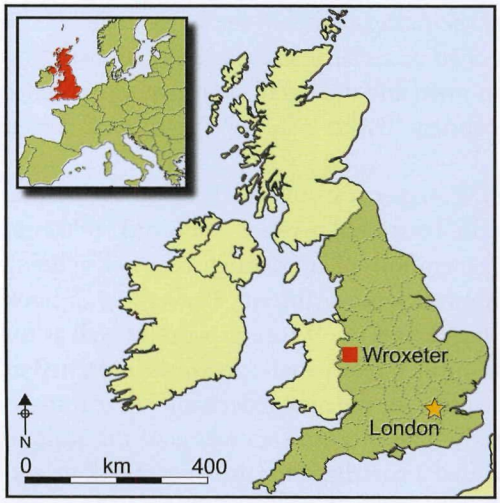
# Wroxeter and the end of Roman Britain

Alan Lane*

Research




*When and how did urban life in Roman Britain end? The excavations conducted by Philip Barker at Wroxeter from 1966–1990 produced evidence suggesting a post-Roman phase of urban activity that continued into the sixth or seventh century AD, up to 200 years beyond the traditionally accepted chronology. Careful re-examination of the evidence, however, throws doubt on these claims. More recent work on Late Roman Britain coupled with new discoveries in Wales and the west challenges the evidence for the post-Roman survival of Wroxeter as an urban centre and suggests that it may have been largely abandoned, along with other Roman towns, in the late fourth or early fifth century AD.*

*Keywords:* Roman Britain, Wroxeter, Celtic West, Anglo-Saxon, urbanism, chronology, Mediterranean imports

## Introduction

The introduction of urbanism has often been regarded as one of the key impacts of the Roman conquest of Britain, as Esmonde Cleary argues: "[t]he Roman Empire was an empire of cities" (2013: 97). Similarly, the fate of Roman towns has been central to discussions of continuity and the nature of post-Roman society. Debates about the possible continuation of Roman towns have oscillated over the past 50 years, with opinion mainly shifting between speedy abandonment, gradual decay and continuing low-level urban activity until Anglo-Saxon takeover in the seventh century. Biddle (1976: 103–12) put an influential case for continuing 'central place' functions at a number of sites, with Winchester claimed as demonstrating Romano-British/English continuity. Wacher's (1995: 408–21) concept of limited non-urban occupation of former Roman towns, that is, 'life in towns' rather than an economically salient 'town life', has had some support. Subsequent analysis of the evidence has, however, led to the general view that towns did not survive the Roman imperial withdrawal, and the re-emergence of proto-urban use in England is now commonly dated to the seventh century (Faulkner 2000; Palliser 2000; Mattingly 2006: 325–50). For most

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of the 'Celtic West' there is no urban life before the Viking period or, in many areas, before the Norman Conquest (Astill 2000: 44).

A few sites—Verulamium/St Albans, Canterbury, York—have continued to be debated as evidence of possible continuous low-level urban activity between the late fourth and mid/late seventh century. A key site for the discussion of urban life in the British west is the Roman town of Wroxeter in the West Midlands, the *civitas* capital of the British tribe of the Cornovii. Since the 1960s, Wroxeter has been cited as a classic excavation demonstrating major building activity post AD 400 in a Roman town and indeed the continuing existence of urban life well into the sixth or even seventh century (Barker *et al.* 1997; White & Barker 1998: 118–36).

Philip Barker's work at the Baths Basilica at Wroxeter was one of the most influential excavations of the later twentieth century in Britain. Excavated between 1966 and 1990, and published in 1997, it set the standard for several generations of archaeologists as well as being immensely influential for the early medieval period in western Britain. Barker's 1977 book on *Techniques of archaeological excavation* drew heavily on the Wroxeter work as well as his other excavations and consequently had an impact much wider than specialists interested in Roman towns or post-Roman archaeology—"the bible for the new generation of excavators" (Collis 2011: 83). From the early 1970s, when the first interim statements of the scale of the Wroxeter discoveries were published, it provided a paradigm for urban excavations and a standard of work, and indeed expectation of discovery, for sites of many periods. In recent decades it has been central to a wider model of fifth-century and later western Britain. 'Late Antique Britain' as announced by Ken Dark in 1994 and *Britannia Prima* by Roger White (2007) depend on the Wroxeter Baths Basilica excavations as their central exemplar. As Ian Wood (2003: 429) says in the recent *A companion to Roman Britain,* "[t]he archaeology of sub-Roman Britain was effectively revolutionized by work carried out at Wroxeter from 1966 to 1994". Most scholars accepted the Wroxeter model and indeed considerable effort has been expended trying to replicate it elsewhere (Carver 1987: 40–46). However, aspects of the Wroxeter claims have met with some criticism in the past, in particular the claim that the excavations demonstrated the continuation of town life in Britain into the sixth or seventh century (Ward-Perkins 1996: 9–10), and by implication that this evidence had been missed by previous excavators on other town sites in Britain and elsewhere in Europe; but the basic claims have not been directly challenged in print (Loseby 2000: 331–36). The failure of other excavators to replicate the scale of the Wroxeter evidence in subsequent urban excavations also led to it being regarded as a strange western English anomaly without any general implication for urbanism elsewhere in England (Faulkner & Reece 2002) or to the acceptance that it was the seat of a magnate or bishop, but not urban (Halsall 2007: 359).

