
8. Fulford 1989.
9. Fulford and Timby 2000.
10. Fulford *et al* 2014, 7–10; 2015, 2–13; 2016, 9–16; 2017, 20–25.
11. Hilts 2018; Fulford *et al* 2019.
12. Fulford *et al* 2018.
13. Fulford 2022.
14. Creighton and Fry 2016.
15. Fulford *et al* 2016, 2017.
16. Fulford 2021.

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of Antiquaries excavations;[17] the existence of apparently blank areas in the plan, which might have been occupied by timber structures; and the occurrence of known buildings both aligned with the street grid and set at an angle to it.[18] Further, the finding of an Ogham inscription in this insula in the excavation of 1893 was significant too. As Insula IX lies close to the centre of the Roman town, lying just to the north-west of the forum, the area also had the potential to provide important insights into the urban core. The scale and ambition of excavation is impressive: an area of 3,025m² (a trench 55m by 55m) was fully excavated at the north-east corner of the insula, so it encompassed a frontage on the main street leading to the North Gate. At the centre of the trench, 'House 1', cleared in 1893, was aligned on a south-west–north-east axis. Impressive though the scale of the excavation is, we should be aware that it represents only about 0.75 per cent of the walled area of Roman Silchester.

PUBLICATION STRUCTURE

The challenges facing anyone undertaking a large-scale archaeological excavation are, first, how to ensure that the results are made available in a timely manner after appropriate study and analytical work has been completed and, second, how to make key primary data available for future researchers. With this project, a bold decision was made early on in the project to start the published account from the top of the sequence, and work back through time while the excavation of earlier deposits was continuing (Vol 1, xvii–xviii). Hence Vols 1 and 2 present the sequence from the late antique period back to *c* AD 125/150. In addition, separate publications discussed the context and reinterpretation of the Ogham inscribed column found in the excavation of Insula IX in 1893,[19] and the evidence of the *modus operandi* of the Victorian excavations of the Insula.[20] As post-excavation work progressed and the excavation drew to a close, it was decided that the remainder of the evidence should be published in conventional order (Vol 3, xix), moving forward in time from the site's Iron Age origins (Vol 3), through the Claudio-Neronian period (Vol 4) and on down to *c* AD 125/150 (Vol 5).

Through the long progress of the project, the broader archaeological publishing environment has changed, with a move towards greater reliance on modes of digital dissemination and interactive archiving. From the outset, the excavations used a digital database, and, in the early volumes, reference is made to access to archive information through websites.[21] Later, a decision was made to publish the core sequence of the excavated buildings (Vol 2, xx) in an integrated on-line publication in the journal *Internet Archaeology*.[22] In the latest volumes (Vol 4, xxi; Vol 5, xxi) reference is given to specific sets of data held in the Archaeology Data Service repository,[23] while it is noted that further work is in hand to make the full archive available digitally (Vol 5, xxi). In academic publishing the world is changing very rapidly, and I would not wish to

17. Bewley and Fulford 1996.
18. Clarke and Fulford 2002, 131–2
19. Fox and St John Hope 1894, 233–7; Fulford *et al* 2000.
20. Fulford and Clarke 2002.
21. Referenced as www.silchester.reading.ac.uk (eg Vol 1, xvii; Vol 2, xix). These websites are no longer securely available [5 May 2025].
22. Clarke *et al* 2007b.
23. Clarke *et al* 2007a; Vol 4, 601 https://doi.org/10.5284/1076947 (accessed 5 Sept 2025); Vol 5, 471 https://doi.org/10.5284/1113246 (accessed 5 Sept 2025).

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Table 1. Summary of the chronology and buildings in Silchester Insula IX based on the final phasing at the completion of the publication series.

