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EXCAVATIONS AT SILCHESTER, HANTS, 1968

By JOHN COLLIS

ABSTRACT

Prior to the construction of the earthen defences there is evidence of pre- and post-conquest settlement around the South Gate. The earth bank was built after *c* AD 160–180, but the stone wall probably not until about AD 250 or later, but before AD 300. Sections of the report are on microfiche, 2–29.

CAUSE OF THE EXCAVATION

In 1966 a length of the Roman town wall and defences was taken into guardianship for conservation by the then Ministry of Public Building and Works. The piece involved extends for several hundred metres either side of the South Gate (Fig 1), and includes the large pit behind the wall known locally as 'Onion's Hole'. The bank behind the wall which has also been taken into care was completely overgrown with undergrowth, especially blackthorn, and a number of large deciduous trees which had to be cleared before restoration could start (Fig 2). The top of the wall was riddled with the roots of these trees, while its base had been eroded and undermined by up to 2m in places. The excavation had the primary aim of investigating the construction and thickness of the wall at this point, the nature of its foundations, and the extent of root penetration behind the wall. Archaeological aims were to confirm the sequence and dating of the defences found in previous excavations (Cotton 1947), and test for evidence of earlier and especially pre-Roman occupation.

THE EXCAVATION

1. PREVIOUS WORK

The South Gate was excavated in 1870 (Boon 1974), but otherwise there has been no recorded excavation along this length of wall. The main investigation of the Roman wall was undertaken by Mrs Cotton in 1938–9 during the conservation of the northern line of the defences (Cotton 1947). She demonstrated that there was an early phase of construction, with an earthen bank and ditch datable to between AD 160–180. Early in the third century, and dated by a coin of Septimius Severus, the wall was constructed. The front of the bank was cut back, the old ditch was filled in and the new wall constructed over it; a new ditch was dug outside. Boon (1969) has discussed the chronological position of these defences within the total defensive framework, and especially has detected an earlier defence which runs under the southern walls in the area with which we are concerned.

2. SUBSEQUENT WORK

In 1974 a further trench was dug by Dr M Fulford of Reading University, just west of our Trench I, producing the same basic sequence and dating evidence; he also re-excavated the South Gate in 1975.

3. THE METHOD OF EXCAVATION

Work started on the site on December 27th 1967 for an initial period of three weeks. There was a second season in September 1968, and a final fortnight ending on December 24th 1968. The seasons corresponded with the worst weather in a bad year – the site was cut off by snow in January, and by floods in September when much of the interior of the town was under water. This caused major problems especially in Trench I where the loose filling twice collapsed despite timber shoring.