In 2002, however, a short but important review by Professor Michael Fulford questioned key aspects of the claimed Wroxeter sequence. Fulford noted the difficulties of the excavation with numerous robber trenches, earlier excavation trenches and other disturbances which isolated the stratigraphy into separate islands and suggested that much of the rubble of the major penultimate phase (Z) was the result of late Saxon stone robbing rather than being the foundation platform of a massive Romanised timber-framed building. While accepting that some structural evidence indicated timber buildings

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of post AD 400, Fulford's review radically disputed the scale of the Wroxeter activity (Fulford 2002).

Barker and White make a number of unique claims about Wroxeter (Barker *et al.* 1997; White & Barker 1998). In particular they claim it continued to function as a Romano-British town, initially with major Roman masonry buildings, well into the fifth and sixth centuries and that it was replaced by a timber town which continued to function in the sixth and seventh centuries until its deliberate dismantling as late as 700. There are a number of difficulties in accepting this claim, not least the complete absence of any objects from the excavations which need dating to the period 400–700 and the claim that fourth-century-style Roman artefacts continued to arrive on the site until 490–550. The second issue concerns the reliability of the sequence and the identification of structures on the site.

## The Baths Basilica sequence

It is important to understand the claimed sequence at Wroxeter in order to evaluate its chronology and structural claims. The following sequence was proposed by Barker *et al.* (1997: 240–41):

- The Baths Basilica, a huge masonry structure, remained standing and roofed until some time in the late fifth to early sixth century (phase W, AD 367–480/530).
- It became ruinous but was used for flimsy structures (phase X, AD 480/530–530/580) and then as an open market (phase Y, 500/550–530/580).
- The remaining basilica structure was demolished and the entire town centre was reconstructed in timber on rubble platforms, including the massive three-storey Building 10 with a towered façade and another 36 timber-framed buildings including other substantial two-storey buildings (phase Z, 530/80–650/700) which lasted for at least 75 years.
- The entire site was then carefully demolished with the removal of larger timbers, portable furniture and effects (phase post-Z, after 650/700, earlier than a burial of 600–790).

Fulford's (2002: 643–44) short review noted the difficulties faced by Barker's team: "...the stratigraphy of the Baths Basilica and its environs was cut by robber trenches, early excavators' trenches and other disturbances with the result that the spatial interpretation involves the linking of numerous islands of stratigraphy by correlating 'matching' contexts, such as rubble spreads". Barker says that almost 50 per cent of the site had been lost to previous disturbances (Barker *et al.* 1997: 7). The site's phase plans required the correlation of these isolated areas of stratigraphy (Figure 1) even though the deposits were not identical. Thus the claim that the different phases could be dated by isolated evidence from the separate stratigraphic areas can be questioned. Fulford's main suggestion was that the phase Z rubble spreads (the evidence for the timber town) were actually the result of late Saxon stone robbing of the remnants of the masonry basilica structure. He suggested that this activity could be dated by the find of a ninth-century Trewhiddle-style strap-end in a trench robbing out one of the nave colonnades. Barker was aware that if, as he believed, the basilica was dismantled in phase Y and sealed by rubble, late Saxon stone robbers would not have known where to locate the buried ashlar blocks they required for church building. In his

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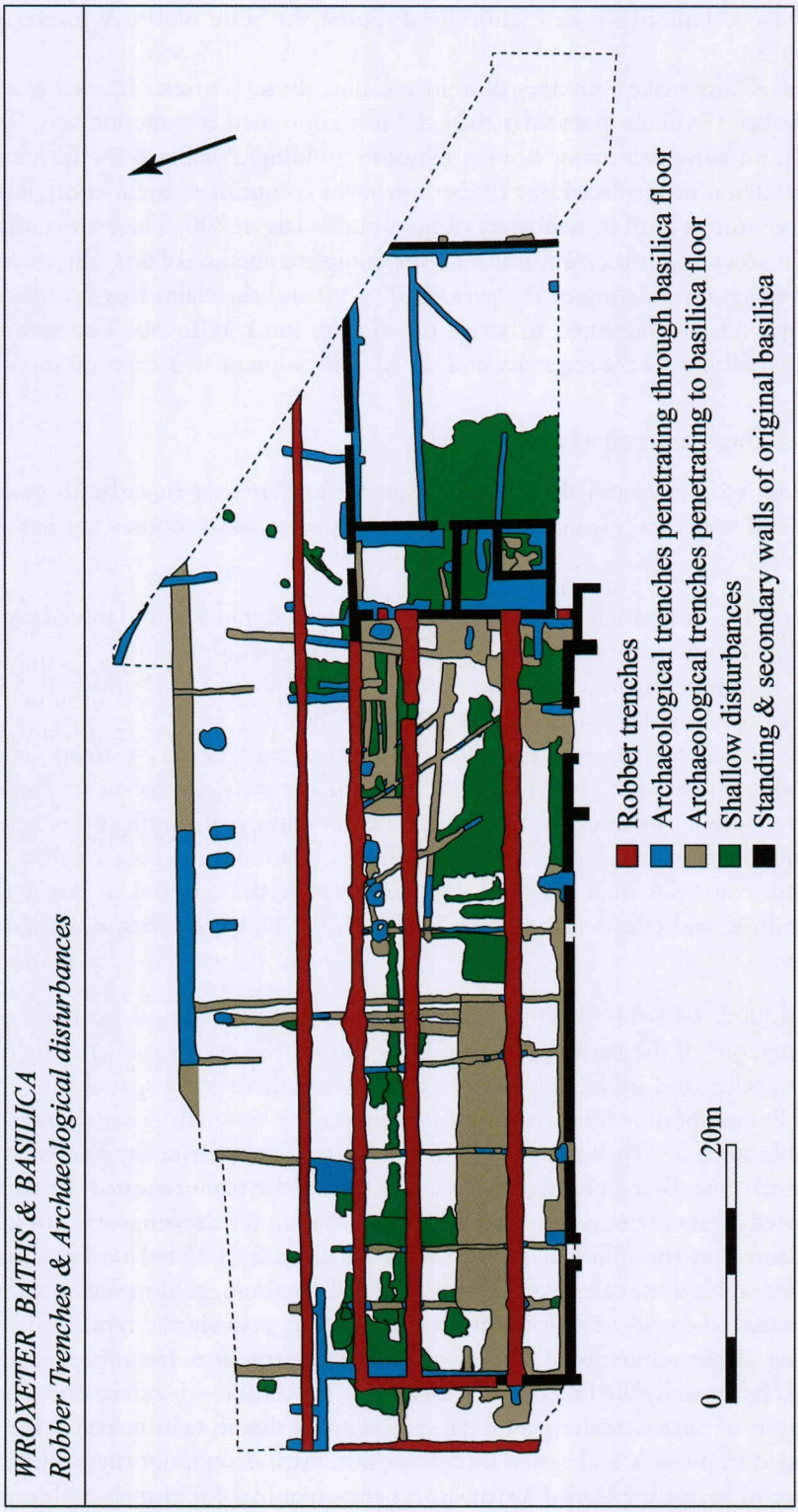


