

Silchester Insula XXX



Temple Excavation 2017

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Fig. 1 Society of Antiquaries' plan of Insula XXX showing location of the temples within the temenos

Introduction

Informed by the results of survey by ground-penetrating radar (GPR), excavation took place over four weeks in August-September 2017 on the site of a presumed, third temple within the walled temenos, which is denoted as Insula XXX by the Society of Antiquaries, towards the eastern edge of the Roman walled town (Fig. 1).

The great majority of this insula lies within the grounds of what, until the 1970s, was a working farm, now The Old Manor House, and beneath the adjacent St Mary's Church and churchyard to the south. Our knowledge of the Insula is very largely based on three interventions by the Society of Antiquaries in 1890, 1893 and 1902 and on geophysical survey by Fry and Thornley in 2015-16 (Fig 2). 1890 saw the discovery of the remains of two Romano-Celtic temples partly underlying the churchyard, the field to the west and the farmyard to the north as well as the remains of a wall which the later excavations of 1893 and 1902 showed enclosed the sacred precinct in which the temples stood. Among the buildings and parts of buildings reported by the Antiquaries is an east-west oriented Block III, elements of which were found in both 1893 and 1902. It is this building which the GPR survey suggested is a third Romano-Celtic temple, sharing the same north-south alignment as the others and similar in size to the southernmost of the group.

Within the paddock immediately to the north of the large barn and hard-surfaced yard in the grounds of The Old Manor House it was possible to excavate approximately half of the temple and a limited area of the precinct around it (Fig 3). The area available lay on the course of the late medieval/post-medieval drove-way which crosses the Roman town from west to east and which originally passed through the farmyard

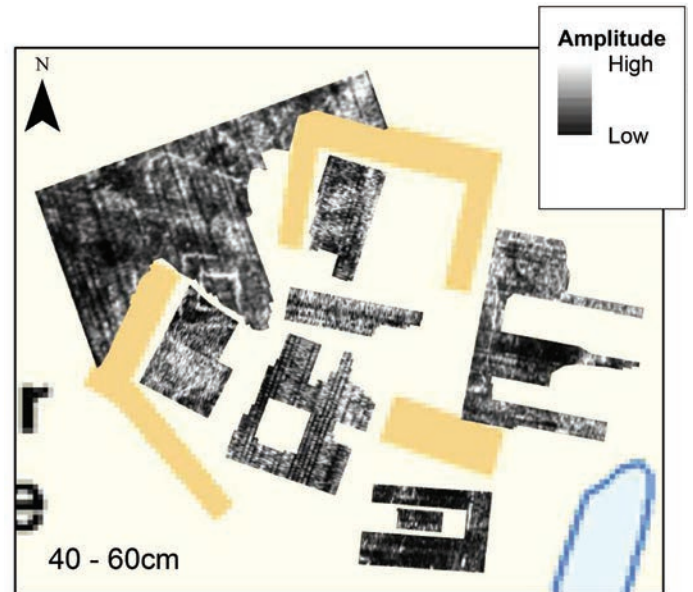


Fig. 2 The Old Manor House, Silchester, Hampshire: Geophysics and interpretation of GPR data

towards the lane which runs due east away from Church Lane and the Roman town. As a result of generations of traffic associated with it and the work of the farm, the stratigraphy was heavily truncated with post-medieval and modern metalling lying directly on the foundations and associated make-up of the Roman temple and, externally, directly on the natural gravel. Occupation later than the construction of the temple was confined to features which had been cut into the natural or through the Roman make-ups into the underlying natural gravel.



Fig. 3 Drone picture of the area of excavation, showing the temple foundations (from south)

Pre-Temple (fig 4)

