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The Ashcroft Site, Cirencester

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By RICHARD REECE

MEDIEVAL CIRENCESTER occupied very little of the land in the south-west angle formed by the present Cricklade Street and Castle Street. Houses fronted on to these two streets, but away from the frontages the land consisted mainly of open fields, part of the Ashcroft estate. When, in the second half of the 19th century, the land was developed for building, several groups of sculptures were found, notably reliefs of the Deae Matres. One of the main open spaces left in the area was a series of allotments owned by Messrs Mycalex and T.I.M. Ltd (O.S. Nat. Grid SP 022018), and it was after the erection of a telegraph pole there in 1950 that exploration of the site started.

The original hole dug for the telegraph pole revealed part of a mosaic pavement which was later cleared and left to await further excavation. In the summer of 1951 Lady Fox, then curator of the Corinium Museum, invited Dr H. W. Catling to direct an exploratory excavation in the area of the pavement, to the north of the site. This continued for two weeks, but owing to the absence of any suitable extra labour, and complications raised by the post-Roman ditches, only a small area could be trenched.

The allotments continued under cultivation until the summer of 1961 when building operations began for an extension to the Mycalex factories. Stanchion holes dug along the south of the site revealed Roman walls and floors surviving to a considerable height, and gave promise of much useful information if the site could be excavated. After the digging of the holes there was a three-week gap in the building programme during which concrete tankers were due to fill the stanchion bases, and the managing directors of the companies very kindly allowed excavation, provided access was left to all the stanchion holes, and the work was finished before the next stage in building began. The personal intervention of the late professors Donald Atkinson and Sir Ian Richmond secured a grant of £100 from the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works within 24 hours, and a two-week season was undertaken.

After his season in 1951 Dr Catling had always hoped to be able to continue his work to reveal a fuller plan and sequence of occupation. When the 1961 emergency arose he very kindly passed to me all his material, including his own draft report, and helped considerably by his visits to the site while work was in progress. After digging ceased it was hoped to produce a joint report, but as this has proved impracticable Dr Catling agreed that I should attempt to put both seasons of work into print. I would pay tribute here to his generosity in passing over all his own material, and in being willing to work over again an episode which hardly provided him with happy memories of archaeology in Cirencester. It will be obvious that the deficiencies of this report are therefore wholly my own.

In 1951 excavation was limited to the area immediately around the mosaic, and the slender labour force was devoted to showing that the pavement was the floor of one of a range of rooms along a corridor which connected the rooms to a court-yard to the south. In 1961 the proviso of leaving access to the factory foundations meant that again only a limited area could be examined. This was taken down to natural gravel in two main sections, and parts of a house plan were recovered. It was, however, impossible to dig the centre of the site so that nothing is certainly known about the relationships of the 1951 and 1961 buildings. The pottery found at each corresponding level in the two buildings is similar, the floors of both contained a curious hard concrete which is discussed below, and the structural history of both, so far as can be seen, is identical. With the

warning that, in the absence of an actual section showing the relationship of the one to the other, the matter cannot be taken as proved, I propose to discuss the remains as similar to a courtyard house such as building III 2 at Verulamium.¹

The plan (FIG 1)

The outline of the walls of the site have appeared on Mr Wachter's plan of Corinium.² On the evidence obtained from the site of the new Police Station in 1962 he suggests a NE-SW road which would run under the houses of Ashcroft Road immediately to the south-east of the 1961 building, allowing for a ditch and a colonnade. Both parts of the building therefore lie in his *Insula XXI* with the mosaic in the wing farthest from the street. An interim note on the 1951 building appeared in the *Journal of Roman Studies*,³ and on the post-Roman features of the site in *Medieval Archaeology*.⁴