*Figure 1. Plan showing the amount of destruction of the Baths Basilica site before Barker's excavations (after Barker* et al. *1997: plan A1).*

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1975 interim report in *Britannia* he hypothesised that they might have dug trial trenches across the site in order to find walls. The final report does not discuss this, though White (2007: 183) in *Britannia Prima* does suggest that the southern aisle colonnade might have remained standing in phase Z and thus been visible in the late Saxon period.

Fulford's other key observation was to question the evidence that a burial provided a *terminus ante quem* for the rubble platforms for the buildings. This north/south orientated male burial lay towards the western end of the basilica. The report notes that the grave cut was not initially recognised and it was only subsequently decided that it had been cut through the platform (Barker *et al.* 1997: 167–68). If this relationship is in doubt, as Fulford claims, the rubble spreads have no firm dating and may indeed represent the late stone robbing which Barker himself envisaged.

## The buildings

Most of the buildings found at Wroxeter were identified by pattern recognition of rubble spreads, though a rather different, and perhaps more convincing, structural sequence of postholes and post pads was noted to the north, in *insula* 2 (Barker *et al.* 1997: 23–24; Roskams *pers. comm.*). It is Building 10, however, which is the key structure for the 'Great Rebuilding' of phase Z. A 'single huge platform of rubble hardcore' across the top of the former nave, north aisle and north portico of the basilica was interpreted as the foundation of a vast timber-framed structure *c.* 33.5m × 15.5m and reconstructed in drawings as a rectangular three-storey towered building (Figure 2)—"among the last classically inspired buildings constructed in Britain before the seventeenth century" (Barker 1975: 114). This rubble was found immediately under the plough soil. Barker states that a key factor that helped in its recognition was that it was observed before any robber trenches or archaeological trenches had been emptied:

> *"Few were visible on the surface of the rubble because most, whether robber trenches or early archaeological trenches, had been emptied and backfilled more or less immediately, with the layers put back roughly in their right order, so the rubble platforms looked more homogeneous and complete than they really were* [. . .]. *When these are subtracted from the rubble platform of Building 10 the evidence becomes discontinuous and fragmented* [. . .] " (Barker *et al.* 1997: 141).

Evaluation of the nature of this supposed structure is made difficult by the presentation of the evidence. I suspect most readers have looked at the reconstruction drawings and the oft-repeated phase plans rather than the 177 loose-leaf A3 drawings which depict the primary recording method Barker used (Everill & White 2011: 175–76). The evidence is only presented in the actual drawings of the rubble and it requires the piecing together of three large plans (A123, A124 and A125) to see the primary evidence. Figure 3 shows these stitched together digitally and with the outline of the structure lifted from the interpretation plans (A129, A130 and A131). It is immediately clear how much of the 'structure' was already destroyed before Barker's excavation. The claim that it was visible before removal of the disturbances and that these had been backfilled in the correct order (by stone robbers?) must cast doubt on its credibility. The report suggests that the 'platform' was clearer due to

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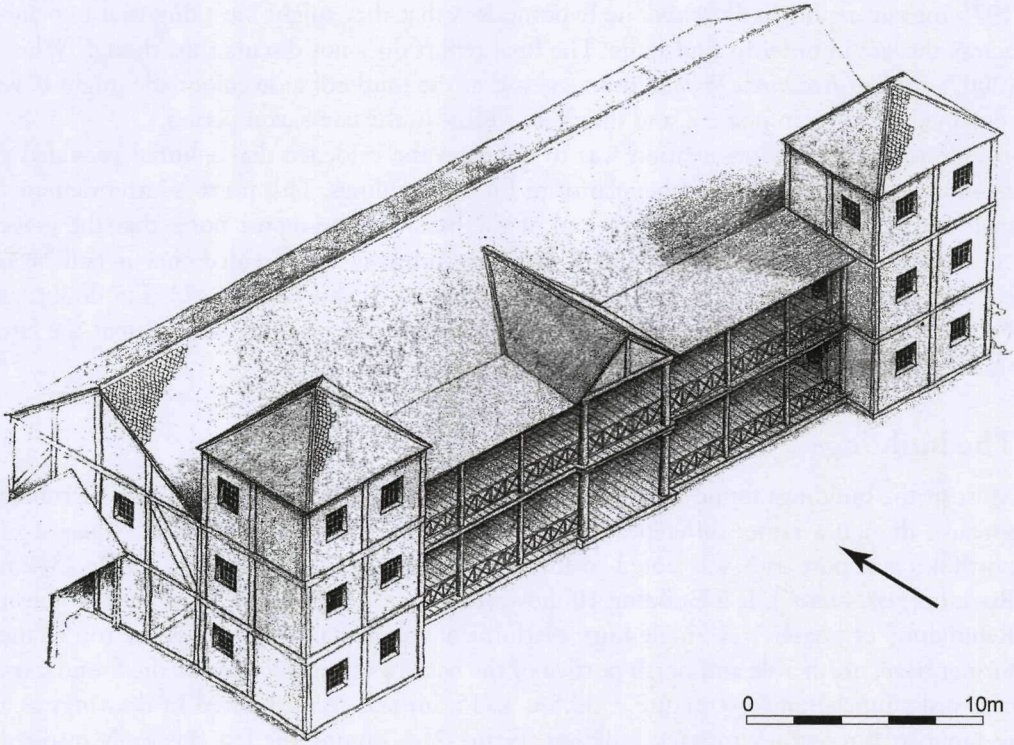


