Silchester

The ‘Town Life’ Project 2014

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Cover and figure 1. Kite vertical of Insula IX trench at the end of the season: photo by Mark Woolston Housebold
Excavations took place in Insula III and Insula IX over six weeks during July and August 2014. By the end of the season excavation in Insula IX, in the area first opened in 1997, was completed and the trench backfilled.

**Insula IX**

At the start of the final season in 2014, the remaining area to be excavated to the natural gravel subsoil lay in the eastern half of the trench. In addition to completing all the archaeology within the line of the Roman north-south and east-west streets, limited areas beneath both streets were also completely excavated. The highlights of the concluding season included locating the northern end of our great hall 2. This gives the structure a length of c.47.5m and a width between c.6.5m and 8.7m.

New Iron Age post-hole alignments were identified, while the alignment of the ditches flanking the Iron Age lane projecting to the north-east appears to turn south-eastwards as if to enclose the end of the great hall, thus giving the clearest indication of the extent of the compound in the pre-Roman period. Sealed beneath the north-south street and by its construction was a well with waterlogged deposits. The preserved insects, seeds and plant remains will give evidence of conditions about the time of the Roman conquest, AD43-44.
The trench opened in the south-east corner of Insula III in 2013 was extended to cover an area of 30m by 30m, 900m² (3). With the completion of the re-excavation of the Victorian trenches of 1891, this area was also backfilled at the end of the season.

The doubling of the area under excavation in Insula III to encompass the full extent of the remains interpreted in 1891 as those of a bath house allowed for a much better understanding of them, their chronology and interpretation (4).
The Victorian excavation methodology

Removal of the plough soil by machine revealed additional Victorian trial trenching in the north-west on a different alignment to that of the single, NNW/SSE trench identified in 2013 in the south-west corner of the trench. Five, narrow trenches, aligned north-west south-east and at intervals of c.2.3m to c.3.6m, extended beyond the limit of our trench to north and west, but all stopped short of the structure identified in 1891 as a hypocaust and the remains of the foundations to its south and east. The assumption is that more extensive excavation was underway in the south-east corner when these trenches were dug. Four of these trenches, however, encountered remains of the walls of the large room which ‘enclosed’ the hypocaust and seem to have recognised and, largely, respected them.

More purposive trenching in 1891 involved following the line of foundations and structures identified by the initial, trial trenching with systematic, wider (c.1.6m) trenching, which straddled the remains in question. Finally, a more open area investigation, some 6.5m in width, was carried out on the southern and eastern side of the insula. On the eastern side of the insula the Victorian trenching followed the line of the colonnade from the intersection of the north-south and east-west streets, extending beyond the northern edge of the trench. Several large pits and wells were also excavated. Some of these were clearly of late Iron Age date; others could be of 2nd century and later date.
The sequence of Victorian trenching would seem to be as follows:

- Trial trenching (aligned NNW/SSE) in the south/south-east
- Wider trenching initiated to follow the lines of wall foundations parallel with E-W street
- Trial trenching oriented NW/SE and started from beyond the limits of our trench into the north-west of our trench
- ‘Open area’ trenching along the eastern side of the insula
- Further, wider trenching to follow foundations identified by 3 and 4
- Excavation of deeper, negative features, presumed to be pits or wells

Through the re-excavation of the Victorian trenches, the following sequence is proposed for the south-east corner of Insula III:

**Late Iron Age & Earliest Roman**

Traces of the Late Iron Age/earliest Roman occupation horizon were identified in several places in the southern half of the trench where the Victorian excavations had reached the natural gravel subsoil. The depth of this earliest occupation never exceeded some 0.2m in depth; in some places it appears to have been truncated by Roman building activity.

A very small area of opus signinum flooring (6), the only evidence of a structure earlier than the main, early Roman building described below, was observed towards the centre of the trench, overlain by later footings and make-up.

6. Patch of mid 1st century AD opus signinum crushed tile flooring

7. Tile dump as revealed in Sondage 3
Overlying the pre-Roman and earliest Roman ground surface were dumped deposits of soil, gravel and clay which extended across the entire area of the trench, though heavily truncated by the Victorian trench running parallel with the N-S street, to create a made-up surface to a height of no more than 0.9m above the underlying ground surface.

