

ARTICLES

THE TOM HASSALL LECTURE FOR 2005

Alchester: Origins and Destiny of Oxfordshire's earliest Roman Site

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This paper is based on the Tom Hassall Lecture delivered to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society in 2005. The topics covered are essentially those presented in the original lecture, though the lecture has been updated and the relative space devoted to different topics changed. The epigraphic discovery and its historical ramifications feature less prominently. My focus here is on some new thoughts and observations; those aspects, already extensively discussed elsewhere, are summarized concisely to provide the wider context. Inextricably linked to the importance of past discoveries is the question, never discussed in similar detail before, what the future may hold for the much vaster archive still in the ground. The recent dry spell confronts us with the potential vulnerability of Alchester's unique waterlogged material. Is there a future for Oxfordshire's unparalleled, but perishable, mirror to life some 2,000 years ago – life in the immediate aftermath of the Roman invasion, one of the most decisive turning points in British history? The future, undoubtedly, will tell, but can we afford to wait?

Before 2003 not a single biography of a person living in the area of modern Oxfordshire prior to the Middle Ages was known. The discovery of twenty fragments of an inscription (Fig. 1 and Pl. IV) in August and September of that year changed this dramatically. Not only did it reveal the brief, but eventful, life story of the earliest person known by name to have lived and died in the area of the county, it also provided circumstantial evidence for the presence of a military unit, several of whose members are known. The text of the inscriptions reads as follows:

DIS [♦] MANIBVS
L ♦ VAL ♦ L ♦ POL ♦ GEMI
NVS ♦ FOR ♦ GERM
VET ♦ LEG [♦] IJI ♦ AVG
AN [♦] L [♦] H ♦ S ♦ E
HE ♦ C ♦
E T

(♦ = symbol for word divider of any shape)

Dis Manibus/ L(ucius) Val(erius) L(uci filius) Pol(lia tribu) Gemi(nus) For(o) Germ(anorum)/ vet(eranum) Leg(ionis) [I]I Aug(ustae)/ an(norum) L h(ic) s(itus) e(st)/ he(res) c(uravit)/ e(x)t(estamento)

'To the souls of the departed: Lucius Valerius Geminus, the son of Lucius, of the Pollia voting district, from Forum Germanorum, veteran of the Second Augustan Legion, aged 50(?), lies here. His heir had this set up in accordance with his will.'

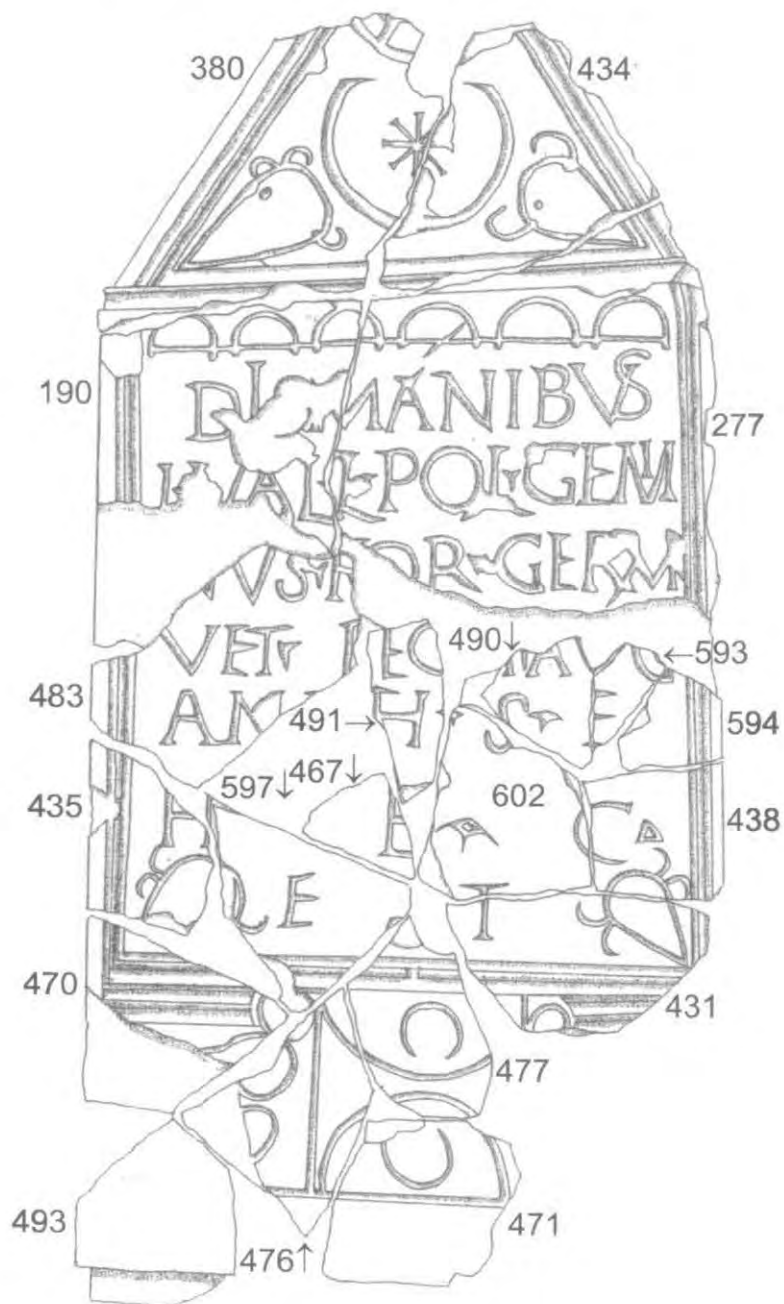


Fig. 1: Drawing of the tombstone by Daniel Prior. The small find numbers refer to the parts whose findspots are plotted on fig. 4. (Scale: 1 : 8.)

The veteran's life story has already been discussed extensively, and there seems little advantage in reiterating the minutiae of the arguments for reconstructing each stage of his life yet once more. The reader is instead referred to the earlier reports on this topic.¹ The paper will confine itself to a brief summary of Oxfordshire's earliest human biography and of the historical implications of the inscription. The key questions, explored in some depth in these earlier publications, include whether or not Alchester was the main base of the Second Augustan Legion and that of its first commander in Britain, Vespasian. This article will evaluate the earliest reactions to the discovery, but, as it was written little more than a year after the first report appeared, it is too early to tell which interpretation of the inscription and its significance for reconstructing the movements of the Second Augustan Legion will prevail, and how much or how little it will alter the majority view on the history of the Roman conquest of Britain. Within the limited space available, this paper will focus on the extraordinary evidence for the origins of the site rather than attempt to provide a summary of the much more ordinary history of the later town. This emphasis is not based on a belief that the history of the small town is irrelevant or uninteresting, quite the contrary. However, it would probably be fair to say that the excavations at Alchester over the past decade have increased our knowledge of the military history of Roman Oxfordshire many times over, while, in comparative terms, they have contributed far less to our understanding of the civilian period, which is already quite well understood.

No excuse thus is needed for focusing on what is new, rather than on what has been known already before. No excuse is needed either for focusing on what is under greater threat than what is under lesser threat. The military deposits are, of course, on average buried at a deeper level than the civilian ones. Even if there is also no scarcity of civilian-period ditches and wells reaching under the water table, the sample from our excavations suggests that the military-period waterlogged material exceeds that from the civilian period in quantity (at least in terms of artefacts) and in significance. There are many sites in Britain which have yielded important waterlogged evidence for life in Roman Britain from the later 1st century onwards. Waterlogged evidence for the life of the soldiers of the invasion army in the mid-1st century is much harder to match elsewhere. To date we have unearthed no more than a minute proportion of the deposits at Alchester that are likely to contain archaeobotanic evidence or artefacts made of organic material. It may thus be fitting to conclude this article not with a summary of what we have learnt from excavating substantially less than one percent of Roman Alchester, but to ask what the destiny of the 99% still in the ground may be and what its destiny should be.

¹ E. Sauer, 'Inscriptions from Alchester: Vespasian's base of the Second Augustan Legion(?)', *Britannia*, 36 (2005) [ES1], 101-33; E. Sauer, 'Forum Germanorum in north-west Italy: the home community and life of arguably the earliest known legionary veteran in Britain', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 24 (2005) [ES2], 199-214; E. Sauer, 'Alchester: in search of Vespasian', *Current Archaeology* 196 (2005) [ES3], 168-76; E. Sauer, 'Wendlebury (Alchester fortress): two tombstones, the first known life story of a pre-medieval inhabitant of Oxfordshire (SP 571 203) and a geophysical survey south of the town (centred around SP 572 200)', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 35 (2005) [ES4], 89-94; E. Sauer, 'A New Inscription from Alchester: a veteran's life story and a future emperor's base in Britain?', *British Epigraphy Society Newsletter*, 14 (2005) [ES5], 11-12 (<http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/BES/newsletters/besnews14.pdf>); E. Sauer, 'Alchester inscription', *Current Archaeology*, 198 (2005) [ES6], 311; E. Sauer, 'Alchester – Vespasian's base discovered?', *ARA: The Bulletin of the Association for Roman Archaeology*, 17 (2006), 23-8.

OXFORDSHIRE'S EARLIEST LIFE STORY

Only one complete and two fragmentary Roman stone inscriptions had been discovered in Oxfordshire prior to 2003.² To these we must add a small number of inscribed portable objects (such as the Alchester game counter, belonging to a Quintianus, Fig. 2³). No ancient literary source names a single site in the area of Oxfordshire, and the contribution of direct written evidence to the county's Roman history had been minimal. While this by and large still holds true today, the inscription found has shed significant light on the beginnings of Roman rule. Furthermore, by describing a personal life story, it opens up a previously inaccessible dimension of pre-medieval local history.

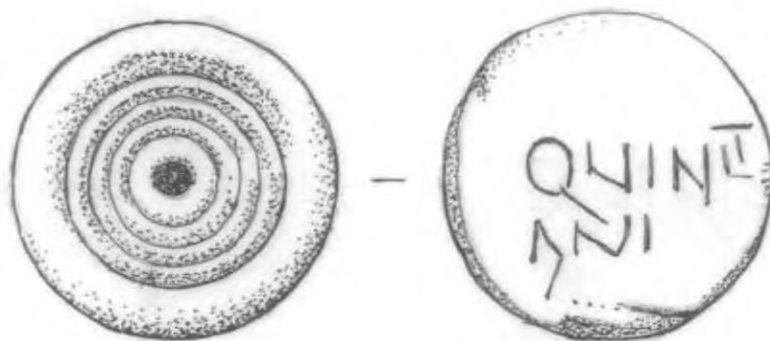


Fig. 2: A bone counter, belonging to a man called Quintianus, from a later Roman civilian context in trench 32, drawn by Vanda Morton. (Scale: 2 : 1.)