*Figure 2. Reconstruction drawing of the key timber-framed Building 10 (Barker* et al. *1997: fig. 252).*

its packing with coloured plaster and mortar from a demolished structure but unfortunately this evidence was not presented in the report (Barker *et al.* 1997: 141; cf. Everill & White 2011: 176–78). It is important to understand that the only evidence for structure 10 is the rubble platform. The reconstruction drawings are entirely hypothetical. Nothing remained of the supposedly elaborate superstructure because it was entirely removed with all the other timber structures when the whole site was demolished—"the strong impression is of systematic abandonment of the site, with the removal of all the larger timbers and the portable furniture and effects" (Barker *et al.* 1997: 241). None of these buildings had floors with the partial exception of the unique stone structure Building 31 which had a small area of internal floor surface (Barker *et al.* 1997: 146). Many were surmised to have had suspended timber floors (Barker *et al.* 1997: 169–91). Domestic hearths were absent too and so braziers were suggested for domestic heating. Nor was any evidence of roofing found; again it has to have either been removed or have been of perishable organic material. Structure 10 and the whole timber town hypothesis rely on the rubble platforms being convincing.

## The dating of Wroxeter

The other key problem with the claims made for Wroxeter is the total absence of any artefacts (apart from the late Saxon strap-end) which need to date later than *c.* AD 400. Whatever the nature of the Wroxeter buildings the dating of the late phases is clearly crucial to their

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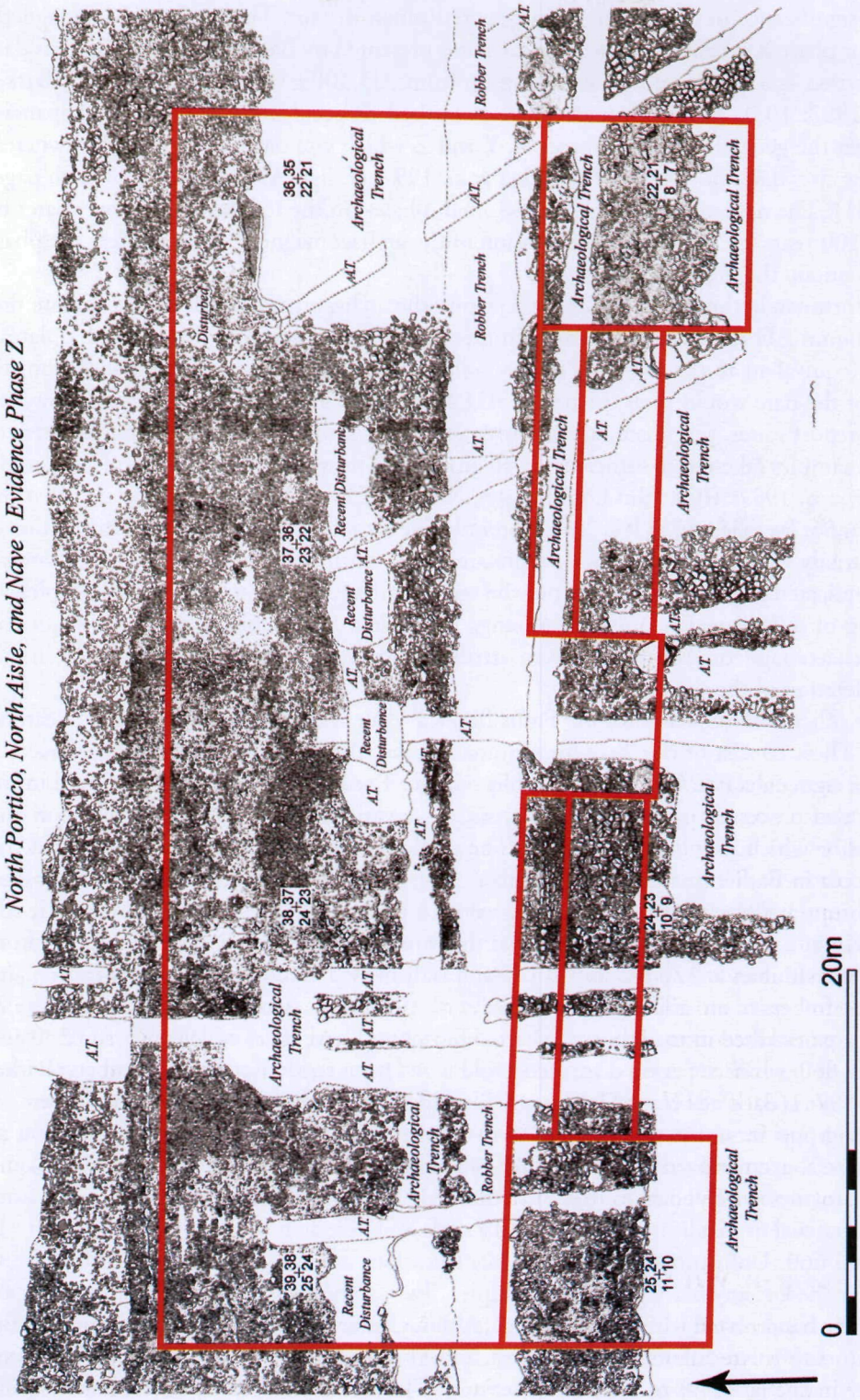


