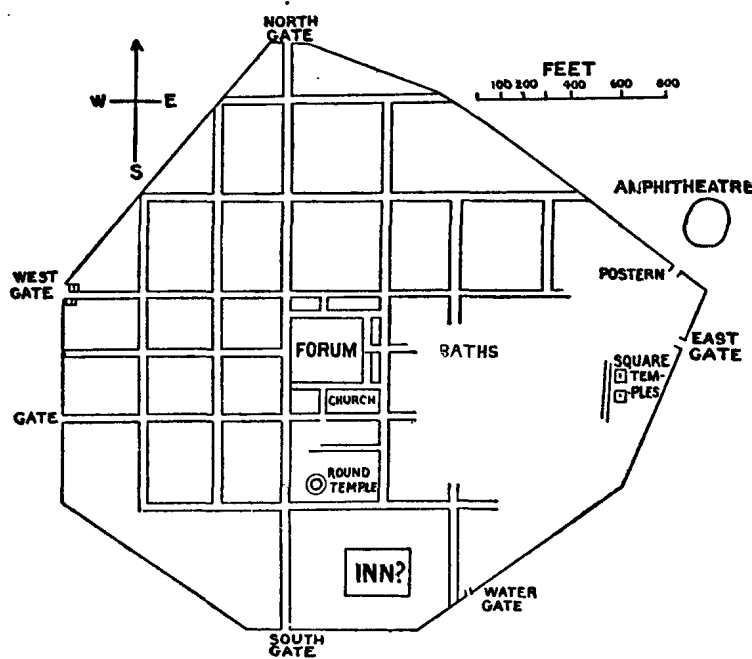


Report of SAS September Lecture – Silchester: recent excavations by Professor Michael Fulford, University of Reading From Sarah Hanna

Our September lecture was given by Mike Fulford, professor of Roman Archaeology at Reading University. He has been digging at Silchester Roman town for many years, and indeed this represents a significant part of his career. From 2018 to 2021 he was working on the public bath house, and this excavation marks the end of the work at Silchester for some time to come.



Plan of Calleva Atrebatum walls and grid system of streets, 1909.
Credit: Wikipedia

The remains of the Roman town of Silchester are situated northeast of Basingstoke, Hampshire close to the Berkshire border. The site was first occupied as an Iron Age *oppidum* (trading centre) and the Roman town dates from ~AD45, known as *Calleva Atrebatum*. The bath house had been excavated in 1903-4 as part of a larger dig carried out by the Society of Antiquaries between 1890 and 1909. A well-drawn plan had been produced, but much detail was missed.

The original first century bath house did not concur with the alignment of the road system, so presumably predated it. Although small it was architecturally detailed, with a columned portico to the front elevation, while to one side an earlier Iron Age ditch was repurposed to serve the baths (which was to cause structural problems later). By the 2nd century, the complex had been remodelled and enlarged, with impressive hypocaust rooms and other facilities, obliterating much of the early structure. Later still, the heated area was remodelled again, with



Bath house, 2021: vertical view of Trench 5 calderium.
Credit: University of Reading

apsidal ends and new furnace arrangements. Finally, as the Roman world declined and the building deteriorated, it was reduced to isolated units in its last active use.

One fascinating type of find at Silchester are tiles stamped with the imprint of the Emperor Nero, which are almost unknown elsewhere in Britain. It is confirmed that they were made in a brickworks at Little London situated about 2km to the south of Calleva Atrebatum, a site also excavated by the Reading team. It is possible to speculate as to why these tiles only occur at Silchester: one possibility is that Roman towns to the east had been devastated by the Boudiccan rebellion, while Calleva seems to have remained loyal. As a result it could have been a base for Suetonius as he reasserted Roman control, and was rewarded by investment. Relatively few finds of personal items survive from the bath house, apart from a number of copper alloy '*strigili*', used for cleansing oil and dirt from the body before bathing.



Excavation of the Portico Area: Credit: University of Reading

There is still much post-excavation work to be done on the baths excavation before publication of the full report and conclusions. In the meantime Mike Fulford has produced a book on his previous excavations; '*Silchester Revealed: the Iron Age and Roman Town of Calleva*', (Windhover Press 2021, from Oxbow books £16.99).

This lecture was well attended as it deserved, and attracted a few new members. We hope they will enjoy our lectures this season and in future years.

For a Youtube video on the similar subject see Mike Fulford's lecture on Zoom to the Hampshire Field Club in 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMh-2kNEFaY>.

Many thanks for contributions from Martyn Dowell & John Langran