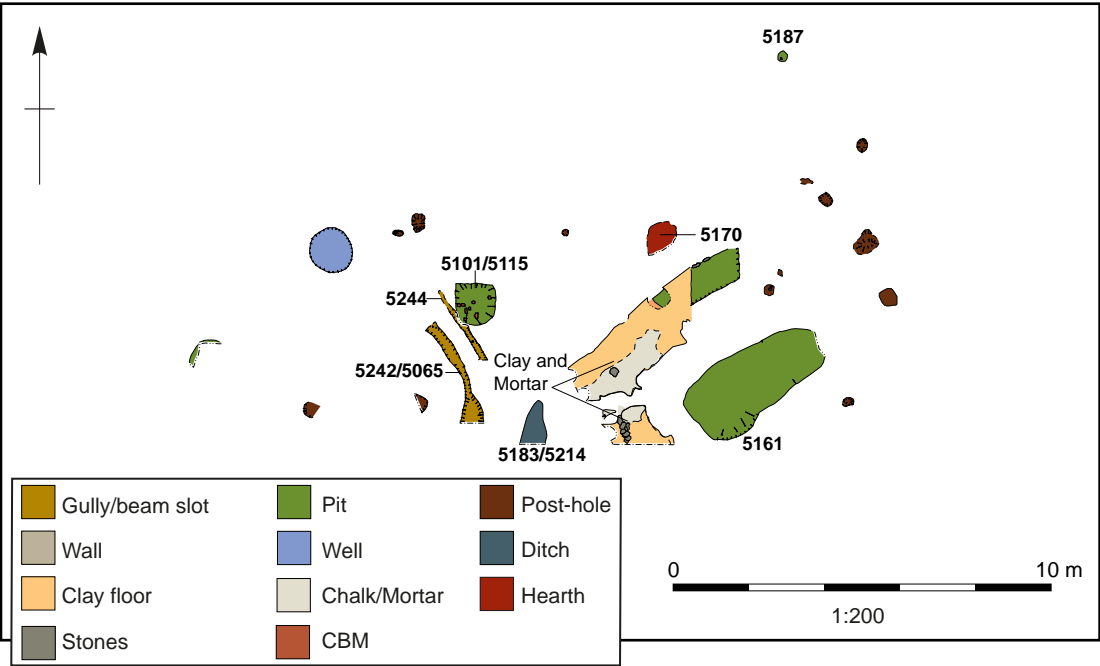


Fig.4 Pre-temple occupation

Gulleys and a ditch

Overlying natural deposits (5031) in the east of the trench was a light green sandy silt (5027) with no inclusions. This is interpreted as an early land surface. Overlying the natural deposits to the west of the trench was a thick deposit of loose greyish-white gravel (5124). Cut into the old land surface were 2 parallel, curvilinear gulleys (5065/5242 and 5244), filled with a hard yellow clay (Fig. 5). These gulleys had a depth of c.0.2m, with a flat base. They were between 0.15m and 0.2m in width, with the western one widening to the south to a width of c.0.5m. They survived as lengths of up to c.2.83m.

Cutting the loose gravels, and extending south beneath the standing barn was a shallow (c.0.25m deep) length of ditch (5214/5183) terminating c.1m into

the trench (Fig. 6). It was filled with a friable whitish-grey sandy silt (5142) with a date of c.AD50 - 70. Overlying the fill were numerous slump layers, some which may have been pre-temple occupation layers, the later ones being interpreted as make-up for the overlying temple.



Fig. 6 Terminal of ditch 5214/5183 in section, showing fills and slumps. Looking west



Fig.5 Parallel, linear gulleys

Occupation

A series of thick yellow clay deposits interleaved with thin silty layers containing charcoal are interpreted as the remnants of pre-temple floors and occupation material. They had been cut through by the later cella walls. These deposits covered an area of at least 5m square. Overlying the uppermost of these clay deposits was a thick spread of crushed white chalk/mortar (5148), up to 0.04m in depth. Cutting through these deposits was a shallow c.0.1m in depth rectilinear feature measuring c.2.46m north-south, and c.1m east-west. It was packed with flints, and overlain at the north end by a dark orange-red burnt clay. This area of clay is interpreted as a small hearth 5134, (Fig. 7). Associated with these spreads and the hearth, and enclosing them, were a number of postholes. Together these features are interpreted as the remains of a small structure – a possible predecessor to the later temple – defined by a spread of mortar, rectilinear in plan and cut by the foundations of the later cella.



Fig.7 The hearth (5134), cut through by the later cella wall.

Pre-dating the temple itself were two intercutting pits, located between the ambulatory and cella walls. The earlier of these pits (5116) cut into the old land surface and was a rounded cut measuring 1.12m by 0.44m, with a depth of 0.56m. It had a wide, u-shaped profile, and was filled by dark brown clayey silt with stony inclusions. Samian found within it gave the pit a Neronian-early Flavian date. It also contained tesserae, slag and Roman glass. This pit was truncated by pit 5115, a rectangular cut which measured 1.14m by 0.36m, with a depth of 0.43m. It was filled with a silty deposit which contained CBM, two pieces of tesserae, and an iron object, and is dated to c.AD 70 -85 by the presence of samian pottery.

