
5 Cirencester - Corinium *Dobunorum* Alan McWhirr

Wheeler was never directly involved with the archaeology of Cirencester. He never dug in the town, was never associated in any advisory way with its museum, nor sat on any of the committees which were responsible for excavations at Cirencester. He did, however, give the inaugural lecture to the newly formed Cirencester Archaeological and Historical Society on the 2nd January 1956. Over 400 people attended his lecture in the Corn Hall where gave an address on 'Digging up the Past'. Interestingly, the founder President of the Society who introduced Wheeler was the Speaker of the House of Commons, Mr W S Morrison and to quote from the *Wilts and Glos Standard*, 'Of Sir Mortimer, Mr Morrison said amid laughter that although he was well known to television viewers there was more to him than that. He had managed to combine in a most effective way the qualities of the scientist and scholar with those of the humanist'.

If we look back to the 1930s when Wheeler's work at *Verulamium* was receiving so much media attention, those living in Cirencester would have had considerable difficulty in recalling any archaeological activity in their town. They would have had to cast their minds back to 1922 when, by accident, a Roman building with several mosaics was exposed to view. W St Clair Baddeley was called in to supervise the uncovering of the building and record the mosaics. He duly reported the discoveries in *The Builder* (9th June 1922), the local newspaper *Wilts and Glos Standard* (17th June 1922) and briefly in the *Journal of Roman Studies* (XI, 1921, 209). In the same year Baddeley also dug a trench across the Roman western defences in the grounds of the Union Workhouse, Watermoor Lane, now the offices of the Cotswold District Council.

Despite this lack of archaeological activity, the 1930s saw one major advance in the archaeology of Cirencester, for in 1938 a new Museum was provided by the Urban District Council. This brought together the objects in the private museums of Lord Bathurst and Wilfred Cripps, to provide a collection which still forms the backbone of the present museum.

It is perhaps surprising that Wheeler did not become more involved with Cirencester; it offered tremendous potential and being the second largest Romano-British city, it would, in the hands of someone like Wheeler, have generated considerable national publicity. He must have been well acquainted with the area from his time at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, and in connection with his excavations at Lydney, Gloucestershire, in 1928-9.

It was not until a year after the formation of the Cirencester Archaeological and Historical Society that the major campaign of excavation at Cirencester, which was to last some twenty years, began. Dr Graham Webster dug in Dyer Court in 1957 (Webster 1959), Mary Rennie in Ring Street in 1958 (McWhirr 1986) and also in Parsonage Field (Rennie 1971), and one of Wheeler's proteges, Kitty Richardson dug in the town in 1959 (Richardson 1962). She had previously dug with Wheeler at Maiden Castle and also went on his expeditions to France. This activity in the late 50s led to the formation of the Cirencester Excavation Committee in 1958 under the chairmanship of Professor Sir Ian Richmond.

It was in 1960, just as Professor Frere's excavations were coming to an end at *Verulamium*, that Professor John Wachter was asked to become Director of Excavations at Cirencester. As there were few large national excavations in 1960 on which to work, many of the personnel who annually dug with Frere moved west to Cirencester for their annual dose of archaeological masochism! If you wanted to cut your archaeological teeth by taking part in such an excavation *Verulamium* and then Cirencester were the obvious choices. Winchester was to follow some two years after the start of work at Cirencester.

As was the case in many towns in the early 1960s, Cirencester did not have any full time archaeological presence to watch over the quite major developments which took place during that decade. In fact, it has never been possible to establish a full time unit in the town, which in retrospect may have been a mistake and due to lack of effort by those of us working at the town at the time. Whatever the case may be, there never has been a permanent archaeological presence in the town and most of the excavation work which was necessary had to be done at fixed times of the year by people who could engage upon archaeological research during vacations from university, polytechnic or school. The work at this time was funded almost entirely by Department of the Environment (its predecessors and successor) with small grants from the local authority, Society of Antiquaries and Haverfield Trust. Funding was only available in those early years for digging - *none* for post-excavation work. Consequently a huge back-log of publication built up and is still being dealt with. This seems to be a problem that still exists with urban archaeology. Even where established archaeological units have budgeted for post-excavation work, the prompt production of excavation reports eludes many.