Human remains of the Roman period, despite the invaluable information they provide on health, living conditions and burial practices, are of nameless individuals with at best vague hints of origins and of how they had made a living. By contrast, not only do we know the three names of the deceased, Lucius Valerius Geminus and his profession, we also know where he was born and grew up, where he lived at various stages in his life, the names and biographies of some of his superiors and a few key historical events he probably got caught up in. An Italian and, almost certainly, Roman citizen from birth, he came from the territory of a town called Forum Germanorum, 'the market place of the Germans' (or, possibly, Forum Germanici, the market place of Germanicus') in north-west Italy (Fig. 3). While the question why this marginal Italian community appears to have been named after the Germans remains unresolved, it was at the German frontier that Lucius Valerius Geminus joined the army, probably aged in his late teens or early to mid twenties as was normal for legionary recruits. His unit, the Second Augustan Legion, was based at Strasbourg when he joined, probably under the reign of Tiberius (AD 14-37). Between AD 39 and the early AD 40s his legion was involved in combat operations against the Germans, and there is a good chance that he may have been involved in these military campaigns. The majority of legionary

² R.G. Collingwood and R.P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain i: Inscriptions on Stone* (1965), nos. 235, 240; M.W.C. Hassall, 'Inscription', in P. M. Booth, J. Evans and J. Hiller, *Excavations in the Extramural Settlement of Roman Alchester, Oxfordshire, 1991* (Oxford Archaeology Monograph 1, 2001), 253.

³ Sauer, ES1, 128 with fig. 8.

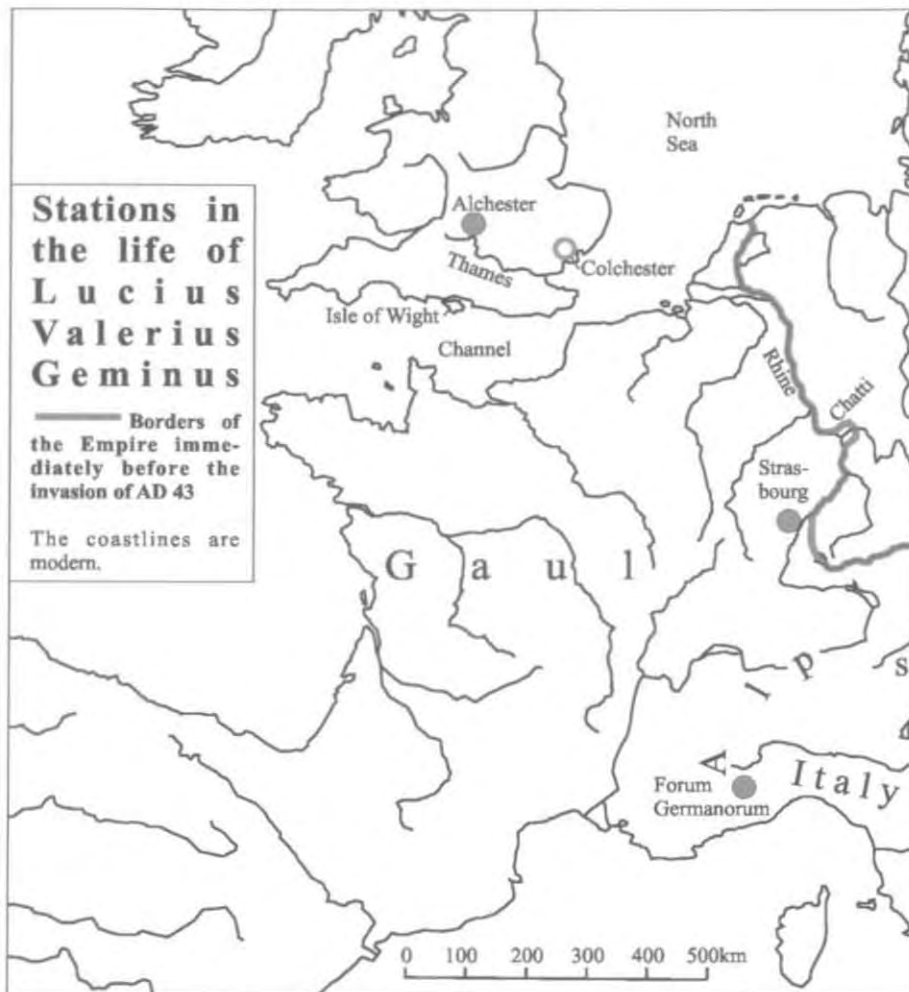
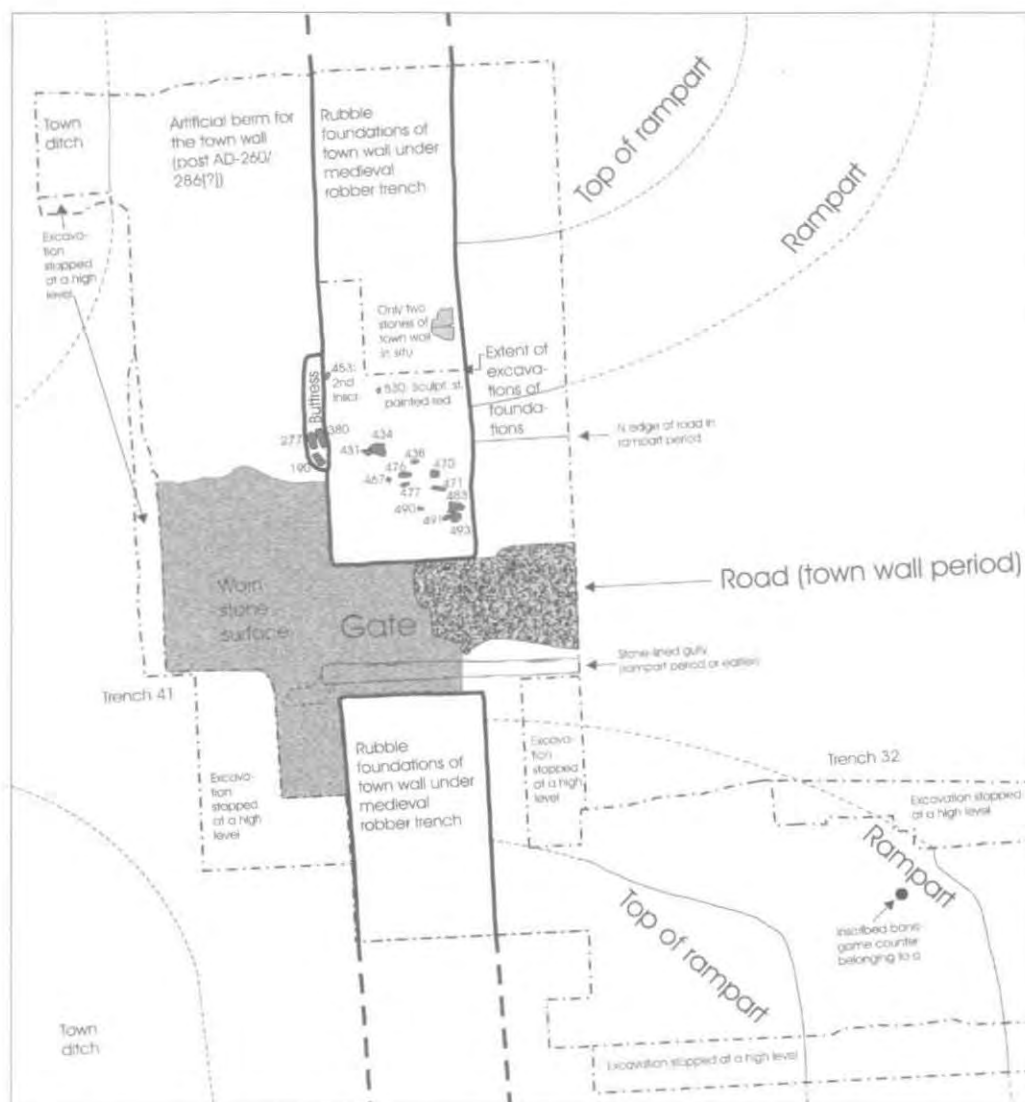


Fig. 3: Stations in the life of Lucius Valerius Geminus.

veterans, particularly in newly conquered land, settled at their base or returned to their home town at the end of their service. If Lucius Valerius is no exception to the rule, he is likely to have retired during, or not long after, Alchester's military occupation, from AD 43 or 44 to the AD 50s or early to mid-AD 60s. We may conclude, as military service in a legion lasted scarcely less than a minimum of 25 years and he almost certainly left active service less than 25 years after AD 43, not only that he had joined the army before the invasion of Britain, but also that he almost certainly had taken part in it.

The earliest known inhabitant of what much later became the county of Oxfordshire was a member of a foreign invasion army. This was no coincidence. In contrast to the native population, he had been familiar with tombstones from his childhood and adolescence in northern Italy and from his early professional career based in the Upper Rhine Valley. Making provisions in his will to safeguard his memory was important to an immigrant, who had grown up in societies where such monumental display was common. After the conquest,



The inscriptions and the west gate of the town of Alchester

Only the town wall, the earlier rampart and related structures are included in this plan, but no features of earlier or later phases. (The attribution of phases is provisional and may have to be revised after full analysis of the finds.)

Fragments of the tombstone: nos. refer to the small find nos. of those fragments found *in situ* in the rubble foundations (nos. 190, 277, 380, 431, 434, 438, 467, 470, 471, 476, 477, 483, 490, 491 & 493); no precise position could be recorded for the remaining fragments (nos. 435, 593, 594, 597 & 602). No. 453 refers to the fragment of the second tombstone, no. 530 to that of a sculpted stone painted in red.

Fig. 4: The west gate of the Roman town of Alchester and inscription fragments reused in the wall's foundations (cf. Fig. 1 on the individual numbered fragments).

the army base at Alchester would have formed an island of high literacy in an initially at least largely illiterate environment. In all probability this would not have been the only such monument at Alchester, but many of his comrades presumably chose a similar grave marker. Ironically, it was the smashing of his tombstone and reuse in the (late third-century?) town wall which ensured that his memorial survived after having been hidden from view for some 1,700 years.