Period/dating	Phase plan publication reference	Principal structures: their relationships and orientations
Period 0 10 BC–AD 40/50	Vol 3, 12, fig 5	• **Structure 9** aligned south-west–north-east.
Period 1 AD 40/50–85	Vol 4, 14, fig 7	• Southern area: **S10** (overlies **Structure 9**) end on to Trackway 1 aligned south-west–north-east. Dense concentration of twelve circular and sub-rectangular buildings (**S23**–**S34**) in surrounding area to south of Trackway 2. • North of Trackway 2: five circular and sub-rectangular buildings (**S18**–**S22**).
Period 2 AD 85–125/150	Vol 5, 6, fig 1.3	Period of major replanning: • Central property: range comprising **ERTB1** (part overlies **S22** and **S23**), **ERTB2** (partly overlies **S30**) and **ERTB3** aligned south-west–north-east. • North-west property: **ERTB10** (partly overlies **S21** and **S22**) and **ERTB11** aligned south-west–north-east. • South-east property: **ERTB5**, **ERTB6**, **ERTB7** (partly overlies **S10** and **S32**), **ERTB8** (partly overlies **S31**) and **ERTB9** (partly overlies **S10**) aligned south-west–north-east.
Period 3 AD 125/50–200	Vol 2, 10, fig 5	• Central area: range comprising **Masonry Building 2** (overlies **ERTB3**) and **Masonry Building 1** (partly overlies **ERTB2**) with adjoining **MRTB1** (partly overlies **ERTB2**) and **ERTB1** (continues from Period 2) attached at north-west. Aligned south-west–north-east. • Facing street to east: **MRTB3** (partly overlies **ERTB8**) aligned north–south. • Middle of south edge of trench: **MRTB2** (partly overlies **ERTB6**) aligned south-west–north-east.
Period 4 AD 200–250/300	Vol 2, 36, fig 29	• Central area: **Masonry Building 3** (overlies/incorporates **Masonry Buildings 1** and **2**). Aligned south-west–north-east. • Facing street to east: **MRTB4** and **MRTB5** (partly overlies **MRTB3**). Aligned east–west.
Period 5 AD 250/300 –	Vol 1, 5, fig 13	Period of major replanning: • Series of three new properties: **Building 1** (overlies **MRTB4**), **Buildings 6/7** (overlies **MRTB5**) and **Building 8**. All aligned east–west, adjacent to north–south street on east side of trench.

Abbreviations: ERTB = Early Roman timber building, MRTB = Middle Roman timber building, S = Structure

criticise the authors for their decisions in response to these circumstances as things have progressed, but from the point of view of the future researcher, it is important that a clear guide to all available information is made available (and it would have helped had these five volumes been given more consistent titles indicating that they formed a complete set[24]). For convenience, Table 1 collates some key information and provides the references for the key phase plans.

24. It may be noted that on a printed page before the title page, each of the books does provide a series title, but this neither appears on the cover nor on any of the various library catalogue citation details that I have checked.

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GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Anyone who has themselves excavated on a Romano-British urban site cannot fail to be impressed by the scale of the undertaking and the success of the excavators in not only making sense of the stratigraphy, but also bringing the sequence and the finds successfully to publication. The stratigraphy was not especially deep, but a combination of complex surface deposits on a difficult subsoil, with disturbance both from later phases of development and the intrusion of the Victorian trenches, was clearly challenging. For the earlier phases, the team nonetheless exposed a coherent series of structures that are comprehensively phased to provide a clear picture of the development of the site. The late antique phases are less easy to understand, as a result of later agricultural disturbance as well as these intrusions. Indeed, ploughing had destroyed all contexts down to the foundation of the masonry-built structures, leaving only the fills of pits and wells, and pockets of stratigraphy where they had sunk into earlier features (Vol 1, 11–12).

One of the strengths of the project is its focus on characterising the changing nature of 'town life' through the sequence. This is based on the study of the full range of excavated material (artefacts and 'ecofacts') by a team of excellent specialists who have been given the space and scope to explore different dimensions of the material. This is not that unusual in contemporary archaeological projects (although rarely at this quality). What is exceptional is the effort that has been made by Fulford to integrate the results of these various strands on research to provide a coherent overview in each volume (Vol 1, 249–85; Vol 2, 326–50; Vol 3, 373–85; Vol 4, 567–99; Vol 5, 453–70). These discussions will certainly become key resources for future students of Roman Britain, although it should be noted that the main emphasis – as laid out in the research design – is on the excavation trench and the wider town, with only limited comparison with other towns. There are interpretations with which to take issue, but this should not detract from the value of an approach that has sought to integrate this mass of complex material to offer new perspectives on the character of Roman urbanism in Britain.