Cut into a compact, deliberately laid gravel to the north of the temple, was a well 5140 (Fig.8). This feature



Fig.8 Well 5140 (not bottomed) showing mortar capping

had a diameter of c.1.2m and was excavated to a depth of 1.65m. The fill of the well beneath a substantial, 0.08m thick deposit of mortar contained samian pottery of Flavian date.

Together the structures and finds indicate occupation of the area subsequently occupied by the temple, the mortar fill of the well indicating consolidation at the time of the temple's construction.

Ritual deposits

A potentially ritual deposit which may also be associated with the pre-temple occupation is a pre-Flavian, Alice Holt dish (5187) which was deposited in a small pit adjacent to the inner face of the later ambulatory wall (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Alice Holt dish, deliberately deposited

One other potentially ritual feature (Fig. 10), partly sealed by the later make-ups for the temple, was the cut of a very large, sub-rectangular pit (5161), measuring c.4.5m by 1.8m, with a depth of c.0.35m, which extended from the south-east facing wall of the cella, towards the centre of the cella. At its north-east end it tapered to a rounded end which was cut by a later posthole. This feature had two distinct phases. The primary cut was

filled with clean, re-deposited gravel capped by a thick (0.1m) deposit of tile (5087), consisting almost entirely of broken tegulae. Among these were four examples stamped with the Emperor Nero's name and titles (Fig. 11). There were no other finds. At its western end, and thus towards the centre of the cella, this fill was cut by a later squarish pit, discussed below. The primary cut, sealed by make-up associated with the temple's construction, may either be related to a ritual to commemorate the building and roofing of the temple, or



is to be associated with a possible temple predecessor. The concentration of Nero-stamped tiles and tegulae in one, non-structural context has, as yet, no parallel elsewhere at Silchester.

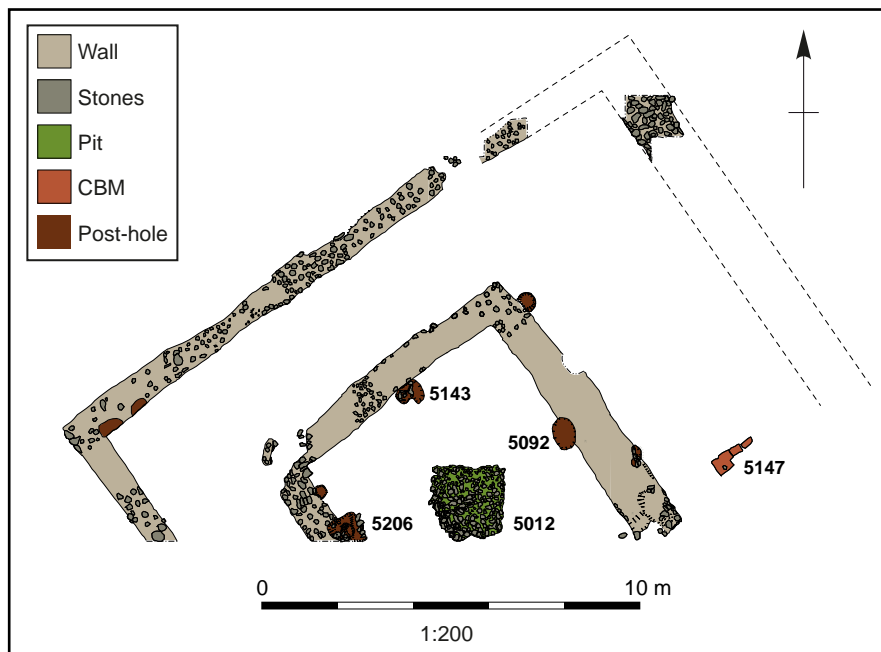


Fig. 11 Nero tiles from pit 5161

The temple (fig 12)

