

Wroxeter Baths Basilica Finds Archive

Assessment and Project Design

Extract

Applicant

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1 **Project Name**

Wroxeter Baths Basilica Finds Archive

2 **Summary Description**

The project will prepare the finds reports prepared as part of the post-excavation work on the Wroxeter Baths Basilica between 1966 and 1990 for public dissemination via the Archaeological Data Service (ADS). It falls within SHAPE sub-programme 11113.110.

3 **Background**

The excavations in the Baths Basilica at Wroxeter between 1966 and 1990 are rightly seen as a milestone in excavation methodology, leading to the recovery of evidence for occupation on the site extending onwards from the ‘Roman’ fourth century until well into the seventh century. When the report was published (Barker *et al* 1997), the focus was on the stratigraphic narrative as witnessed by the inclusion of a container of loose plans weighting 2.5kg with the letterpress. The decision was taken that the bulk of the artefacts found were residual Roman items, and thus of no direct relevance to the fifth to seventh century occupation. As a result over 7,000 small finds were summarised in a 28 page illustrated essay concentrating on aspects of interest to the post-excavation team, and a ten page listing in the final report. The very extensive finds reports and catalogues on which these were based were consigned to archive. It is appropriate to quote what authors said themselves of this approach.

‘... we earnestly hope that it may be possible at some time in the future to compile a comprehensive catalogue of material from the whole of the Roman town so far excavated.’ (Barker *et al* 1997, 249).

The approach was understandable at the time as it was only subsequently that it became to be understood that amongst ‘residual’ Roman material found on fifth century sites there was an entire suite of material of both new types and actively re-used old material. This idea was first introduced in a paper I published in 2000, and has been explored subsequently by others, e.g. by Swift in the most recent *Britannia* (2012). The complexity of fifth century behaviour patterns and use of material culture is also starting to become apparent with the use of ¹⁴C dating such as the recent date obtained for a burial at Bradley Hill which was accompanied by a coin of AD 388-98. This individual is as likely to have been buried in the later fifth to early sixth century as in the first two-thirds of the fifth century (Gerrard 2011, 191 fig. 2).

With the exemplary stratigraphic recording in the Baths Basilica, the finds assemblage from the excavations provides an ideal opportunity to explore and to identify the fifth century, and possibly later, suites of small finds that could then be used to identify occupation of that date on other sites. With the known problems of using coins and pottery after the end of the fourth century, it is the small finds that provide the best route forward.

The finds reports and recording had not been deposited with the rest of the archive as the authors of the monograph had hoped to develop them into a full-

scale finds monograph. Three years ago Dr Pretty decided that this was not feasible. Roger White now has that archive and kindly made me a copy of it. Section 4 provides my evaluation of the work and how it could usefully be put in the public domain for a relatively modest cost. These finds reports are work that English Heritage paid to have done mainly between 1985 and 1989 by Angela Bliss, aided by Ellie Hughes and within the Barker post-ex project and supervised by Kate Pretty. In a very real sense, therefore, this would be the releasing of a research dividend from previous investment.

4 Assessment and Evaluation

4.1 Introduction

The archive of the finds works consists of four different parts. It is clear that Angela Bliss's work went through at least two stages. There were introductory assessments of the material and final reports. It would also appear that both she and others were putting information onto a database. The database work may have continued after her involvement ceased. The fourth element of the finds archive is the drawn and photographed record. These elements will be evaluated in 4.2-5. In addition the state of the stratigraphic information will be considered in 4.6 as this has an important role to play in how the information will be used in the future. Section 4.7 provides an evaluation of how this work could best be presented given that it is now over two decades old.

4.2 The finds reports

It is clear that Bliss completed work on all of the copper alloy, worked bone and other skeletal material, and the glass objects. There are lengthy reports where material is assigned to typological categories, aspects of dating and manufacture are considered, detailed *comparanda* are presented and some preliminary analysis with regard to stratigraphic location carried out. The sites details of each item assigned to a particular type is given at the end of each report (context, area of site, finds number etc), but there are no detailed catalogue entries.