DESTRUCTION AND SURVIVAL OF A TOMBSTONE

When excavating just nine metres of the town wall foundations in total on either side of Alchester's west gate in 2003, we found 21 fragments of inscriptions (Fig. 4), 20 belonging to the main epitaph discussed here, one to another. (All fragments, found *in situ*, were from north of the gate.) By contrast, not one fragment of an inscription likely to derive from Alchester has ever been found re-used in any of the old buildings in the surrounding villages and towns. It thus seems improbable that it was mere coincidence that we discovered this inscription and a fragment of a second when excavating less than 1% of the foundations of the town wall. The foundations of the town wall had been spared by the medieval stone robbers, presumably because they contained otherwise mainly irregularly-shaped blocks, less suitable as building material. At first sight it seems surprising that the inscription, despite the cubic form of its main part, was re-used in the rubble foundations, where shape was of lesser relevance, rather than as facing for the wall itself. The re-use of inscriptions as *spolia* in late walls is a phenomenon we find throughout the Empire (Fig. 5) and in some areas much more frequently than in Britain.⁴ A possible security scare or unexpected order by a higher authority to build a town wall could conceivably have resulted in all redundant stone monuments being smashed and maybe some stone buildings being dismantled: the heaviest of the 20 fragments (no. 277; Fig. 1) can still be lifted by a strong person, but there is considerable variation in size and weight of the blocks – suggesting unsystematic fragmentation to create portable blocks of more or less any shape. Old stone monuments would have provided an easily accessible source for building stone and their re-use in the foundations would have allowed construction works to start without delay. It is possible that there were only few stone monuments, so that it would not have been worthwhile to devise a method of splitting them into more regular blocks. Alternatively, all cemeteries may have been cleared of tombstones in the first wave of gathering building material for the Alchester town wall. Such a scenario could have resulted in all of Alchester's inscriptions perishing at the same time, all then being instantly reused in the foundations and none in the higher robbed-out courses of the wall. The absence of *spolia* in medieval or modern buildings around Alchester, likely to have benefited from the medieval robbing of the Roman town wall, offers support for such a scenario. The observation that the only other fragment of a Roman stone inscription ever found in the area came from the fill of a shallow pit, dated to c. AD 240/250-300/320 just over 500 m. north of the town wall in the area of suburban settlement⁵ may support this hypothesis. If we are right in thinking that the Alchester stone

⁴ There is no space here to list the abundant literature on the reuse of *spolia*. For Fig. 5 see D. Pringle, *The Defence of Byzantine Africa from Justinian to the Arab Conquest* (BAR S99, 2nd edn., 2001), 243-4, 327 no. 29, 584 fig. 32a, pls La-Lb.

⁵ P. M. Booth and J. Hillier, 'Site Sequence', in Booth et al. op. cit. n. 2, 123 fig. 5.61, 127-8; Hassall op. cit. note 2.



Fig. 5: The re-use of *spolia* was a widespread phenomenon in Late Antiquity, and was even more common in other parts of the ancient world than in Britain. This former triumphal arch at Teboursouk in North Africa was blocked with re-employed stone monuments and transformed into a gate in AD 565/569.

town wall dates to the late 3rd century (or possibly slightly later),⁶ a theory which still awaits confirmation or correction once the associated finds have been fully analysed, then all three of Alchester's known stone inscriptions may have perished, or at least disappeared from sight, at roughly the same time. If so, many more may still lay buried in the town wall's foundation, providing an undiscovered archive for the site's history.

ALCHESTER FORTRESS

It is not my intention here to describe Lucius Valerius Geminus's life in as much detail as before, nor is it my aim to explore the historical ramification of the discovery in depth. It must be noted, however, that all other known tombstones of legionary veterans in Britain came from the main base of their legion, and this has implications for how we interpret the status of Alchester. While there are just 12 from five other sites,⁷ it is improbable (though not inconceivable) that the Alchester veteran should be the only exception to the rule. Similar patterns of behaviour have been observed elsewhere in the Empire: legionary veterans most frequently tended to settle at their base, in company of their former comrades, or return

⁶ E. Sauer, 'Wendlebury (Alchester fortress): the 2003 season (SP 570 203)', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 34 (2004), 83-4; Sauer, ES1, 108.

⁷ Sauer, *op. cit.* 112-13 tab. 1; Sauer, ES3, 176.

home. Comparatively few chose domiciles elsewhere.⁸ Those deciding to retire at sites other than the *canabae* (i.e. the settlement next to a legionary base) or their home communities generations or centuries after the province in question had been brought under Roman rule do not form a suitable comparison for Roman Britain under Claudius and Nero. The security situation in such pacified territories was in most cases entirely different to that in newly conquered land. Furthermore, in first-generation Roman Britain military compounds, manned exclusively by soldiers from abroad, will have formed islands of Roman lifestyle in an alien cultural milieu (however strong Roman influences on some aspects of culture, such as coin production, had been prior to Rome's invasion⁹). This forms a sharp contrast to the situation in pacified territories, which had been under Roman rule for a long period of time; in 2nd or 3rd-century North Africa, for example, most legionaries were of African descent, and the cultural difference between occupiers and occupied had long melted away.

The theory that the Alchester tombstone is likely to indicate that the main base of the Second Augustan Legion had been at this very site, of course, stands and falls with the archaeological evidence: only if there was a permanent military compound, large enough to house some 5,000 to 6,000 soldiers at Alchester, can the above hypothesis be right. That Alchester's location close to a major crossroads in the evolving road network of Roman Britain (probably in part following pre-Roman routes), made it an ideal candidate for a military site had already been postulated before any military architecture had been unearthed, e.g. by Graham Webster.¹⁰

In the meantime, after Simon Crutchley's survey¹¹ and nine years of fieldwork, there is no longer any doubt that there was a densely occupied military complex at Alchester. The double ditch, remains of three gate posts of a timber gate in the west (two of them dated to between October AD 44 and March AD 45), the density of mid-1st-century finds and the remains of barrack blocks within this ditched enclosure (Fig. 6) prove that we are dealing with a permanent site. The extent of this compound is easily traceable west of the later Roman small town by aerial photographs,¹² and has been confirmed by resistivity survey¹³ and excavation.¹⁴ By contrast, the deposits of the Roman civilian period in the area of the later town are far too thick and complex to be easily penetrated by geophysical survey and the mid-1st century features too deeply buried to cause any cropmarks. (The top of the mid-1st century structures are at a depth of up to two metres below the modern surface in the area of trench 32.) There are nevertheless strong indications of military occupation in the area of the later town. Not only were there typical mid-1st century military finds, some of them re-deposited,¹⁵ but there is also evidence for structural remains of this period. They

⁸ J.C. Mann, *Legionary Recruitment and Veteran Settlement during the Principate* (University of London Institute of Archaeology Occasional Publication 7, 1983).

⁹ On Roman influences on pre-Roman Britain, see J. Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (2000); cf. J. Creighton, *Britannia: The creation of a Roman province* (2006).

¹⁰ G. Webster, *The Roman Invasion of Britain* (2nd edn., 1993), 146, 191 no. 100.

¹¹ S. Crutchley, in E. Sauer, 'Alchester: A Roman fort & parade ground?', *Current Archaeology* 157 (1998) [ES7], 34; E. Sauer, 'The Military Origins of the Roman Town of Alchester, Oxfordshire', *Britannia*, 30 (1999) [ES8], 289.

¹² Sauer, ES7, 34-7.

¹³ P. Erwin and E. Sauer, 'The Geophysical Survey at Alchester', in E. Sauer, 'Alchester, a Claudian "vexillation fortress" near the western boundary of the Catuvellauni, new light on the Roman invasion of Britain', *The Archaeological Journal*, 157 (2000), 3-9.

¹⁴ e.g. Sauer op. cit.

¹⁵ Sauer op. cit. 22-3, 27, 29, 56-7 and Booth et al. op. cit. n. 2 426-7 with references; a wide range of further mid-1st century artefacts has been recovered from the trenches excavated within the town wall as part of our project, notably from trenches 32 and 41.

