

The Silchester Insula IX Project
Emma Durham, University of Reading

Excavations have been conducted at Silchester for many years, beginning with the work of Joyce in the 1860s and then excavations by the Society of Antiquaries from 1890 to 1909 which aimed to produce a complete plan of the town. Staff from the University of Reading have a long history of involvement at the site, with Professor Mike Fulford first digging there in the 1970s at the South and South East Gates and in the 1980s at the amphitheatre and Forum Basilica. It was in 1997 that work began at Insula IX.

The excavation at Insula IX was the training excavation for students from the Department of archaeology at Reading from 1997 until 2014. One of the aims of the excavation at Insula IX was to provide the first full sequence at the town extending from the post-Roman layers down to the Iron Age. Beginning with a small team, the operation grew year on year until by the final year of excavation in 2014 there were some 130 people on site each day, and apart from the staff the team included students from Reading and other universities around the world, A-level students and local volunteers.

In fact in 2013 we opened a new trench in Insula III as we were not sure there was enough archaeology left in Insula IX to accommodate all the students. The remit for Insula III is different to that in Insula IX as we are concentrating on removing Victorian backfill and conducting only small amounts of new excavation.

As a training excavation everyone had a go at all the different aspects of site work. This meant that there were always enough people around for finds washing and marking, although the majority of them came and went in fairly quick succession meaning that a lot of time was spent teaching or monitoring progress and not so much actually processing finds. However, in addition to the finds manager and the students being trained, there were also placements for those more interested in finds and these students spent the whole 6 weeks of the excavation working on finds and learning about how the finds hut works. Similarly, students and placements helped with the environmental sample processing.

A certain amount of finds recording was done on site. All bulk finds were weighed, but not always counted. Similarly basic details of all small finds were recorded.

The main purpose of this basic recording was to create records for the IADB. This database was developed for the York Archaeological Trust and allows the different recording systems from site to be entered onto a single database. Context, finds and sample details are entered and the records are linked so that you can use context records to get to information about finds and from finds records to information about context. As well as text, images can be appended to records, which is especially useful for small finds.

As with any form of database, the information it supplies is only as useful as the quality of the data entered. Some records have been amended as work progresses and more information added. This can include spot dates for pottery and the fabrics identified, the species found in bulk animal group assemblages or detailed descriptions of individual finds. Other records have very little information at all and can really only be used to record the presence of the material and its location in the archive. Over the years the way in which finds have been recorded on the database has changed, both in terms of what information is recorded and the terminology used. So at the start the bulk finds were quantified by number of bags only, then after a few years weights were added. It is the changing terminology that has caused the most problems though and it meant that one of the first jobs I had to

undertake was to go through the database and standardise the terms so that if we search for groups of finds we can be certain that we will actually retrieve all of the relevant records.

One of the benefits of this project being a training dig means that every absolutely everything found on site ends up in a finds tray. One of the problems with this being a training dig is that absolutely everything found on site ends up in a finds tray. An experienced finds person can make certain judgements about what to keep or discard, for instance unworked pebbles, but a large number of objects were retained which really don't need to be part of the permanent record. It is only now as I go through all the finds that these are being identified and weeded out. But we also have categories of finds which fall in between.

For example calcite crystals. There are 4, 5 maybe even 6 boxes of calcite crystals. It could be that Calcite is connected with the use of bath stone at Silchester. Bath stone was used for architectural features such as columns and cornices and if some of the more delicate pieces were finished on site the calcite could be waste from carving. Crushed calcite may also have been used in wall plaster and it does appear in some of the plaster samples from Silchester. Thus this is one category of find which it was useful to retain so that we could record the quantities and location from which it came but for which only a small sample need be kept long-term.

Other categories of finds are more problematic: stone and ceramic building material are two groups which are most often subject to discard on site. At the time that I became involved in the Silchester project there were stone and ceramic building material specialists attached who could advise about what to keep or discard, but at the start this was not the case. In the early days everything was kept and it was only later that material began to be discarded. For the stone this means that there are a number of unworked pebbles among the collection, but for the most part the fragments either have worked surfaces or are stone types which were imported to the site. Once stone specialists began visiting the site they could tell the finds staff about the different types of stone being found and what sort of things it was being used for.