Existing typologies were used where they existed, e.g. Guido (1978) for the glass beads and recourse was also made to unpublished PhD theses where appropriate such as my own for metal personal ornaments (Cool 1983) and Greep (1983) for the worked bone. As the finds assemblage from the Baths Basilica was so large, Bliss often developed Wroxeter specific typologies where no useful published typology existed. These had associated dating systems developed from Wroxeter and the studies of the *comparanda*. This means that the assemblage for these categories has a very secure typological underpinning. Given the reliance on province-wide PhD surveys, the reports also took the opportunity to include lengthy considerations of the types *not* present.

In total there are 83 separate reports consisting of 1,126 pages. The main organising principle is by material, and within that by functional categories following Crummy 1983. The reports survive as rather pale double-spaced print-outs from a dot matrix printer. There are some hand-written additions and alterations.

In addition to the Bliss reports there is also one on the brooches by Don Mackreth. This does include catalogue entries and is the normal Mackreth format where each individual brooch is considered in detail.

4.3 *The preliminary reports*

There are preliminary reports for all of the categories of material noted in 4.2 apart from the brooches. These include catalogue detail such as measurements for individual pieces which are not present in the 4.2 reports. Unfortunately the lower parts of these pages has sometimes faded making the information illegible. In addition there is an extensive report on the very large assemblage of jet and shale objects (75 pages). This is a hybrid report including the detail of the 4.2 level reports of the other material and the catalogue entry data of the preliminary reports.

4.4 *The database*

No electronic copy of the database that must have existed has been traced, but there are print-outs from it organised by material and within that by typological groupings. This material is coded, and concordance lists of the coding used in relation to the finds themselves survive. Other information includes find number, context, area of site etc. There are print outs for all the categories of finds covered in 4.3 and 4.4, and also for material such as gold, silver, iron and worked stone for which no Bliss reports are present. In these cases these are catalogue items of the material.

4.5 *The line drawings and photographs*

Approximately one-third of the assemblage was drawn and there are finished inked drawings of publishable quality. The drawings are at 1:1 with detail where necessary at 2:1. The drawings are clearly the work of a number of different hands, but are generally of high quality and appear accurate.

They survive in two formats. The originals were on Permatrace with individual sheets loosely bound in the type of photograph album where the photo was mounted on a slightly sticky page and held in place by a sheet of cellophane. There are also A4 sheets where copies of the drawings have been pasted up in rough groupings corresponding to the typological work described in 4.2-4. There are between 2000 and 2100 individual drawings. The precise number is difficult to quantify at present as the rapid evaluation that the records have been subjected to for this document has not included detailed cross-checking, and it has been noted that the same illustration appears in more than one location in the pasted-up sheets. The drawings cover all categories of finds including those such as iron that otherwise only have database entries.

There are also a total of 480 high resolution scans of slides of artefacts of all types taken by Sidney Renow and scanned by Graham Norris.

4.6 *The stratigraphic record*

A fully developed phasing scheme was published in Barker *et al* 1997 but that volume does not include a concordance which would allow individual finds to

be assigned to a phase. Matrices exist for each area of the site but have not been copied as they are physically too large. The information from them was copied into a number of concordance lists that phase all context / feature / layer numbers used for the entire site. Roger White has a bound copy of this document (EH 88230496/7) and has typed up all of the concordance books. All that is required now is to marry the phasing information with the roughly 5000 contexts so that the artefacts can be phased. Given the long life of the excavation and the developing nature of the recording systems, some guidance to how the numbering and phasing work will be required.

4.7 *Evaluation*

As will be apparent from the proceeding descriptions, there is a wealth of detail in the archive that would enable a simple catalogue entry assigned to appropriate type to be constructed for the entire assemblage. During the work for this project design experiments have been made to judge whether scanning the archive in its current state and publishing that electronically would be feasible. It was found that the state of the reports described in **4.2** would not support that. Using OCR technology in different programmes, it was found that so many corrections would be needed in the scanned text that re-typing from scratch would have been quicker. The originals of the line drawings do not scan well, but scans of photocopies of them are good. The scans of the slides are high quality and could be deposited as they stand.