A great deal has been written and said about the development of archaeological techniques on urban sites and I think that it is worth stressing that the excavation of large areas, or open-area excavation as some refer to it, was employed by Professor Frere at *Verulamium* and not surprisingly also adopted by Wachter, who had been trained by Frere, at Cirencester. Clearly on some sites it was impossible, because of limitations imposed on the excavations, to open up large areas and excavators had to resort to smaller trenches, but on the whole during the 1960s and 1970s excavations at Cirencester were conducted in this way.

So presumably, after two decades of archaeological investigations at Cirencester we are in a position to give a definitive account of the city's historical development - the second largest city in Britain, in terms of the defended area. It is certainly true to say that we know more now than we did 30 years ago when Professor Wachter began digging, but it is important to point out that even after nearly 20 years of regular excavations, less than 4 hectares of the 97 hectare town have been looked at, ie about 4%, and not all of that 4% has been excavated completely. This means that the sample examined is *small* and perhaps too small upon which to base any conclusions. And yet, we continue to do so!

It is this question of the size of the sample which caused Wheeler problems when others took the results of his excavations on the town defences at *Verulamium* and applied them to other Romano-British cities. Even though he dug several sections across the defences, his sample was, in percentage terms extremely small, and as we now know did not produce a representative sample of dating material.

Our samples are still, in the majority of cases, too small to work out the evolution of town defences properly and one thing we have learnt at Cirencester is that such defences are much more complicated to understand than we at first thought. At Cirencester, it is estimated (on the generous side) that, at the most, 60m of the town's defensive circuit has been examined - that is, 60m out of 4km, which is a maximum of 1.5%. How risky it is to try to write an account on the town's defences from such a small sample!

Nevertheless, it is necessary to attempt an outline of the development of the town's defences and in view of Wheeler's interest in such matters it would seem appropriate to begin this brief review of Cirencester with a summary of what is known. This model will, no doubt, have to be modified as, and when, more work is carried out.

The city was first defended at the end of the 2nd century by an earth bank with associated ditches. Professor Wachter showed that the monumental stone *Verulamium* Gate was contemporary with this bank (Wachter 1961). Subsequent excavations have also revealed that stone internal towers, which have been located in two places, were also contemporary with the earth rampart. Perhaps contemporary is the wrong word to use for the excavations have shown that the towers and gates were built before

the rampart was thrown up (Brown & McWhirr 1966). They may have been built together as part of a unified scheme. Alternatively, it might represent a course of action which had to be modified as it was being built and therefore appear to be a single plan.

During the first half of the 3rd century, the earth bank was cut back so that a stone wall could be built between the bank and ditch. Earlier excavations found that the masonry wall around the town was of two thicknesses 1.2m and 3.0m and it was only when David Brown examined a stretch of the defences some 230m north-west of the *Verulamium* Gate that he was able to show that the wider wall was the later of the two. It looks, therefore, as though it was found necessary to replace the narrow wall for some reason or other with a more substantial one. There is no obvious reason in terms of the localised conditions and so one must look for other explanations.

The final modification to the defences was the addition of external towers, or bastions, which took place in the middle of the 4th century.

The dating of defences is always difficult and in years to come, when a larger sample of the defences has been examined, we will undoubtedly see a refinement of the dates attributed to the various phases just outlined, and, indeed, even more phases.

Wheeler was involved for a number of years with the excavation of the military *ludus* or amphitheatre at Caerleon and would, no doubt, have been extremely interested in the work carried out on Cirencester's amphitheatre, or bull ring, as it is known locally. The most startling result to emerge from Professor Wachter's excavation was his suggestion that the amphitheatre was turned into a fortified retreat for the survivors of the late-Roman town (Wachter 1975,314). This was based on his finding in the arena of a large timber building and on a reduction in the size of the north-east entrance (Wachter 1964). The timber building was considered to be late Roman and the alterations to the entrance were said to be associated with a scatter of late Roman pottery and coins. The material from these excavations is currently being processed and in due course the evidence for this interpretation will be presented fully.