*Figure 3. The rubble spreads of Building 10 with the outline of the supposed structure superimposed (after Barker* et al. *1997: plans A123, A124, A125, A129, A130 & A131).*

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wider significance in discussions of early post-Roman Britain. The single archaeomagnetic date for phase X is central to the absolute dates presented by Barker *et al.* (1997). This date was revised at a late stage in the writing up from AD 400±100 to AD 500–550 (Barker *et al.* 1997: 103). This is clear from the published text and implicit in the discrepancies between the general plans for phases X, Y and Z which cite dates of *c.* 410–550, whereas the text cites dates of *c.* 480–700 (Barker *et al.* 1997: cf. figs. A9, A10 and A11 with pages 240–41). The date of each of the 'post-Roman phases' in the text has been moved later by 50 to 100 years (or more) after the revision of the archaeomagnetic date, whereas the phase plans contain the original dating.

Unfortunately there are reasons for rejecting the archaeomagnetic date. Mid to late first millennium AD dates are notoriously imprecise due to the scarcity of dates and a plateau effect (equivalent to the flat parts of the radiocarbon calibration curve) and an optimistic view of the date would span the period AD 470–980 (Cathy Batt *pers. comm.*). However, as the report states, the "material was only moderately stable magnetically, and only five of the 12 samples taken were sufficiently well grouped to provide a reasonable result" (Clark in Barker *et al.* 1997: 103). Paul Linford (*pers. comm.*) of English Heritage has stated that the date cannot be relied on as it is "based on only five samples and the statistical calculation is only strictly valid provided eight or more are used". Both he and Cathy Batt (*pers. comm.*) have indicated that this would not now be seen as sufficient for a reliable date. Its alpha-95 reading of 4.9 degrees is outside the range of modern acceptable error. In consequence, the archaeomagnetic date for the oven attributed to phase X needs to be set aside in any consideration of the site chronology.

The other absolute dates for the Baths Basilica sequence are provided by 10 radiocarbon dates. These consist of one date for a human burial, three for fragments of human skulls and six charcoal dates, including one split sample. These samples were all excavated in the 1970s and processed in the early 1980s and have various issues with their collection and processing which may limit their value. The skull dates span the period AD 70–530 at 2 $\sigma$ and occur in Barker phases W, Y and pre-Z. The excavators regarded these as re-deposited cult objects and therefore of little dating value. A pooled mean for the skulls would be AD 210–410 at 2 $\sigma$ and support the view that they are Roman. One split charcoal sample from phase W calibrates at 170 BC to AD 130 and is dismissed as old wood possibly from major roofing timbers of an earlier phase (Barker *et al.* 1997: 89). Two dates come from phase Z. These are described in the report as charred beams and have dates of 190 BC–AD 330 and AD 20–410, which are again dismissed as old wood from residual structural timbers (Barker *et al.* 1997: 168). The Harwell laboratory identifications, however, suggest these timbers are hazel and poplar, which are relatively short-lived trees. The hazel charcoal was adjacent to the phase X oven and may represent rake-out from the oven (Alex Bayliss *pers. comm.*) and hence provides a useful date for that structure (AD 20–410). Three further dates come from wood charcoal from a hearth, a dump and a surface. These all have dates at 2 $\sigma$ between AD 390 and 660. Unfortunately, no wood identifications are available, which might indicate whether there is any old wood in the samples. Two of the radiocarbon certificates indicate they were hand sorted from bulk samples. Although these three dates are attributed by the excavators to three different phases, W, X and Y, they do indicate the possibility of some activity in the late fifth to early sixth century. The last date is for a human burial which

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the excavators believed post-dated their phase Z. This has a 2 $\sigma$ date of AD 600–780. As noted already, Fulford (2002: 645) has disputed this interpretation and suggested that the supposed phase Z rubble from stone robbing sealed the burial as it was only after excavation that the excavators reinterpreted the stratigraphic relationship and decided that the burial was cut through the rubble.

The result of this reconsideration of the absolute dates for the Baths Basilica is that none of them can be used to confirm the proposed sequence. If Fulford is correct about the burial, the phase Z rubble is later than the seventh/eighth century and may belong to the phase of late Saxon stone robbing dated by the Trewhiddle-style strap-end. The other dates indicate Roman and possible post-Roman activity, but do not confirm the wider phasing claimed by the excavators.