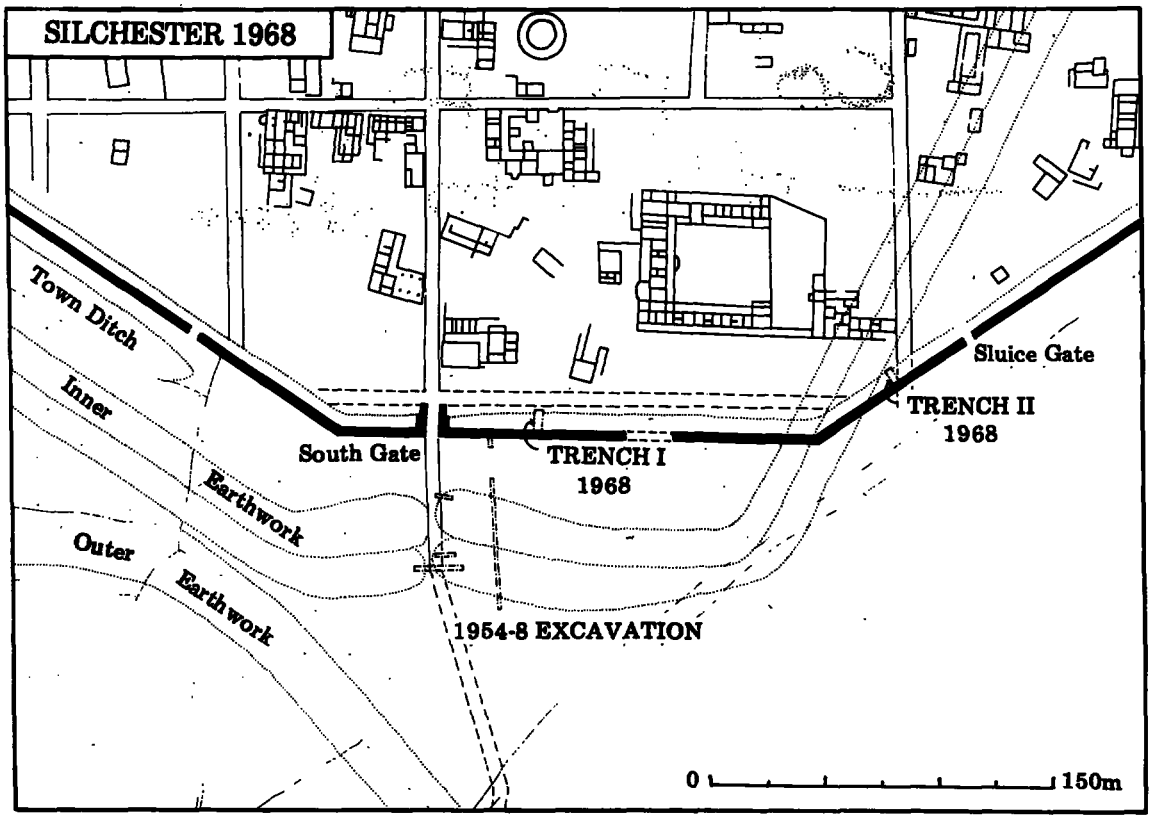

Fig 1. Silchester: position of the 1968 trenches across the town defences.

Two trenches were dug at right angles to the wall across the bank behind the wall (Fig 1). They were not extended beyond the limits of the guardianship, so complete sections of the bank were not obtained, and the hope of extending one trench across the ditches also had to be abandoned. Choice of the siting of the trenches was limited by the state of preservation of the bank, and by the presence of large tree stumps (Fig 2). Trench I had been highly disturbed by rabbits, especially the upper deposits, and the generally loose character of the infill finally made it possible to take only half of it down to the natural sub-soil. Trench II was less disturbed, but though it was excavated to below the water table, natural was not encountered.

Although a layer system was employed for the deposits, for practical reasons the trenches were dug in spits. All finds from the bank and wall foundation trench were plotted in roughly, and labels projected on to the sections, so that the position of doubtful sherds could be checked. With the multiplicity of layers and turves it was not always clear during digging if a new deposit was significant or not, so the plotting of finds acted as an extra check. In practice the trench collapse and bad weather took a toll of some of the labels, but about 1000 sherds were measured in. In addition to drawings, a series of overlapping photographs of the sections was made.

4. THE RESULTS

The material falls into five main phases, A–E:

Pre-bank, Bank, Wall and two post-wall phases (Figs 3, 4, 5 and 6).

A. Pre-Bank occupation.

The results from the two trenches were very different, and have been subdivided:

A1. Trench II should lie just outside the line of the earliest defences as defined by Boon (Fig 1). Our failure to reach natural does however raise the possibility that by chance our trench actually lay on the line of the ditch. If this was the ditch, the layers were remarkably level, and it seems more likely that this was a natural hollow which may have dictated the line of the defences. The hollow gradually filled up with silt deposits interspersed with deliberate clay infill. The top gravel surface slopes to the north and had several hollows in it whose significance it is impossible to interpret within the narrow confines of the trench. The meagre finds suggest that the hollow or ditch was filling up gradually during the first century. The native wares are well represented (12 out of 33 sherds) and the two well stratified samian sherds are both south Gaulish. The later sherd (402) dated AD 100–130 comes from the top of the deposit.

A2. The pit in Trench 1. This was filled with the same black soil with occasional gravel as the overlying deposits, and there was a spread of orange gravel sealing the pit. There is no evidence for the function of the pit. The finds should all be pre-conquest.

A3. Lower occupation level, Trench I. Overlying the dirty greyish natural gravel in Trench I was a dark grey deposit with streaks of gravel. Whether this represents midden build-up or cultivation is unclear. The coarse pottery and the samian show it was accumulating during the pre-conquest and immediately post-conquest period with a terminal date somewhere in the AD 50's. Native wares and Gallo-Belgic pottery are both well represented, consisting of nearly 50% of the finds (45 out of 102) sherds. An infant burial was found cut into the natural, but its precise stratifigraphical position could not be observed.

A4. Upper occupation level, Trench I. This layer of black soil represents a build up over a century, though some sherds like the two

Fig 2. Silchester: view of the defences looking east from the South Gate, January 1968.