Wheeler reminded us in the introduction to *Archaeology from the Earth* published in 1954, that the excavator is not digging up *things*, he is digging up *people*, and so I think that it would be most appropriate to spend some time talking about people. We can learn about actual people from inscriptions and from their skeletal remains. In addition we can gain some idea about their artistic tastes from wall plaster, mosaics, sculpture and other works of art.

Various craftsmen working in, or around, the town have left their mark in one form or another. An altar found in 1899 in an area known as Ashcroft mentions Sulinus the son of Brucetus (*RIB* 105). A Sulinus is also mentioned on a statue base found in Bath (*RIB* 151) where it is also stated that he is the son of Brucetus, thus making it highly likely that it is the same person. On the statue base from Bath he

is described as a sculptor and if it is the same person as commemorated on the altar then we know that Sulinus, a sculptor, lived in Cirencester.

For some, as yet unexplained, reason tiles and bricks made in the Cotswolds were often stamped and many found their way to Cirencester (McWhirr & Viner 1978). Tiles have been found in the town bearing similar groups of letters, TPF, TPFA, TPFB, TPFC and TPLF and also some bearing the letters TCM and LHS. Various explanations have been given for their meaning, but the fact that we have one name in full, ie ARVERUS, must mean that these groups of letters are abbreviated names. Whether the group with the TPF followed by A, B or C indicate joint names or various *officina* in a large brick field is not certain.

Several people who lived and died in Cirencester have left us personal details on their tombstones. The earliest is probably Philus whose headstone, sadly still in Gloucester Museum and not in Cirencester, was discovered in the military cemetery to the south of the auxiliary fort (*RIB* 110). It is suggested that this tombstone is 1st century in date and that Philus was a camp follower, perhaps a trader. He is represented on the stone wearing a hooded cloak.

A group of three tombstones found in 1971 give further insights into those living in Cirencester (McWhirr 1973). Unfortunately, only the names and ages are recorded and we are not told anything else about these individuals. Even so, they provide us with actual names of people and accurate ages at death - assuming that those who erected the headstones had their facts right, which may not have been the case.

One of the tombstones records a juvenile named Aurelius Igennus aged 6 years and 10 months, whose father's name, Aurelius Euticianus, suggests a Greek background. Nemmonius Verecundus is commemorated on another of the stones. This stone is an excellent example of the monumental mason's craft with well-cut lettering and the lightly scored guide lines that were used for each row of letters. Having taken the trouble to prepare the stone and to cut such fine letters, it is strange that he should have to squeeze in the 'o' and 'm' on the first line. Interestingly, Verecundus was 75 when he died. The last one of this group of three found together was erected to a Lucius Petronius who was 40 when he died.

Other individuals are known by name from inscriptions. They include Julia Casta aged 33 (*RIB* 113), Publia Vicana (*RIB* 111) and Casta Castrensis (*RIB* 112), all recorded on tombstones, and Sabidius Maximus (*RIB* 104), who is mentioned on an altar. In addition to these civilians we also know the names of two members of the Roman army who were stationed in Cirencester from their tombstones, which were found in the same area as that set up to Philus. Both were cavalrymen attached to auxiliary units. One was Sextus Valerius Genialis (*RIB* 109), and the other Dannicus (*RIB* 108).

We also know the name of a high ranking member of the Roman administration whose seat of office

was in *Corinium*. A rectangular base for a column found in 1891 records part of the name of the governor of *Britannia Prima* (*RIB* 103). The surviving part of the name reads Lucius Septimus, and the presence of this inscription in Cirencester is usually taken to imply that Cirencester was the capital of the province of Britannia Prima.