For instance Lodsworth greensand from Sussex was used for quern stones, old red sandstone from the forest of dean for querns, millstones and roof tile. There are also a few bits of Hertfordshire pudding stone and millstone grit but, while stone records on the IADB would now include an identification of the stone type, this also led to a somewhat cavalier attitude towards the discarding of stone on site. While in theory a good idea, especially when faced with tons of fragments of roof tile, this has also caused problems for post-excavation analysis. In particular many smaller fragments of Lodsworth greensand were discarded but all that was recorded on the IADB was the number of fragments and the weight. There are no details of whether it was from a saddle or rotary quern, whether there was any tooling or how abraded the fragments are. I have recently been looking at the stone from the pre-conquest levels and have found a number of joining fragments from both within and between contexts. No joins were noted on the IADB and obviously now I cannot look for any among the discarded fragments. As this early assemblage is generally very fragmented, often it was only by joining pieces together that I was able to determine the type of quern and the size. Thus the concentration on identifying the type of stone has meant analysis of the type of object has suffered.

Another category of finds which was subject to disposal was the ceramic building material.

Like the stone the building material was all kept during the early years of the project, but then a PhD student based at Reading started working on the material and they decided to start discarding some of it. Again the records on the IADB have basic information – the material was divided into tile or brick type when it could be determined and each type was weighed and counted.

The problem with the recording is that the identifications are very basic, the level of fragmentation and abrasion is not noted, nor is the fabric. The student working on the tile was focussing on the form and so although a basic fabric series was identified (largely building on the work conducted at previous excavations at the forum basilica) fabric was not a factor in determining which fragments were kept, instead the focus was on form and unusual details such as animal or human prints, keyed decoration, signatures and re-use. The lack of fabric information was the main flaw in the discard policy.

However, we now have a new student working on the brick and tile and her focus is on the fabrics. She is working her way through the sample of building material that has been retained. The issue of fabric has become particularly relevant in relation to a particular type of tile that has been found at Insulas IX and III and in the antiquarian excavations.

These are the Nero tiles, stamped with the letters NRE CL CAE AUG GR (Nero 64-68). Nero stamped tiles have been recovered from Insula IX, Insula III and the forum-basilica excavations. Antiquarian finds include one from the Silchester baths and one from Little London near Silchester. It is thought that there is a tilery at Little London where Roman tiles may have been produced. The Nero tiles are unique in Britain and suggest an imperial involvement of some sort in a building project at Silchester.

What is important to us here is the pale fabric in which most of these tiles are produced, which appears quite different to the mass of tile from Insula IX and Insula III and would stand out whether there was any of the stamp present or not. However, since only a very small amount of the tile from Insula IX and the first two years of Insula III is available we cannot adequately assess how many of these tiles were actually used at Silchester.

In fact the excavations at Insula III have given us the chance to re-examine our selection criteria for all categories of finds. As we are concentrating on emptying out backfill from Victorian trenches very little of the material we recover is stratified. Given the already huge sample of material recovered from Insula IX there was some question whether we should keep everything, as well as what level of recording should be undertaken. However given the rather random approach to what the Victorians kept or discarded, we decided that we would once again keep everything in the first instance, but discard some of the building stone and ceramic building material on site. As it turns out there was a high proportion of interesting pottery fabrics in the assemblage, including early imports not previously identified at Silchester as well as some sixth century material, which shows how important even unstratified assemblages can be towards writing the story of a site. With our newly installed PhD student we still record and discard a lot of tile on site, but a larger sample is retained which now considers both form and fabric. Similarly, any stone associated almost solely with objects, for instance Lodsworth greensand, is retained. Stone rubble with no worked surfaces is recorded and discarded, but the tiles are more carefully examined for any sign of re-use as quite a few fragments have been re-used as whetstones and these are kept along with any complete tiles or those with measurable dimensions or other features. This means that our sample is bigger than that from Insula IX, but still manageable.

One area where Silchester has tried to be particularly pro-active is in the taking of environmental samples. As well as bulk samples for charred remains there has been a programme of samples for micromorphology and xrf analysis. All of the bulk samples have now been processed but there are many boxes of other sample types still in storage. However, we have found that as techniques have advanced we are getting more and better results from these other forms of sampling, and have in some cases returned to old samples for re-examination. These samples are now informing the micro-processes at the site, in particular for activities such as metal working in ways that were not possible when the excavation started. It could be that we will continue to store the samples at the university

so that future students can continue to study them, and we are lucky that we have the space to do so at the moment.

In my work with the Silchester archive I have found that a lot of information is available on the IADB, but that with the long-term nature of the project recording systems have evolved over time leaving a record which can be difficult to interrogate at more than a gross level. While the emphasis has been on creating a long-term digital archive, sometimes the details that make the database more than just a finds list are lacking.

The research interests of students involved in the project in particular have informed what was retained in the past and, indeed, what we currently retain. At times the criteria were perhaps too narrow and the value of retaining adequate samples for examination using new or different techniques is becoming more apparent.