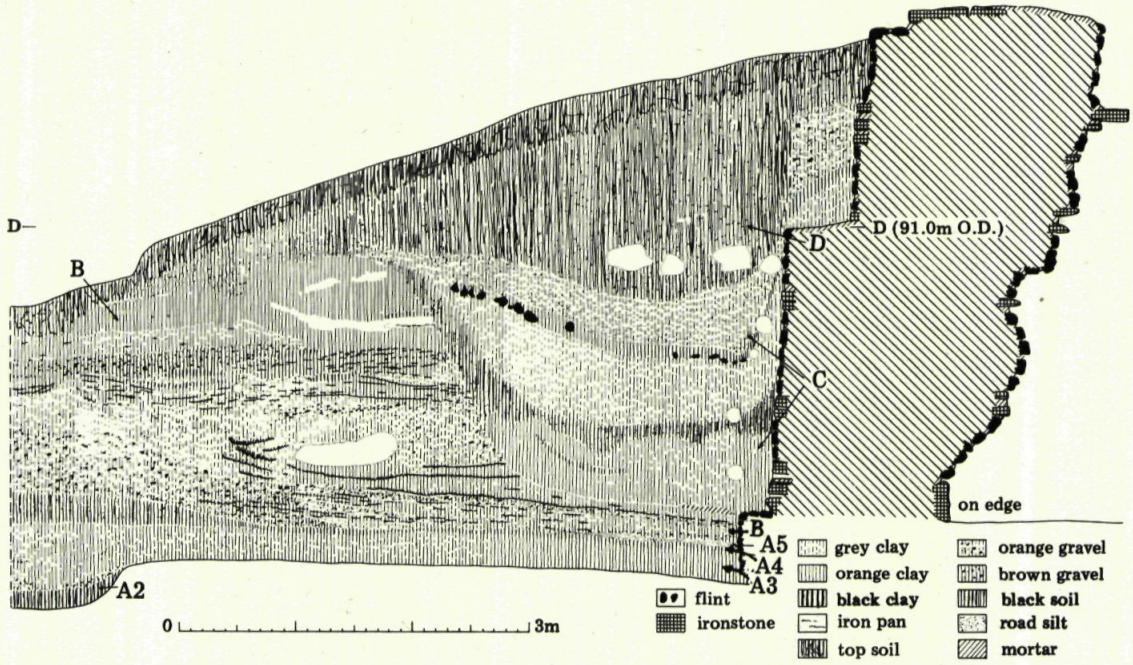

Fig 3. Silchester: the east section of Trench I.

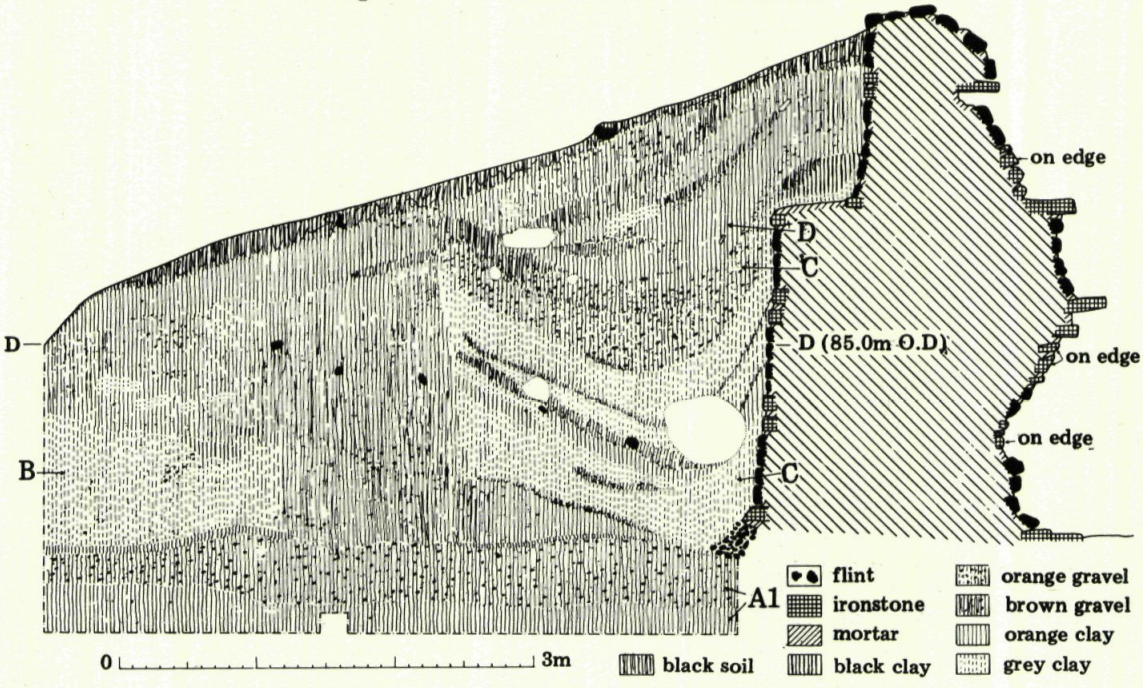

Fig 4. Silchester: the east section of Trench II.