Only the foundations and associated make-ups of the temple had survived post-Roman activity. The north-west-facing wall foundations of the cella were exposed in their entirety along with the majority of the joining north-east facing and part of the south-west-facing wall foundations (Fig. 12, right). Assuming a square plan, the completely exposed foundations of the cella suggests overall, external dimensions of 8m square. The foundations of the cella consist of mortared flint and are c.0.9 to 1.0m in width with a depth of c.0.5m. Almost the entire length of the north-west-facing wall foundations of the ambulatory was also exposed as well as a portion of the south-west facing wall and a fragment of the north-east facing foundations in the north-east corner of the trench. Exposure of the latter was sufficient to reconstruct an external dimension of the north-west facing wall foundations of c.17.5m. A greater width (6.30m) between the fragment of north-east-facing wall foundations and the corresponding wall of the cella than between the north-west-facing wall of the cella and the corresponding ambulatory wall (c.3.5m) suggests external dimensions of the ambulatory of 17.5m by 15m. While the width of the north-west and south-west-facing foundations of the ambulatory wall was 0.7m, that of the fragment of north-east facing wall was 1.2m, suggesting the possibility that it supported the entrance-façade, perhaps colonnaded, of the temple. Such an interpretation is supported by the greater depth of space between ambulatory and cella wall on this side of the temple. The temple would then have faced on to the main road entering Calleva from London, not towards the heart of the town to the west. The depth of the north-west and south-west-facing ambulatory foundations, also constructed of mortared flint, was c.0.5m. Tiles packed around the outside of the north-west corner of the ambulatory suggest an attempt to address possible subsidence. A number of postholes also appear to be associated with the construction of the cella walls: posthole 5092 cuts the east wall, posthole 5206 the west wall and posthole 5143 the north wall. Smaller postholes are also situated amongst the foundation material.

Deposits of clay, similar in character to the consolidating fill of the north-south-aligned ditch, within the cella are interpreted as make-ups for its floor. These contained a small amount of pottery including samian of Neronian early Flavian date, c.AD 50-75.



Cutting through the sub-rectangular pre-temple pit 5161 was a square feature 5070 which shared the same orientation as the cella and was largely filled by packed, nodular flint 5012 (Fig. 13-14). This measured c.2m x 2.5m and had a depth of 0.5m. Unlike the primary cut (described above), the later pit was not certainly sealed by make-ups, rather by later, post-medieval or modern, superficial deposits.

The purpose of this pit remains unclear. It may have been associated with the closure and demolition of the temple, the flints perhaps a symbolic reminder of the fabric of the building.



Fig. 13 Nodular flint packing 5012



Fig. 14 Square feature 5070



Fig. 15 Tile surface 5147

No internal surfaces survived either within the cella or ambulatory except for a partly robbed, rectangular, tiled surface (5147), c.1.23 by 0.45m, located off-centre within the ambulatory on its south-east side and cut by a modern water-pipe (Fig. 15). Whether this was part of a distinct, internal feature such as a platform for an altar, or merely the only surviving fragment of a completely tiled floor of the ambulatory is not clear.

Abandonment of the temple (fig 16)

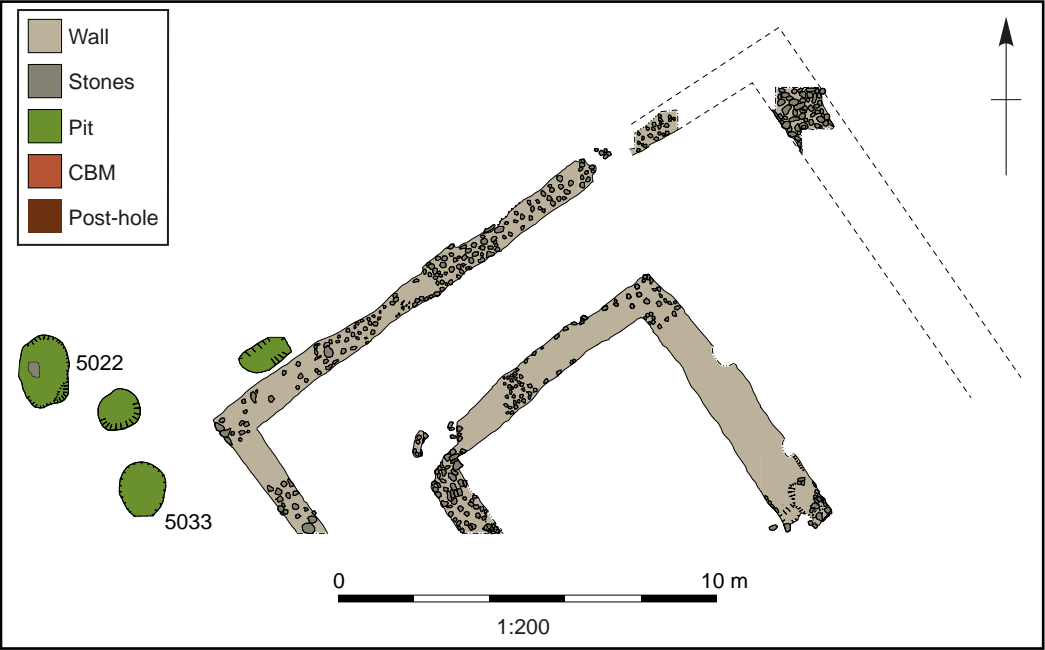


Fig. 16 Abandonment of the temple

Two pits excavated outside the temple but within the temenos wall on the western side, both truncated to an unknown extent by post-Roman activity, may relate to the abandonment and demolition of the temple and temple precinct. One (5022), against the western edge of the excavation trench and measuring 1.9m north-south by 1.28m east-west with a depth of 1.1m, contained little else other than a roughly shaped block of greensand (0.82m by 0.35m by 0.27m) (Fig. 17). This may have been a roughout for an altar, discarded and then, judging by wear patterns on one surface, perhaps subsequently re-used as a threshold. None of the few finds from this pit could be dated.

