Roman and Medieval Finds from St. Birinus Primary School, Dorchester, Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

An archaeological recording action at St. Birinus School in Dorchester led to the discovery of probable Roman features and a quantity of Roman pottery spanning the 1st to 4th centuries AD, with particular emphasis on the 2nd century, and metalwork of comparable date. The site is located just outside the line of the 2nd-century Roman town defences, so the evidence may represent an area of extramural settlement previously suspected from earlier archaeological discoveries. Subsequent disturbance of the site and the restricted nature of the recording action mean that the information gained and conclusions reached are necessarily very limited.

INTRODUCTION

A targeted archaeological recording and monitoring action was carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services on the Scheduled Ancient Monument (Oxon 116(6)) at St. Birinus School, Queen Street, Dorchester, Oxfordshire (SU 57919447). The local solid geology is (fine) gravel covered by a sandy loam and the site lies at a height of approximately 49 m. above OD. The aim of the investigation was to observe the excavation of beam trenches and boxes for the school building extension and record anything of archaeological significance. The fieldwork was undertaken during May/June 1994 and the site code was SBSD93. The finds and archive have been deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service (accession number 1996-36).

The new building lay largely within the area of the Scheduled Monument but the site is also thought to be just outside the northern edge of the Roman town defences and beyond the proven area of medieval settlement.¹ Extra-mural settlement both north and south of the Roman town has been suggested and 'investigations' by the primary school children have produced Roman finds.

The planning authority, under advice from the Oxfordshire County Archaeologist, requested a field evaluation prior to the granting of planning permission in order to assess the archaeological potential of the area. In order to avoid the need to gain scheduled monument consent the fieldwork was located just beyond the limit of the scheduled area. The evaluation revealed a number of features and finds, although from such a small sample area the conclusions were necessarily limited. Five features were noted at a depth of about 0.9 m. (F2-F6), the earliest of which were three intercutting, vertical-sided and flat-based pits (F2-F4). All three features have a *terminus post quem* of the 2nd-4th century AD, with the

¹ J. Munby and K. Rodwell, 'Dorchester', in K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire* (1975), OAU Survey no. 3.

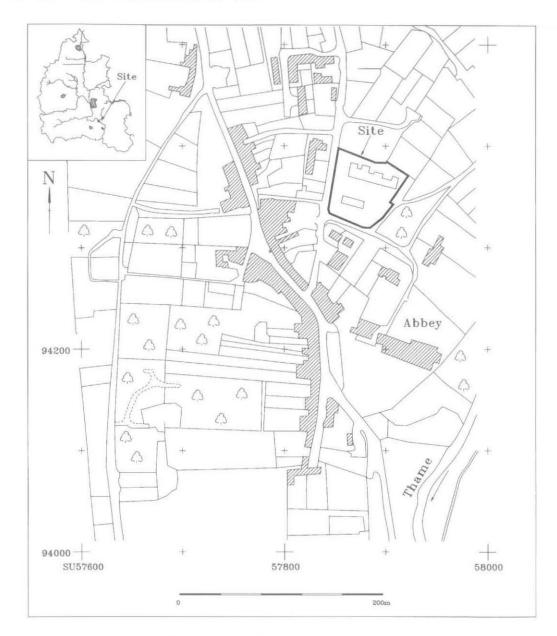


Fig. 1. Location of site within Dorchester.

earliest date for F3 being the 3rd century AD.² Brick, tile and daub were recovered, with 51 sherds of Roman pottery, the date range for which spans most of the Roman period. Given the restricted nature of the evaluation, a high density of archaeological deposits of mainly Roman date were discovered.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 42 boxes with connecting beam trenches were excavated, 20 of them by machine (Fig. 2). They ranged in size from $0.60 \ge 0.60$ m. to $1.10 \ge 1.10$ m. and the sand/gravel bedrock was usually encountered at a depth of between 2 m. and 2.5 m. below the surface. The modern overburden was removed by machine for all the boxes and beam trenches and in some cases this overburden was only 0.20 m. deep, with archaeologically sensitive layers beneath. The beam trench between Boxes 1 and 5, and part of the trenches between Boxes 6, 9 and 23, were excavated by hand. Where it was not possible to hand dig, the material removed by the machine was carefully monitored for finds. Every effort was made to record archaeological features as fully as possible, although in some instances features could only be seen once the boxes had been excavated.