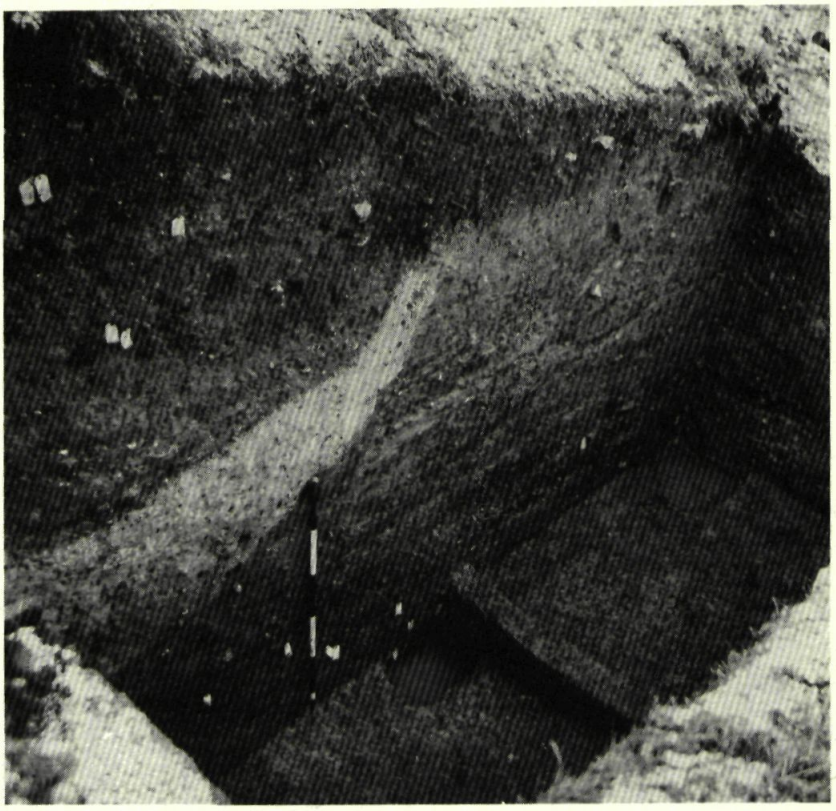

Fig 5. Silchester: west section of Trench II showing bank, wall cut and later infill. December 1968.

Arretine fragments may have been derived from earlier deposits. This deposit was clearly differentiated from A3, but again the cause of build-up is unclear. The deposit is most important in providing a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the bank, with samian going into the Antonine period, perhaps around AD 150–160. Late second and early third century sherds are notable by their absence.

A5. Silt deposit, Trench I. This consisted of coarse, washed material like road silt which seems to have spread from the south, partly overlying A4, but sealed by the bank. The finds add little to the dating. Perhaps contemporary with it is a pit in the east section of the trench which had been filled with the same material used to construct the bank.

B. The Bank

The lowest bank deposits in both trenches represent a clear break from the underlying levels, most notably in Trench I with layers of bright orange clay mixed with bands of light grey or dirty grey clay. This material may be derived from the digging of the ditch, but there was no trace of the top soil which must have been dumped elsewhere. No structure was visible in the bank , merely dumps and lenses of different clays and gravels, some of which have subsequently formed iron pans. The upper part of the bank was constructed of brownish soil with little sign of layers. In neither trench was the back of the bank found and in both the front had been cut away for the construction of the wall. The finds add little to the dating evidence