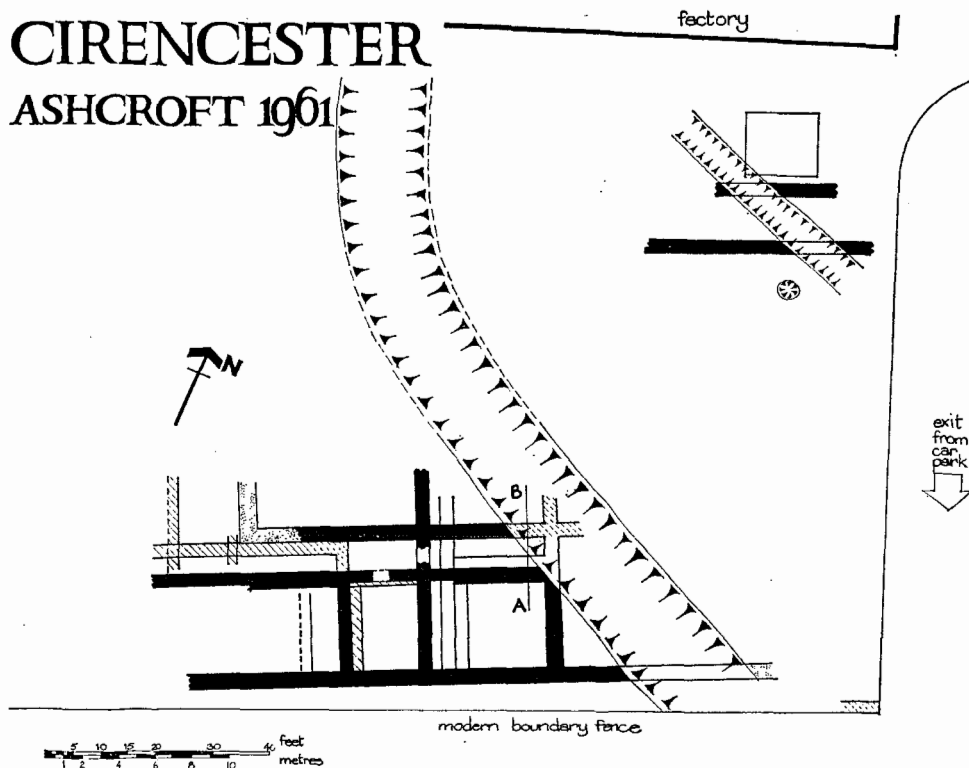


FIG. 1. The plan.

The features on the site fit into three periods. At some date before, or very soon after, the conquest of A.D. 43 a large scoop had been dug through the natural clay, presumably to extract gravel. It was in this scoop that the first phase of occupation took place with evidence of several successive buildings from c. 50 onwards. The first phase closed somewhere after the end of the 1st century, and the site may well have been vacant until about 150. Sometime in the reign of Antoninus Pius the site seems to have been levelled by the introduction of what must have been many cart-loads of sandy material containing some building debris, and much pottery. This levelling layer must

1. R. E. M. and T. V. Wheeler, *Verulamium, Society of Antiquaries Research Report XI*, pl. xxviii and xxix.

2. *Antiquaries' Journal*, XLIII (1965), pt I, 17.

3. *Journal of Roman Studies*, XLII (1952), 98.

4. *Medieval Archaeology*, VI-VII (1962-3), 546.

have been some sort of rubbish deposit, containing as it did a complete mixture of pot from the Claudian to the Antonine periods.

On this layer the stone house of phase II was built. The levelling material seems to have been far from safe however, for the foundations were usually cut right back through the layer to natural gravel. The stone building provided many walls of different dates which, on the limited evidence available, cannot be sorted out. All that can safely be said is represented on the plan (FIG 1), where the house of about 200 is shown in solid shading, earlier walls are unshaded, and later walls are cross-hatched. The house (IIA) built after 150 was probably of a simple plan with interconnecting rooms and no corridor, as in Verulamium III 2B (1). A second period used some earlier walls but introduced a corridor (II B). The main building period (II C) is probably the first stone feature in the 1951 area so that this version of the house is probably the first with a courtyard. A considerable renewal in period II D involved only new floors and wall plaster, so that with minor changes the plan of II C seems to have gone on through the 3rd century until a final rebuilding started off the last period (II E) sometime in the 4th century.

