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The Excavation at Cirencester, February - March 1922

by W. St. C. Baddeley
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THE EXCAVATION AT CIRENCESTER

(Corinium Dobunorum).

February—March, 1922.

By ST. CLAIR BADDELEY.

(WITH EIGHT PLATES).

“ The Roman Towns which do not show the theoretical regularity of Plan must be explained by supposing that in such cases the Roman invaders had merely occupied the whole or part of some existing British Town, subordinating their own theories (*i.e.* official type of town) to existing facts, or to topographical conditions which interfered with their theories.” (Cf. *Earthworks of England*, p. 336, A. H. Allcroft).

THAT some points in this fuller and later account of the work carried out at Cirencester will be found at variance with the contemporaneous account supplied by request to the local journal (*Wilts. and Glos. Standard*), will be no matter of surprise, and probably it requires no explanation. It is hardly ever possible to give true perspective to accumulating archæological data without allowing some interval in which duly to weigh them. In the present case considerations are rendered more than usually complicated by the nature and conditions of the site of the Town, presenting, as it does, quite a peculiar coffin-shaped area dropping lengthwise 25 feet in one mile, and through which, not only the Churn flows in its original more or less winding bed, but around three sides of which a (*Romano-British*) diverted portion of its waters has in ancient days been artificially turned in order, doubtless, to render both more formidable and more salubrious the northern and eastern *fosse*, and still flows at its own level, while the water of a secondary streamlet (the *Duntisburne* or *Daglingworth*) has similarly fed the remaining (now obliterated) *fosse* upon the long western

flank; this water being now culverted. It will be safe further to state that at no similarly extensive Romano-British town-site known to us as having been recently explored have such problems, both archæological and historical, been hitherto so little grappled with as these at Cirencester; and the reason has no doubt been owing to their unusual complexity. It will, we trust, become plain to the reader that much of the Romano-British and later history of this Dobunic town must surely have depended upon careful Hydrostatic control. It is well known that certain time-honoured (and not unnatural) conceptions as to a great and continuous military wall of the usual heavily-mortared and faced masonry of Imperial days, have haunted the writings and sayings of all those conversant with Cirencester for well over three centuries past. It has thus come to be taken for granted that the (partly surviving) "City-bank" (or *vallum*), with its moat or fosse, which engirdle this area of 240 acres, was of old, and still is, though concealed to-day, accompanied by one of those powerfully towered and gated Roman walls, such as have been found and measured at London, at Uriconium, at Caerwent, and at the far more exposed Legionary towns of that period,—walls usually to be attributed to the example started by Aurelian at Rome, in A.D. 272. That in 1540 Leland noted not merely the then far loftier city-bank or mound, punctuated here and there along its course by masonried remains of perhaps the former gates, or the smaller posterns, of the R-British town and should therefrom have concluded that one continuous wall must have encircled the town, was but natural. He did not know that so great a Roman town might have been non-military¹ but civilian, and not

¹ With an entire Legion, but 50 miles away at *Caerleon*, whence and (if needed), a force could reach *Corinium* in three or four hours by the main roads, the necessity of a towered girdle of wall, in addition to *vallum* and flowing fosse, certainly did not press here.

needing any garrison. The friendly Abbot even showed him part of an official Imperial inscription, almost certainly pointing to one of the greater Gateways.¹ No other conclusion as to the mound containing a wall could well have entered his mind; and this notion came in later days to be accepted without question by Hearne, Browne-Willis, by Stukeley, and later by Rudder, who with but little additional (and regrettably imperfect) evidence, carried on this tradition, by applying it to the finding in his day, and under his observation, of some fragmentary solid remains along the eastern line of the city-bank. Consequently, until to-day there seems to have arisen, neither locally, nor in the archæological world, any idea that this conception might need serious reconsideration. For, the presence of such a vast wall must have made the place a military centre, which we know it never was.