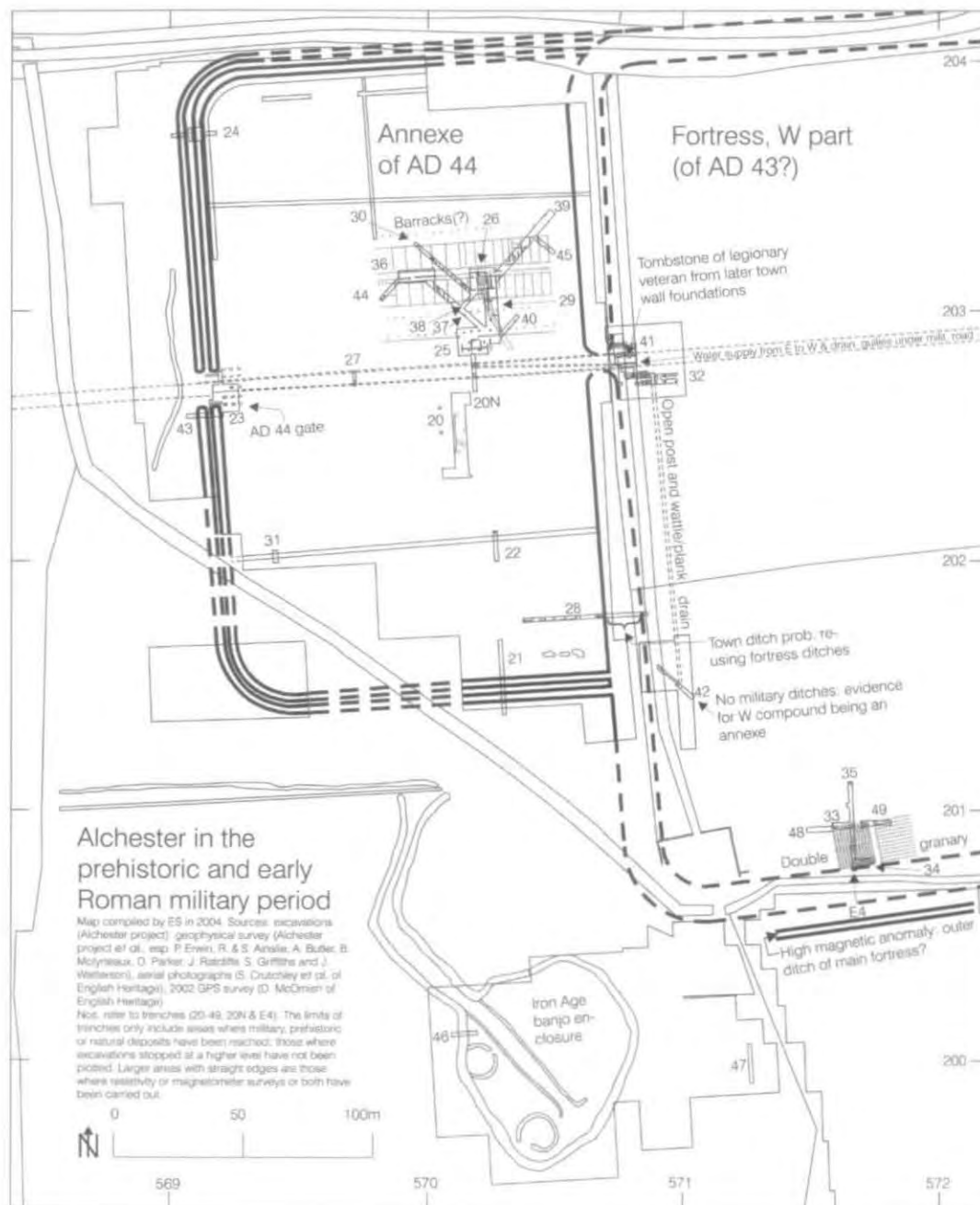


Fig. 6: Plan of military-period and earlier structures at Alchester.

include ditches in the east and north-east of the town reaching underneath the water table,¹⁶ even if their function, whether defensive or for drainage purposes, cannot be resolved on the basis of the evidence presently available. Trench 32 yielded military-style beamslots and trenches 32 and 42 the remains of a, presumably open, early drain lined by oak posts (unfortunately too thin to yield a date¹⁷). Their structural similarity, position and alignment (parallel to the north-south orientated military and the later civilian-period features) suggest that these two sections belong to the same drainage ditch. If so, this ditch would cross the alignment of the southern defences of the compound in the west. This suggests that the compound in the west was an annexe to a fortress underneath the later town rather than being part of an independent playing-card shaped base. A ditch in trench 32, branching off the deeper north-south running drainage ditch and leading westwards, may conceivably point towards the position of the gate. This branch was not lined by posts, suggesting that it was covered, which would make sense; otherwise it would have obstructed traffic in the gate area of the *intervallum* (the empty inner margin of a fortress), if our theory is right. Further excavation to the west of trenches 32 and 41 is required to test whether or not there was indeed a military gate here, or whether evidence for the presence or absence of such a gate may have been removed by the later town ditch.

While the hypothesis that there was a military-period gate west of trenches 32 and 41 has to remain conjectural, it is worth emphasizing that the absence of any deep military-style defensive ditch in trench 42 offers strong support for the fortress-annexe theory. If the compound west of the town indeed extended eastwards, then it ought to have crossed trench 42. Furthermore, the presence of a military-style double granary (Figs. 6 and 7) well to the south of the southern defences of the western compound equally suggests that the mid-1st century military complex extended at least as far south as the later Roman town. The western one of them was apparently entirely rebuilt, to judge by the observation that its foundation trenches were on average separated by half the distance separating those of its eastern counterpart. We do not know whether or not the southernmost part of the western granary has been found or whether it may have been destroyed by the later town ditch. Even if the southernmost foundation trench in trench 34 marked indeed the southern limit of the building, its proximity to the town ditch suggests that the granary was located in an earlier compound, which extended beyond the southern limits of the later town. An extensive geophysical survey south of the town in 2004¹⁸ failed to locate any defensive double ditch in the meadow to the south, but traced via magnetometer survey a linear high magnetic anomaly (a ditch?) in the vicinity of the Gagle Brook (Fig. 6). The brook and a stone bank on its south side made it impossible to test via geophysics whether or not this ditch was the southern representative of a pair of parallel ditches. The ditch's location would allow for the possibility that it was the outer defensive ditch of the postulated main fortress under Alchester and it would leave sufficient room for a second ditch, a rampart and an *intervallum* south of the double granary. It is, of course, equally possible that we are dealing with a ditch of the Roman civilian period or indeed a military ditch reused and incorporated in a wide town ditch. Excavation is required to decide this question; on the basis of the evidence presently available it appears that the postulated main fortress may have extended further to the west and south than the later town, but probably just by a few metres. It is possible that there was a simple practical reason for this: when in the second half of the 2nd century

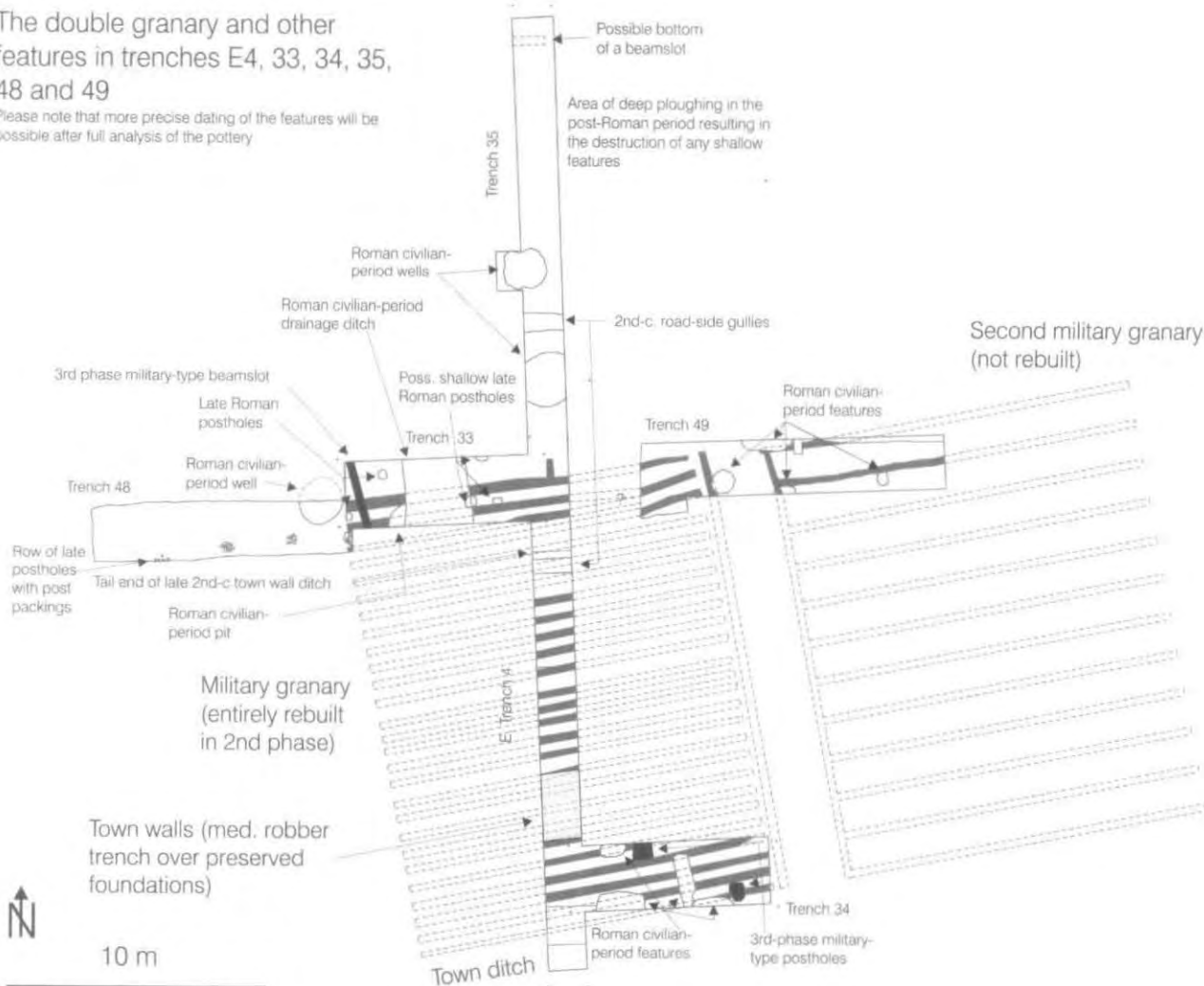
¹⁶ J. H. Iliffe, 'Excavations at Alchester, 1927', *Antiquaries' Journal*, 9 (1929), 106-7, 114-17; J. H. Iliffe, 'Excavations at Alchester, 1928', *Antiquaries' Journal*, 12 (1932), 37-9, 41-7.

¹⁷ Ian Tyers, pers. comm.

¹⁸ Sauer, ES4, 92-4.

The double granary and other features in trenches E4, 33, 34, 35, 48 and 49

Please note that more precise dating of the features will be possible after full analysis of the pottery



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Fig. 7: The double granary at Alchester.

Alchester was enclosed with a rampart¹⁹ (with a stone town wall added several generations later), substantial quantities of earth and gravel were needed. It would have been much easier to obtain gravel by extending the postulated military ditches of the main fortress on the inside than on the outside. The latter option would have necessitated transporting thousands of cubic metres of gravel and soil over an existing double ditch full of water. Aerial photographic evidence²⁰ and excavations suggest that the settlement density in the south of the Roman civilian town of Alchester was thin and as such there would have been no point in going this extra mile to create a large circuit. If we are right in thinking that the town ditch in trench 28 incorporated and destroyed the two postulated ditches of an earlier fortress, then its width of 14.50 m. (i.e. 5.50 m. more than the 9 m. average distance between the outer edge of the outer military ditch and the inner edge of the inner of the western compound) would allow for an extension of the ditch by c. 5.50 m. on the inside, which would probably also have destroyed the rampart. The observation that in trenches 34 and E4 the town ditch is immediately next to the southernmost known granary foundation trench suggests that in this area the town ditch destroyed (or was north of) the earlier military rampart. The re-channelling of the Gagle Brook into a remarkable rectilinear stream bed in the Roman civilian period, including the section of the town ditch on the south side of the town, does not appear to have respected earlier military-period land divisions. The south-west corner of the western military compound is cut off by this stream. There is thus little doubt that the re-channelling postdates the abandonment of this mid 1st-century defensive enclosure.

