



## Review

*Silchester Insula IX: The Claudio-Neronian Occupation of the Iron Age Oppidum (The Early Roman Occupation at Silchester Insula IX)*. By M. Fulford, A. Clarke, E. Durham and N. Pankhurst. Britannia Monograph series 33. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London, 2020. Pp. xii + 682, illus. Price £64. ISBN 9780 907764472.

*The Emperor Nero's Pottery and Tiley at Little London, Pamber, by Silchester, Hampshire: The Excavations of 2017*. By M. Fulford. Britannia Monograph series 36. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London, 2022. Pp. xi + 200, illus. Price £30. ISBN 9780907764502.

The extensive excavations at and around Silchester, directed by Mike Fulford, have produced nine monographs and a popular book, all since 1984. Several more monographs are on the way. This sustained programme of work has made Silchester one of the best known of the Iron Age *oppida* and Roman towns in Britain. These publications also testify to Fulford's persistence and stamina as an excavation director and project leader. Some of the results of this work are truly remarkable, including the unexpected discovery of the rectangular Late Iron Age timber aisled buildings in the area that was to become Insula IX of the Roman town and also the (apparently) nucleated form of the Late Iron Age *oppidum* (addressed in the 2018 volume reviewed in *Britannia* 51 (2020)). The two volumes reviewed here address the Claudio-Neronian occupation of Insula IX (published in 2020) and the excavation of the imperial tiley at Little London (published in 2022). This industrial site was located 3 km south-west of the *oppidum*/Roman town.

Some issues emerge in the 2020 volume that supplement and update/correct the information published in 2018. For example, it emerged from detailed work on the stratigraphy and finds that some of the deposits interpreted as Late Iron Age in the 2018 volume (Period 0) actually probably date to the very early conquest period (A.D. 43–50) (pp. 9–10). As a result, Periods 0 and 1 of the site stratigraphy are now interpreted as conquest-period. Fulford also reinterprets some of his earlier suggestions to argue that there was a short-term phase of Roman military occupation of the *oppidum*, in which soldiers lived in pre-existing Iron Age buildings (p. 569). He interprets this military occupation, which is mainly identified on the basis of the frequency of cattle bone and the discovery of 45 Roman military finds, as resulting from the stationing of Roman soldiers at the *oppidum*. Fulford's concluding summary does not discuss the nature of Roman conquest-period activity at the *oppidum* in any detail, although Nina Crummy's discussion of the Roman military finds considers the idea that the Roman military maintained a presence because of the strategic importance of the location at a significant road junction (p. 288).

Another significant issue explored in the 2020 monograph is the connection of the community living at the *oppidum* with Emperor Nero during the 50s and 60s A.D. The combined excavations at the Roman town and at the neighbouring tiley at Little London have recovered 21 tiles and tile fragments that are impressed with circular stamps that include the name and titles of Nero. This kiln site was partially excavated in 2017. The 2020 volume contains some interim comments (pp. 7–8), and the 2022 volume documents the full results of this work. These excavations produced 4.5 tons of ceramic material and indicated that, in addition to tile, pottery was fired at this industrial site. It only proved possible to excavate part of this extensive site, resulting in some significant discoveries. Fulford emphasises that this is the first time a major tile works associated with a Roman town has been excavated: the usual range of bricks and tiles was being produced, including *antefixes*.

Die stamps used on the flue tiles enable the distribution of tile from this production centre across much of southern Britain to be studied. Tile stamps with Nero's name from this production site have been found only at Silchester and Little London. They were evidently produced in small quantities, since only 21 stamps have

been recorded: the kiln excavations produced over 17,000 pieces of ceramic building material. It is interesting to speculate about the character of the buildings at Silchester that included these stamped tiles. Unfortunately, the five stamped tiles from the *oppidum*/town were all found in secondary contexts (in the baths and basilica). The tile production probably occurred over a short period of time, probably mainly during the reign of Nero. Archaeomagnetic dating, however, produced an anomaly, since the final firing of the main excavated tile kiln (Kiln 1) occurred during the early medieval period.

Fulford has long supposed that at least one monumental masonry building was constructed during Nero's reign at Silchester. His recent excavations at the bathhouse inside the town suggest a very early origin, perhaps during the reign of Claudius, with the construction of a more substantial bathhouse in Nero's reign. The amphitheatre may also have been constructed during the 60s A.D., while reused masonry finds from later contexts suggest at least one more substantial early masonry building. In an earlier article (*Britannia* 39 (2008), 1–13), Fulford tentatively suggested that Nero rewarded a friendly king, perhaps Togidubnus, for loyalty and support after Boudica's rebellion by arranging for the construction of monumental buildings at this *oppidum*. Fulford drew upon the parallel of the Roman house at Fishbourne on the outskirts of the developing town at Chichester to interpret the developments at the Silchester *oppidum*.

Searching for an explanation for these Neronian developments, Fulford draws upon Sheppard Frere's (improbable) suggestion that the *oppidum* was seized by Nero's officials as the result of the forceable recall of loans made to the Britons (p. 8 of the 2020 report). Discussing the results of the excavations of the tiliary, Fulford suggests yet another possible explanation by drawing upon Tacitus' comments about Nero's trusted freedman Polyclitus, sent to Britain in the aftermath of Boudica's uprising with a vast retinue (p. 172 of the 2022 report). Fulford suggests that Polyclitus set up his temporary base at this *oppidum*, hence the large-scale building work. Fulford suggests that Polyclitus might have brought a tilemaker with him from Rome (broadly comparable circular stamps to examples from Silchester have been found at Rome). Fulford also proposes that the imperial procurator Classicanus, appointed to serve in Britain immediately after the uprising, was based at Silchester.

We know from the Bloomberg writing tablets that London acted as a base for soldiers arriving in Britain in A.D. 61 to suppress the areas to the north of the Thames that had rebelled under Boudica. This port and town were destroyed by Boudica's followers and, in the immediate aftermath of the uprising, Silchester might have seemed a secure place for senior imperial officials to station themselves. The *oppidum* may well have been the capital of a friendly kingdom and there is no evidence from the excavations of any disruption to the developing community around the time of the uprising. Silchester might have appeared an attractive location for the imperial official tasked with settling the problems in the province.

Tacitus does not explain how long Polyclitus spent in Britain, or the role he performed in settling the rebellion. When Classicanus died, he was buried with a grand monument in London, and this may well suggest that his main base was there. Silchester was on an important road junction and might have been viewed by these Roman officials as vital to the stability of the southern areas of the province. London was a far more strategic location, however, and also the prime port of the province. If Polyclitus wanted a base of operations during his stay in Britain, London would have been well protected by the military personnel landing at the port and campaigning further to the north. Why was Nero's tiliary not established close to London? Fulford's theory that Polyclitus was based at Silchester seems less likely to me than the idea that Nero decided to favour a friendly ruler at Silchester by sending architects from the Continent to construct monumental buildings at this *oppidum*.

Meanwhile, Fulford and his team have continued working on at least two other Silchester monographs. One will document the results from the excavation of the post-Neronian phases of Insula IX: the other will address the excavations of the bathhouse. The interpretation of the Neronian period at the *oppidum* may change again in these volumes. Although these excavations have produced more questions than answers, Fulford and his team are to be warmly congratulated for the scale of the work undertaken at this key site and for the prompt publication of the results from decades of excavation.

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