It should be noted, however, that the reports on the iron slag are problematic. J R L Allen (Vol 1, 1,660–3) identified what he refers to as 'slag basins' as evidence for iron smelting on site. As he himself acknowledged (Vol 1, 162–3),[25] the majority of specialists interpret slag of the type found at Silchester as being the result of smithing rather than smelting, a conclusion that is supported by more recent research.[26] Indeed, work on smelting sites in the local region has shown that the character of smelting furnaces is very different from the slag recovered from Insula IX.[27] This, and the very modest volume of slag recovered, calls into question the emphasis on large iron-working on site,[28] especially in the late antique period (Vol 1, 268; Vol 2, 346): the evidence seems much more likely to represent intermittent smithing for day-to-day purposes rather than representing a substantial industry.

25. Also, Allen 2012, 79, n 19.
26. I am grateful to Elizabeth La Duc for discussion on this point (on the basis of the results of her recent PhD work).
27. Millett and Paynter 2014, 256–65.
28. Insula IX produced 36.3kg of iron slag (Vol 1, 145 [16.4kg], Vol 2, 234 [8.8kg], Vol 3, 242 [3.1kg], Vol 4, 434, [1.6kg] and Vol 5, 501 [6.4kg]). For comparison, recent excavation of a smithing complex at Aldborough (sampled in a trench less than a quarter of the size of the Insula IX trench) produced over 300kg of slag.

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Several of the specialists have themselves been given the space to provide syntheses of their particular sets of material (complementing the essays published in 2012[29]). These will become fundamental works of reference. Note in particular in Vol 3, the Iron Age coins (Haselgrove, pp 77–91), Iron Age brooches (Crummy, pp 107–15), Arretine pottery (Bird, pp 214–20), animal bones (Ingram, pp 268–76) and plant remains (Lodwick, pp 300–13). In Vol 4, there are key discussions of the Gallo-Belgic pottery (Timby and Rigby, pp 378–87), Gaulish sigillata stamps (Bird, pp 388–93) and further key discussions about the animal bones (Ingram, pp 458–67) and plant remains (Lodwick, pp 507–14). Finally, in Vol 5 we are provided with overviews of the Roman coins (Walton, pp 141–48), small finds (Crummy, pp 208–38) and glass (Cool, pp 268–89). Unusually too, throughout the reports, evidence from geochemistry and micromorphology is deployed to enhance understanding of the nature of the stratigraphy.

It is worth noting also how both specialists and excavators have consistently addressed the vexed issue of the role of ritual deposition within the sequence, with careful consideration of the extent to which material and deposits may have been structured by religious belief. Although this topic has been a recurrent theme in more general discussions for a number of years, rarely has it been so carefully and comprehensively addressed through a major excavation.

In the context of the analysis and discussion of the coins and metal small finds, I would offer one note of caution. Although not explicitly stated, it does not appear that any form of systematic screening with metal detectors was deployed during the excavation. My own experience on a number of projects where they have been used suggests that this does significantly alter the character of the assemblage recovered as well as increasing the number of metal objects found.[30] This needs to be borne in mind in considering the assemblages published here.

Finally, in terms of general comment, in reading the discussion chapters of the five volumes noted above, I sometimes wondered about the challenge of distinguishing patterns in the evidence that are specific to Insula IX alone from those that characterise the town of Silchester more widely, and from wider regional or provincial trends.

CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Before turning to look at what the excavations have revealed about the history of Silchester and Romano-British urbanism, it is worth pausing to consider how the excavation has been phased and dated. Given the nature of the stratigraphy, with thin surface deposits, problems of disturbance and significant residuality, the dating framework relied strongly on the spot-dating of pottery, with broad chronological periods determined by major changes in the character of the site. More refined dating has been based on the (excellent) detailed analysis of ceramic groups, many of which are derived from pits and wells. This raises two issues. First, as noted by the authors, the distribution of pits is uneven spatially and through the sequence, with few from Periods 2–4, *c* 85 until late third century (Vol 5, 7). This not only affected dating, but also the extent to which changes in activity could be mapped. Second, given the clear evidence that deposition in such contexts was strongly

29. Fulford 2012.
30. Millett 2007, 103–4.

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influenced by ritual, it would have been interesting to see the impact of this on assemblage composition and chronological resolution further explored.