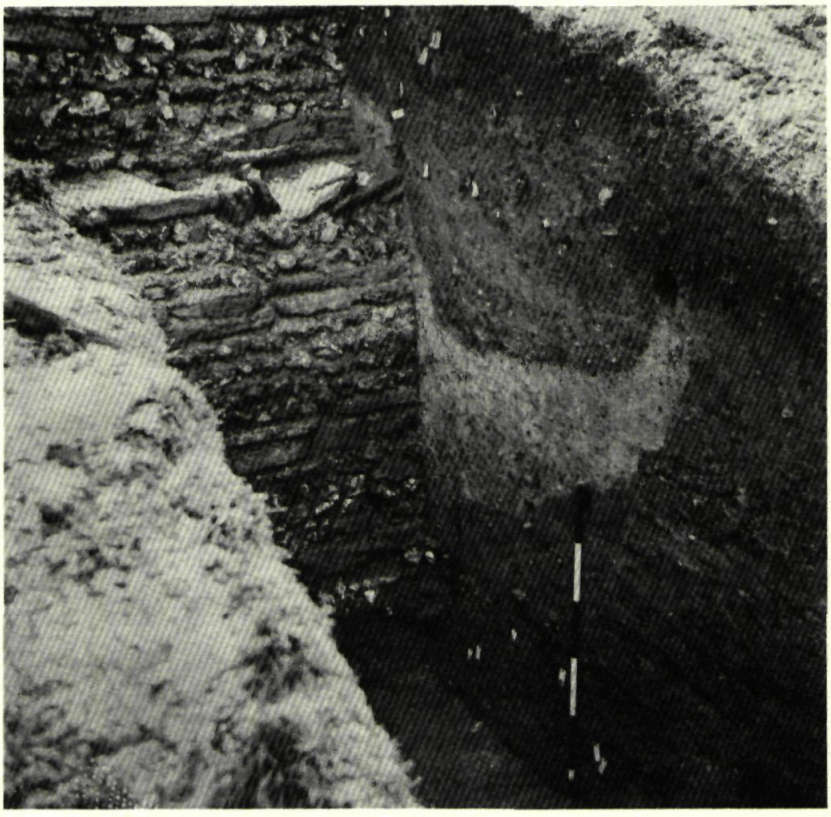

Fig 6. Silchester: west section of Trench II showing slumped infill behind the wall and later levelling. December 1968.

obtained by Mrs Cotton, except the samian sherd 158 which is 'unlikely to be earlier than AD 160.'

C. The Wall

The front of the bank was cut back and a free-standing wall constructed some two metres in front. The bottom of the foundations was not located but the lowest fill consisted of loose gravel and flints, somewhat wider than the wall, on which a pad of mortar had been laid. A course of ironstone slabs was set on top of this, and the wall was then carried up with alternating layers of mortar and flints. After every 4–5 flint layers there were double horizontal courses of limestone which seem to extend through the thickness of the wall. When the core of the wall is exposed the flint layers are occasionally replaced by blocks of ironstone laid on edge or at an angle. At about 2m (7 feet) above the foundation the internal face is stepped reducing the wall thickness by about half a metre.

By chance Trench II coincided with a gang junction (Fig 7). The eastern side had been built earlier using a creamy mortar, and the slabs on the off-set were laid horizontally. The western side had yellow mortar, with angled slabs on the off-set. The string courses of limestone in the two sections more or less correspond though there was a slight stepping up to the west.

The infill behind the wall in Trench I consisted of fairly compact clays with clear layers, the lower of mixed brown clays, then dark grey clay, mixed brown and grey clay, and finally

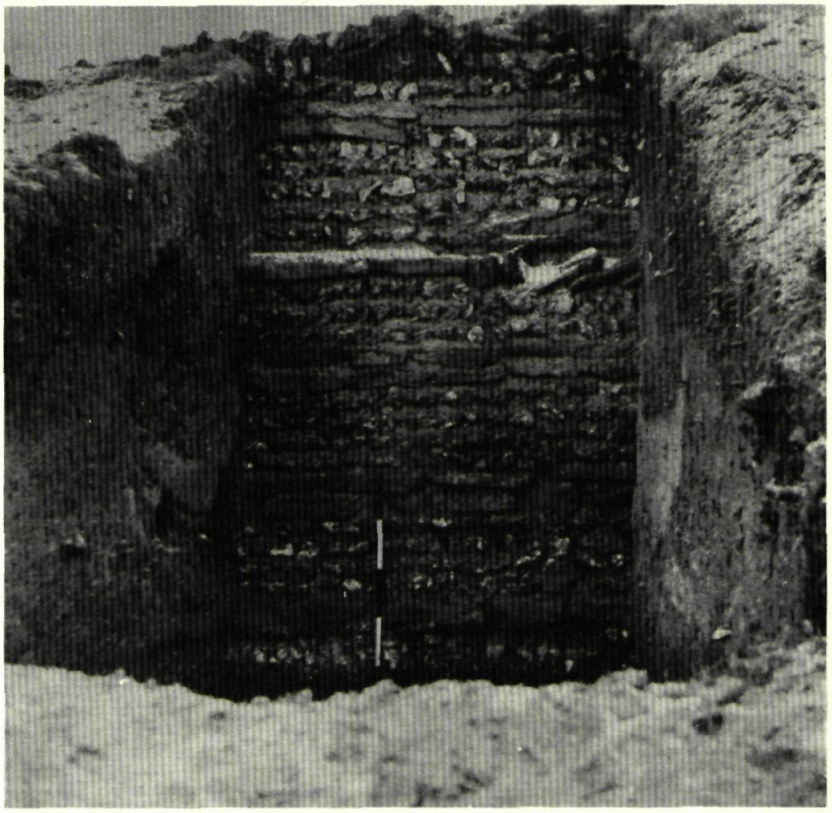

Fig 7. Silchester: internal face of the wall in Trench II, showing the gang junction. The different constructions on the off-set are picked out by the snow. December 1968.

russet brown clay with some flints. In Trench II the lower fill was again of variegated clays, but this was sealed by a deposit of pure grey clay interleaved with deposits of gritty brown black soil with much occupation debris. These were especially noticeable in the western section but they interleaved with the clay, and the difference between the two sections does not seem to be connected with the gang junction. The infill, though now compact, seems to have been placed *in situ* in a very loose state, and had subsequently slumped. The layers overlying the off-set correspond to deposits lower down in the main infill.