Sometime after phase II closed the whole Roman plan of the area was cut by a large and a small ditch. The larger was about 16 feet wide and 8 feet deep from ground level, the smaller about 9 feet wide and 5 feet deep. These ditches seem to belong together in phase III but their dating remains uncertain.

The Pavement

This is shown on the plan simply as a rectangle in the northern corner of the site, and unfortunately it cannot be properly illustrated. A photograph showing the main details was published in *Illustrated London News* when it was first found;⁵ a second photograph in the same magazine in 1961⁶ is less satisfactory since the centre of the pavement is obscured by the writer. Little attention could be given to the pavement during its second exposure in 1961, but at the end of the season, at the urgent request of the Mycalex company, it was lifted successfully in sections and put in storage.

The design, mainly geometrical, consists of a central square in which is an octagon containing a bell-crater as a centrepiece. Four rectangles with diamond and guilloche patterns fill the sides, and the design is completed by four conventional flowers in small squares at the corners. Pottery from below the pavement was early 2nd century in date, containing fragments of undecorated samian which suggested a date of 150 at the latest. Many of the red tesserae were fragments of samian pottery, and, so far as could be seen, East Gaulish wares were well represented. The pavement was worn in places, and crudely patched with plain mortar, especially around the central panel. All available evidence suggested that a gravel and mortar floor of period IIE once overlay it, so that a date in the second half of the 2nd century seems fairly certain.

The Section A-B (Fig 2)

In an attempt to simplify the section, stones are drawn in outline, gravel is shown by circles, occupation layers are unshaded, and mortar is hatched according to cleanness and texture.

Natural Gravel. The absence of natural clay, usually about 1 ft thick, in the area of the section points out the large-scale disturbance probably due to gravel digging, which antedates the first occupation. Natural clay and gravel occurred on other parts of the site level with the make-up of floor 4.

Phase I. Several thin occupation layers flecked with charcoal provided dating material for the thin rammed gravel floors 1 and 2, which presumably belonged to wooden buildings. Stone footings may perhaps be seen in the large stone resting on layer 3 on the right-hand side of the section. From the occupation beneath layer 2 came a barbarous As of Claudius I which was probably not in use long after 64, and two different rouletted rims of samian form 24 usually put in the reigns of Claudius and Nero. From the debris between layers 2 and 3 came a simple rim of iron-age type which Miss Fell considers should be early in the second half of the century (Note A). This is

5. *Illustrated London News*, 2 Dec. 1950, 912.

6. *Illustrated London News*, 23 Sept. 1961, 495.