These features of the site mean that the periodisation developed has quite long phases, and the authors acknowledge uncertainties of dating at some of the margins. Their transparency over this is commendable, but at one or two points I wondered whether a temptation to tie the site chronology to historical events had created problems. This certainly seems to be the case at the time of the Claudian conquest, which is represented as a break in the narrative (between Vols 3 and 4) and in the sequence (shortly after AD 43) to separate Period 0 (Late Iron Age) from Period 1 (AD 43/44–85). This break does not seem to be justified by the stratigraphic sequence since the Iron Age layout broadly continues uninterrupted. In a revision of the sequence argued by Creighton,[31] the excavation now shows that the street grid of the town was laid out in the early Flavian period, *c* AD 70–80, with good dating evidence from underneath the street to the north (Vol 4, 156–8). Nevertheless, Fulford argues (Vol 4, 157, 571) that a north–south route must have been established at some time shortly after the Claudian conquest, prefiguring the route that later became the primary north–south axis of the street grid, leading to the North Gate of the town. This is based on the establishment of a link to the military site established at Alchester in AD 44.[32] However, the date of this route is actually uncertain and the presence of a short-lived fort at Alchester does not seem a convincing reason why the two sites should have been connected by a road at this stage, especially since military bases were generally short-lived. If the route is as early as Fulford suggests, it is not at all clear how it would have exited through the Inner Earthwork, the evidence from which suggests that it was still in use at this date.[33] It is argued, too, that the orientation of the timber courtyard building beneath the later basilica, dated to late 40s/early 50s,[34] supports the conclusion that the north–south route was established at this time (Vol 4, 571). However, the orientation and location of this major building may instead have been the result of its position in relation to the southern entrance to the Inner Earthwork (the only entrance attested) which it faces. These uncertainties seem to me to raise questions about placing such weight on this historical horizon.

A different type of issue concerns the date of the first phase of Silchester's development – the origins of the *oppidum*. The chronology offered here for Insula IX (Vol 3, 374–5) is based primarily on the evidence of the *sigillata*, which Joanna Bird shows to have first arrived at Silchester *c* 10 BC, with its *floruit* lasting until *c* AD 25 (Vol 3, 214–16). By contrast, in his discussion of the Iron Age coinage, Colin Haselgrove notes differences between the chronology of the assemblages from Insula IX predominantly of his Period 8 (AD 10–40) and the basilica excavation where coins of his Period 7 (20 BC–AD 10) are more prevalent (Vol 3, 83–91). He further suggests that coins may have been arriving at Silchester before 20 BC, significantly earlier than the date for the start of occupation suggested on the basis of the *sigillata* chronology. Furthermore, the analysis of the radiocarbon dating provides very strong evidence that the sequence may have started from nearer 50 BC (Vol 4, 532–5, fig 297 – model 2). Two issues are worth considering. First, it is important to note the issue of spatial variation and the likelihood that the area excavated in Insula IX was later in

31. Creighton and Fry 2016, 390–2.
32. The key excavations at Alchester have never been fully published. The dendrochronological date of the west gate of the annex (excavated in 2001) is provided in Sauer 2006, 9, 25, fig 14.
33. Creighton and Fry 2016, 307–11, 325, fig 9.7.
34. Fulford and Timby 2000, 42–3.

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development and marginal to the earliest activity at the *oppidum*. It seems quite likely that curved line of Trackway 2 (Vol 3, 21, fig 12) defined the limit of the settlement around the beginning of the first century AD, hence evidence of the earliest phase of the *oppidum* is largely absent. Second, as now clearly demonstrated at Stanwick,[35] the arrival of *sigillata* in bulk may not have coincided with the establishment of the settlement, but was perhaps the result of a subsequent shift and growth in exchange with Gaul. This opens wider questions about the broader date of the origins of Silchester that can probably only be addressed through targeted excavation, for instance at Rampier Copse.[36]

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

I turn now to consider the sequence revealed in Insula IX and some of its broader implications, following a chronological approach.

The *oppidum*

Noting the comments above about the date of foundation of the settlement, it remains the case that Silchester now provides the most significant evidence we have for the nature of a major late pre-Roman Iron Age settlement nucleation in southern Britain. Other sites have been sampled, but the extent of the areas excavated in Insula IX and under the nearby basilica area are unparalleled. There have long been debates about the use of the term *oppidum* and the character of pre-Roman urbanism, so Silchester now provides key evidence, and the quality of that information is outstanding. The evidence shows that there was initially a small permanent population who farmed the local area (raising animals and growing cereals) supplemented by periodic gatherings of traders with links to Gaul. The scale of permanent settlement increased in the second decade of the first century AD, with the growth of other forms of economic activity, including non-ferrous metal-working, with the notable presence of pellet moulds usually associated with coin production (Vol 3, 375–82).