## Wroxeter viewed from the west

The Wroxeter claims need to be examined not merely from within the site and its excavation report but also from the archaeology of nearby areas. Our knowledge of the archaeology of some parts of western Britain has been transformed in the decades since Barker began his work at Wroxeter. There are areas of the 'Celtic West' where we can with confidence claim later-fifth- and sixth-century activity because examples of imported Mediterranean ceramics have been identified at a number of sites. This material has been studied in increasing detail since the 1930s but only recently has its chronology been firmly established (Campbell 2007). Phocaean Red Slip ware (PRS), African Red Slip ware and Late Roman amphorae seem to have reached Britain in a fairly narrow time zone from *c.* 475 to 550 (Campbell 2007: 26). Small quantities of *dérivées sigillées paléochrétiennes* (DSPA), probably dating to the mid sixth century, arrived from western France (Campbell 2007: 32). Subsequently we find 'E' ware, again from western France, of late-sixth- to late-seventh-century date, in Britain and Ireland (Campbell 2007: 46). Substantial quantities of imported glass, also largely of western French origin, seem to occur in the same period, perhaps mid sixth to late seventh century (Campbell 2007: 54–73). The Mediterranean imports identify sites that were in use around AD 500. These lie most densely in a zone centred on Cornwall, western Devon, Somerset and southern Wales, with occasional outliers in northern Wales, Ireland and southern Scotland. Such imports seem to be absent from the rest of western and northern England. With some exceptions they allow us to identify enclosed and defended sites that are likely to belong to the British military aristocracy glimpsed in Gildas's denunciations (Lane 2007). It is striking that none of these imports have been found in the Roman towns of western England and there may be a political barrier to their penetration up the River Severn beyond Somerset and Glamorgan. However, two sites have been identified in the vicinity of Wroxeter (Figure 4).

New Pieces is located just over 30km to the west of Wroxeter on a hill-spur beside the great Late Bronze Age and Iron Age hillfort of the Breiddin. It is a small enclosed site of about half a hectare (1.2 acres), defended by a bank and ditch. Limited excavations in the 1930s and then again in the 1990s (1996–2000) found evidence of timber structures, iron slag, fired clay and indications of industrial activity (Edwards & Lane 1988: 97–98; Arnold & Huggett 2000). The older excavations recovered Roman material and early medieval

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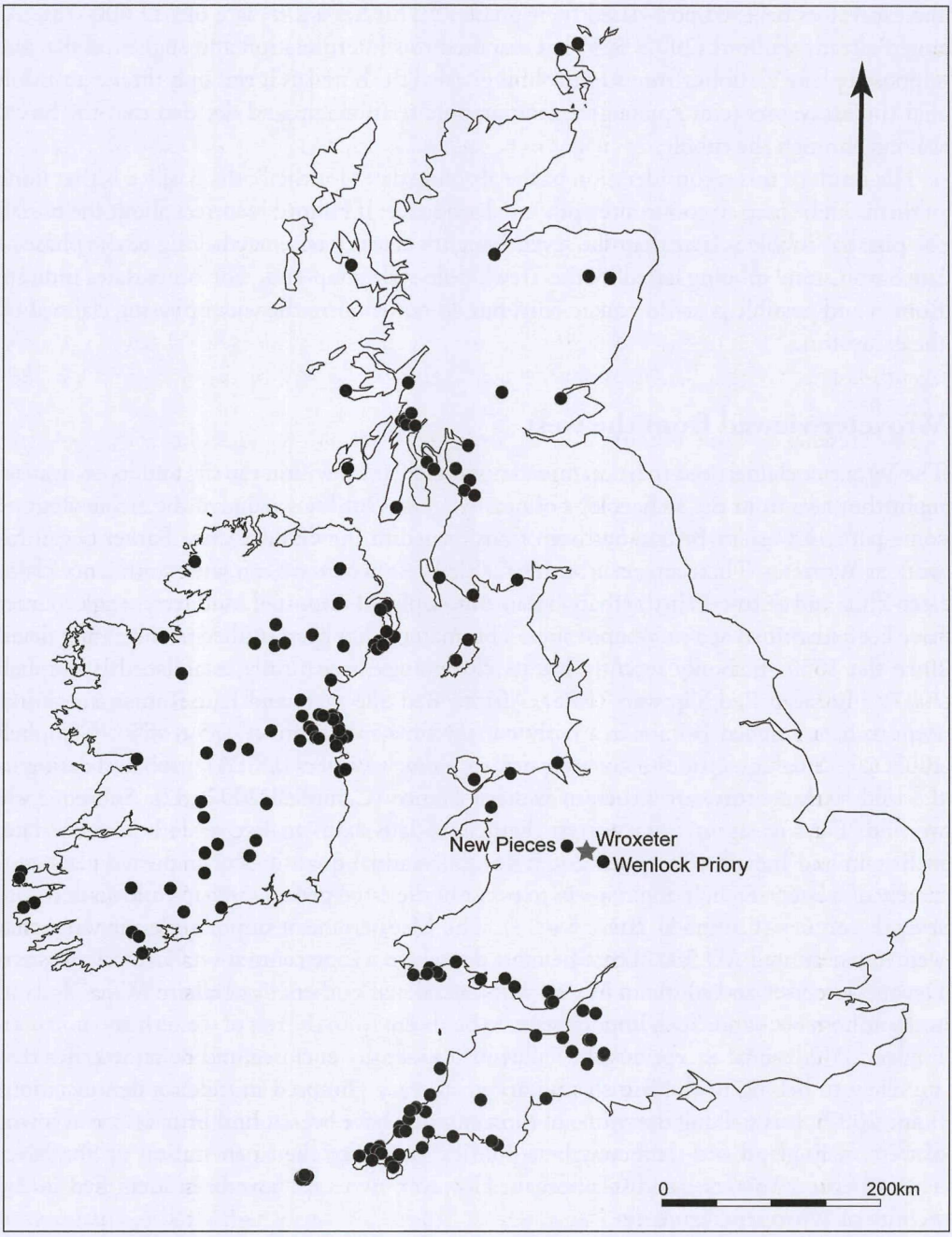