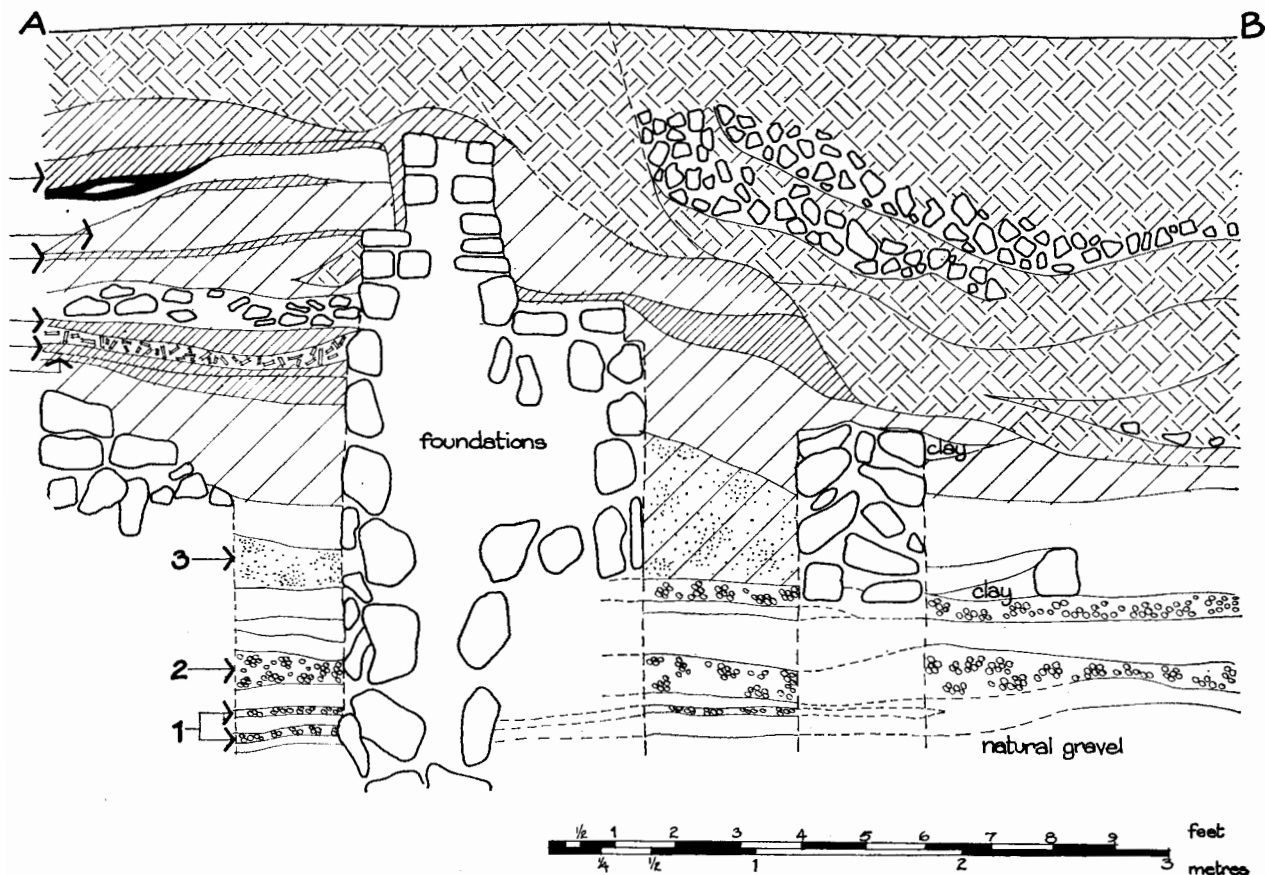


FIG. 2. The section.

probably the first sherd of iron-age A/B tradition to be found in Cirencester, and with it were several pieces of samian form 27 which Professor Atkinson assigned to the early Flavian period.

Levelling layer

Between floors 3 and 4 came the deep Antonine levelling layer which produced pottery ranging from the conquest to the mid 2nd century. The later pieces were undecorated samian, form 18/31. *Phase II.* The evidence coming from between floors 4 and 8 is far from satisfactory. Floor 4 belongs to the first stone house (II A) and has a fairly safe date of *c.* 150 supplied by the latest samian pottery in the levelling layer. The next helpful pottery is a burnt and crushed piece of a Nene valley type hunting cup in the hearth above floor 8. This cannot be put later than the early part of the 3rd century. This means that a sequence of five floors have to be put in the period 150–220. Floor 8 had time in the same period to get badly broken up, accumulate a thick layer of debris, and descend to a condition where several hearths were made above it, one on top of the other. Not surprisingly the pottery is of little use in trying to date these successive periods more closely. Floors 4 and 5 belong to the simple house (II B), while floor 6 may belong to the simple house with a corridor. Floor 7 seems the best candidate for the fully rebuilt courtyard house (II C) and floor 8 represents the extensive reflooring of this house (II D). Both floor 7 and the corridor south of the pavement produced a most peculiar hard mortar a report on which is included below (Note B). Floor 9 seems to belong to the mid 3rd century because it is cut by the foundation trench for the rebuilding of the

corridor walls. From one coin of Tetricus I found above floor 9 and below the later floors and debris of rebuilding the final reconstruction fits best into the early 4th century. Later floors have no doubt disappeared due to ploughing so that the circumstances of the end of the use of the stone house are completely unknown. Coins from the site allow occupation extending into the last decade of the 4th century, but levels of this date were probably near the present ground level.