As a final point it is worth stressing that Alchester's plan, remarkably rectangular for a small town in Roman Britain's civilian zone, equally offers support for the assumption that the town had inherited its regular shape from a fortress of similar dimensions buried underneath (Fig. 8),²¹ even if the sides of this rectangle may have shifted by a few metres. While further excavation is desirable to verify the existence and extent of this postulated military fortress under the Roman town, it is safe to say that there are strong indications of a fortress of some ten to eleven hectares size, with an annexe covering an additional four hectares. The previous base of the Second Augustan Legion at Strasbourg is thought to have been smaller and its next at Exeter was not much bigger than the combined area of the postulated main fortress and annexe at Alchester.²² No other legionary fortress in Britain with evidence for this particular legion can be shown to have been occupied as early as the AD 40s. Alchester's two identical tree-ring dates of October AD 44 to March AD 45 (Figs. 9 and 10, Pl. V) suggest strongly that the western compound was established as early as the second autumn or winter after the invasion. A systematic re-use of timbers at a later date seems highly improbable, especially since Alchester is not on a major waterway and since the Roman army tended to fell timbers locally when needed.²³ The postulated main fortress is likely to be earlier and may well date to the first autumn (or winter) after the invasion.

¹⁹ C.J. Young, 'The Defences of Roman Alchester', *Oxoniensia*, xl (1975), 136-70.

²⁰ Booth et al. op. cit. n.2, 3 fig. 1.2.

²¹ D. Mattingly, *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire, 54 BC-AD 409* (2006), 265; Sauer, ES8, 289; E. Sauer, 'Wendlebury (Alchester Fortress): Headquarters, Granary and Timber Bridge (SP 570 203)', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 33 (2003), 98, 104.

²² Sauer, ES1, 115-17.

²³ See, for example, Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, v, 523-4; vi, 5-8; P. M. Monti, *La Colonna Traiana* (1980), 44.



Fig. 8: Roman towns of rectangular plan often, even if not always, overlie Roman forts or fortresses. Sometimes, such as here at Lincoln, the civilian-period stone wall and gate are directly superimposed over its military timber predecessor; sometimes the position has shifted by a few metres.

THE HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

If we are right in thinking that Alchester was the main base of the Second Augustan Legion from AD 43/44 to the army's withdrawal (which, to judge by the archaeological evidence, took place between the AD 50s and the mid-AD 60s), then it was also the headquarters of Vespasian, commander of the legion during the Roman invasion of Britain and the initial phase of conquest.²⁴ This theory in no way contradicts the scarce literary evidence for Vespasian's and his legion's activities.²⁵ It does, however, run contrary to most previous hypotheses which had placed Vespasian's headquarters further south. Not surprisingly, this suggested revision

²⁴ Tacitus, *Historiae*, iii, 44; cf. Suetonius, *Divus Vespasianus*, iv, 1; A. R. Birley, *The Roman Government of Britain* (2005), 232-3 no. 2.

²⁵ Sauer, ES1, 118-23.



Fig. 9: One of Alchester's posts (no. 1) dated to October AD 44 to March AD 45 immediately after recovery in September 2000.



Fig. 10: The other identically-dated post (no. 2) shortly after recovery in September 2000.

of a chapter of Roman Britain's history has not found universal approval. First responses, few of them yet published, suggest that at the very least the majority will accept that it is a serious possibility that Vespasian's main base was at Alchester – and few, if any, (myself included) would even have contemplated it as a possibility before the discovery of the tombstone. It is too early to decide whether majority opinion will swing one way or the other concerning my view that it is a high probability rather than a mere possibility. De la Bédoyère, the first scholar to have responded in print, rates the level of probability that the Second Augustan Legion had been based at Alchester lower than I do, but accepts that this is perfectly possible. It is reassuring that most recently he also appears to concede that it is most unlikely to be a case of a veteran gone or posted to a site with no other connection to this legion as implied in an early note:²⁶ 'recent excavations of a fort built in the mid-40s at Alchester (Oxfordshire), and the discovery there of a 1st-century tombstone belonging to a veteran of *II Augusta*, suggest that the legion may in fact have spent a significant part of this time fighting further north than previously believed.'²⁷ Others might go further: John Peddie recognised the strategic importance of Alchester's location and suggested that it, or Dorchester-on-Thames, may even have been a suitable place for the headquarters of Aulus Plautius.²⁸ In Graham Webster's publication of the Wroxeter fortress Alchester already features as a legionary fortress,²⁹ even if he did not commit himself to any particular legion. David Mattingly equally considers Alchester a full legionary fortress³⁰ and wonders whether during Boudicca's rebellion parts of the Second Legion were stationed at Kingsholm or Alchester.³¹

ONE LIFE STORY: A CLUE TO OTHERS?

The view that Alchester was a legionary fortress and that either parts or all of the Second Augustan Legion may have formed its garrison thus seems to be gaining ground. Should I be right in arguing that it probably housed not just a vexillation, but the whole unit, Oxfordshire has gained not just one, but several ancient biographies, even if the other personalities' presence was of a more transient nature. In addition to Vespasian, who was to become emperor from AD 69 to AD 79, we know the camp prefect P. Anicius Maximus from Asia Minor³² and the equestrian tribune M. Stlaccius Coranus from the Rome/Ostia area.³³ The senatorial tribune (*tribunus laticlavus*) L. Vettius Statura from northern Italy probably also served in the legion whilst it was still based at Alchester.³⁴ We do not know whether its famous camp prefect during Boudicca's revolt, Poenius Postumus,³⁵ was based at and committed suicide at Alchester, or whether the legion had been moved to Exeter by then. It may be futile, but not without some fascination for local history, to speculate whether Vespasian's wife, Flavia Domitilla, and his elder son Titus, who succeeded him on the throne

²⁶ G. de la Bédoyère, *Roman Britain: a New History* (2006), 25 fig. 15; G. de la Bédoyère, 'The Alchester inscription', *Current Archaeology*, 197 (2005), 256; cf. my response: Sauer, ES6.

²⁷ De la Bédoyère, *Roman Britain*, 31.

²⁸ J. Peddie, *Conquest: The Roman Invasion of Britain* (1987), 132 tab. IV no. A.

²⁹ G. Webster, *The Legionary Fortress at Wroxeter: Excavations by Graham Webster, 1955-85* (2002), 81 fig. 3.2; cf. 2 fig. 1.1.

³⁰ Mattingly op. cit. n. 21 133 fig. 5, 137 fig. 6.

³¹ Mattingly op. cit. 110.

³² A.R. Birley, *Officers of the Second Augustan Legion* (The Third Annual Caerleon Lecture, 1990), 8-10.

³³ Birley op. cit. 10.

³⁴ Birley op. cit. n. 24 277-8 no. 2.

³⁵ Tacitus, *Annales*, xiv, 37.

from AD 79-81, born probably on 30 December AD 39, spent some time with him whilst based at Alchester.³⁶ While Titus was for at least parts of his childhood in Rome,³⁷ it was not unheard of for military commanders to be joined by their family even in frontier posts. Germanicus's son Gaius was famously brought up in his father's base at the Rhine frontier. This earned him the nickname Caligula – from his *caligae*, the military-style footwear he wore as a boy of about two years. Later he joined his father in Syria as well.³⁸

THE FUTURE

Fascinating as it is to explore which known historical figures may have been based at Alchester and how they shaped the history of the emerging new province, the future of Alchester confronts us with bigger, and certainly much more urgent, questions. To what extent should such a scheduled site be explored to satisfy our thirst for knowledge of the past – or should it be left alone? Should this question be made dependent on whether or not the site is under threat – or should a combination of the level of threat and the significance of the research questions determine our choice of what (if anything) to excavate? If so, how can we evaluate the level of danger (if any) and what level of certainty of such a threat is required to justify intervention and on what scale? If we argue that the level of threat and/or significance of any research questions does not merit any further intervention in future, then it follows logically also that everything we have done in the past was a mistake and that it would have been better had we never started the project in the first place and if we knew no more about Alchester today than we did in 1995, unless there are arguments that any unresolved research questions are less significant than those answered and/or that the level of threat to the site has diminished.

Even if a hyper-cautious approach is adopted in assessing the significance of Alchester's Roman remains, it is hard to deny that there is at the very least a strong possibility (in my view a high probability) that it was the main base of the Second Augustan Legion in the years following the invasion, and that there is no other site in Britain which has anywhere near as strong a claim. Even sceptical minds will have to acknowledge that the site has provided us with other extraordinary insights into the Roman conquest of Britain. Having yielded the earliest evidence in the British Isles for parts of no fewer than four plant species, celery, coriander, millet and Mediterranean stone pine cones,³⁹ as well as Britain's earliest Roman tree-ring dates and evidence for the early presence of parts or all of one of the four legions involved in the invasion, it is indisputable that the site has unique potential.

If substantially less than one percent of its area has yielded so many insights, there can be no serious doubt that much more still awaits discovery. To what extent can the waterlogged environmental evidence be preserved, despite Global Warming, and to what extent should it be recovered in case it cannot? Decisions whether to excavate more or whether to leave the evidence in the ground may lead to irreversible consequences, should future – or even present – generations find that unique evidence has perished by the time they attempt to unearth more. The Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society is the ideal forum for exploring these questions. Those dedicated to local history and archaeology may be able to

³⁶ B. Levick, *Vespasian* (1999), 13 considers it possible that his wife joined him when based at Strasbourg, but assumes that 'she cannot have crossed into Britain.' There is, however, no reason to exclude the possibility that she may have joined her husband temporarily at a later stage.

³⁷ Suetonius, *Divus Titus*, 2; cf. Levick op. cit. 20.

³⁸ Suetonius, *C. Caligula*, 8-10; Tacitus, *Annales*, i, 40-2.

³⁹ Professor Mark Robinson, pers. comm.

influence decisions either way and may help to raise the funds for whatever is considered to be in the best interest of a unique archive, be it to be left untouched for an indefinite period or in perpetuity or be it to be explored by further targeted fieldwork.