Since the excavation of the Bath Gate cemetery in the 1970s it has been possible to say a great deal more about the people who lived and worked in *Corinium*. Whatever figure we put on the population of the city over the 400 years or so of its existence there must have been at least 100,000 people who died and were buried in the town's cemeteries. If, however, we use a higher figure for the population, which has been suggested, then there might have been many as a quarter of a million interred in the graveyard, although it should of course be remembered that during the first two centuries they would have been cremated. The excavations recovered some 400 skeletons in various states of completeness and so again we come up against the problem of the size of the sample that has been studied. Four hundred skeletons out of possible 50-100,000 is indeed a small sample. Another difficulty with the study of the skeletal remains concerns their date. Archaeologically it was impossible to date all but a few of the burials. However, there is good reason to believe that most were 4th or early 5th century. It is difficult to say how long into the 5th century they were buried in this cemetery. Bearing in mind Wachter's idea of the city's late population retreating into the adjacent amphitheatre then they might have used it until quite late into the 5th century, or dare we say even into the 6th, remembering that the Battle of Dyrham took place in AD 577.

So what did those living in Cirencester in the 4th and 5th centuries look like? Of the 107 male skeletons from which it was possible to calculate height the men averaged 5' 6½" and 44 women 5' 2". Men ranged in height from 5' 3" to 5' 11½", and women from 4' 10" to 5' 6¾".

There are difficulties in ageing skeletons, especially of those individuals who achieved old age. Calvin Wells, however, did produce an age estimate of variable reliability for 239 adults - 167 male, 72 female. Mean age at death of males was 40.8 years and females 37.8, ie the males outliving the females by 3 years, which Calvin Wells points out is very common in early societies. The histogram shows the spread of ages of death, with male deaths peaking at around 48-53 and female being fairly even. At this stage it is interesting to remember the tombstone of Verecundus who died aged 75.

Arthritis was common amongst the inhabitants of Cirencester; 80% suffered. Five skeletons indicated the congenital defect of spina bifida and there was evidence of poliomyelitis. Three cases of gout were detected and 15% of the skeletons exhibited fractures. Six people had been decapitated. The state of the teeth was extremely good and there was no evidence of dental filling, ornamentation or the use of false teeth.

Further work is being undertaken on these skeletons by various people. Helen Bush is looking at aspects of health and nutrition and non-specific indicators of stress. Charlotte Roberts is studying the paleopathology of leprosy and tuberculosis in Britain. In due course it will be possible to say more about these who once lived in *Corinium Dobunorum* from these and other studies of this important collection of skeletal remains.

Continuing with the theme of people it is interesting to speculate on the city's population. Clearly there is at present no reliable way of estimating how many people were living in the town at any one time. One only has to look at the town plan and remember how little has actually been examined to realise that we cannot use the number of buildings as an indicator of population size. Likewise, the number of graves located cannot give any idea of the number living in the town at any one time as only a small fraction have survived.

Professor Frere has suggested by analogy with known population figures for later towns that the larger civitas capitals held around 5,000 people and Cirencester may fit this model (Frere 1987, 253). However, in view of its elevated status as a provincial capital Frere points out that it might have had as many as four times that number of people.

It has been sometimes suggested that the size of the amphitheatre is directly related to the size of the population, but this idea must be suspect. The Cirencester amphitheatre was laid out towards the end of the 1st century when the city's population was relatively small. The size of the amphitheatre does not seem to have changed over 400 years whereas it is almost certain that there would have been ups and downs in the size of the population. In addition, the amphitheatre would no doubt have been used on market days when the town's population was swollen by those arriving from the country to attend the market. For what it is worth the plan of the amphitheatre indicates that some 5-6,000 people could be seated to watch the activities which took place there.

We still know little about the inter-relationship between the city of Cirencester and the countryside around. We can speculate about the spheres of influence of the town and the extent to which services were used by the surrounding population. The work

of Dr David Smith in identifying schools of mosaicists who were probably based in the town gives some idea of the extent of *Corinium's* influence. It is hoped that in years to come we shall learn more about the economic ties between city and country.

Various accounts of the past 30 years work have appeared in print and with the series of excavation reports now underway the story of the history and development of Cirencester is gradually unfolding. This account is far from comprehensive. It has selected a number of themes which one assumes would have been of interest to Wheeler.

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