Phase III. The ditches form at once the most interesting and most difficult feature of the site. The line of a shallow ditch may be traced in the centre of the section later obscured by a larger slightly irregular ditch which forms the main part of the right hand side of the section. The large ditch was cut from a high level down to a depth of at least eight feet. Its lower filling consisted of a very dense, fine, black earth upon which the late Canon Grensted kindly reported (Note C). The upper filling of the ditch contains tips of completely 'clean' Roman building debris, such as would be obtained during the digging of the ditch, which has been tipped in from the southern lip. Dating evidence is very slender since most of the finds are redeposited Roman material. One sherd of a 14th-century green glazed jug occurred about 15 inches from the bottom of the ditch, and a late 17th-century token lay above the tips. Among the clean Roman tips was a fair amount of late Roman shell gritted ware; it occurred nowhere else on the site. The features of the 1951 ditch to the north of the site are in general agreement with those just described except that there is slight evidence for a bank on the northern side.

Pottery

The samian pottery was examined by the late Professor Donald Atkinson who supplied dates for deposits wherever he felt that the sherds were consistent enough to hold as dating material. Potters' stamps found were DONATI· on form 33, and VTALIS on form 18.

The coarse pottery nowhere provided closely dated groups or material which could improve on the dating from samian pottery. There are therefore no pieces which have to be illustrated as part of vital evidence. Since the excavations of the Cirencester Excavations Committee in the past eleven years have provided so much well-dated coarse pottery from which, it is hoped, a Cirencester type sequence will be constructed, publication of pottery from Ashcroft, which will remain in the Corinium Museum for inspection and study, would be an unwarrantable waste of valuable space. One sherd, already mentioned, is not normal in Cirencester and comes ultimately from Bagendon. Miss Clare Fell, F.S.A., has kindly supplied the following note on it:

Note A. This is a sherd of heavily gritted dark-grey ware with a plain, slightly everted rim and a short neck with internal thickening. The outer surface is black and well burnished showing horizontal smoothing on the rim and neck, and vertical smoothing below the neck. The external rim diameter is $6\frac{1}{4}$ in.

Both in ware and in form this sherd closely resembles forms 163 and 164 at Bagendon.⁷ Native cooking pots of this type express the iron-age A/B tradition underlying the Belgic elements at Bagendon. They were more common in the earlier levels, but occurred throughout the occupation which lasted to a date between 50 and 60.

The Coins

Only two of the coins had any direct archaeological value, and these have been mentioned during discussion of the section. The other 35 coins by themselves tell us nothing, even the coins of Arcadius and Honorius mean little when it is remembered that a large open space was once under plough, and any unstratified coin could well have been brought one quarter the width of the Roman town. Put on record with the rest of the Cirencester collection however there is hope that a method may one day be found for extracting more general information. The coins were:

3 Claudius I RIC⁸ 66, copies as 66 (2)

7. E. M. Clifford, *Bagendon, a Belgic Oppidum*, 244-5 and FIG. 68, nos 163-4, FIG. 55, nos 7-16.

8. Mattingly, Sydenham and others, *Roman Imperial Coinage*.

1	Second/Third century	Core of plated denarius, otherwise illegible
1	Gallienus	Reverse illegible
1	Victorinus	RIC 55
3	Tetricus I	100 (2), rev. illeg. (1)
2	Radiates	Fragments otherwise illegible (2)
1	Constantine I	H.-K. ⁹ 384
1	Urbs Roma	556
2	Constantinopolis	66, 185
6	Fel Temp Reparatio	Regular as C.-K. ¹⁰ 25 (1), copies as 25 (5)
3	Valentinian I	C.-K. 479, 532, 1419
2	Valens	995, as 96 (1)
1	House of Valentinian	Rev. as 96 (1)
1	Valentinian II	As 162
2	Arcadius	As 164 (2)
1	Honorius	As 174
4	House of Theodosius	Rev. as 162 (1), as 796 (1), illeg. (2)
2	Tokens	French 16th century, English late 17th century (Bristol)