Had Angela Bliss's report been published at the time they were written, they would have been a major advance on what was being published in small finds reports at the time. As it stands, some of the work has been overtaken by new finds and studies in the quarter of a century since they were written. Equally some of the digressions about the types not present at Wroxeter whilst interesting, are not essential. Given all of that, and given the problem in converting them to a recognisable digital form, another avenue of publication seems best. It is proposed that the **4.2** and **4.3** reports be summarised to retain the typological work and such elements that have not been out-dated. These summary reports would then support a basic database derived from **4.2-4** which would enable people to search for assemblages or individual items of interest. The summary reports could also have additional footnotes that pointed the reader to more recent work if appropriate. The scanned drawings and photographs would provide more than adequate illustration.

5 **Potential**

5.1 *Contribution to characterising fifth to sixth century assemblages*

The importance of the finds assemblages for characterising the suites of material typical of the fifth to sixth century has already been outlined in Section **3**. The evaluation of the records in Section **4** has confirmed that the resolution of description and typological work, together with the stratigraphic information, will enable useful stratified assemblages to be extracted. These should show the sort of progression that will enable the suites that are diagnostic for fifth century and later to be identified. That this can be done using stratified assemblages from Wroxeter has already been demonstrated on

a broad level using bulk pottery assemblages (Cool 2006, 232-3, fig. 19.3). This is information that will be of national importance.

5.2 *Contribution to characterising regional material culture patterns*

Regionality within Roman Britain has been a research question of some interest for a number of years now. Mapping recurring distribution patterns of regional types allows us to map meaningful, coherent regions within the province, and by doing so gain a better understanding of the period. Small finds are one of the most useful tools for doing this. The re-current patterns seen in items such as hair pins (Cool 1991, figs. 15-7.), toilet equipment (Eckardt and Crummy 2008, figs. 29-31) and cosmetic sets (Jackson 2010, Maps. 4-15) show that this regionality is not just a product of individual collection strategies. Once the regions are mapped, we can then start asking questions about why the people living in them were using material culture in different ways.

The regions of the southern part of England and Wales are relatively well understood. The West Midlands less so. In part this has been because of the lack of finds assemblages from large urban centres which always provide large enough groups to start mapping differences. There are increasing hints from currently unpublished excavations in places like Worcester, that this region too has a diagnostic suite of small finds. The very large assemblage of finds from the Baths Basilica excavations, allied with the material from the Webster excavations on the Baths Macellum that was published in a more conventional manner (Ellis 2000, Webster 2002), would enable us to define what this was in some detail. This would be useful on both a national and regional level.

6 **Research Aims and Objectives**

The research aims of this project are twofold

- 6.1 To prepare the finds archive and publish it in such a way that it can be used as a primary research tool to explore the potential outlined in 5.1 and 5.2. It may be noted that this will also make the data available for anyone doing type-specific research in the province and empire generally.
- 6.2 To publicise the availability of the resource.

7 **Business Case**

The business case for undertaking this project is compelling. Wroxeter is a site in Guardianship which EH owns and cares for. Historically EH has contributed resources for both the excavation and the post-excavation work. Currently it continues to expend resources curating the finds at the Atcham store. It is to EH's credit, and to the credit of the post-excavation teams, that much of the work on the Baths Basilica excavations and the adjoining ones directed by Dr Graham Webster (Ellis 2000, Webster 2002) are in the public domain to be used and re-used. The Barker excavation small finds are the only major exception, and are the final part which remains unusable. Making them available to the wider research community would undoubtedly deliver useful dividends. It is also worth considering that such an assemblage is

unlikely to be retrieved again in such conditions anywhere else in Britain, so its importance in advancing the research agenda can hardly be overstated.

If this project was funded it would release the research dividend from all the previous investment. As such it would fall within English Heritage's sub-programme 11113.110 of its SHAPE framework – realising the research dividend from past unpublished historic environment investigations.

The reason why it should be done now is two-fold. In the first case there is an increasing interest in what was happening in the fifth and sixth centuries, going beyond the conventional tales of Anglo-Saxon incursions. The picture that is likely to emerge from the published volume that synthesises the results of the conferences exploring the 410 issue held in 2010 (due for publication in 2013) will show a much more complicated reality. To have the Wroxeter Baths Basilica archive available for research in the same year would be most timely.

Secondly though Wroxeter is considered a 'Roman' site, it may well be that some of these 'residual Roman' finds were actually being used as late as the sixth to seventh centuries. Establishing patterns such as that would enable a much better exploration and understanding of this region at the time, with all the benefits that would provide for other projects that EH is currently supporting in the West Midlands such as the work on the Staffordshire Hoard (EH Project 5892).