As far back as 1898, when first visiting Cirencester, having requested a local antiquary (and but little later, several other archæologists) to show ever so small a portion of indubitable Roman-Wall here, they frankly confessed either that they were unable to do so because it lay hidden under the city-bank (*i.e.* within it), or they declared on the contrary, that it had been built external to the bank or mound, but had been pulled to pieces by the former Abbots and the wealthy Wool-men in order to raise the Abbey, the Parish Church, and the short-lived Norman Castle (1142). All, however, agreed that solid traces of it had certainly been met with in the cutting made for the Midland and South Western Railway; though two of them stated that, at the chief point of the second intersection, on Cricklade Street (*Irmin*) some

¹ A Mr. Birch is widely reported to have met with two arches standing but a few years ago, at a point corresponding probably to the site of the South Gate on Irmin Street, what he has done with this extremely interesting find is variously related.

foundations disclosed belonged probably to the East Gate once there, and not to a great Wall. Since those days the writer has met other students who have taken the stricter view that the sole reliable evidence of properly-measured and described wall-masonry here met with (and identifiable with remains of some wall along the city-bank), is that so minutely given by the late Keeper of the Corinium (Earl Bathurst's) Museum, Prof. Sir A. H. Church, who, as much as any expert, deplored the lack of scientific evidence in all local writings upon this subject.

We are therefore inclined to view the description by this qualified eye-witness as to what he measured and scrutinised as probably the only evidence worth closely examining as to the existence of what has been ascribed to a great structural Wall. Let us, therefore, see what he says:—

“Just past *Grove Lane*, a road to the left separates one branch of the river Churn from the remains of the ancient Roman Wall (*i.e. here* he is evidently referring only to the mound). A little further on a course or two of the veritable dressed facing-stones of the Roman Wall may be seen *in situ*; while the earth-bank (*i.e. mound or vallum*) *behind them* is still in some places not less than 20 feet in height. A public walk is on the top.”—The locality here pointed to is the commencement of Beeches Road (*La Beche* (c) 1240). Sir A. H. Church then proceeds (meanwhile taking his reader a couple of hundred yards south-eastward along this):—“Where this earth-bank trends to the west, forming the southern side of the Roman Town, a portion of the ancient wall remained tolerably perfect for a considerable distance till the year 1867, when the owner of the land gave permission to one of his tenants to cart the stones away.”¹ He then brings us to

¹ No difficulty in doing this, no hardness of cement, nor other trouble, seemed to have occurred, such as is invariably the case with Roman defence-walls.

the really crucial point, the evidence as to this bit of ancient defensive wall at the time of its declared destruction (cf. *Guide to Museum*, p. 10). "This wall measured four feet six inches through and six feet eight inches high where most perfect. *It was built chiefly of loose stones and rubble backed by earth, but it had a complete facing of large dressed blocks, put together without mortar.*"

Now the obvious character of this so carefully described wall cannot be said in any single particular (if we except the dressed facing-stones), to agree with a Roman defensive town-wall. Firstly, it has barely the thickness of a mere bastion of such (*i.e.* 5' 6"—6'); secondly, it retained no mortar, an element for such serious purpose always made specially strong and well-grouted. At best this masonry could represent but some hasty fronting addition to the city-bank made up of previously used materials. But it would not be safe to ascribe it even to such purpose as that; for it may well have been part of a mediæval structure, having nothing whatever to do (save in its materials) with Roman times or defences.

Hence, it will be understood that it has been no satisfaction to find the only exact literary evidence surviving as to a real military wall for this non-military centre of Corinium reducing itself upon scrutiny to these exceedingly feeble proportions. For the Abbots of St. Mary had built and worked their successive Mills in this very section of the moat and mound for centuries and may have possessed other structures (even small defensive outworks) in connection with these? At any rate, from whatever building this particular faced wall survived, it was certainly not part of an Imperial girdle of defence, and no more even of this has been found in our time.

It may further here be added that both Leland's (c. 1540) and other later recorded evidences of solid foundations, and even arched stones, and supposed tower-

bases, where discovered, far more directly point to the positions of the various town gates that certainly existed, minor and major, and to which streets led, than to a great military Wall. That Corinium like smaller towns, possessed double-arched typically towered gates is, of course, not here in question; nor probably ever will it be. But since we know that the foundations (where they do occur) of such concreted stone-faced Roman walls in Britain are quasi-indestructible, and that examples of these are fairly abundant; and, secondly, that, after at any rate the sixth century (though probably long before), the population (and also the habitable area of *Corinium* or *Caer-ceri*) must have become reduced to very humble defensible dimensions,—that the late-Saxon College of Prebendaries here was at no period a flourishing institution,—that the great Norman Abbey that succeeded it was only built in the XIIth century, just before the comparatively new and short-lived Castle was burned down by King Stephen (1142) to rise no more;—and, finally, that, until less than a century back, the extensive *Water-moor* lower half of the site was composed of a succession of ill-drained pasture-fields, often flooded orchards, and nurseries, and before that, for centuries, was merely what its name denotes,—it was, and it is impossible to accept the notion that two miles of Roman town-wall has been rooted up from its huge and noble foundations merely to build mediæval *Cirencester*.