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37
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Small Finds

Only one small find cannot easily be paralleled. This small bronze sphinx, no 20, is illustrated in FIG 3. All the other small finds belong to classes of objects which have been illustrated many times before so that only one appropriate reference for each is given.

- A. *Bone* (1) Several fragments of human skull. Anatomical details will be included in a forthcoming paper summarizing other skeletal material from Cirencester. The fragments were found in the disturbed 4th-century levels above floor 9.
 (2 and 3) Carved fragments of bone sheet *cf*¹¹ IV pl. LVII 276 h and n, and ¹² FIG 92 no 2.
 (4) Bone counter *cf*¹² FIG 91 no 13, diameter 1.8 cm.
 (5) Bone needle *cf*¹² FIG 91 no 1, length 13.8 cm.
 (6, 7 and 8) Bone pins *cf*¹² FIG 90 no 1, length 7.1 cm (incomplete); FIG 90 no 2, length 11.0 cm; and FIG 90 no 7, length 9.1 cm.
- B. *Glass* (9) Handle of a glass bottle *cf*¹¹ IV pl. LXVIII no 371.
- C. *Iron* (10) Knife *cf*¹¹ IV pl. LX no 326 with a knob at the end of the handle, length 12.0 cm (incomplete).
- D. *Lead* (11) A weight of acorn shape, length 5.1 cm, maximum width 4.4 cm with iron hooks at each end. Weight 351 gm, corrosion and maltreatment may have caused anything up to a variation of 2 gm from its original weight.
- E. *Bronze* (12) A needle *cf*¹² FIG 89 no 17, length 7.2 cm (incomplete).
 (13) A pin *cf*¹² FIG 89 no 10, length 6.1 cm (incomplete).
 (14) Finger ring *cf*¹¹ III pl. 11 no 28.
 (15 and 16) Bracelets *cf*¹¹ II pl. XXII no 61 and no 63.
 (17) Nail cleaner *cf*¹¹ IV pl. XXXVI no 125 but smaller and without decoration, length 3.5 cm.
 (18 and 19) Brooches *cf*¹² FIG 80 no 14 and ¹³ pl. XLI no 46.

9. Carson, Hill and Kent, *Late Roman Bronze Coinage*, pt I.

10. *Ibid.*, pt II.

11. J. P. Bushe-Fox, 'II Second', 'III third', 'IV fourth Report on Richborough', *S.A.R.R.*, vii, x and xvi.

12. K. M. Kenyon, 'Jewry Wall site Leicester', *S.A.R.R.*, xv.

13. Hawkes and Hull, *Camulodunum*, *S.A.R.R.*, xiv.

- (20) Statuette of a sphinx (FIG 3). Corrosion obscures its right wing but it is otherwise well preserved.

Martin Henig has very kindly supplied a note on this find:

Note B. One of the more unusual objects found in the excavation was a figurine of cast-bronze in the form of a sphinx (or possibly of a siren).¹⁴ The face, clean-shaven and evidently female, is framed by locks which hang down as far as the relatively ample breasts. The wings, shown on either side of the body are pointing upwards (although corrosion has removed any detail that there may once have been), and the whole thing is supported on the four-toed paw of a carnivore.

The figurine was found in a context which would not exclude a dating as late as the early 2nd century A.D.

Height 2.3 cm (foot 0.6 cm); width across breast 0.6 cm.