Before considering the potential impact of future climatic developments or of local factors, such as drainage, on the water table and the waterlogged deposits, it is useful to provide an idea of the scale of the excavated and the unexcavated deposits. Table 1 lists what area (in square metres) we have excavated as part of our research project within the town wall, excluding a non-research-led small-scale evaluation in 2000 affecting mainly the uppermost archaeological layers; no trench excavated between 1996 and 1999 was within, or extended into, the walled circuit. The measurements include the town wall and are taken from the outer edge of its rubble foundations. All of the trenches were at the margins of the walled circuit and none went anywhere near the centre of the town (as the third column demonstrates). The centre of the town, where, to judge by aerial photographs,⁴⁰ there was by far the highest concentration of monumental stone buildings has not been affected by our research project. Our excavations have demonstrated that the margins of the town were not just largely devoid of stone buildings of the civilian period, but also of housing of less permanent materials (as far as we can tell on the basis of our small-scale interventions).

TABLE 1: EXTENT OF EXCAVATIONS WITHIN THE WALL CIRCUIT OF ALCHESTER AS PART OF THE ALCHESTER PROJECT

Trench	Area excavated within town, incl. town wall foundations		Furthest point from outer edge of town wall foundations		Year of excavation
E4		23.7		15.8	2001
28		1.2		0.8	2001
32		92.1		20.4	2002
33		17.5		14.6	2002
35		23.9		30.7	2002
41		85.0		5.0	2003
42		33.0		17.7	2003
48		20.0		12.0	2003
49		24.5		14.5	2003
Total/ Maximum	Total in m.²	320.9	Maximum in m.	30.7	2001 –2003

The Alchester project has excavated *c.* 320.9 square metres within the walled area, which corresponds to 0.3% of the estimated size of Alchester of *c.* 105,000 square metres. These figures even include the areas where we only excavated the uppermost deposits. (As Fig. 6 will demonstrate, more has been excavated outside the wall circuit, but the area of the scheduled monument outside the town wall of course equally exceeds that within them many times, as the area of suburban settlement outside the town wall appears to be far greater than the area within.)

⁴⁰ Booth et al. *op. cit.* 3 fig. 1.2.

If excavations continued at present rate, it would take roughly another 1,000 seasons to complete the task – and it would still take centuries if the speed was doubled or even tripled. As it is, however, most improbable that the next forty generations will excavate at this one site each and every year, this estimate ought to be increased greatly. It is pointless to speculate whether it might take another 5,000, 10,000 or 100,000 years to complete the task, but it is clear that Alchester is not an archaeological resource which is at risk of vanishing within our lifetimes, even if well-funded excavations continued unabated for decades to come. It seems clear in the light of this simple calculation, which would equally hold true for many other Roman towns or those of other complex civilisations, that comments, such as those by Brian Fagan, implying that archaeology is at greatest risk from archaeologists, are misguided: 'Will there be any archaeology for future generations if we keep on digging and digging as we are now, especially on sites that are not endangered?' Of course it ought to be conceded that there are categories of monuments which are less ubiquitous and of lesser extent than ancient towns and are thus at greater risk. Fagan has a point when claiming that the 'site base is eroding ... rapidly', but little supporting evidence when implying that this is because of archaeological fieldwork (rather than modern development) or that research excavations are likely to cause our archaeological heritage to disappear in the near future.⁴¹

If we are right in thinking that complete excavation even of a small town, like Alchester (or most other Roman towns or those of other civilisations), would take millennia or at least several centuries, the question arises whether humanity in another 1,000 or 10,000 years, should it survive, may not be as interested in our own times as in that of the Roman Empire – or, alternatively, may have decided to rid itself of some or all of its heritage, be it for ideological reasons (as during China's cultural revolution) or to enable large-scale underground construction or engineering projects to go ahead. If archaeology and history teach us just one thing, then it is that history is not predictable and that states, laws and regulations, let alone fashions, scarcely last as long as a single millennium. Indeed, the impression is unavoidable that the pace of change accelerates more and more as technology advances further and further. No serious historian can believe with any confidence that Alchester will enjoy uninterrupted protection as scheduled ancient monument continuously from now to the year 3005 or beyond. The question whether there is any point in being over-protective of a resource which will predictably last for at least another millennium, if responsibly excavated, is thus surely a legitimate one – all the more so as the potential threats it may be facing in future are numerous and less predictable. The question how much or how little of Alchester's waterlogged remains will last for another century is certainly equally legitimate – and so is the question whether public interest in archaeology will last for as much as another decade, if it is largely confined to uninspiring watching briefs.⁴² The question whether inspiring and targeted research excavations, involving local and international volunteers as stakeholders in their past (to use a fashionable term), are not the best way to maintain public interest in archaeology and thus to protect the high percentage of buried remains, which we cannot excavate in our lifetime, seems an eminently fair one too.

The future of Britain's and Europe's waterlogged heritage is far from secure. Anne Crone and Ciara Clarke, for example, discuss as part of their programme for wetland archaeology for Scotland in the 21st century the possible damaging impact of water abstraction in a time

⁴¹ B. Fagan, 'The WAC at Washington: Brian Fagan's sneak preview of the forthcoming World Archaeology Congress', *Archaeology*, 56/3 (2003), 16.

⁴² See the apt summary of the current state of archaeology by M. Biddle, *Current Archaeology*, 200 (2005), 442-3.

of climatic change. Wetlands degrade as a result of past interventions, even if no longer visible. There are no grounds for complacency: 'We simply do not know how much of our wetland heritage will survive without a significant loss of environmental and cultural evidence for future generations to investigate.'⁴³ R. Van Heeringen and his colleagues, based on their research in the Netherlands, are no more optimistic on the ability of even the most modern monitoring techniques to reliably predict how slow or fast organic material above the water table will deteriorate or disintegrate.⁴⁴ This applies to a high proportion of the unique waterlogged evidence from Alchester, which at least in some recent summers has been well above the water table (cf. Tables 2-4). The upper parts of all three posts of the gate of the western compound (Figs. 11-12) have rotted away at some point after their burial, but the voids bearing their imprints when excavated in 2000 (Fig. 13) had not yet collapsed. The voids left by pointed stakes rammed in the ground near the AD 44-gate for defensive purposes were equally still preserved (Figs. 14-15). While we do not know when precisely the wood filling what are now voids had rotted away, the observation that the depth of deposits where timber had been affected by past water level fluctuations exceeds one metre gives grounds for serious concern. Far lesser fluctuations could destroy some of the surviving structures and artefacts. Alchester has, to my knowledge, yielded the only waterlogged remains of lilia or similar features (i.e. originally pointed stakes in pits or ditches intended to injure attacking enemies, similar in function to a modern minefield). Yet only the bottom c. 12-19 cm. of these stakes were preserved (Fig. 16). The observation that merely c. 18-23 cm. of bark survived on the two AD 44-gateposts, and that it was already damaged (tables 3-4), demonstrates even more forcefully how vulnerable Alchester's waterlogged remains are.

TABLE 2: PRESERVATION OF WOOD ABOVE THE WATER TABLE IN AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2003

Trench(es)	Highest preserved wooden remains at what level	Height above highest recorded 2003 water table	Height above lowest recorded 2003 water table
23 and 43	62.480 m. OD	320 mm.	540 mm.
32 and 41	62.475 m. OD	over 475 mm.	over 475 mm.
42	62.260 m. OD	505 mm.	620 mm.
46	61.280 m. OD	140 mm.	305 mm.

While some stress the unpredictability of the future of waterlogged remains, others stress acute risks. David Miles sees wetland desiccation as one of the 'real problems' for English Heritage.⁴⁵ Sebastian Payne, chief scientist of English Heritage, is equally far from sanguine about the fate awaiting wetland sites in a time of climatic change: 'While there is some inevitable uncertainty, predicted changes add to the urgency to work on waterlogged and coastal archaeology'.⁴⁶ The editors of *Current Archaeology* capture and express the urgency of

⁴³ A. Crone and C. Clarke, 'A programme for wetland archaeology in Scotland in the 21st century', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 135 (2005), 10-11.

⁴⁴ R. M. Van Heeringen, G. V. Mauro, and A. Smit, *A Pilot Study on the Monitoring of the Physical Quality of Three Archaeological Sites at the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Schokland, Province of Flevoland, the Netherlands* (Nederlandse Archeologische Rapporten, 26, 2004), 18.

⁴⁵ D. Miles, 'English Heritage backs amateur archaeology. And that's official.' *Current Archaeology*, 187 (2003), 302.

⁴⁶ S. Payne, 'Under the weather', *British Archaeology*, 78 (2004), 32.



Fig. 11: Trench 23, the site of the AD44 gate, under excavation.



Fig. 12: Excavation of the western post dividing the gateway.

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TABLE 3: THE PRESERVATION OF THE TIMBER GATE POSTS IN TRENCH 23

Gate posts (and SF no.)	Post 1 (42/23)	Post 2 (39/23)	Post 3 (44/23)
Felling date	October AD 44- March AD 45	October AD 44- March AD 45	Undated
Age when felled	96 annual rings	106 annual rings	?
Timber	Oak from same woodland		Oak (not analysed)
Location	Middle S post of S tower	SW post of S tower	W post dividing double gate
Highest point of void above the post where the timber has been totally destroyed	62.65 m. OD	c. 62.62 m. OD	62.81 m. OD
Highest surviving point	62.44 m. OD	62.32 m. OD	62.48 m. OD
Preserved height	654 mm.	563 mm.	558 mm.
Base at (inferred from values above)	61.786 m. OD	61.757 m. OD	61.922 m. OD
Interpretation	Deep foundation because of tower	Deep foundation because of tower	More shallow foundation because carrying less weight
Bark preserved to what level above base	182 mm.	231 mm.	no bark
Bark preserved to what level (inferred from values above)	61.968 m. OD	61.988 m. OD	n/a
Depth of rotting in the centre (below tip)	159 mm.	126 mm.	528 mm.
Deepest point of crater-shaped hole in the core (inferred from values above)	62.281 m. OD	62.194 m. OD	61.952 m. OD
Depth down to which irreparable damage has been caused	61.968 m. OD	61.988 m. OD	61.952 m. OD
Description of preservation	Rotted to cone with crater-shaped tip	Rotted to cone with crater-shaped tip	Largely rotted out in the centre, but also rotted on the outside
Description of original shape of the base	Natural roundish tree trunk (not squared in the preserved section & void)	Natural roundish tree trunk (not squared in the preserved section & void)	Squared

Interpretation	n/a	n/a	Probably to facilitate closing mechanism of the gate
Diam. at base	221 x 275 mm.	272 x 280 mm.	259 x 266 mm.
Diam. of void	225 mm.	not precisely recorded	285 mm.
Circumference at base	848 mm.	856 mm.	789 mm.
Cut by Ian Tyers for dating purposes at what level	86 mm. above the base	75 mm. above the base	Not examined due to bad preservation
Water table in trench 23 on 13th September 2000	62.30 m. OD		
Water table in the adjacent trench 43 between 15th August and 21st September 2003	Between 62.16 m. OD (maximum) and 61.94 m. OD (minimum)		

TABLE 4: TIMBER PRESERVATION IN TRENCH 23 (SUMMARY OF TABLE 3)

Highest point of the voids above the posts left by timber rotted in the past	62.81 m. OD
Highest surviving tip of a gate post	62.48 m. OD
Highest point at which bark was preserved	61.988 m. OD
Deepest base of a post	61.757 m. OD
Depth of levels where wood was once preserved (as proven by the voids above the posts), but where all wood has already been destroyed	330 mm.
Depth of levels where some wood still survives though irreparable damage has already been done (including the disintegration of all bark)	492 mm.
Depth of levels where wood with bark survives, but has already been damaged as a result of past fluctuations in the water table and may disintegrate in future – holes were beginning to form and the timbers were about to lose their bark (according to Ian Tyers, pers. comm.)	At least 231 mm.
Total depth of levels where wood has been destroyed or damaged as a result of past fluctuations in the water table	At least 1053 mm.



