

# **THE ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE OF CHESTER VOLUME 1: THE PREHISTORIC AND ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY BY TONY WILMOTT AND DAN GARNER**

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The book under review is the first of two volumes that detail the results of the ambitious and highly successful Chester Amphitheatre Project, undertaken jointly by Historic England (formerly English Heritage) and the Cheshire West and Chester Council (formerly Chester City Council). While the excavation and interpretation of the Roman amphitheatre has received international attention (p.24–25), the excavations also uncovered, beneath the Roman horizon, evidence for some of the earliest occupation of the town, dating to between the Mesolithic and Iron Age. These discoveries remain the most important and wide-reaching evidence for prehistoric activity found in the city thus far. This review considers the text that discusses the prehistoric evidence from the site (Part 2), however, it also reflects on the Introduction to the volume (Part 1), which includes the background to the project, and the general presentation and layout. The remaining sections of the volume discuss the remains of the Roman amphitheatre (Part 3), the artefactual and environmental studies (Part 4) and summary conclusions of all the archaeological evidence (Part 5).

The Introduction section begins with an overview of the archaeological background for Chester, focusing mainly on the Roman fortress and specifically on the remains of the amphitheatre. Pre-Roman activity represents a single short paragraph and demonstrates the extent of prehistoric knowledge prior to these investigations (p.3). An extremely interesting overview of past archaeological investigations of the amphitheatre, includes detailed descriptions, photographs of areas under investigation in the 1930s and 1960s and plans of the excavated areas, updated through modern reassessment. This section also includes a detailed analysis of the results of previous investigations, including the pitfalls of past techniques, and provides much of the rationale for the strategy of the Chester Amphitheatre Project. The scope of the background research in this chapter provides an exemplar for future projects of this type. Usefully, this section also includes a detailed discussion of the planning, pre-excavation strategies and post-excavation methodology of the project, following the completion of the excavations 12 years ago (p.22–26). This information is often lacking in excavation volumes such as this but provides essential information for later reanalysis of the site.

The prehistoric evidence, as detailed in Part 2, was confined to a single part of the site (Area A), which lay underneath the seating banks of the later Roman amphitheatre. A summary and interpretation of this activity is given in Part 5 (p.431–2). The earliest features, dating to between the Mesolithic and early Bronze Age, consisted of a small group of three pits. Helpfully, the analysis of relevant artefacts is presented here alongside details of the archaeological features. For the earliest pits, this includes an in-depth analysis of the recovered lithics, which even as unstratified artefacts, provide evidence for occupation in and around Chester from the Mesolithic onwards (p.31–40). The analysis of the raw materials used for the Mesolithic artefacts provide important information as to the movement of people across the region during this period (p.36). Some further consideration of the function of these features and what activities were undertaken at the site may have been useful. Scientific dating techniques are conspicuously absent from this section, particularly in comparison to the 14 samples analysed for the Iron Age evidence, however, this is presumably due to the lack of available material. Despite limited surviving evidence, these remains are examined within a detailed consideration of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age evidence for the surrounding area and the wider region, which will provide an important resource for future research.

The main body of evidence dating to the pre-Roman period is of Iron Age date. The evidence for a small Middle Iron Age farmstead (Phase 1b) is represented by a single roundhouse and a four-post structure, probably a granary, which was reconstructed on at least one occasion. The Middle Iron Age activity dates generally to between 400–200 BC (see below). Once these structures had fallen out of use, this area was used for cultivation, demonstrated by the presence of a large quantity of ard marks. The identification, excavation and recording of these ephemeral ard marks in various parts of Area A suggests the level of care undertaken during fieldwork. This activity was followed by the establishment of cord-rig cultivation in the later Iron Age.