It is clear that the figurine was not freestanding, but attached to some other object, for the back of the piece is not worked. The only close parallel known to me from Britain is the Swan from London—evidently one of the feet from a tripod lamp-stand,¹⁵ but a ? Silenus-head flanked by wings and standing on a claw was found at Bavai in Northern France.¹⁶ In addition to these we may note the sphinxes (or sirens) which support water-heaters from Pompeii.¹⁷ Similar creatures on bronze cista are probably much earlier in date (perhaps 3rd century B.C.) and serve to remind us that the artistic tradition to which all these zoomorphic attachments belong, is a very ancient one.¹⁸



FIG. 3. The bronze sphinx (scale 1 : 1).

Building materials

The only unusual feature amongst the building materials was a peculiar deposit in floor 7 and the corridor to the south of the pavement. Some lumps of this very hard substance had impressions of straw, and some of wood. The deposit was so hard that it needed a well aimed pick-axe to make any impression on it, and when fractured it came up in large sheets. A sample was submitted through the good offices of Dr Norman Davey to the Building Research Station and was examined by Mr D. C. Teychenné, who kindly produced this report:

Note C. The sample comprised (a) porous, loosely bonded 'concrete' and (b) dense 'concrete' with relatively large, rounded aggregate: the two were partially separated by a fragment of timber.

In thin section, under the microscope, (a) is seen to comprise scattered fragments of oolitic limestone in an 'earthy' type of matrix which is often crystalline around the edges

14. Martin Henig, 'Zoomorphic Supports of Cast Bronze from Roman Sites in Britain', *Arch. Journ.*, CXXVII (1971), 186, no. 2 and pl. xxv C.

15. *Ibid.*, 184, no. 1 and pl. xxv A and B.

16. G. Faider-Feytmans, *Recueil des Bronzes de Bavai*, 8th supplement to *Gallia* (1957), 117 and pl. xlvi, no. 288.

17. F. B. Farbell, *Catalogue of Bronzes in the Field Museum of Natural History reproduced from Originals in the National Museum of Naples* (Chicago, 1909), 116 and pl. lxxv, no. 96; 117 and pl. lxxvi, no. 101.

18. A. de Ridder, *Les Bronzes Antiques du Louvre II* (Paris, 1915), 40 and pl. lxxiv, no. 1668.

of the numerous, irregular pores; the oolitic grains are well formed and of medium size. In the thin sections prepared from (b) there are relatively large and small pieces of limestone aggregate occurring in an 'earthy' matrix which contains very finely divided aggregate, mainly of angular quartz, but including some calcite; the fragments of oolitic limestone vary from very small to medium sized ooliths in a continuous matrix of crystalline calcite.

The limestone fragments are of a kind which occur in the locality of Cirencester; it is possible that the dense part of sample (b) contains marl.

Dr Davey agrees with us that the denser part of the sample is natural conglomerate; we cannot say whether the softer material in (a) was formed naturally or was a man-made material using oolitic limestone particles as an aggregate, although Dr Davey considers that this softer material would be a lime mortar.

Natural deposits

An understanding of the thick black deposit in the bottom of the ditch was a vital stage in understanding the use of the ditch and excluding the possibility of its function as a drain. Canon L. W. Grensted very kindly undertook to examine a sample from the deposit and produced this most useful and decisive report:

Note D. This deposit proved on examination to be closely akin to humus. There was no trace of water, and the only mollusca found were rather numerous *Trichia hispida* (L.), one of the commonest land shells in comparatively dry places, often under long grass. There were no fresh-water mollusca, and the deposit seems to have formed slowly from a cover of vegetation with little or no standing or flowing water. Even if it was at times wet, the water seems never to have been sufficiently permanent to support a fresh-water fauna. The impression given is of a dyke or ditch lying open and mostly dry for a considerable period of time.

Discussion

Evidence in phase II is disappointingly scrappy. The main points of interest and information which emerge are the levelling of the site in the Antonine period, carrying as it does a hint of large scale town planning, and intensive if not frenzied building periods over the subsequent fifty years. The indecisive finish to phase II, the life of the stone building, is not due to the limits imposed on the excavators but to the fact that the vital stratigraphy lay in, if not above, the level of the Victorian allotments.