*Figure 4. Finds of fifth–seventh-century imported pottery and glass in the Celtic West (Ewan Campbell* pers. comm.*).*

glass, while the more recent excavation recovered more early medieval glass and pottery. The import assemblage now has nine glass vessels including seven cone beakers and a glass bowl. Seven vessels have white trailed decoration showing them to be Continental imports of

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Campbell Group C, dated to the later sixth and seventh centuries (Campbell *pers. comm.*). In addition, two sherds of a PRS plate dated to the later fifth to early sixth century and two sherds of DSPA ('D' ware), probably of the sixth century, reinforce the importance of this phase of the site. Although there has been limited modern exploration of the site, the quantity of imports suggests it was of considerable importance in the early post-Roman centuries.

Nor is New Pieces the only site with imports in the vicinity. At Wenlock Priory, 11km to the east of Wroxeter, two sherds of early medieval glass were recovered from medieval deposits. Campbell has identified these as respectively one sherd of a western French group C white-trailed cone beaker and one sherd of an Anglo-Saxon vessel (Campbell 2007: 54–73, 117, figs. 45 & 48). The site at Much Wenlock is thought to be a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon monastery on a possible earlier British site (Pretty 1989: 175–78).

The presence of these imports near to Wroxeter raises serious questions about how late the site can be said to have been in significant use. The later the activity, the harder it is to credit the absence of Anglo-Saxon artefacts. Anglo-Saxon finds were reaching elite western sites such as Dinas Powys, in southern Wales and Cadbury Congresbury, Somerset, in the sixth century and Dinorben, in northern Wales, in the seventh (Edwards & Lane 1988: 64–66; Graham-Campbell 1991: 221–23; Campbell 2007: 60–64), and stray Anglo-Saxon finds are being reported in Shropshire by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (e.g. Hitchcock 2006: 81, no. 114). Barker *et al*'s (1997: 218) response to the absence of dateable artefacts post AD 400 was to suggest that Romano-British material continued in use, and presumably in production, until sometime in the period AD 490–550—"the period at which Wroxeter ceased to receive large quantities of new material from outside; after that we see the deposition of fourth-century material through the sixth century as stocks dwindled and trade dried up". They suggested that "it is almost as if anything Roman was wearable in the fifth and sixth centuries in preference to the Germanic or British fashions found further east or west" (Barker *et al.* 1997: 203). This view has been restated by White (2007: 151) in his account of *Britannia Prima* where he envisages a division between a Brittonic elite in the west with Mediterranean imports and Romans "living in the Romanised, eastern half of the province who remained defiantly Roman in terms of their material culture and desire to maintain as much as possible of the Late Roman state".

Fulford's dismissal of the phase Z timber town does not mean there was no activity at Wroxeter after AD 400. He was happy to suggest that the evidence for less elaborate buildings, in particular those with post pads and postholes to the north of the road in *insula* 2, may be genuine and comparable to the late structures he postulates at Silchester (Fulford *et al.* 2006). Some post-Roman activity elsewhere at Wroxeter is demonstrated by the *Cunorix* stone, whose Latin inscription seems to indicate a high-ranking Irish figure, with western British connections, on the site in the fifth or sixth century (Sims-Williams 2002: 25–26; Redknap & Lewis 2007: 538–39). The old find of a stray bronze coin of Valentinian III (*c.* AD 430–35) has recently been confirmed (Abdy & Williams 2006: 31). Cool (2006: 231–35) has suggested that changes in the pottery assemblage at Wroxeter indicate some continuing pottery use. Similarly Hammon (2011) has noted slight changes in the composition of the animal bone assemblage between the different Barker phases.

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However, neither of these studies demonstrated any longevity of the site nor showed any serious critique of the stratigraphic claims of the excavators.

The absence of diagnostic artefacts is the key problem with the Wroxeter claims. This is not an upland site where poverty and acid soils can be used to explain the absence of finds—3400 Roman coins, a quarter of a million pottery sherds and over 100 000 animal bones were recovered in the Barker excavation (Armour-Chelu 1997; White 2000: 106; Hammon 2011). There is also evidence of bronze- and lead-working and many examples of hearths, although not associated with floors, in the hypothetical buildings. A comparison with the assemblages of bone, fine metal-working and other small finds from sites such as Dinas Powys (Alcock 1963; Campbell 2007: 83–101) shows what is missing from Wroxeter.

It is important to understand the intellectual context of the Baths Basilica excavation between 1966 and 1980. Frere had argued for continued fifth-century activity at Verulamium and in *Britannia*, his history of Roman Britain, he referred to towns being defended into the late fifth century (Frere 1967: 375–77). Biddle was arguing for Roman towns as important central places in the early Anglo-Saxon period. Anglo-Saxon specialists were trying to close the gap between late Saxon burhs and Roman towns and a significant interpretative lobby was minimising the cultural break between Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England (Biddle 1976). Few Anglo-Saxonists would now argue for town life before the mid/late seventh century. There is no evidence for towns in most of the Celtic West before the Viking Age and none in Wales before the Normans (Davies 1982: 57–58), so to claim urbanism on the Welsh Marches in the sixth and seventh centuries is to fly in the face of most of the evidence.