RESULTS

Some 50 archaeological features were identified, making up a complex sequence of layers with intercutting relationships, including a large ditch occupying the beam trench between Boxes 5 and 6 and several pits and postholes. A significant quantity of finds were recovered, mainly comprising pottery, brick and tile of Roman or medieval date and quantities of animal bone. A number of metal finds including coins and jewellery were located by metal detector users from the Wessex Metal Detecting Association working in conjunction with the archaeologists.

Given that this was not a full excavation, a significant amount of information was recovered. However, the limitations of the exercise have caused considerable problems with interpretation. Many of the deposits were only present in part in the boxes and the full extent or profile was not available to be recorded (Fig. 3). For many contexts it was impossible to say whether they were part of a layer, ditch, gully or pit. Some of these were recorded as 'possible features' including F118, F119, F123, F125 and F142 and over 20 features were recorded as possible ditches/pits e.g. F102, F104, F110, F116, F121, F135 and F145. Three possible postholes were recorded (F107, F133 and F137) and a further three (F108, F146 and F148) may be modern in origin as they were cut from very high up, often at the level of the made ground. Lastly, several features may be natural in origin, e.g. F123 and F147.

The task of reconstructing the stratigraphic sequence of the site suffers from similar problems. All of the contexts visible in the boxes were given individual numbers on site; it could not be assumed that layers of similar appearance occurring in different boxes were necessarily the same layer. However, by comparing the colour and soil description of each context an attempt was made to map the spatial extent of these layers across the excavated area. Secure dating of all the layers was not possible and it was decided that, owing to the limited areas of layers or features excavated, they could only be securely dated if at least 20 finds of comparable date were recovered from them. Unfortunately, only 11 of the archaeological deposits satisfy these criteria (see below). Of these, F103 (180) produced the required quantity of Roman pottery but also contained rabbit bones which date this layer to the medieval period or later; it was therefore discounted.

F112 (183) in Box 5 produced more than 20 sherds of Roman pottery dating to the 2nd century. It is not clear, however, whether this context represents a cut feature or a layer. Sherds from F119 (252) (Box 15) also proved to be of 2nd-century date. Context 282 (Box 16) produced pottery from the 2nd to the 4th centuries, indicating that re-deposition may have occurred in the later Roman periods. (These sherds were rather small and fairly abraded which also implies re-deposition.) A mix of Roman (?2nd*3rd century) pottery was recovered from Box 17, but from a context (273) immediately below the modern overburden (01) which itself contained a mix of Roman and medieval pottery. The same is true for context 452 in Box 19; here there is a mix of pottery from the 2nd to late 3rd century. It may be that these two layers have been disturbed or redeposited.

Box 20 contained a negative feature, probably a ditch, cutting into the sand bedrock (F131). This feature produced pottery dating to the 2nd century AD (from context 357) and a layer in Box 33 (298) contained

² S. Ford, 'St. Birinus School, Dorchester, Oxfordshire' (Thames Valley Archaeological Services Report 93/28).

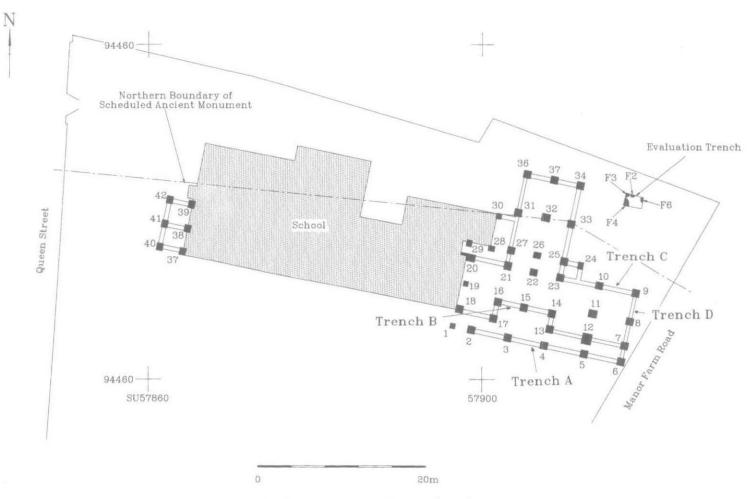


Fig. 2. Plan of excavated boxes and trenches.