This make-up could be seen to continue north and west beyond the limits of the excavation trench. It also included dumps of waster tile (7).

In the earliest stages of this process wall footings of a building, including the foundations of a colonnade running parallel with both streets, were set in place (8).
At least one wall (30349) extended north, and one wall (30054), extended west, beyond the limits of the trench. The colonnade survived best along the north-south street (10), where it was supported by at least eight, tile-constructed, rectangular piers, spaced at intervals of c.2m. The southernmost two piers were badly robbed and the northernmost was only partly exposed by the excavation, but indicated the continuation of the colonnade further north. A dwarf wall of tiles (bessales and lydions) linked piers 2-5.

The colonnade running parallel with the east-west street was poorly preserved but its existence is suggested by the remains of two piers, the one at the south-east corner and the remains of a second close to the western edge of the trench.

The remainder are presumed to have been robbed out by the later digging of a street side ditch (11) which was traced the full length of the trench, parallel with the E-W street.

It is possible that a similar ditch ran parallel with the N-S street, as was the case in Insula IX, and it may account for some truncations of the western face of some of the piers, but the Victorian excavations had otherwise removed all trace of it. Remains of a further, tile-constructed pier, also marked on the plan of 1891, were observed in the north section of the trench, on the line of the eastern outer wall of the building.
The evidence for the wall footings of the building proper is variable (8). All walls appear to have been robbed to a greater or lesser extent, with the better preserved further from the streets. Some wall lines are clearly defined by laid flint or chalk blocks; others much less so and, in one case (30415), the robber trench is the only evidence for the course of the wall. The footings of the outer wall were traced through an east-west Victorian trench which exposed them on the south side, though the quality of what survived declined markedly from well laid and coursed flint to the west (30054, 30092) to a thinning structure of flint and chalk blocks set in clay to the east (30075). The existence of the return to the north could only be detected as a truncated robber trench (30415). Owing to the depth of the truncation, it is not certain that this wall continued as far as the northern edge of the trench. Figure (8) distinguishes between those walls where the footings survived in situ, those where there is some doubt owing to the slightness of the remains, and those whose existence is inferred from robber trenches. Some of the walls plotted on the plan of 1891 proved to be entirely false - wishful thinking, where the make-up deposits had been pedestalled by trenching either side (12). Such ‘walls’ had been extrapolated from more securely evidenced footings, and these are indicated on the Victorian plan.

What are we left with of the plan of the building (8)? Towards the centre of the trench well preserved footings define a large room (Room 1) or internal court of 12m by 8m. While the east wall (30320/30216) extends to join the southern, east-west aligned wall (30075), the extent of the west footing (30349) is less clear and it is not certain that it extended as far as the south wall. Between the south wall (30355) of Room 1 and the south wall of the building, there is some evidence for a one third/two third subdivision of the space in the form of an east-west wall (3036), defined more as a linear, clay structure, but with some laid flints at its western end. Two metres to the south is a short extent of a further wall of flint (30175), aligned slightly...
obliquely to the course of its neighbours to north and south. The Victorian trenching indicated that it continued eastwards, but trending a little to the south. However, we could not find any evidence sufficient to give us confidence that this continuation was real. It is possible that the residual structure is earlier, perhaps relating to the adjacent patch of *opus signinum*. Between the extended east wall of Room 1 and the eastern, outer wall marked only by shallow footings 30415 there is some evidence of an east-west wall (30440) linking the two, but the stone or tile is not well or consistently laid along its length. What remains may be the result of thorough robbing; it would create a room to the south of 6.8m by 12m, Room 5.

A striking feature of the wall footings described above is the lack of foundation trenches which cut below the ground surface at the time of their construction; the walls merely lie on it, the footings embedded in the first deposits of make-up. As a consequence several lengths of footing show marked slumping into underlying pits and wells.

Another distinct phase of pre or early Flavian building activity is represented by two robber trenches which do cut into the underlying natural, their positioning and orientation bearing no obvious relation to the wall footings already described (14). These two features were observed in two sondages excavated to recover evidence with which to date the sequence of occupation in Insula III.

