

NEW LIGHT ON THE SOUTHERN END OF HAMWIC: EXCAVATIONS AT THE DEANERY BY SOUTHAMPTON CITY COUNCIL ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT AND WESSEX ARCHAEOLOGY

By NICK STOODLEY

ABSTRACT

Two major excavations have recently been undertaken in the St Mary's area of Southampton. Because both projects targeted the same site (The Deanery), it is appropriate to publish the results side-by-side. The Site lies at the southern end of the Middle Saxon settlement of Hamwic, a trading centre of international significance. The excavations revealed the remains of buildings, property boundaries, pits, industrial activity and imported pottery plus other exotica. This note briefly summarises the evidence of each excavation before considering what it can reveal about this little understood, yet potentially important, part of the settlement.

During the Middle Saxon period (7th to 9th centuries AD), Southampton was home to an international trading centre known as Hamwic. It was located around the St Mary's area of the city and was one of a number of settlements known as wics, or emporia, that were dotted around the coasts of northern Europe.

From the early 19th century the excavation of soil in the St Mary's area, for the purpose of producing bricks, resulted in the disturbance of many Middle Saxon features. In 1946 formal archaeological investigations began (SOU 36, Kingsland) (Morton 1992, 9–11), which over the following years enabled the layout and structure of Hamwic to be pieced together, and its importance both nationally and internationally to be appreciated. The results of many of these projects have been published in the Proceedings of the Hampshire Field and Archaeological Society.

Much of Hamwic was densely occupied, especially in the north-west where the large open area excavations at Six Dials have provided strong evidence about the nature of

the settlement in this area (Andrews 1997). In contrast, the southern end of Hamwic is not so well understood, although it can be defined as lying south of a line drawn just north of St Mary's churchyard to Marine Parade (Russel, this volume, Fig. 15). Chapel Road, which follows the line of its Middle Saxon precursor (Morton's Street 9), runs east-west across the area and in the Saxon period probably linked the area with the waterfront. The south-west corner is occupied by the Cook Street area, which was demarcated to the west by a ditch and to the east by St Mary Street (Morton's Street 2). In between St Mary Street and the ditch, is the Cook Street cemetery (Garner 2001). The southern edge of Hamwic was marked by a salt marsh, which acted as a natural boundary to the settlement.

While the north-west of Hamwic was the focus of dense, perhaps even urban, occupation the generally lower proportion of archaeological features in the southern part indicates that the area had more open spaces and was not as densely occupied. Consequently the nature of the occupation in southern Hamwic has proved difficult to determine, and this has led to speculation about what the area might have contained. Morton (2005, 197) has argued that the south-west corner could have contained a *monasterium*. Any archaeological investigations, in this part of Hamwic, are therefore potentially very important, and it is fortunate that two major excavations have recently taken place on the site of the former Deanery School. The Site lies to the south-east of St Mary's church and to the south of Chapel Road. Wessex Archaeology (hereafter WA) investigated the northern part of the Site ((SOU 1386), plus a smaller site to its west (SOU 1511)). Southampton City Council Archaeology Unit (hereafter SAU)

concentrated their efforts in the Site's southern part (SOU 1332).

The work by WA discovered that occupation was concentrated on a strip of land to the south of Chapel Road. The highlight of the work was a property boundary that demarcated an area 20m wide by 30m in length and was set at right angles to the road. No evidence for a dwelling was found; it may have existed outside the area of excavation, perhaps fronting onto Chapel Road. One possible structure was discovered to the east of the property, but its small size indicates that it probably was ancillary to a building on Chapel Road. A range of crafts were produced in the area, such as textile production and iron working, in addition to indirect evidence for lead/pewter working and possibly silver working. Farther to the south of Chapel Road, the archaeological features thinned out. The work by SAU recovered plentiful evidence for Middle Saxon activity in the form of pits, structures and craft working. It was concentrated in the northern part of SOU 1332, but compared to SOU 1386 the evidence was less dense. Three buildings of 8th-century date were identified. Structure 1 was of post hole construction and its pits produced evidence of industrial activity, in addition to producing a fragment of a glass vessel and imported lava querns and pottery. Structure 2 was also post built, and the finds from pits included a fragment of a decorated glass beaker and a rare iron pin with glass head. Both buildings appear to have witnessed periods of refurbishment. Structure 3 was a large building that was associated with imported pottery and craft production. To the south of these buildings the Deanery Site was largely unoccupied apart from a few pits that lay north of a ditch. This ditch was probably a continuation of the feature identified in the Cook Street area; it did not extend to the waterfront and was probably not a boundary to the southern edge of Hamwic.