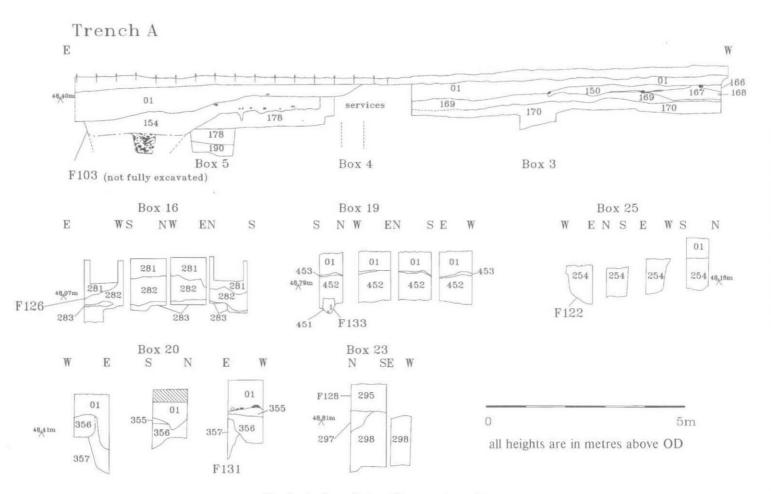


Fig. 3. Sections of selected boxes and trenches.

pottery of the same period. Further sherds of 2nd-century Roman pottery were recovered in sufficient numbers from Box 41 (481), although, as this box was excavated by machine and the finds were recovered from the spoil, it was difficult to be certain of the provenance of the finds. The same problem existed for finds from Box 34, context 472.

Apart from those discussed above, finds from the majority of layers were too small in number to be used for dating purposes, or they were of mixed date, indicating considerable amounts of later disturbance of the archaeological deposits.

THE FINDS

POTTERY by JANE TIMBY

The excavations yielded a relatively large group of pottery amounting to approximately 1,850 sherds (some 25 kg, in weight). Most of the sherds are Roman in date ranging from the 1st to 4th centuries with a particular emphasis on material of 2nd-century currency. Saxon wares are notable by their absence although sherds have been found elsewhere in the town, particularly in the SE, quarter.³ Approximately 10% by weight of the assemblage dates to the medieval period. The medieval pottery showed no specific concentrations, occurring as a relatively sparse scatter across the trenches. In many cases a moderately large group of Roman wares was accompanied by just one or two medieval sherds indicating a moderately high level of redeposition and disturbance of the area in post-Roman times. It was therefore quite likely that for many of the features the date arrived at from consideration of the pottery would not necessarily reflect the date of the context. For this reason it was recommended that at least 20 sherds of comparable date should have been recovered from a single layer to give a level of confidence to the dating.

Despite the apparent mixed chronology the pottery is, for the most part, in relatively good condition with a moderately good average sherd size; the main exception being a poor group from Box 16 (282) which is noticeably abraded.

The pottery was sorted into main fabric types and quantified by weight and number for each excavated context. Individual contexts were dated for the preparation of the stratigraphic sequence. The character of the archaeological investigation mitigates against the preparation of a detailed pottery account although a small number of vessels have been selected for illustration. Details of the pottery record including fabric descriptions are to be found in the site archive.