Phase I is useful in that it pin-points three stages of wooden buildings between about 50 and 75. This occupation has native affinities, lies outside the fort which was occupied during some of that period, near the slaves' cemetery discovered in 1960,¹⁹ and half submerged in a disused gravel pit. Further comment seems unnecessary.

Phase III needs a short examination to point out what the excavations revealed and also what should be sought in the future. The first shallow ditch has left too few remains to yield any information, but the large ditch is at least confined within certain limits. In date these limits are wide. The ditch cannot have been dug before the final rebuilding of the stone building in the 4th century. It had been a large open ditch slowly filling by growth of grass and formation of humus for some hundreds of years by the time that the 14th-century sherd was deposited in an undisturbed level. Sometime after that it was filled in, probably by pushing bank material back into it. No historical record of it has been traced.

The purpose of the ditch, and its smaller northern counterpart, must match the labour and effort needed to dig them. The possibility of drainage is firmly removed, and the main ditch is far too large at 16 feet deep from the top of the bank to the bottom of the ditch, for a simple boundary.

19. Richard Reece, 'The Oakley Cottage Cemetery', *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LXXXI, 51.

This is emphasized by the effort that was needed to dig it out of solid Roman buildings, and by the fact that it corresponds to no known past or present legal boundary. The usual suggestion for ditches and banks which are neither drains nor boundaries is defence, and this must remain the most likely suggestion in this case, even though there are difficulties.

The smaller northern ditch, if it had a definite bank, may have had it on its northern side, i.e. above the pavement. A large amount of clean Roman debris, exactly what would be produced in digging the ditch, was found in the fill of the large ditch suggesting that it was tipped in from the southern lip. The side of the trench opposite the section illustrated was nearer the north lip of the ditch, and showed far less Roman rubble. The bank of the large ditch therefore seems to have been on its south side. This makes it difficult if not impossible, to give it any function related to the medieval town to the north. In fact, assuming the complete shape of the ditch to be a closed curve, a bank on its 'outside' at present makes nonsense. Any assumption other than a closed curve, or irregular circle for the ditch is straying too far from the present evidence, and the presence of the smaller ditch 'inside' the main one only adds to the confusion.

This impasse presents a challenge which must be met since the problems lie in the thousand years between 400 and 1400 when we are most in need of information in Cirencester. Three possible periods in which the structures can lie are the conflicts of the 5th and 6th century, the defence of the Saxon settlement surrounding the very large church of the 8th or 9th century, or the troubles in the century after the Norman conquest. The last period is the least likely since it is the most likely to have left dating evidence, and this was not found. A reasoned conclusion then, suggests that we are dealing with dark age defences.

With two separate excavations ten years apart there are many people to thank beyond those already mentioned in the text. Amongst those who helped with work on the site mention must be made of Miss Rosalind Dunnnett and Messrs D. C. W. Salter, J. P. Mansbridge, P. Grace, P. D. C. Brown and M. Haines. The first excavation was helped by grants from the Craven Committee of the University of Oxford, Mr M. W. Ingram and the Cirencester Urban District Council. The second excavation was financed by a grant from the Ministry of Works. Work in 1951 was undertaken at the suggestion of the late Sir Herbert Ingram, and was continued in 1961 with the forbearance and co-operation of the Directors of Messrs Mycalex and T.I.M. Ltd. They also bore the cost of backfilling and with large quantities of liquid cement making the site safe for building.

Valuable assistance was given on the site and in subsequent work by the late Miss M. V. Taylor and Dr D. B. Harden, Mrs E. M. Clifford and Mr J. S. Wachter. Mr J. Real at the Corinium Museum acted as custodian of the facts and finds between the periods of excavation, and Mr Peter Baker drew the final figures for publication. To all these and many others whose help was invaluable the excavators give their best thanks.