One robber trench (30517), c.0.7m wide and c.0.12m deep, also observed in the side of a Victorian excavation of a pit (13), runs north-east/south-west, across the centre of the excavated area, while the other (30337/30324), 1m wide and 0.60m deep, can be traced through the slumping of later deposits into it to the north and west of the sondage where it was identified. This trench, a reverse ‘L’ in plan, is located in the west of our trench (15). It shares the same orientation as the footings described above and is adjacent to them. The common fill of gravel and mortar in both robber trenches suggest that they may be connected, but, given the different orientations, it is quite possible that they are unrelated to each other. We cannot be confident whether either or both are earlier or later than the major structure with surviving footings, but trench 30517 is probably, but not demonstrably, truncated by the walls of Room 1.

**Robbing and an unfinished building**

Although the Victorian trenching following the walls has removed much of the evidence, it would seem that all the walls were robbed to a greater (closer to the streets) or lesser (away from the streets) extent. One section where the trenching to define the full extent of N-S wall 30320/30216 did not follow all the way through to the southern wall of the building clearly reveals the robbing cut (16).

Given the lack of foundations into the underlying natural and the overall, poor quality of the build, evident in the subsidence of several walls into underlying pits, which would have threatened the stability of the superstructure, it is doubtful whether this building could have stood to any height, if was ever even completed. The sides of the Victorian trenching reveal a very uneven surface to the makeup across the trench and no trace whatsoever, even as a robbed structure, of any floor surface. The implication is that the robbing took place before construction was complete.

A gravelly soil, possibly including further imported material, developed across the excavated area and sealed the robber trenches of all the walls, such that nothing at all remained to indicate the existence, potential or actual, of the building.
Robber trenches and footings

14. Plan showing robber trenches and sondages

15. Robbing cut observed in sondage 5

16. Robbing cut seen in south-facing section (arrows show the edges of the cut)
Pottery from the Late Iron Age and earliest Roman occupation indicates a pre or early Flavian date for our building and all the phases of construction so far discovered. Pottery from the soil which was laid/developed across the building site gives a late 1st/early 2nd century terminus ante quem for the demolition and robbing. A pit, 30487, dug through the make-up in the NW corner of the trench was filled with rubbish, including pottery no later in date than the Antonine period. The ditch (30879/30245) along the north side of the E-W street was also filled with material of a similar date.

There is little evidence of any use of Insula III, at least as far as its SE corner is concerned, until the late 3rd and 4th century. To this period we can attribute the fragments of flint wall on gravel-filled construction trenches along the edges of both streets with further traces of north-south aligned, gravel-filled, wall trenches just to the north of the E-W street (17). These suggest the presence of buildings, perhaps similar in character to the late Roman cottages-cum-workshops of similar build found in Insula IX. In the south-west corner of the trench several flint-packed postholes, running parallel with the E-W street,
suggest a fence or timber-framed building. In support of the latter interpretation and immediately to the north, and also parallel with the street, were the remains of two shallow, flat-bottomed trenches (30085, 30086), both possibly beam slots. The slumped fills of a flint-lined pit or well (30126) of uncertain date lay to the east of this group of features.

Much better preserved were the remains of an isolated hypocaust structure (30328) towards the centre of the excavated area, apparently unrelated to anything else within the trench (19).

This structure was built over the edge of a dump of oyster shells extending to the north. It comprised an external wall consisting of a single course of flints, one flint in width, only further widened and heightened to compensate for subsidence on the southern side. The western wall was broken to accommodate a short flue of more substantial construction incorporating re-used tile as well as flint. Within the structure were four substantial ‘pilae’ of mortared flint construction in each of the corners, with two of lesser build, one incorporating a re-used tegula, in between. Interpreted as a hypocaust by the Victorian excavators, it is not at all clear what function this structure served. No trace of any burnt material survived within the structure and none of the internal wall faces, including the cheeks of the flue, showed any trace of burning or applied heat.

Given its relatively late date, it is possible that it was intended to be a corn-drying oven, but its design is very different from that of the typical, T-shaped, corn-dryers of the late Roman period, one example of which was found in Calleva.