It is clear that this was a highly organised, planned settlement, with a strong case being made for the division of space into a series of compounds that Fulford reasonably argues should be associated with a series of separate social groups or lineages (Vol 3, 378, 381–5). The extent to which we can characterise these and link them to regional political groups seems much less certain, although there are clear differences between the assemblages in Insula IX and under the basilica (Vol 3, 381–5). As noted above, the overall plan suggests that Insula IX might lie towards the north-west periphery of the settlement, with the curving line of Trackway 2 marking its limit; this is significant and contrasts with the suggested extent of settlement implied by Fulford (Vol 3, 378) and previously postulated by Creighton.[37] It also raises the key question of the relationship between the planned settlement core and the defensive circuit known as the Inner Earthwork. The most recent review suggests that probably dates to the late first century BC,[38] contrasting with Boon's

35. Haselgrove 2016, 386–93.
36. Creighton and Fry 2016, 322, fig 9.7.
37. Ibid, 437.
38. Ibid, 304–11.

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conclusion that it was early Roman.[39] Standing back to look at the landscape as a whole, there is a notable contrast between the orientation of the planning of Insula IX – which has a broadly north-east–south-west axis – and that of the Inner Earthwork, the only known access to which is at its southern corner. (As suggested above, this may have determined the north–south layout that the basilica excavation indicates to have been established in mid-first century in date and itself later informed the orientation of the street grid.) This difference in axis seems problematic and raises questions about the dating of the Inner Earthwork and its relationship to the development of the excavated settlement layout in Insula IX.

In the excavated area, evidence for buildings and boundaries is provided by a series of postholes with few coherent floors or surfaces surviving. The overall distribution of these features clearly delineates the compounds already noted as well as the trackways, the principal one running on a north-west–south-east alignment, apparently unrelated to the Inner Earthwork. The identification of buildings within these compounds is challenging, but it is clear that round-houses are entirely absent, with all evidence suggesting that a tradition of rectangular post-built structures was dominant from the outset. However, the nature of the evidence means that surface-built framed timber structures would have been extremely difficult to detect, and one suspects that further buildings of such types may originally have been present. This has an effect on our understanding of the density of occupation, which was perhaps greater than at first appears.

Within the main compound excavated, a huge timber building (Structure 9) is identified (Vol 3, 23–6, fig 14), and argued to be the residence of a social elite. However, the identification of Structure 9 as a building is problematic and it seems much more likely to be a palisaded enclosure rather than a building. The walls are represented by foundation trenches, up to *c* 0.5m deep, that define a trapezoidal area, 47.5m in length, narrowing from 8.5m in width at the south-west to 6.5m at the north-east. A irregularly spaced line of internal postholes, described as axial, actually lie parallel with the north-west foundation trench, diverging from the south-eastern one. This asymmetry would have made roofing extremely challenging, while the absence of further roof supports or features to maintain lateral stability make it very difficult to see this as a viable building. While Fulford notes parallels for large timber hall on the continent (Vol 3, 377), where these occur, they are generally more robust and heavily timbered, characteristically with the use of vertical internal timbers with obvious pairings across the span.[40] Structure 10 of the subsequent phase, dating to *c* AD 30 (Vol 3, 30–3, fig 21), is much more convincing as a building, although its span of 12.6m is very wide and would have required a sophisticated roof truss, given the absence of evidence for internal roof supports. The interpretation of Structure 9 is significant, since the discussion develops the idea that this building was a significant centre of elite power (Vol 3, 381–5).

This brings us back to the historical context for the *de novo* foundation of the Iron Age settlement. Fulford's discussion (Vol 3, 382) places this within the context of events in the century following Julius Caesar's annexation of Gaul, favouring the idea that migrants from Gaul formed a significant element in its population. Although I remain sceptical about the details of such historical reconstructions, the finds evidence from Insula IX clearly demonstrates that there were strong links between Silchester and Northern Gaul, while the fact that the later *civitas* of the Atrebates shared its name with a Gallic *civitas* supports this.

39. Boon 1974, 44–6.
40. Eg Roymans 1990, 171–4, fig 8.2.

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Hence, there can be little doubt that Silchester formed a key locus within a cultural region that linked the lands on either side on the English Channel.