The second pit (5033), however, which was sub-circular with dimensions of 1.54m by 1.32m with a depth of 0.42m, contained an assemblage of domestic rubbish, principally of animal bone and pottery (Fig. 18). The latter included samian of mid-to-late second century date, including a Dr 33 stamped by Martius iv, c.AD155-90. The degree of wear suggests a date of deposition around the end of the second or early in the third century. On the basis of the domestic character of the finds assemblage and its date we tentatively suggest that the temple, perhaps the whole temple precinct, was abandoned and demolished c.AD 200 along with the symbolic burial of an associated, roughed-out altar, later serving as a threshold stone.



Fig. 17 Possible threshold stone



Fig. 18 Rubbish pit

Post-Medieval Occupation

Animal Burials

On the western side of the temple and between it and the temenos wall were found the remains of two animal burials. Immediately beneath the surface and in the middle of the driveway were the poorly preserved, but articulated remains of an animal, provisionally identified as a cow (Fig. 19). If it had been buried in a pit, then all but the very lowest fill con-



Fig. 19 Possible cow burial

taining the animal remains had been truncated by the driveway. There were no associated finds to date but a sample of bone has been radiocarbon dated to the 16th-17th century. Lack of datable finds was also the case with a second, articulated animal burial, in this case of a horse (Fig. 20). It had been buried in a shallow pit, 1.7m by 0.98m with a truncated depth of c.0.2m, revealed in the south-west corner of the excavation trench. A sample of bone from this animal has been radiocarbon dated to the 16th-18th century.



Fig. 20 Horse burial

The cobbled and metalled surfaces of the driveway as it entered the farmyard were the most prominent remains of the post-Roman period.

These extended over most of the excavated area, but were edged on the south side by the foundations of a brick wall cut into the foundations of cella and ambulatory and on the same orientation as the surviving barn foundations immediately to the east (Fig. 21).



Fig. 21 Post-medieval metalling and wall foundations

The Society of Antiquaries' Excavation

The Society of Antiquaries excavated in this part of the farmyard in 1902 locating part of the outer wall of the temple which they projected as running up to the walls of the barn to the east. The only trace of their excavation was the discovery of a single trench which straddled the outer, ambulatory wall.

Modern Interventions

The 1902 excavation was sealed by further deposits of gravel metalling which extended across the excavated area. Modern trenches for water pipes and electric cables cut across the remains of the temple.

Conclusions

Despite the extent to which the Roman deposits had been truncated by the driveway and the life of the farm, excavations have confirmed the remains of a third Romano-Celtic temple in Insula XXX. Together, the three temples are aligned approximately north-south, those to north and south flanking the considerably larger, central temple, still the largest of its kind in Roman Britain. The evidence of the pottery and stamped tile gives a Neronian terminus post quem for the start of construction, perhaps with completion in the early 70s. The temple occupied the site of a possible predecessor of Claudio-Neronian date. There is no evidence to suggest to which deity or deities the temple was dedicated. The disposal of domestic rubbish in pits outside the temple suggest that abandonment and demolition took place after c.AD 200.

This temple is the earliest masonry building so far attested at Silchester. If all three temples were constructed at the same time, as the symmetry of their layout might suggest, the ensemble would have presented a striking monumental entrance to the town to travellers from London.

Photogrammetry



Explore the site for yourself! Photogrammetry models have been made of some of the key features. These are available to view at:

sketchfab.com/sagesuav/collections/silchester-temple-site

Stills from models (from top left, moving clockwise):
cow(?) skeleton, horse skeleton, pot in-situ, tile feature in the corner of the temple wall, half-sectioned well.

Acknowledgements

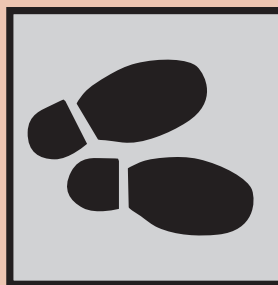
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