

BOOK REVIEW

Silchester: The Roman Town of Calleva, By G. C. BOON. David & Charles, 1974; £8.50.

It has long been a source of regret, especially in Hampshire, that George Boon's *Roman Silchester* was allowed to go out of print, neither revised nor reprinted. Here is the reason: what its author dismisses as 'the work of a young man in haste' has been thoroughly rewritten and expanded. The principal areas of change reflect the shifting emphases in Romano-British archaeology: an examination of the agricultural basis of the economy of *Calleva* (considerations of space unfortunately precluded a full survey of the tribal area), and a radical analysis of the famous street-plan. In the latter, not only does he demonstrate what many of us had suspected – that the apparently open spaces contain numerous timber buildings, and that even the excavated areas leave plenty of opportunity for future excavation (below the floors, for example, and on the sites of spoil heaps); but that the plan itself can be made to tell us the secrets of the ancient surveyor. Chapter 7, while the most technical, is perhaps the most fascinating original research in the book.

Original research is manifest in every detail. Each published statement has been critically examined, and checked against the extant records and photographs. These, moreover, have been combed for information, sometimes crucial, that seemed unimportant or inexplicable at the time. The prodigious scope of the bibliographical research for this is displayed in the *Notes and References* that occupy nearly a quarter of the text. In these the author has yielded to a temptation familiar to any student – to find a place for every scrap of comparative material, however relevant.

The Notes should be read carefully for their own sake (especially as they are, unhappily, not indexed). For they are a pot-pourri of detail on every conceivable aspect of life, Roman or otherwise. The persistent searcher will be rewarded, for example, by an essay on Roman knitting (p. 367); while on the opposite page the tactful dismissal of an allegedly Roman wood-screw as 'a workman's practical contribution to the collection' pursues the history of the steel screw (with bibliography) into the field of industrial archaeology.

This is not an easy book to read. The lack of explanatory diagrams obliges the reader to refer constantly to the cumbersome full plan, and the determination to say nothing twice means little recapitulation. The important commentary on the Church, for instance, has to be pieced together from at least six scattered sections. Nothing, however, has been left out, and to get so much into a single, reasonably priced volume was an achievement. For easy reading one might still prefer the earlier, shorter work. But the serious student of Roman Britain will find this new study indispensable. The early excavators would surely be astonished to see what modern research has made of their findings; not merely an archive of unusual and sometimes unique material; not merely an exceptionally well documented 'typical Roman town'; but an illumination of the central theme of any study of the northern provinces of the Empire – the interaction of Roman and native ways of life, something in this case new to Celtic Britain, 'an early experiment in urban living'.

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