The large groups of finds from the infill include some sherds of late second/early third century samian which would fit well with Mrs Cotton's evidence of a coin of Septimius Severus. Coarse wares are notoriously difficult to date in the third century, but the majority of the pottery would agree with a date in the first half of the century. There are however several sherds which one would not like to date before AD 250 (Fig 9, 91, 96, 98 and possibly 100), and the group as a whole seems to belong to the transitional period when late Roman types were first appearing. There seems to be little residual material.

D/E. Post-wall construction.

The loose infill behind the wall settled leaving a hollow which was filled with loose light brown sandy soil with much occupation material. That this does represent a later infill and is not

contemporary with the construction of the wall is suggested by three facts: the deposit is very different in character from the infill behind the wall; the present profile of the bank shows no evidence of slumping, suggesting subsequent levelling; and the deposit itself showed little sign of slumping, though the earlier deposits had slumped to such a degree that the deposits on the off-set had in places totally parted from the main infill behind the wall. However, though the deposits could be clearly distinguished in section, no turfline had formed.

The pottery too was very different from that contemporary with the wall, with late Roman types such as the cavetto rim jars, straight-sided dishes and flanged bowls predominating, whereas they were in a minority before. In Winchester the assemblage would be dated to the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth. It forms an important *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the wall. The material has been divided into two groups, D which is securely stratified, and E which was in the area heavily disturbed by rabbits or simply lying on the back of the bank. Most of the coins fall into the latter category, but the absence of fourth century coins would confirm the dating suggested above for the pottery.

THE FINDS

1. THE COARSE POTTERY

In our present state of knowledge of Roman pottery, the coarse ware offers little help in our primary object of dating the defences, though some of the more diagnostic wares such as the Gallo-Belgic pottery are of interest in their own right, and others have a potential value for dating even if this cannot yet be realised. Also, little stratified pottery has yet been published from Silchester. A total of 2019 sherds of coarse pottery were found in the two trenches, divided between the phases as follows:

	No. of sherds
A1 Pre-bank deposits in Trench II	33
A2 Pit in Trench I	12
A3 Lower occupation level in Trench I	102
A4 Upper occupation level in Trench I	883
A5 Silt deposit in Trench I, overlying A4	42
Total pre-bank material	1072
B Bank construction	213
C Wall construction trench	225
D Post-wall construction (stratified)	359
E Post-wall construction (unstratified)	150
Total post-wall construction	509

These have been grouped into 46 main groups and 207 subgroups, mainly on intuitive grounds based on fabric, shape and finish. It thus has little scientific basis, and in any case the sample is too small, so it is not published here in detail, though the numerical annotation is used. A card index of the finds along with a list of all the recorded finds has been deposited with the other records with the Department of the Environment. The majority of finds is naturally undiagnostic body sherds, but the occurrence of the more diagnostic sherds is listed on Table 1, and some are illustrated in the microfiche Figs 9–11 grouped according to their stratigraphical positions. Certain groups of pottery are discussed in greater detail in the microfiche, pages 3–17.

2. THE AMPHORAE by Dr David Peacock

Sherds of Spanish globular amphorae occur in all phases from A3 to E, and of south Spanish in phases B and D. These are listed in the microfiche, p 17.

3. THE SAMIAN by Brian Hartley

The finds of samian are summarised on Table 1, and listed in full in the microfiche p 18. It is interesting to note that in all the larger groups samian constitutes about 5% of the total number of sherds, even in contexts where it should be residual. The following items are of special note:

A3. One Arretine sherd.

Table 1. Silchester: occurrence of samian sherds.

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	B	C	D	D/E	E	Totals
Pre-Claudian	–	–	1	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	3
Pre-Flavian	1	–	4	11	–	5	1	1	–	–	23
Flavian	1	–	–	10	–	–	–	–	–	–	11
First century	–	–	–	--	–	1	1	1	–	–	3
Trajanic	1	–	–	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	3
Hadrianic	–	–	–	6	–	–	–	1	–	–	7
Antonine	–	–	–	10	–	5	4	9	1	1	30
Late second century	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	2	1	–	4
Late second/early third century	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	3	2	–	5
Totals	3	0	5	40	–	11	7	18	4	1	89

A4. Two Arretine sherds, stamps of Cintismus, Peculiaris and Velox, and decorated sherd of Igocatus.

B. The latest sherds 621, 183, 187 and 335–6 are Antonine.

C. The finds are mainly Antonine, including 352 in the style of Servus of Lezoux.

E. Sherd 895 is a stamp of Catianus.

4. THE GLASS by Miss Dorothy Charlesworth

There are a number of glass fragments from phase A3, both vessels and window glass. The only identifiable form is of Isings 100. See microfiche pp 22–23.