Roman

The fabrics present are extremely diverse including local, regional and imported wares. The latter include a number of early imported sherds dating to the pre- or early Flavian period. Among these are South Gaulish samian (including forms Ritterling 8, Drag 24/5, 15/17, and 27), terra nigra (Fig. 4.7) from North Gaul, and Lyons ware from Central Gaul. It is quite likely that these derive from the postulated early military occupation at Dorchester, along perhaps with some of the early local finewares. Coarsewares include examples of Silchester flint-tempered ware, local grey and oxidised wares and Savernake ware. Secondcentury wares seem particularly common with a great emphasis on hard, fine to medium sandy grey wares with a burnished finish and to a lesser extent oxidised wares. Several of the local finewares have a painted decoration in a white or red barbotine slip. A single greyware sherd from F131 (357) is decorated with a barbotine applied figure, possibly a horse (Fig. 4.14). Comparable decorated wares have been recovered from earlier archaeological work in Dorchester.⁴ Second-century samian forms present include Drag 18/31, 27, 31, 333, 37 and Curle 35/36. Other 2nd-century products include a local colour-coated ware with roughcast decoration (Fig. 4.13), mica-slipped ware, Oxfordshire whiteware, white-slipped flagons, Alice Holt sandy wares, Verulamium (Brockley Hill) sandy ware, and Dressel 20 amphorae. A large number of grog-tempered storage jar sherds dating to the 2nd-3rd century were also present, probably locally made. Later material was not as prolific but included products of the later Oxfordshire industries; mortaria, whitewares and colourcoated wares. Of particular note was an example of a dish (Young⁵ form C43) with rouletted decoration. This is a rare undated form. Other later products present include New Forest and Nene Valley colour-coated wares, Dorset black-burnished wares, black-slipped BB1 imitations and shell-tempered wares.

³ S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester on Thames, 1962', Archaeol. Jnl. 119 (1964), 114-49; S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester on Thames, 1963', Archaeol. Jnl. 141 (1984), 91-174.

⁴ Frere, op. cit. note 3 (1964).

⁵ C. Young, The Roman Pottery Industry of the Oxford Region (BAR 43, 1977).

Medieval

The medieval activity, as far as can be determined, does not appear to be particularly intensive or at least did not lead to the inclusion of much discarded refuse into the area investigated. Most of the material is likely to date to the later 12th to 14th or 15th centuries and includes both glazed and unglazed wares. The unglazed material includes several sherds of Newbury fabric type B cooking pots, along with a hard sand and flinttempered ware and a fossil-shell-tempered ware. The glazed wares include a single example of an applied grid stamp from Box 21 (359). No post-medieval material was encountered.

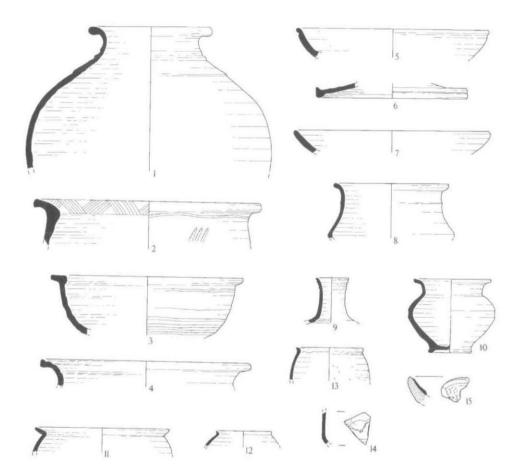


Fig. 4. Roman pottery.

Description of Illustrated Sherds, Figure 4

- 4.1 Necked, cordoned jar in a coarse granular sandy cream ware with a pink core. Probably an Oxfordshire product. F128 (298).
- 4.2 Large bowl in a hard, blue-grey, granular sandy ware. The interior rim face and body are decorated with burnished lines. F119 (265).
- 4.3 Flat rim hemispherical bowl in a hard, blue-grey, medium sandy ware. The exterior has slightly uneven horizontal burnishing. Box 15, F119 (265).
- 4.4 Necked wide-mouthed jar with a burnished finish. Hard, dark blue-grey, finely micaceous sandy ware. F112 (183).

- 4.5 Beaded-rim shallow dish. Light brown sandy ware. Box 18 (59) spit 2.
- 4.6 Lid in a hard, blue-grey ware with a lighter grey core. Trench A, spit 2.
- 4.7 Curved wall platter, Camulodunum type 166 in terra nigra. F103 (180).
- 4.8 Small carinated bowl in a blue-grey, hard, sandy ware. Box 40, unstratified.
- 4.9 Single-handled ring-neck flagon in a white-slipped oxidised ware with a grey core. Box 41 (482).
- 4.10 Small necked bowl in a very well-fired dark blue-grey ware with black iron specks. Trench A, F103 (180).
- 4.11 Large beaker with a short everted rim in a hard, orange, sandy ware. Box 41 (482).
- 4.12 Beaker with a short everted rim in a hard, fine, orange, sandy ware. Trench A, spit 3.
- 4.13 Cornice rim beaker in a hard, orange sandy fabric with a reddish-brown colour-coat. The external body has a rough-cast finish. F103 (180).
- 4.14 Fine greyware bodysherd with barbotine decoration. Interpretation varies but the decoration possibly represents a horse's head. An alternative suggestion is that it represents a peacock. F131 (257).
- 4.15 Fragment of a metalworking crucible. Trench A.