Disturbed therefore, by these conflicting traditions and evidences, and yet desiring that the great bastioned *enceinte* should not prove to be a myth, the only hope of proof for long years seemed to lie in obtaining leave, somehow and at sometime, to select a promising site or two along the obvious lines of the city-bank, and there, with help of the spade, to discover the nature, or perhaps the non-existence, of this truly elusive Wall.

Facing-stones, of course, are evidences of faced buildings;

but Ciceter, it is proved, possessed, besides convenient quarries, very important public structures of stone, some of them, besides gates, at no distance from its ancient boundary-lines; consequently, we should have in such excavations to find such stones either *in situ*, or else, to discover the mortared and grouted core of the Wall from which they had become, either by decay, or perhaps by violence, detached, or at base of which they were still plentifully lying concealed.

It was, therefore, with surprise and pleasure that in February, 1922, the writer received a note from Mrs. Wilfred Cripps, inviting him, relative to an agreement completed by her with the Guardians of the Union Workhouse, to excavate and explore within their long and sheltered garden at Watermoor, where we know that no mediæval buildings can have obstructed the rich soil, and where the lowered city-bank had been met with only a little over half a century ago, by the late Mr. Bravender and others employed on the drainage and survey, and wherein the late Mr. Kennett Beecham had then viewed, and noted down at a certain point, some stonework of so extensive a character that in his enthusiasm he became inclined to refer it to the base of a Roman tower, though he knew it to be (and has mapped it) standing within (not upon) the wall-line. But we have met with some indication in his kindly-given notes that he was not un-influenced in coming to such a conclusion by feeling that there perhaps *ought* to have been such a tower there in order to correspond with the reputed one mentioned by Leland over upon the N.E. side of the town opposite. He became indeed possessed with this idea of symmetry.

While the present *withy-bed*, corresponding more or less, to the ancient moat or fosse, lies outside (W.) of the garden-wall, the extensive Union Workhouse (saving its working-yard and one or two small timbered sheds) stands considerably back (N.E.) of that wall; so that the earth-

hidden mound or city-bank line passes between these two. A portion of the garden-wall thereabouts displays (externally) some four hundred well-dressed stones certainly attributable to Roman date; and these have been often taken for granted to belong to the great city-wall; but a sufficiently strong recollection by local folk of their traditional provenance ascribes them (probably correctly), to some important ancient building that was encroached upon, and deleted, when the rear (N.E.) portion of the Workhouse was built.¹ One nevertheless could not but hope that excavation might tell some other tale.

Terms having been agreed and labour conceded, the rough season, as well as the coming demands of the kitchen-garden plantings, bade us lose no time. Many a day seemed only too likely to be seriously spoiled by the violent sleet and rain which, by hampering digging, would waste a precious opportunity.

The objects mainly to be held in view, therefore, were: (1) determination of the characters of both the mound (*vallum*), and (if found) of any structural wall; (2) their respective foundations, and the virgin soil whence they rise; (3) whether the wall, as at London and elsewhere, was strengthened by semi-circular (or possibly square) bastions; whether it fronted to the fosse or moat by a slope or *berm*; (4) finally, the nature of Mr. Beecham's supposed tower foundations situated at 50 feet (S.W.) from the commencement of Watermoor churchyard wall.

At no less than four separated points, in a direct line eastwards from the entrance of the Workhouse yard through the long garden, the surface was now laid open, parallel with the path, exposing at each of these points the desired rubble mound or city-bank, here shorn no doubt of many feet of its original elevation, but still thoroughly compact and continuous, if obviously irregular.

¹ Such findings would be likely here for the Central Forum and Basilica lay but a short distance from it.