8 Project Scope

This project will exist solely to put the existing research now in archive into the public domain. No new research will be carried out though some slight annotation in the form of footnotes will be provided (see 4.7). It will be a highly focussed archive project to provide research tools for others. The team members involved in the project may well at a subsequent date carry out further research using the data, but that will be out of the scope of this project.

9 Interfaces

This project stems from the work reported in Barker *et al* 1997. When completed there will be a useful interface as well with the work carried out in the financial year 2009/10 in organising the archive from the Webster excavations at Wroxeter (published in Ellis 2000 and Webster 2002). This was funded by the local region of English Heritage and published on the ADS as Cool 2011. When that work was being carried out it was found that a certain amount of the Barker excavation archive in the form of X-radiographs, photographs etc had become mixed with the Webster archive. These were documented and provide a useful research tool for anyone working with the Barker material. Making the finds report archive publicly available will also be a useful resource for the EH curators who are responsible for the finds. In preparing this documentation we have had discussions with Sara Lunt about the proposed project, and can confirm that the regional curatorial office is enthusiastically supportive.

10 Communication

Most of the communication will be carried out by email and telephone. There will be one face to face meeting between Roger White and Hilary Cool at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum where the finds report archive is currently stored. This will enable us to check details, compare different copies of documents to select the best-preserved ones to work with etc.

11 Project Review

As the project is of short relatively short duration (two months) and is clearly focused, no review point will be appropriate. The project manager will keep English Heritage informed of progress as and when requested. The normal end of project review will be completed at the end.

12 Health and Safety

The project will be run in accordance with the Health and Safety Policy of Barbican Research Associates Ltd, a copy of which has previously been lodged with English Heritage.

13 Project Team

The project team will consist of Hilary Cool, Roger White and one assistant. Roger White has had a long and ongoing relationship with the work at Wroxeter and was one of the authors of Barker *et al* 1997. He will take overall responsibility for bringing the stratigraphic listings to the point where they can be incorporated into the database, will write the necessary site introductory matter for the ADS publication, and provide general advice. Hilary Cool also has a long involvement with the Wroxeter excavations having been the glass specialist for the Webster excavations and having acted as a consultant on the glass during the Barker post-excavation work. She also directed the Wroxeter Webster archive project. She will take responsibility for summarising the reports and act as project manager. The assistant will take responsibility for some of the basic data entry, the scanning of the drawings etc.

The project will be run through Barbican Research Associates Ltd and financial matters will be the responsibility of Peter Guest. All of the team members will be externally contracted specialists.

14 Methodology

14.1 Sorting

The archive will be sorted into the different elements itemised in section 4, any duplications noted and where possible the best preserved copies selected for use. The phasing concordance data (4.6) will be checked.

14.2 Database creation

A basic database structure will be created and the data from the print-outs described in 4.4 and the phasing concordance entered. The structure of the proposed database is given in Appendix 1. Each item will have its own unique entry. During the creation of the database that structure will be reviewed and amended as appropriate.

14.3 *Summary of reports*

The reports described in 4.2 will be summarised. Data from them and the information summarised in 4.3 will be used to populate the database.

14.4 *Illustrations*

Each drawing will be scanned as a .tiff file at a resolution suitable for it to be reproduced in a print publication. The individual files will be numbered according to the unique number of the item on the database. The file format and resolution mean that in future, anyone wishing to use the illustrations in other publications will have them 'ready-prepared' and will only need to download them. The slide scan files will also be renamed to reflect the unique number of the item.

14.5 *Introductory matter and deposition with the ADS.*

The resource will be documented to explain the background including appropriate references to the published reports and a guide to how to use it. The team will liaise with the ADS and deposit the resource.

14.6 *Publicity*

Short notes will be written and submitted to appropriate Newsletters to publicise the availability of the resource. Obvious outlets are *Epistula* (Roman Society), *Lucerna* (Roman Finds Group), *Salon* (Society of Antiquaries) and the newsletter of the Study Group for Roman Pottery. It will probably also be helpful to send *Current Archaeology* and *British Archaeology* a brief notification for the news round-ups in those magazines.

18 Bibliography

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