The excavations from The Deanery have demonstrated that the densest occupation was along Chapel Road, which confirms that this was a main thoroughfare through this part of Hamwic. The property boundary identified by WA was larger than those from Six Dials in the northern part of the town but is comparable in size to examples from St Mary's

Stadium (Birbeck *et al.* 2005). The size of the plot indicates that there was less pressure on space, perhaps because this area supported a different type of occupation, and evidence from The Deanery suggests that some of its occupants might have been of a higher social order. For example, the contents of a pit (528; SOU 1386), which included a high proportion of imported pottery, marine shells and bones from possibly young animals and the imported pottery and fragments of glass vessels from several of the pits excavated in SOU 1332. The large size of Structure 3, and the high proportion of imported pottery associated with it, is also significant in this respect.

The evidence from The Deanery can be better understood if it is considered in the context of south-west Hamwic. The key feature, in this part of the settlement, is the area occupied by the present day church of St Mary's. Radiocarbon dating of burials discovered in its churchyard and just outside demonstrate that graves were dug during the Middle Saxon period (Smith 1995, 259). That St Mary's Church was the mother church for the lower Itchen Valley during the 11th and 12th centuries, in addition to it being outside the walls of the later medieval town, suggests that it was a Middle Saxon foundation (Cherryson 2010, 62) – part of a network of minster churches in southern Hampshire (Hase 1988). Such minsters were ecclesiastical complexes containing a number of churches in addition to cemeteries, wells and chapels (Blair 2005, 199). Another Middle Saxon cemetery is found 200m to the north-east of St Mary's Church (SOU 13), which produced 81 burials orientated west-east, and was situated around a timber building interpreted as a probable church (Cherryson 2010, 60–1). The aforementioned ditch that extended from the Cook Street area into The Deanery may have acted as a formal boundary demarcating this corner of Hamwic. The enclosing of space in this manner can be viewed against the wider changes to settlement morphology in the Middle Saxon period which saw a greater emphasis by a social elite on the use of boundary features to enclose settlements and structure social space (Reynolds 2003).

Excavations at The Deanery have revealed new and important evidence that contribute

to a clearer understanding of the layout of southern Hamwic and its economic and social topography. The lower density of features supports the view that this area was different to the north of the settlement. The evidence was, however, concentrated along Chapel Road, an important route and one that marked the limit of dense occupation. Away from Chapel Road the evidence of occupation is sparser and appears almost rural in comparison. Southern Hamwic, and in particular the south-west part, probably had a different role to the more built up area to the north. The generally open

character of the area, coupled with the higher proportion of imports and other prestige items is compatible with the idea that its residents enjoyed an elevated social status, although, at the present time, the evidence is not sufficient to identify the character of this elite. It may have been connected to a religious establishment, or possibly a twinned secular and ecclesiastical centre similar to the elite centres that were located in some of the old Roman towns (Hinton 1990, 27–30). A more definitive answer will have to wait until further excavations take place.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, P 1997 *Excavations at Hamwic Volume 2: excavations at Six Dials*, (CBA Res Rep 109), York.
- Birbeck, V, Smith, R, Andrews, P & Stoodley, N 2005 *The Origins of Mid-Saxon Southampton: excavations at the Friends Provident St Mary's Stadium 1998–2000*, Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury.
- Blair, J 2005 *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford.
- Cherryson, A K 2010 'Such a resting-place as is necessary for us in God's sight and fitting in the eye of the world': Saxon Southampton and the development of churchyard burial, in Buckberry, J & Cherryson, A (eds), *Burial in Later Anglo-Saxon England c.650–1100 AD*, Oxford, 54–72.
- Garner, M F 2001 A Middle Saxon Cemetery at Cook Street, Southampton (SOU 823), *Proc Hampshire Field Club Archaeol Soc* 56 170–91.
- Hase, P H 1988 The Mother Churches of Hampshire, in Blair, J (ed.) *Minster and Parish Churches. The Local Church in Transition 950–1200AD*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monography 17, Oxford, 45–66.
- Hinton, D A 1990 *Archaeology, Economy and Society. England From the Fifth to the Fifteenth Century*, London.
- Morton, A D (ed.) 1992 *Excavations at Hamwic: vol 1*, (CBA Res Rep 84), London.
- Morton, A D 2005 Variation in Occupation Density Across Hamwic, in Birbeck *et al.* 2005, 197–98.
- Reynolds, A 2003 Boundaries and Settlements in later Sixth to Eleventh Century England, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 12 98–136.
- Smith, M P 1995 Excavation of Two Saxon Burials Beneath Chapel Road, Southampton, *Proc Hampshire Field Club Archaeol Soc* 51 255–60.

Author: Dr Nick Stoodley, Department of Archaeology, University of Winchester, Winchester, Hampshire, SO22 4NR

© Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society