WORKED STONE by DAVID WILLIAMS

Several complete and broken roofing 'slates' were discovered in F143 (Box 12). One example, with a peg hole at the top, was analysed and found to be possibly of medieval date. This is made of an oolitic shelly limestone too coarse to be from the Collywestern quarries in Northamptonshire. It may, however, have come from a more local source, since during the medieval period the Great Oolite of Oxfordshire was extensively used as roofing material. (Size 228 mm. x 172 mm. x c. 10 mm.)

Also found was a large, roughly rectangular block of Ham Hill shelly limestone from south Somerset in Box 21, spit 2 (size 246 mm. x 204 mm. x 97 mm.).

METALWORK by DAVID RICHARDS

Among the 65-70 identifiable objects found were fragments of two bracelets from Boxes 11 and 27 and a copper alloy (bronze) ring from Box 25. These have parallels from many other Roman towns and can be loosely dated to the 4th and early 5th centuries AD.⁷ In addition, a miscellaneous collection of iron and copper alloy objects and a few pieces of lead and copper alloy sheet were recovered during the course of the excavation. None of the pieces is intact or well-preserved. Roughly 50% of the identifiable objects are iron nails or stem fragments. Details of all the metal objects are contained within the archive.

COINS by PAUL CANNON

Three coins were recovered from the site, all unfortunately unstratified:

Box 33 (spoil): As, Titus. Obv: DIVVS AVGUSTVS PATER. Rev: IMP T VESP AVG REST, eagle type (restored series), c. AD 80.

Trench A: AE 4, contemporary copy of uncertain type, 4th century AD.

Unstratified: AE farthing, James I. Lennox round type, 1614-1625.

OTHER FINDS

Quantities of iron slag and large quantities of tile were recovered from several contexts across the site. The only slag from a secure context came from 252, a sample of which was retained; the remaining slag was recorded by context, weighed and discarded. All tile was recorded by context, weighed and discarded, except for a representative sample. Details can be found in the site archive.

⁶ C. F. C. Hawkes and M. R. Hull, *Camulodunum* (Rept. Res. Comm. Soc. Antiq. London xiv, 1947), Pl. XLIX.

⁷ N. Crummy, *The Roman Small Finds from Excavations in Colchester 1961-1979* (Colchester Archaeological Report no. 2, 1983), Figs. 47 and 50.

FAUNAL REMAINS by SHEILA HAMILTON-DYER

Eight securely dated contexts contained animal bone, totalling 168 pieces (see Table 1). It was decided that analysis would be restricted to these contexts. Most of the material is datable to the 2nd century AD, with some contexts extending to the 4th century. The bone is generally well-preserved and has few recent breaks. The fragments were identified to species using the comparative collections belonging to the author and many of them have been identified as cattle and sheep, with horse, pig, dog and duck also represented. Several fragments could not be identified further than cattle-sized and sheep/pig-sized. No goat bones were positively identified and it is probable that most or all of the sheep/goat bones are of sheep.

Measurements were taken using a vernier calliper and are in millimetres. In general these follow the methods of Von den Driesch⁸ and withers heights are based on factors recommended by Von den Driesch and Boessneck.⁹ Summary totals of the species identified in each context are given in Table 1.