Fig. 13: A void was visible above all three excavated gate posts, such as this one (no. 2), where the rotted timber has left an imprint in the section.

the situation even more forcefully: 'Indeed the greatest disaster to our monuments over the past half century has been the damage caused by dewatering and the drying out of wet deposits. It is argued that it is surely better to have a presumption that all research should be welcomed before sites are destroyed by dewatering, ploughing, or simply the passage of time, often by invisible and unwitting agencies.'⁴⁷ May Cassar predicts, at least for eastern England, a substantial drop in average summer rainfall and soil moisture levels.⁴⁸ Any changes to the height of the water table or its seasonal fluctuations 'could have catastrophic results' for York's buried archaeology.⁴⁹ In East Anglia '— where agricultural pressure will be very strong — a significant drop in water table height must be anticipated.'⁵⁰ What will be the effect of climate change and agricultural pressure on future water table developments in Oxfordshire? What effect has the drainage of adjacent fields (via drainage pipes and the dredging out of streams) in the past have had? While we lack detailed long-term records for developments of the local water table, local eye witnesses attest a significant overall reduction in flooding over recent decades. There seems little doubt that a drop of the water table at Alchester, like at York, will have catastrophic results.

⁴⁷ 'A new Ancient Monuments Act?', *Current Archaeology*, 188 (2003), 342-3.

⁴⁸ M. Cassar, *Climate Change and the Historic Environment* (2005), 50, 52, 73-4, 78-9.

⁴⁹ Cassar *op. cit.* 40.

⁵⁰ Cassar *op. cit.* 79.

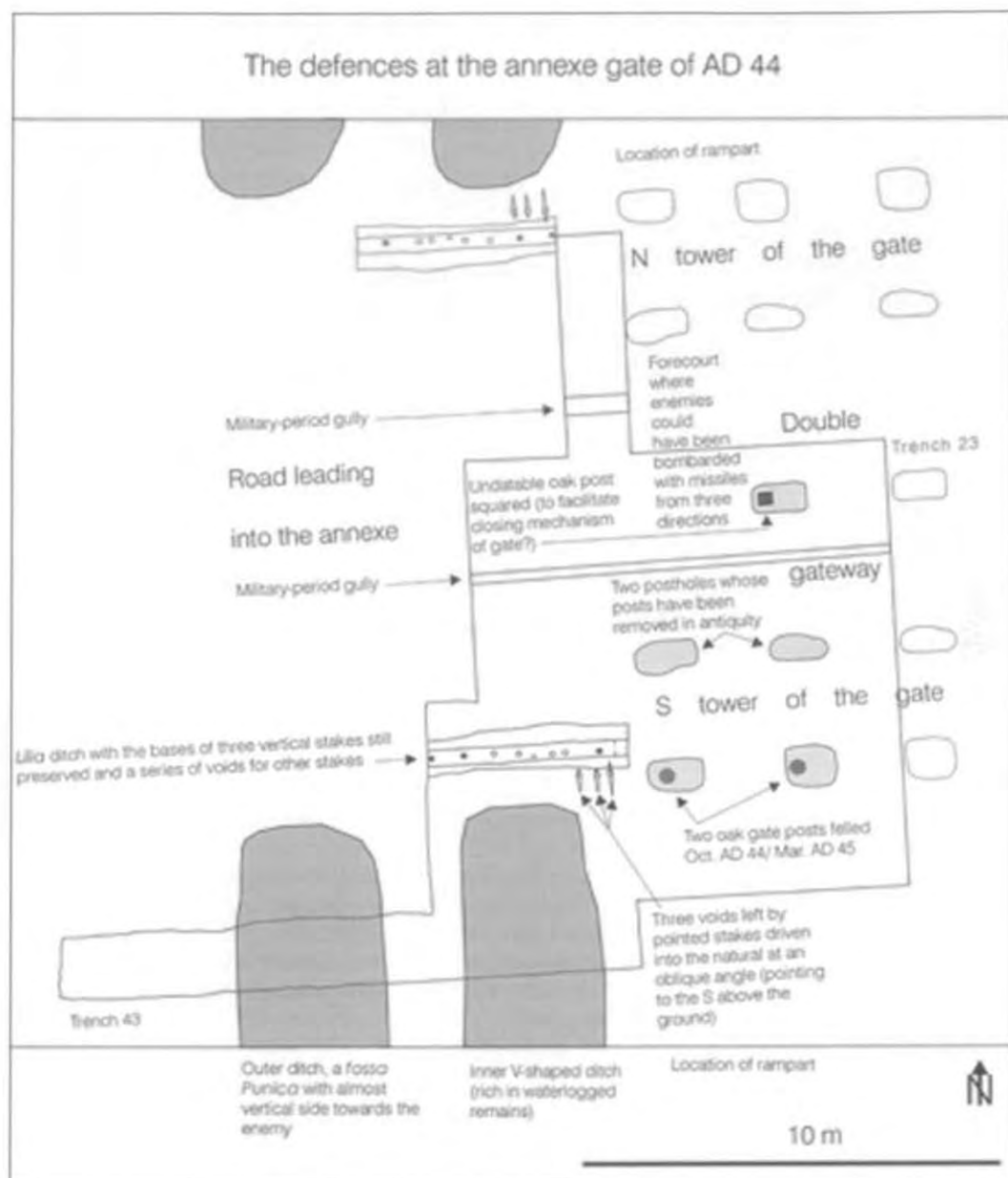


Fig. 14: Plan of the AD44 gate with associated defensive obstacles.



Fig. 15: Imprint of one of the diagonal pointed stakes rotted *in situ* (see fig. 14 for their location).



Fig. 16: The remains of the bases of three vertical stakes implanted in a ditch, probably as ancient minefield-equivalent (see fig. 14 for their location).

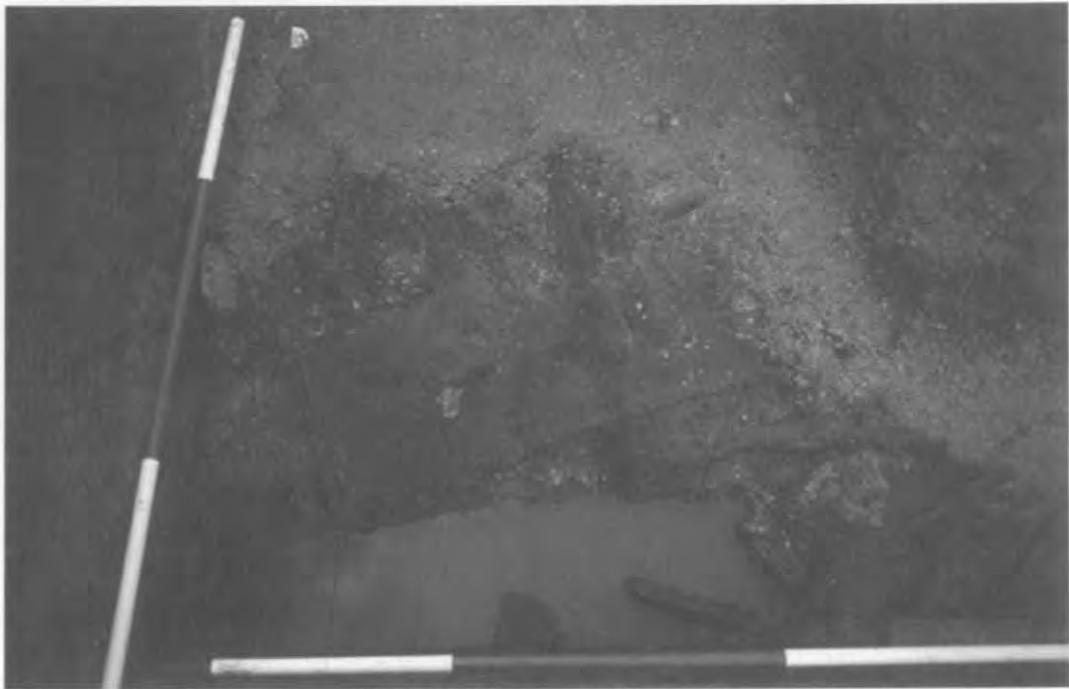


Fig. 17: The quality of timber artefact preservation at Alchester (here in trench 43 in 2003) suggests that any writing tablets at deeper levels would probably still be preserved.

If and when in future a significant temporary drop in the water table beyond the range of past fluctuations should occur – or a permanent drop in the average water table – the question arises whether any effective measures could be taken to raise the water table, given the sheer extent of the site and the possibility that a hosepipe ban may be in place, or whether a rescue excavation could be launched at a short notice. Even if, it would be unrealistic to expect that a rescue project under such circumstances would be able to excavate more than the odd token trench, and it would have to do so under considerable pressure of time. Even the assumption, however, that we would know about such a drop in time is an optimistic one and it is by no means certain whether this is just a future threat.