Barker's assertion that the Baths Basilica was re-roofed and continued in use until the late fifth to early sixth century (Barker *et al.* 1997: 224–25, 240) is in stark contrast to the near universal evidence in Britain and elsewhere on the Continent for the earlier abandonment of such massive masonry structures with the decline of competitive aristocratic public building. Nor does the Continental evidence support the idea that large towns survived in adjacent areas of Gaul. Contraction of urban space into smaller defended areas and substantial reduction in complexity and economic activity can be seen on many sites. Moreover, activity on Continental sites is indicated by artefact and structural sequences dateable to the fifth and sixth centuries by continued glass and ceramic production (Wickham 2005: 674–81; Esmonde Cleary 2013: 431–41).

Barker's work at Wroxeter and other sites was both beneficial and extremely influential (Roskams 2001: 13; Collis 2011). It fitted the (now uncontroversial) view that structures of many periods could only be recovered by meticulous excavation and recording. Many scholars thought that medieval deposits had often been destroyed by excavators interested in clearing upper layers to get at solid Roman structures (Collis 2011: 75). Barker was one of the excavators of the 1960s and 1970s who helped make field archaeology professional. He was a charismatic figure who had a profound effect on those who knew and worked with him (Everill & White 2011). He was also an artist and he knew that reconstruction drawings could mislead the unwary: "[o]ne problem which arises from the publication of such a drawing is that it is seized on by authors who want to illustrate their books on Late Roman Britain, often without the very strong reservations which ought to accompany a piece of kite-flying like this" (Barker 1986: 172). The interpretation

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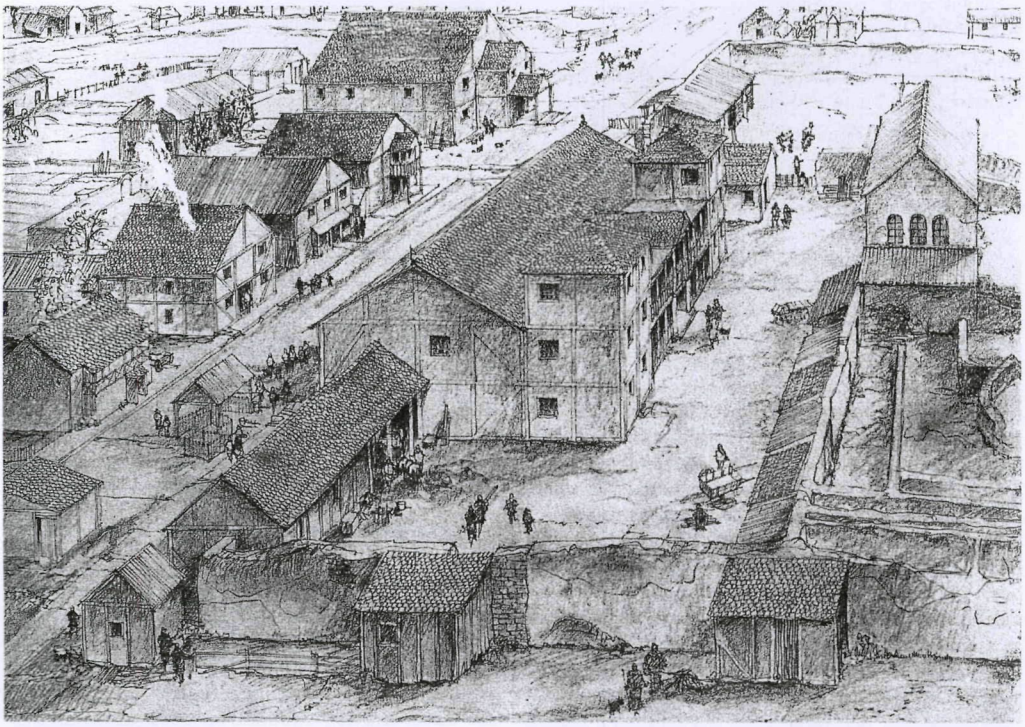

*Figure 5. The phase Z timber town at Wroxeter (Barker* et al. *1997: fig. 324).*

of Wroxeter, however, needs to be judged now on the evidence the excavation presents, not on its seductive reconstruction drawings of elaborate timber buildings, its busy open market or soft-focus timber town (Figure 5) (cf. Barker 1986: fig. 90b; Barker *et al.* 1997: fig. 324).

Wroxeter's urban status and its massive central building are crucial to Ken Dark's (1994, 2000) claim that western Britain was a flourishing Late Antique society in the fifth and sixth centuries. It is frequently quoted when scholars are trying to extend the life of Late Roman sequences (e.g. Rogers 2010; Speed 2010). It is also fundamental to Roger White's *Britannia Prima* model. However, the failure to replicate the claims of the Baths Basilica elsewhere and the emerging evidence of dateable fifth/sixth-century activity in the vicinity must raise serious questions about the Wroxeter sequence. The radiocarbon dates may support the idea of some fifth/sixth century activity but their stratigraphic contexts spread through phases W, X and Y do little to bolster the site phasing or chronology. There seems no reason to claim that the Roman pottery and coins are anything other than the late-fourth- and probable earlier-fifth-century material they appear to be. Perhaps it is time that the 'ghost city' of Wroxeter is put to rest. As Barker (1986: 147) himself wrote, "the important thing is to be continually aware of the difference between the evidence and its interpretation, so that it becomes possible to discard completely an interpretation which does not fit the emerging evidence".

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## Note

The full outline of Building 10 is only shown in the overall plan of phase Z (Barker *et al.* 1997: plan A11). The building outline in Figure 3 is taken from the dotted interpretation in Barker *et al.* (1997) plans A129, A130 and A131.

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