Roman conquest and subsequent development

As noted above, although the publication of Vols 3 and 4 formalises a break in the sequence around the date of the Claudian conquest, the stratigraphic sequence in Insula IX instead shows a large degree of continuity, with the main break in the sequence coming in the early Flavian period, *c* AD 85 (Vol 4, 570–1). The density of occupation in Insula IX clearly increased in the mid-first century AD, with a much more diverse range of structures present, including a series of round-houses that perhaps imply the integration of local British cultural traditions, even though the finds assemblages from them are indistinguishable from those of other buildings (Vol 4, 557–8). The economic evidence shows a continuation of the activities from earlier in the century, but with strong signs of intensification at the household level, in agriculture and in trade.

As noted above, in terms of the excavated sequence, much depends on the date at which the north–south axis that is followed by the later street grid was established, and there are doubts about the early date favoured by Fulford. In his discussion of this key period, his narrative is strongly influenced by broader historical issues, namely the role of the military, the presence of the client kingdom of Togidubnus and links with the imperial household under the emperor Nero. It is useful to try to separate the archaeological evidence from such historical assumptions, as the interpretation of the textual evidence is itself highly debateable. Although the presence of Togidubnus' client kingdom lasting down to the reign of Vespasian is reasonably certain, its extent is not and there is no real evidence that we should consider Silchester to have fallen within it. Furthermore, we know very little about how client kingdoms operated in the northern provinces at this period and the extent to which they were truly autonomous or mere constitutional fictions. Second, although the production of tiles stamped with the names of the emperor Nero at nearby at Little London[41] are unique in Britain, arguably implying production on an imperial property, their broader significance is highly uncertain and linking them to imperial investment in the development of Silchester, or imperial confiscations or the recall of debts, stretches the evidence too far (Vol 4, 7–9, 598–9).

At a more general level, Fulford remains an advocate of the role of the military in the development of Silchester. Although there is no evidence for a conquest-period military installation from these excavations, there is clearly material derived from the army (including weapons, fragments of armour and items of horse equipment as well as brooches with suggested military associations) from these excavations (Vol 4, 567–8). It is also suggested that a shift towards the consumption of beef in the animal bone assemblage might reflect military preferences (Vol 4, 568). However, the pottery assemblage lacks the characteristics associated with known military sites (Vol 4, 372–5).

Fulford's view is that there was a short-lived military garrison, in the period soon after AD 43, who were housed within the settlement, with soldiers probably also later being engaged in the construction of the urban timber courtyard building under the basilica (Vol 4, 569–70; Vol 5, 469). I would suggest an alternative interpretation that acknowledges widespread presence of soldiers across the region in the aftermath of the invasion, hence

41. RIB 2482 (Frere and Tomlin 1993, 26–7). For the kiln excavation, see Fulford 2022.

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both their passing presence at Silchester and an influence on supply systems and the local economy. This would provide a context for the 'leakage' of military metalwork into local civilian hands, as recently discussed in the context of Lower Germany (noting also the potential mis-categorisation of some equine metalwork as exclusively military).[42] In this model, the development of the settlement was primarily the product of local agency rather than Roman state intervention. If we are honest, it is very difficult to distinguish between these two explanations on the basis of the excavated evidence alone, as illustrated by Fulford's own discussion of the interpretation of the major building dated to AD underneath the later basilica (Vol 4, 570–2). Whether this was a military or civil structure, it certainly represents a significant development in the provision of public monuments in the town.

The establishment of the *civitas*

Following the construction of major public buildings (including the amphitheatre and public baths) between *c* AD 50 and 70 (Vol 5, 6), the imposition of the street grid (and the contemporaneous construction of a timber basilica) in the early Flavian period marks a significant change in the topography of the town. Fulford argues that this coincides with the establishment of Silchester as the administrative centre of the *civitas Atrebatum* (Vol 4, 3). This conclusion is entwined with the historical assumption that Silchester had formed part of the client kingdom that is generally assumed to have been dissolved at this period (Vol 5, 6–7).

This model of *civitas* development sees it an alien imposition (Vol 5, 7 and 469), while it is argued that Silchester is unique in Britain as being a centre where an Iron Age *oppidum* was transformed into a *civitas* centre (Vol 4, 4; Vol 5, 3). This fails to take sufficient account of the evidence of other major centres with similar sequences (certainly Chichester, Canterbury, Leicester and Verulamium, as well as others where the situation is less clear[43]).