All of the eight contexts contained bones of cattle and sheep; pig bones were less frequent and none were recovered from contexts 452, 472 and 481. Three horse bones were discovered: a carpal from context 273 and two teeth of a young animal from F122 (254). The five dog bones from F122 (254) are all foot bones, probably from the same animal, standing about 0.5m. at the shoulders. Context 452 contained part of a dog coprolite. There is also indirect evidence of the presence of dogs in the form of gnaw marks on 29 bones, over 17% of the total. Every context contained at least one gnawed bone. Much of the canid damage is on the softer epiphysial joints and it is likely that some anatomical elements and bones of young animals are under-represented as a result. The 19 fragments recovered from context 282 include the only bird bone recovered, a complete duck tarsometaarsus (probably mallard).

Butchery marks were noted on some of the bones; knife marks probably made when disjointing and cutting ligaments. Some of the cattle bones had been heavily chopped, particularly near the joint ends. This butchery style is often encountered in Roman material and occurs only rarely on native sites.

The small sample size prevented detailed analysis of the age structure of the animals, but it can be said that the cattle and sheep bones include those of prime meat age. The five sheep jaws are all of animals of about two to three years old. One fragment each of lamb and calf were also noted. More of the pig remains were of young animals, as expected with an animal which does not provide a secondary product such as wool or traction. Unfortunately, gnawing, butchery and immaturity all reduce the amount of measurable bone. The few measurements available fit within the ranges reported for Roman material from southern Britain. A complete cattle radius in F128 (298) gives an estimated withers height of 1.139 m. and a sheep metatarsus in context 472 gives a height of 0.58 m.

Few conclusions can be drawn from such a small sample; however, the species represented are typical of other material of this period. The butchery style is also consistent with Roman influences and the few measurements available are comparable with other Roman material. Lastly, the high proportion of gnawed bones indicates that the material was available to dogs before final disposal.

Box	Feature/ Context	Date (century AD)	Horse	Cattle	Sheep	Pig	Cattle Sized	Sheep Sized	Mammal	Dog	Duck
16	(282)	2nd-4th	-	3	4	2	7	2	-	-	1
17	(273)	2nd-3rd	1	3	1	1	5	—	-	-	-
19	(452)	2nd-late 3rd	-	3	5	-	8	2	-	I	
20	F131 (357)	2nd	-	8	12	8	2	3	-	-	
25	F122 (254)	2nd	2	8	9	1	5	6	6	5	-
33	F128 (298)	2nd	-	10	6	2	5	3		-	
34	(472)	2nd	-	2	3	-	2	2		-	-
41	(481)	2nd		3	2	-	4	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	3	40	42	14	38	18	6	6	1
%	-	-	1.8	23.8	25	8.3	22.6	10.7	3.6	3.6	0.6

TABLE 1. FAUNAL REMAINS

⁸ A. von den Driesch, A Guide to the Measurement of Animal Bones from Archaeological Sites (Peabody Museum Bulletin 1 (1976), Harvard).

⁹ A. von den Driesch and J. Boessneck, Kritische Anmerkungen zur Widderristhöhenberechnung aus Längenmassen vor- und früh-geschichtlicher Tierknochen (Säugetierkundliche Mitteilungen 22, Munich, 1974), 325-48.

PLANT REMAINS by JOHN LETTS

Three samples containing charred plant remains were submitted for analysis. These were refloated in the laboratory and specimens were identified by comparison with modern reference material. The samples examined were very small and did not contain enough specimens for a rigorous interpretation. However, they are unusual for sealed Roman contexts in that they are rich in cultivated pea and contain no firm evidence of hulled wheat (e.g. spelt wheat *T. spelta*) (Table 2). Many of the cereal grains recovered are too poorly preserved to be securely identified as wheat or barley. Wild legumes, dock, chess and wild grasses have been crop weeds for millennia, and the pea was introduced into Britain in the Neolithic period. The preponderance of pea and the poor quality of the cereal recovered suggests differential preservation of specimens with dense tissues, and the glume wheat chaff typical of Roman sites may simply have been burned away prior to deposition.

Most of the legumes were recovered from the dense residue of the second flotation and would have been missed by a standard flotation recovery procedure that did not include sorting of the residue.