Adjacent to it, and with one end angled towards the hypocaust, but with no evidence of a structural relationship to it, is a linear feature (30120) which heads south towards the E-W street (20).
This comprises two parallel lines of flint and other stone flanking a void which could have contained a wooden pipe, the whole structure functioning as a drain, as the Victorians had interpreted its function. Are the two structures in some way related? Were the ‘hypocaust’ foundations sufficient to carry a structure which might have contained water? The ‘pilae’ appear robust, but the outer wall of the structure is flimsy. Whatever might have been intended, it appears that the ‘hypocaust’ structure was never exposed to fire and may never have been used.

The final late feature of note is the flue-like hearth structure (30015), the flue constructed of re-used tegulae, which was re-discovered in 2103 (21). It is aligned N-S and shows clear signs of burning. It is undated, but may have been associated with a late Roman property located in the SE corner of the insula. While it is frustrating that the later Roman structures cannot be more closely dated, the question must remain open as to whether some might date after AD 400. The discovery in 2013 of (unstratified) sherd of chaff-tempered ware of 5th to 8th century date points to some post-Roman occupation and some of our late structures may well be 5th century or later in date.

**Discussion**

It was already clear in 2013 that the remains which the Victorian excavators had interpreted as a possible bath house could not possibly represent such a structure. It was also clear that they were not all of the same date; there were extensive footings of an early Roman building and a number of disparate features of late Roman date. The 2014 season provided much more evidence of the extent and character of the early building as well as confirming a much later date for structures such as the ‘hypocaust’ and the drain.

**The Pre or early Flavian Buildings**

The south-east corner of Insula III contained the remains of three phases of pre or early Flavian building, the earliest represented only by a small patch of opus signinum, and a second by two lengths of robbed wall on two different orientations. The third, comprising the most substantial remains, broadly corresponding with the walls planned in 1891, were of a single building associated with the making up of the ground to about 0.9m above the previous ground surface. Certain walls and the associated make-up extend beyond the 900m² to both the north and the west, indicating a significantly larger building than the hypothesised bath house of 1891. This building was surrounded by a colonnade on its eastern side, fronting onto the N-S street, and, arguably, on its south side as well. There were up to five rooms, the largest of which – and the best defined - was of 96m². There were no obvious sub-divisions in the western quarter of the excavated area though the walls defining this space extended west and north beyond the excavated area. With only part of the building revealed within the excavated area, it is hard to interpret, but a building of high status, with at least one large room or internal court, is indicated. This would also be consistent with the fragments of Purbeck Marble inscriptions, veneers, etc and other high quality architectural masonry recovered in 1891 as well as in 2013-14.
A pre or early Flavian date is assured and the find of four fragments of ‘Nero’ tiles (22), the highest concentration from anywhere within the town, points towards a Neronian construction date for some of the structures, potential or actual, identified here, even though no such tile has been found in situ in a structure. Yet, for a potential building of high status there is at least one major anomaly, the lack of attention to the foundations which were not taken below the pre-existing ground surface, except for the enigmatic phase where the masonry had been entirely robbed out. The evidence suggests ‘stop-start’ in addition to inadequate architectural supervision. Was the presumed Neronian intervention to rescue a doomed project, perhaps of the client king, begun on borrowed finance whose credit had run out or been withdrawn? If this was the case, it, too, was doomed as the building gives strong indications of never having been finished. Why was the project abandoned? Was it precipitated by Nero’s death and the damnatio memoriae which followed? In that regard it is pertinent to note that this area, at least, of the Insula, despite its central position within the town, was not built on again until the late Roman period.

While the late Roman use of Insula III is not without interest, it is the very early Roman use and the early building programme which commands attention. Given what we now know, perhaps the most important question to be addressed is the intended scale of the project which clearly extended beyond the bounds of the SE corner of Insula III. Did it encompass the whole of Insula III? How many buildings were envisaged? Some of the comments by Fox and Hope in reporting the discoveries in Insula III in 1891 do suggest much more extensive early remains. It may be relevant to note that Insula III is one of a group of eight insulae – six to the west of the forum, four to the east – of a smaller module to the other planned insulae of Calleva. Perhaps they were designed with particular buildings, or complexes of buildings in mind?

Insula III is the third area of the town where modern excavations have shed light on early developments. The contrast between the high status project in Insula III and the crowded, simple, timber-framed structures of Insula IX to the north, or the pre-Flavian military principia or early forum of timber in the adjacent Insula IV to the east is very striking.
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