It must be conceded that, apart from some root action in 2003 (down to 61.94 m OD in trench 43), there was not much evidence for active decay during our excavations. This observation, however, indicates merely that the water table had not reached an all-time record low during this season, evident anyway from the damage to the gateposts' bark at an even deeper level (table 4). That no record levels were reached in 2003 does not prove that the waterlogged deposits are safe. As no excavations have taken place in the dry summers of 2005 and 2006, nor any monitoring of the water table, we simply do not know the water level at the time of writing in August 2006, let alone its potential impact. The water level is

unlikely to have recovered sufficiently in the dry winter 2005/06. There is thus little ground for complacency in the light of the exceptional drought between November 2004 and July 2006 or the predictions for future developments.⁵¹

What may we lose? If such a small percentage of Alchester's ancient deposits have yielded the earliest evidence for four plant species in Britain – not to mention numerous other insights into diet and environment – how many more may await discovery or unnoticed disintegration? There is every probability that evidence for the precise foundation date of the main fortress survives (AD 43 or 44?) and that a future dry spell could wipe it out, so that we will never know how long it took the invasion army to reach the area of Oxfordshire. There is no doubt that extensive written records were kept at a fortress and in all probability (as at many other military sites⁵²), at least a few will have ended up in ditches (cf. Fig. 17) or wells. If so, they would be the earliest handwritten documents from the British Isles, potentially providing unique insights into life during the Roman invasion of Britain.

David Miles concluded his article, based on his Tom Hassall lecture for 1996 (the very year when the Alchester project began), with ten observations what we had learnt from the two preceding decades of work on the Later Prehistory of the Oxford Region. The first of these is worth quoting in full in our context:

'...persistence pays. Only after 25 years of work in Abingdon was the oppidum located. Now a mass of small observations begin to make sense.'⁵³

Eight years of excavations at Alchester have yielded substantial progress, but persistence beyond this is required. How much further might we have advanced after 25 or even just another five years of fieldwork? Will we ever find out? We still know very little on the postulated main fortress and at least a few more years of fieldwork are required to prove or disprove this hypothesis and search for evidence whether or not the site's origins go back to AD 43, the very year of the Roman invasion. Persistence, however, comes at a price. There is no suggestion here that excavations at Alchester should be resumed on an inadequate budget and under all circumstances. At a site as rich in finds as Alchester, there must be sufficient funds in place for full analysis and conservation of all relevant finds before we embark upon a renewed programme of fieldwork.

⁵¹ The Midlands received during the November 2004 to July 2006 dry spell only 83% of the average 1961-1990 average rainfall, the second-lowest of Britain's nine regions: (http://www.met-office.gov.uk/climate/uk/interesting/2004_2005dryspell_areal.html, accessed on 31 August 2006). 83% is similar to East Anglia's 84%, for whose water table a significant drop has been predicted by Cassar op. cit. 79. The Environment Agency announced in August 2006 that in the Thames Valley 'groundwater levels at some boreholes were near to the lowest ever-recorded levels' even if 'further west the levels are closer to average' (http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/waterres/1014767/1131486/?version=1&lang=_e, accessed on 31 August 2006). On predictions for future developments see J. Luterbach, D. Dietrich, E. Xoplaki, M. Grosjean and H. Wanner, 'European Seasonal and Annual Temperature Variability, Trends, and Extremes Since 1500', *Science*, 303/5663 (5 March 2004), 1499-503, <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/303/5663/1499#REF19>.

⁵² J. Pearce, 'Archaeology, writing tablets and literacy in Roman Britain', *Gallia*, 61 (2004), 43-51; R.S.O. Tomlin, 'Roman Manuscripts from Carlisle: the Ink-Written Tablets', *Britannia*, 29 (1998), 31-84, esp. 32-3 with fig. 1; W. Glasbergen and W. Groenman-Van Waateringe, *The Pre-Flavian Garrisons of Valkenburg z. H.* (1974), 37.

⁵³ D. Miles, 'Conflict and Complexity: The Later Prehistory of the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lxii (1997), 18.

The future will tell whether excavations will be resumed or whether the preservation *in situ*-ideology⁵⁴ will prevail. The future will also tell how long some of Alchester's unique waterlogged material can be preserved *in situ* and how long it will take for it to be reduced to dark dry soil.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the Miller family for their kind permission to excavate at Alchester, their deep interest and their invaluable support of the project over many years. I am also indebted to Mr and Mrs Baker, Mr and Mrs Offord, Mr and Mrs Shouler, Mr and Mrs Taylor and the Ministry of Defence, notably Major Wilkins, for allowing us to excavate and survey on their land in the late 1990s and for all their help and enthusiasm. Hundreds of volunteers, specialists and academic colleagues, far too numerous to be listed here individually, have made this project possible through their dedicated contributions and support. The project enjoyed thirty generous grants from no less than ten different institutions: the British Academy, the European Community (via the Culture 2000 programme), the Roman Research Trust, the Royal Archaeological Institute, the Administrators of the Haverfield Bequest, the Society of Antiquaries of London, the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, the Marc Fitch Fund, the T.W. Greene Fund of the Craven Committee and the Association for Roman Archaeology, not to mention the support by the Oxford University Archaeological Society, the University of Edinburgh, my current employer, and my previous employers, the universities of Leicester and Oxford. I am indebted to all of these institutions, as well as to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society and to Tom Hassall for the opportunity to present the results of one decade of research to the local community, to the Acting Editor for his editorial efforts and to an anonymous referee for helpful and thought-provoking criticism, which improved the text.

To keep with the house style, I have not been able to name the co-authors of various previous articles on Alchester (i.e. Nick Cooper, Simon Crutchley, Geoffrey B. Dannel, Brenda Dickinson, Dr Patrick Erwin, Dr Annie Grant, Dr Martin Henig, Dr Alison W. McDonald and Professor Mark Robinson), but gratefully acknowledge their essential contribution here.

⁵⁴ It is important to stress here that this argument is against a widespread ideology, in Britain and abroad, which increasingly seeks to 'protect' archaeological heritage, be it of scheduled sites or all sites not threatened by development, from any invasive fieldwork in perpetuity or until an unspecified time in future. I have been frequently confronted with this ideology, in personal conversations on the future of Alchester and on more general topics, and it is occasionally also insinuated in print. It is not my intention to imply that this ideology is shared by any particular scholar cited in this paper (other than Fagan, *op. cit.*), but it is shared by some who are not cited.

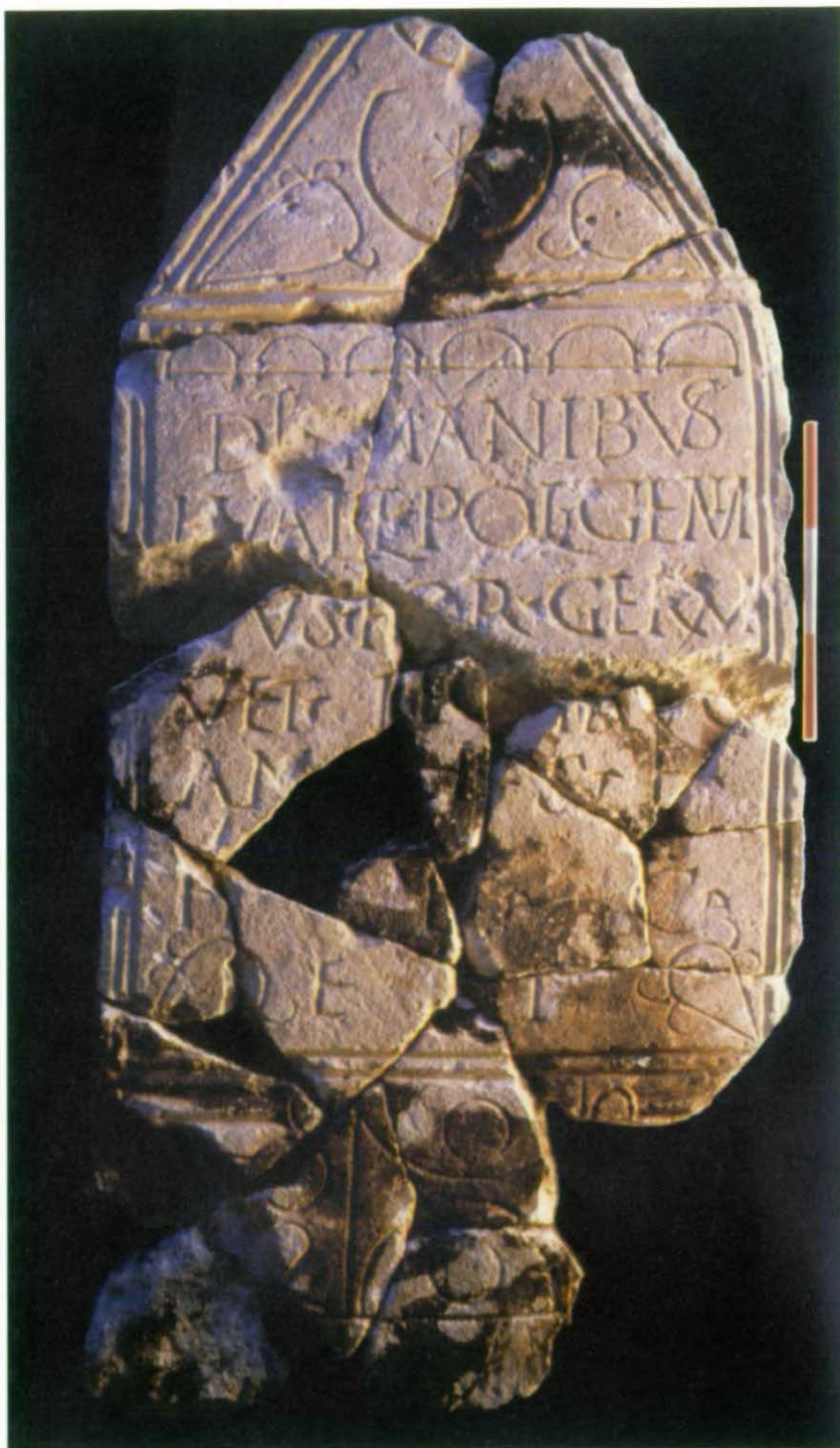


Plate IV. The tombstone of Lucius Valerius Geminus. (The scale measures 3 x 100 mm.) [Sauer p. 1]
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Plate V. Artist's impression of the AD-44 gate by Deborah Miles-Williams. [Sauer p. 13]



Plate VI. Church with yew planted axially due east of chancel, South Moreton, Berks.

Photograph by John Blair. [Secker p. 45]

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