5. THE COINS by Richard Reece

There are two barbarous radiates in phase D, and five in phase E, plus one each of Claudius II, Tetricus I and Carausius, listed in the microfiche p 23.

6. PAINTED PLASTER by Joan Liversidge

There is much plain white plaster from phases C, D and E, and striped pieces in phases B, C, D and E listed in the microfiche, p 24.

7. THE SMALL FINDS.

The small finds are illustrated on Fig 8.

1. A bronze belt mount from phase A3. Dr Graham Webster writes: A bronze belt mount in the form of a phallus which is slightly hollowed on the underside and attached to a rectangular loop. The type is well illustrated by two larger examples from Richborough (Bushe Fox 1949 Pl. XXXVI, 121 and 122). A leather belt or strap 10cm wide could slip through this loop. Most belt mounts are fastened by rivets or tangs, it is more unusual to have a slide loop. The phallus was a very common decorative object in Roman times, and its function was to ward off the evil eye and offer luck to the wearer. Normally, they are attached to pendants by means of a suspension ring and there are many examples of these from military sites. This particular mount could, however, be of any date in this period.

2. Bronze stud, one of two found in phase A3 adjacent to the belt mount.

3. Bronze Hod Hill brooch found in phase A3, lying on natural. D F Mackreth writes: The head of the brooch is damaged and part is missing; the pin is lost. There is a suggestion of two cross-mouldings on the head. The upper bow has three mouldings down the centre with a