Each of these surface-openings became gradually extended, and the western face in each case was followed slowly down as far as the excessive rains would permit. Although for nearly three weeks on this account it was not possible to reach the real foundation, a careful collecting of pottery and objects, such as fibulae and coins, was made, and the nature of the upper mound was everywhere thoroughly examined. Moreover, at the second and third openings (which were now connected up) important spurs or outworks of quite irregular form, but of homogeneous attachment with the mound were found extended from the western face, one of them to as much as 14 feet (W.) Could these, in any consideration, perchance, represent the cores of aforetime external bastions along a wall from which every trace of facing-stone perhaps had been torn off? or whence it had fallen to where, when the waters subsided in our trenches, we must yet surely come upon them? Close scrutiny of the structure only too sternly declared that both mound and outworks persistently reveal only ancient dry-walling; that is, they have been raised and strengthened without use so-ever of mortar, that all the stone-work is literally without foundation, and that the irregularities of its width and depth and lack of method or uniformity of width to the earth mound that carries it (sometimes it is barely 4 feet thick), shewed the whole mass of it to be ancient, but not Roman work at all. Further, the various finds, save occasional coins, (and coins will get down anywhere), occurred usually in the rich upper soil, and close to the surface, and (as will be noticed further on) the best Samian fragments lay nearer to it than the inferior or (actually, in date) later forms of pottery. The digging, however, now continued and became concentrated more and more upon two points.

As the withy-bed at present lies quite outside the garden-wall, if it accurately represents the original fosse, this

lies further from the mound (*i.e.* 50 feet) or city-bank, than does the corresponding fosse (or moat), upon the N.E. flank of the town. But there is reason for thinking that excavation (by cutting a five foot trench away westward from the mound and at right angles) would reveal the causes of that difference in ancient successive clearings of the moat thrown up towards, and even over, the city-bank.

The rain-water having now sunk from the trenches, careful search and probing in the bottoms was made; but no trace of a single facing-stone, nor a fragment of one, was anywhere to be found, nor of mortar, though at one point a pocket of stiffened sand was temporarily mistaken for this last. At the third extended opening, close to the site of Mr. Beecham's conjectural tower, we now came upon by far the most interesting evidences we were to deal with. They fall under four categories.

First, the comparatively sharp line continuity of the rubble or dry-walling (mound) here gave way (for a length of some thirteen feet) to a deliberately interposed sloping saddle or track made of far larger stones (equally innocent of mortar) and sloping down eastward (at an angle of (c) 30 deg.) for some 27 feet in length, as though representing a track from within the town to pass out over the mound-wall. When fully exposed, this only presented the character of a rough stone-track, such as we find at the exits or entrances of Bronze Age camps in this and other Cotswold districts; Painswick, Uley, etc. It had no stone margins binding it, as had such tracks in Roman settlements. On the inner (or N.E.) termination of it, we reached the virgin (yellow) gravel at 7' 6"; but while endeavouring to do likewise on the other, or S.W. side when, instead of sloping down, it totally gave out, and, at six feet down, we lighted upon two probably prehistoric cooking-pits, containing burnt stuff. These pits are also made of dry-walling. Adjoining this spot eastward,

and at a level of five feet above the hollow thus formed, were noted remains of a rough herring-bone edging to an outwork (fragmentary), shown in the photograph. Such herring-bone may or may not be pre-Roman. It does not mark a period. Lastly, and just beyond the base of the inner (*western*) rise of the sloping stone track, or saddle, we met with a portion of a two-foot Romano-British house-wall, upon which lay two pieces of hexagonal stone-tile. This rough slope from both its position and the extent of its stoned area, coincides with the foundations which Mr. Beecham attributed to a possible tower.¹ No sign of facing stone or mortar was met with in any part of it; and, as it has no foundations, it is conclusively no tower, nor ever was it.

However, an unexpected element, but involving another kind of interest, now made itself manifest. Whilst driving the opening for about 30 feet right over this stone-track, the cleanly-intersected soil from the garden surface downwards upon the western flank had displayed a series of slanting layers, differing in shade or colour (some of the streaks amounting to almost a black mud), and evenly superposed the one upon another. Here was an extensive mass consisting of many tons of darkish vegetable soil artificially thrown down at some perhaps remote period over the mound or city-bank, from without it (right to left), and taking its uniform angle or slope from that of the said bank below it. But still other masses of it lay also over and against the western point of the bank. These will prove rich to the future explorer.

Upon searching this, pottery and shards, all of them Roman, made their frequent appearance, but the more ancient and the best Samian pieces were found invariably uppermost and the inferior wares lay below. Almost nothing modern or mediæval was met with. The

¹ It is difficult to imagine the use of a tower at such a position, where the slope up over Chesterton must have overlooked it.

position, the slanting layers, the distribution of the pottery, in addition to the nature of the soil and the general absence of mediæval and modern shards, seemed sufficiently to suggest ancient clearings of the adjoining moat, such as the Roman régime of the town doubtless ordered from time to time in view both of safety and salubrity; although in the flourishing days of the Empire such accumulations may have been regularly carted away elsewhere and spread over the fields. In more perilous and less disciplined days (perhaps at the close of Roman rule in Britain), the operation might certainly have been carried out in a rough and ready manner, and without regard to the displeasure of the neighbouring householders. It may also be remarked that enemies from the S.W., approaching from over Chesterton to attack the town on this side would have had no difficult task if the moat either through neglect or drought did not run or had become dry. But speculation is needless. Chesterton itself may well have been the earliest Roman station here.