The convincing phasing of this Iron Age activity is based on a detailed understanding of the stratigraphic sequence (p.44–47) and is supported by a robust programme of scientific dating (p.58–61). This level of scientific dating, including the use of Bayesian modelling, is beginning to form a substantial part of the analysis of Iron Age sites across Northern Britain overcoming previous concerns of the pitfalls of the ‘Hallstatt’ plateau (eg, Hamilton *et al.* 2015, Haselgrove 2016). It is encouraging to see this trend continue into the investigation of Iron Age settlements more generally, especially at Chester where evidence has previously been sparse. Limited finds were recovered from these features, but included briquetage, fired clay, a quernstone, a

leaf shaped iron spearhead and some intrusive later Roman pottery (p.58–63). Some integration of these artefacts alongside the description of archaeological features would have been useful, despite the probable intrusive nature of some of these objects. A detailed assessment of the paleobotanical evidence is provided by Ruth Pelling, who carefully considers the contextual basis of the deposits within the Iron Age remains and deftly reflects on the interpretation of this material as representing different stages of crop processing (p.47–56). Usefully, this material is also considered as part of a broader understanding of archaeobotanical material in the wider region.

One small critique might be levelled at some mistakes in the illustrations of the Iron Age features. Notably pits 1305 and 1339 are shown as intercutting in section but not in plan (Fig. 33, p.45). Furthermore, a possible fourth posthole (1317) that may have formed part of Building 2 (phase ii) and was considered as disturbed by later activity, is discussed in the text (p.46) but not shown on the plan. This remains a small oversight that highlights the understandable difficulties in achieving accurate drawings of a truncated stratigraphic archaeological horizon. However, the importance of these remains mean that it is even more vital to have accurate depictions that can be cross compared to other contemporary sites.

The importance of these new discoveries to our understanding of prehistoric Chester cannot be underestimated, especially given the sparse evidence for Iron Age occupation prior to the arrival of the Roman military to this area. The investigation of many Roman towns and forts in Britain have uncovered evidence for pre-Roman occupation. The recent excavations at Silchester, for example, have provided detailed evidence for the nature of Late Iron Age settlement, including the structural form of several buildings (Fulford & Timby 2000; Fulford *et al.* in press). However, while the site at Silchester today falls within open pasture, many Roman towns lay beneath their modern descendants. Pre-Roman evidence in these circumstances is usually highly truncated by Roman and later occupation, or never uncovered due in part to a reluctance to remove *in situ* Roman deposits. At Chichester, evidence for more than 20 rectangular buildings were excavated in the 1970s and 80s at the lowest point in the stratigraphic sequence. While the initial interpretation argued that these buildings represented early Roman military buildings, changing interpretations about the origins of the Roman town has led to the argument that they may in fact represent rectangular Iron Age structures, akin to those found at Silchester (Davenport 2003; Manley *et al.* 2007, 45). The lack of associated material culture and the inability to undertake scientific dating has limited our knowledge of this clearly important and possibly pre-Roman evidence. Where investigations occur, it is evident that this is a wide-reaching occurrence, stretching across Britain, and that much can be said about the pre-Roman occupation of these sites. This phenomenon has been

uncovered from the far south-west of Roman Britain, at Exeter where a Middle Iron Age roundhouse was uncovered at Southernay Street (Stead 2004), to the far northern frontier at South Shields in the north-west, where excavations beneath *Arbeia* Roman fort uncovered a Middle Iron Age roundhouse that was overlain by late Iron Age plough marks (Burnham *et al.* 1993).

The excavations at Chester demonstrate both the difficulties, but also the tremendous benefits of investigating beyond the Roman horizons, which currently dominate archaeological research agendas in these areas. While opportunities for developer-funded archaeology to investigate deep stratigraphy in urban areas are few, often only allowing an extremely small window into the past, the Chester Amphitheatre Project demonstrates the level of precision and information that can be achieved through modern archaeological techniques. The methodology utilised here should provide a template for future projects undertaken in urban areas. In turn a greater awareness of this evidence, analysed through modern scientific dating techniques, will allow us to link this new understanding into a wider debate about the nature of the Iron Age to Roman transition in Britain and possibly the pre-Roman origins of many of the towns and forts established in the 1st century AD (eg, Rogers 2016).

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