The alternative, that integration into the Roman system was driven by the will of existing elites in order to maintain their status through integrating with Roman power, remains more attractive to me and seems to be strongly supported by the excavated evidence from Insula IX. The orientation of the main property ('the central building'[44]) is retained throughout the period, with structures rebuilt despite their misfit with the new grid. This surely implies continuity of property ownership, notwithstanding that negotiation would have been required over the appropriation of the land by the municipality required for the new streets (Vol 5, 457).

Despite the apparent change in its constitutional status, the overall character of the area excavated in Insula IX shows strong elements of continuity, including in the orientation of the buildings, notwithstanding the replacement of buildings with substantial timber framed structures, including the range that went on to dominate the central part of the excavated area for the following 200 years or so (Vol 5, 458–61). Furthermore, the evidence suggests a continuity of diet and in the inhabitants' engagement in stock rearing. Although there are issues with the changing character of the excavated evidence, there does seem to have been

42. Nicolay 2007.
43. See list in Millett 1990, 102–3, table 4.4.
44. This term is used in Vols 1 and 2. 'House 1' was the label used in the report on the 1893 excavation, and is shown on plans in Vol 1.

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a shift away from on-site crop processing, arguably indicating that processed cereals were now being brought in to the town (Vol 5, 405–6). This provides an important insight into the evolving character of urbanism through this period. Similarly, there is evidence for a shift in craft production away from textile production, while it is argued that food may now have been sold through *tabernae* that opened onto the adjacent street (Vol 5, 463–5).

It is clear that the overall development of the town in the period down to end of the first century was less systematic than some previous accounts of urbanism in the province have assumed, but this is the pattern now emerging across a range of Romano-British towns.

Transformations of urban space

Through the second to third centuries there is continued development of the 'central building', with successive rebuilding of the earlier timber buildings in masonry, first in *c* AD 125/150 (Period 3), then *c* AD 200 (Period 4). This townhouse continued in use until its demolition in the second half of the third century (Vol 2, 41), and its development provides an excellent case study in the evolution of an urban property (Vol 2, 344–5). Alongside this, other buildings occupied the street frontage to the east, being aligned with it. The excavated material provides some evidence for the activities, including small-scale metal-working and bone-working. As in the previous phase, livestock continued to be raised in the area, while cereal processing was absent (Vol 2, 346).

On the basis of the excavated evidence, there was a major transformation in Insula IX at the end of Period 4, with the 'central building' now being demolished. This brings to an end the building orientation that had dominated the area since the Iron Age and clearly suggests a complete break in property ownership, with the plausible reconstruction of a series of new land-holdings all on an east–west alignment (Vol 1, 249–50). Despite the problematic nature of the later Roman deposits (Vol 1, 14–15), activities appear to have remained similar to those of earlier phases, with evidence for the rearing of livestock, but not crop-processing, along with bone and leather working and craft activities. Metal-working is also evidenced, although as noted above, this seems to comprise small-scale smithing rather than smelting.[45]

Late antiquity and beyond

Given the quality of the evidence from the sequence as a whole, the information for the last phases of Insula IX is somewhat disappointing, largely because of the issues of later agriculture and the Victorian excavations. While one might debate the extent to which the activities revealed in Insula IX can be seen as strictly urban in character (Vol 1, 283–4), the evidence shows that they continued down into the fifth century, although at a lower intensity arguably from the late fourth century and certainly by the mid-fifth (Vol 1, 285).

The excavation also provided important new evidence about the Ogham inscribed stone, commemorating someone called Tebicatos,[46] excavated from a well in 1893, which was genuine and reused a baluster column that probably derived from earlier building in the insula. The mid-fourth–fifth century (Vol 1, 40 and 46) dating for the

45. See note 26.
46. Fulford *et al* 2000.

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infill of the well in which it was found provides information about the continuity of life within the Roman town. This makes it all the more disappointing that the stratigraphy of this period was not better preserved. I would, however, question Fulford's interpretation, which sees the inscription as evidence for the residence of immigrants from Ireland (Vol 1, 279). Although Silchester lies at the edge of the distribution of known Ogham inscriptions, there seems no reason to believe that Tebicatos was an immigrant rather than a (Celtic speaking) descendent of the people who had built and lived within the Roman town

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the publication of the Insula IX excavations is a remarkable achievement. The scale of the enterprise is monumental, and the excavation and post-excavation teams are to be warmly congratulated on its full publication. It will be evident from the comments above that there is plenty for students of Roman Britain to debate for years to come. As such, these volumes will assuredly help Silchester to retain its place at the centre of future accounts of Roman Britain.

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