At the (by this time) connected fourth opening on the *vallum*, or city-bank, some forty feet east of this and of the small timber shed, were found two graves lying along the top of the said bank and hollowed within its dry-walling. They lay with an interval between them. No remains were met with in these,—according to the workmen who opened them inconveniently early one morning. That this whole section (by its track and three outworks) betrayed its ancient importance cannot be gainsaid. Every feature pointed to this. But the digging now drew to its natural close. The time-limit could not well be extended. Spring and a genial sunshine demanded the covering in of our sites (as agreed upon), for raising needful supplies of produce for the Workhouse.

In consequence of the various features here clearly disclosed, we now directed our energies to visiting the N.E. sector of the city-bank, across Water-moor, and

with help of the iron bar, to examining the construction, as far as might be possible, of the still lofty mound that rises there. This was done chiefly in order to find whether, as we suspected, this coincided (and as Prof. Sir Arthur Church's notes had led one to think) in make with that of the lowered western city-bank where we had been at work.

The results here obtained entirely tended to corroborate the other experience. The mound upon one side of Corinium is the same, is homogeneous, and is of like date with the mound upon the other side; and presumably they were both thrown up at one period and by the same people. But, instead of finding them to be of Roman Imperial construction, or, formed as has been hitherto accepted, during the late Empire, so as to enclose the by then far-expanded, but not yet endangered, Corinium, we find that they are of precisely identical character with the dry-walled mounds that encircle many other Cotteswold settlements, made by pre-Roman tribes. In the present case, therefore, the probability seems to point to the Dobuni (or a previous people,—perhaps the Cornavii), having been the makers, and the survival of this great dry-walled mound accounts, it will be perceived, not merely for the exceptional extent, which it is probable even Roman Corinium did not any too closely pack, at its most populous period (for there have been noticed large areas here where no Roman foundations have been met with),—but for the fact that the early Imperial sculptured funerary monuments (now in the Museum) were (in 1836) met with well within the said city-mound enclosure; and yet cannot have been reckoned when set up as being within the Roman town of say A.D. 100; so that the Roman town grew always from within the enclosure-camp towards those ancient and, of its native folk (doubtless for uncounted centuries), beloved ramparts; and the first Roman burials were thus made quite regardless of the early tribal *vallum* of the Cantonal enclosure.

OBJECTS FOUND DURING THE EXCAVATION.

BRONZE.

Finger-rings.

Ear-pick (?)

Spoon (*ligula*) rat-tailed; pointed handle.

Spilla.

A diminutive tripod (toy?) base—fine workmanship, having animals feet.

Early fibula enamelled.

Another fibula; plain.

Iron nails. Bone *spillae* and needles.

COINS.

Many minimi of later Empire; mostly illegible.

Alexander Severus (*Pax eterna Augusta*).

Carausius.

Allectus.

Constantius.

Constantine.

I. rare Consular Denarius of Lucius Rubrius Dossenus (c) 86 B.C. Head of Jupiter Laureate; behind sceptre and [Dossen].

Reverse. Triumphal Quadriga ornamented with thunderbolt on it. Victory with a wreath below L. RUBRI (*much-worn*). (*Ex inform*: G. F. Hill, Esq.)

POTTERY. (Samian Ware).

Stamped: Arici Ma(*nu*)

Fragments of Amphora handle (buff).

Asiatici of(*ficina*)

Attili M(*anu*)

Fragments of Mortaria and Colanders (grey).

Dagomar(*us*)

F(*ecit*)

Roofing tile fragments; (*hexagonal*).

Icecti Ma(*nu*)

Macrin(*i*) Ma(*nu*)

Glass-handles of R.—Br. bottle.

Martili (*Manu*)

Masculus (*Fecit*) Large pebbles (not red)

Several rivetted *Samian* fragments. A flat red (*waterworn*) pebble. Bones and teeth of horse; pig; ox and horn-cores of (?) cows.