F103 (180)	F122 (254)	Box 18 (256)
-	1	-
2	-	4
1	2	-
-	2	—
8	5	19
-	-	2
	-	2
-	-	2
2	1	-
6	-	—
	2	
÷.	1	5
-	-	1
19	10	20
	(180) - 2 1 - 8 - - 2 6 - - - 2 - - - - - - - - - - - - -	$\begin{array}{cccc} (180) & (254) \\ \hline - & 1 \\ 2 & - \\ 1 & 2 \\ - & 2 \\ 8 & 5 \\ - & - \\ 2 \\ 8 & 5 \\ - & - \\ 2 \\ 1 \\ 6 \\ - \\ 2 \\ 1 \\ 6 \\ - \\ 2 \\ - \\ 1 \\ - \\ - \\ 1 \\ - \\ - \\ - \\ 1 \\ - \\ -$

TABLE 2. CHARRED PLANT REMAINS

DISCUSSION

Dorchester-on-Thames has a long and varied history. The town was situated on the Roman road from Silchester to Alchester and the earliest evidence for occupation comes from the 1st century AD in the form of a conquest period fort, which appears to have been demolished in AD 78.¹⁰ In the 2nd century the first town defences were constructed, although they only enclosed an area of 5.2 hectares and 1st- and 2nd-century settlement extended well beyond these to the north and south. In the 3rd century the bank and ditch defences were replaced by stone walls and urban buildings were being constructed in previously deserted parts of the town, suggesting expansion and prosperity. However, in the 4th century widespread demolition of buildings was taking place, possibly indicative of

¹⁰ Frere, op. cit. note 3; Munby and Rodwell, op. cit. note 1.

decline or reorganisation.¹¹ Nevertheless, the town continued to be occupied in the 5th century and significant numbers of late Roman coins have been found in Dorchester which is unusual for a Roman town of this date. Munby and Rodwell¹² suggest that the presence of Roman troops in the vicinity may be a possible explanation for this.

The material recovered from the excavation at St. Birinus School covers a wide date range. The Roman pottery spans the 1st to 4th centuries, although the emphasis on 2nd-century wares in secure contexts supports the existing evidence that this area was a location for early extramural settlement; the site is barely outside the estimated eastern continuation of the Roman town defences. The 1st-century pottery, including imported wares, is thought to relate to the original military occupation of Dorchester. A coin datable to c. AD 80 was also discovered in the spoil of Box 33. However, none of these finds is in a securely datable context, though their presence may reflect the location of the camp in the immediate vicinity. The 4th-century pottery, the copy coin from trench A, the copper alloy finger-ring and the bracelets, all support the hypothesis of continuing activity in the 4th and possibly early 5th centuries. Unfortunately, however, these pieces are mostly from contexts with fewer than 20 finds which therefore cannot be considered to be securely dated.

The animal bones analysed from the secure layers support the evidence provided by the associated pottery; many display marks of Roman-style butchery and both the species and size of animals recorded are consistent with other sites of this period. Unfortunately, the plant remains from these contexts were undiagnostic which may be due to poor preservation and the disturbance of archaeological layers.

Dorchester may have continued to be occupied in the post-Roman period, with evidence that may be suggestive of Saxon activity in the 6th and 7th centuries.¹³ St. Birinus chose the town as the location for the first see of Wessex in 635 AD. However, Dorchester lost its importance in the later Saxon period and even by 1500 the town was not as large as it had been in Roman times.¹⁴ No Saxon pottery was recovered from the excavation, although a scatter of medieval pottery and metalwork indicates some activity of this date in the area. As the site seems to be outside the main area of settlement at this time the finds may well be derived from rubbish tips.

To conclude, it appears that the school is located on or near an area of 2nd-century Roman extramural activity. However, subsequent disturbance and the restricted nature of the recording action mean that the information gained and conclusions reached are necessarily very limited.

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¹¹ R. Bradley, A. Grant and S. Sheridan, 'Rescue Excavation in Dorchester-on-Thames', *Oxoniensia*, xliii (1978), 17-39; S. Ford and L. J. Torrance, 'The Old Castle Public House, Bridge End, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire' (Thames Valley Archaeological Services report 91/10).

¹² Munby and Rodwell, op. cit. note 1.

¹³ T. Rowley, 'Early Saxon Settlement in Dorchester-on-Thames', in T. Rowley (ed.), Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Landscape (BAR 1974), 42-50.

¹⁴ Munby and Rodwell, op. cit. note 1, map 2.