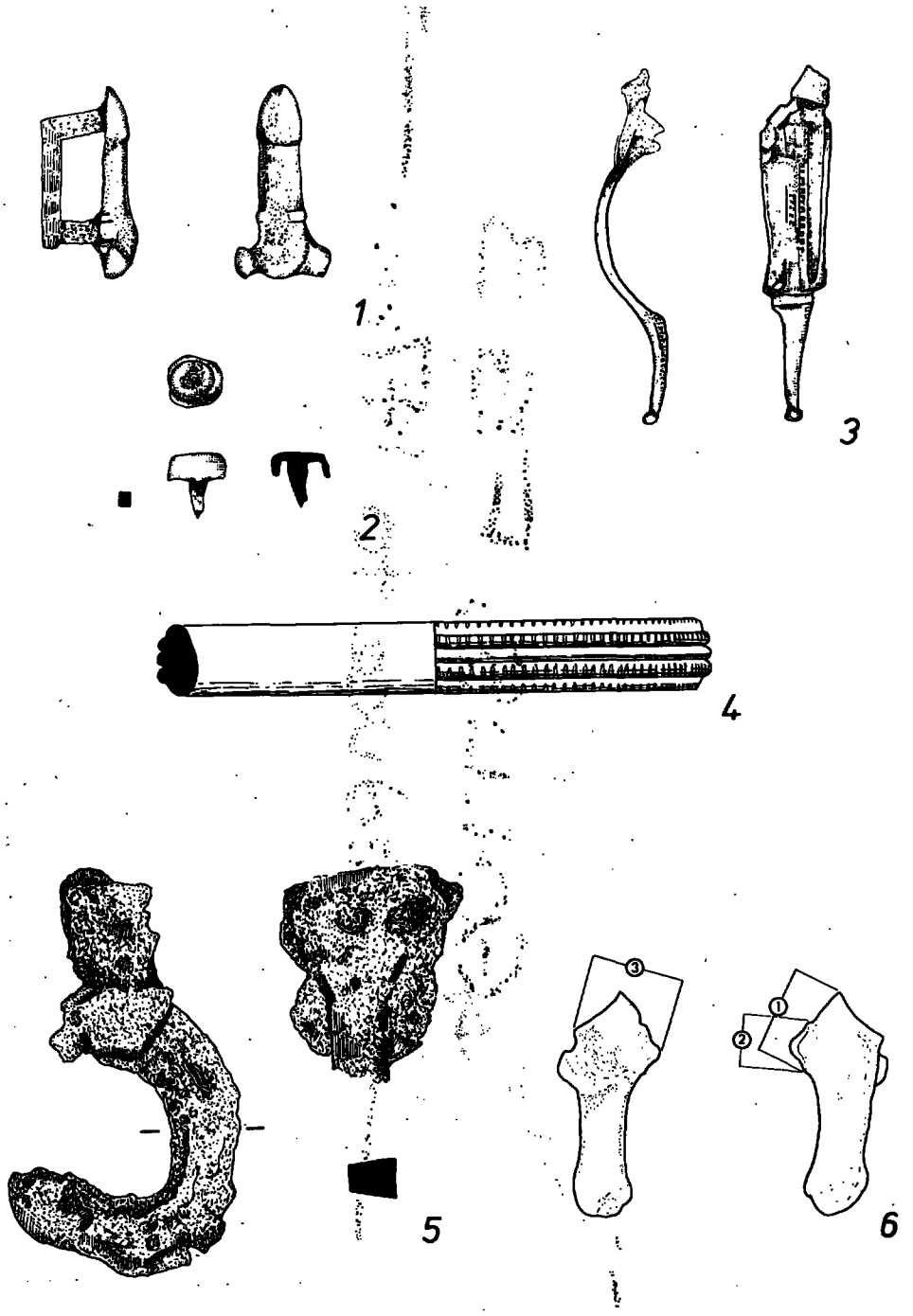

Fig 8. Silchester: small finds (1:2), and details of measurements taken for sheep's calcanea.

row of punched dots separating them. On either side of the triple moulding is a wide shallow flute and a ridge down the side of the bow. These vertical elements are stopped at the bottom by a double cross-moulding below which the bow is thinner and tapers to a small foot-knob. The catch-plate is damaged.

The design of the brooch is very similar to the Aucissa from which the Hod Hill develops, but the detail is poorly executed and the bow profile is very slack. In typological terms, the closeness of the brooch to its predecessor is such that an early date in the change-over seems likely. It is possible that such brooches were developing before the Aucissa itself went out of production, at about the time of the Conquest, and a date range of AD 40–50 may be suggested for the Silchester brooch.

4. Shale bracelet fragment from phase A3. It is lathe-turned, and has shallow grooves giving a notched effect.

5. An iron hook from phase D (Trench I-2).

There is also a pair of tweezers in Trench I–6, period A4.

8. THE ANIMAL BONES by Dr Graeme Barker

From this small sample of 280 identifiable fragments it is only possible to construct a preliminary hypothesis about the changing importance of different stock in the Silchester economy. The next stage would be the construction of further hypotheses about the roles of the various species in the supply of essential products to the community, such as meat, milk, cheese, raw materials and traction. For example, at Hockwold the increase in caprine percentages during the Roman occupation of the site prompted Cram to suggest that the Romans raised caprines in the fenland principally for their wool rather than their meat (Cram, in Salway, 1967, 79). At Silchester, however, the stock economy seems to have relied increasingly on the raising of cattle. The measurements taken from the Silchester faunal sample are presented in Table 7 in the microfiche, and can be compared with the metric data published from the Hockwold and Stonea material. All the samples are small, but the measurements for the stock raised at the three sites seem to compare closely with one another. On the basis of Cram's calculation for the weight of edible meat available from the Roman cow, and of the modern figures for sheep and pigs, the amount of meat provided per 100 animals by the main stock at Silchester has been estimated in Table 2 by multiplying the meat weights postulated for cattle (498 lbs), sheep (60 lbs) and pig (100 lbs) by the percentages in Table 4 of cattle, caprines and pig (see microfiche).

deposit	*cattle*	*caprines*	*pig*
A	17,728	2,430	1,600
C	11,703	2,700	1,850
D/E	26,643	1,680	1,500
E	29,880	960	1,600

Table 2. Amounts of edible meat per 100 animals at Silchester (in lbs).

The figures are of course hypothetical, but at least add a further dimension to the changing percentages in Table 4b. The increase in cattle at Silchester could perhaps be interpreted in terms of greater meat production for an increasing population. On the other hand, it must be admitted that there is no evidence in the mortality data for the peak in immature or young deaths we would expect in a meat rather than a dairy economy. If the trend defined from this sample is supported by further material from the site, a final aim will be the understanding of the processes and not simply the effects of economic change: the underlying stimuli – economic, social, or whatever – which induced the dominance of cattle in the Silchester stock economy over four centuries. However, much more faunal data are required from the Roman deposits at Silchester to test the basic hypothesis put forward in this report of a significant change in the roles of the different stock during the life of the settlement, and only after this procedure is complete will it be profitable to construct more sophisticated hypotheses about the Silchester stock economy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mr Andrew Saunders of the Department of the Environment who initiated the work; Mr Marples, the local Superintendant, who made all arrangements for equipment; my supervisor Mr Philip Dickens, who ran the site during my absence in September: and the volunteers who suffered the discomfort and difficulties of exceptionally bad weather, Prof S S Frere and Mr G Boon have offered comments and information. The pottery has been drawn by Mr Eric Wayman, and the small finds by Mr R Moule. This report was largely written in 1974–5 and the text remains essentially unaltered in the form it was submitted to the Department of the Environment in 1976. My apologies to all those who submitted reports for the delay, which has been beyond my control.

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[see also p 4]

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