

Cirencester Excavations I

EARLY ROMAN  
OCCUPATION AT  
CIRENCESTER



John Wachter and Alan McWhirr

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CIRENCESTER

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Aerial photograph of Cirencester, looking north-west.

CIRENCESTER EXCAVATIONS I

EARLY ROMAN OCCUPATION AT  
CIRENCESTER

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(\* denotes that a metric scale was used in the photograph)

Front cover: Inlaid horse pendant from DM I 56

(photo: *F.M.B. Cooke*)

Frontispiece: Aerial photograph of Cirencester, looking north-west.

(Cambridge University Collection: copyright reserved)

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## INTRODUCTION

By Professor S.S. Frere, C.B.E., D.Litt., Litt.D., F.B.A., F.S.A.

Urban archaeology in recent years has become a fashionable and growing practice, and there is no doubt that both its difficulties and its achievements make it an exacting but rewarding school. Those who have learnt to unravel the complex stratification, and to recognise the sometimes almost invisible complications introduced by dark pits cut into equally dark deposits, which are normal in city sites long occupied, may be held to be at the top of their profession. In the growth of this new and enthralling discipline the excavations at Cirencester have played an influential role. In 1960 when they began, the post-war excavations at Canterbury and at Verulamium were over, the others not yet started. A great opportunity was available both to volunteers and to the directing staff. In those far-off days large excavations were still run with volunteer labour and by directors who in real life held other jobs. Large numbers of people who have since made their names in one or another branch of archaeology received their early training thus. The experience was usually enjoyable; the strains were felt only later, when the great bulk of material, amassed year after year from the maintained impetus of what may now be called the proto-rescue phase, proved an excessive burden on the part-time archaeologists in charge. Nevertheless the devotion of those in charge, year after year devoting their holiday seasons to the project, deserves our grateful recognition. The Cirencester excavations have continued annually for eighteen years, and perhaps only the increased assistance latterly provided by the State to further the research on finds, and to get them processed and drawn, has made possible the appearance of a report so soon. Long past are the days when it was possible to toss off a superficial final report on an important site in only a year or eighteen months after the spade was laid aside; the standard of information nowadays looked for in reports calls for much more detail to be made available, and in far greater variety, than used to be thought necessary. Thus the authors of this first volume on the Cirencester excavations are to be congratulated.

The present volume deals with the military remains. The division has the advantage of being not only thematic but also chronological, for, like the majority of cities and other large settlements in Roman Britain, Cirencester owed its origin and choice of site to the first-century Roman army. Nineteenth-century discovery of two military tombstones had already suggested that there once had been a garrison at Cirencester; but Mommsen had dated them stylistically to the late first or even to the early second century. In 1917 Haverfield prophetically wrote: "If the whole area could be minutely excavated, a skilful excavator might, no doubt, detect the fort by its ditch, or even by the post-holes of its wooden buildings. Nothing of the sort has yet been noted, and, even if found, such traces would form only a temporary feature of the site in its earlier days. Cirencester remained, then, like most of Southern Britain, civilian, and free from the incubus of a garrison". Half a century later skilful excavation has provided some of the answers. We now know the context of the tombstones and have a better understanding of the complex processes whereby the site of a fort became the administrative centre of a civitas. We may even question the use of the word 'incubus'.



But urban archaeology and rescue excavation have their limitations; a living town cannot be stripped nor 'the whole area minutely excavated', and it continues to guard important secrets. In this volume a great advance of knowledge is revealed, and we have a basis of proven fact from which to watch the future. Vigilance is indeed required, for only excavation at the right spot, when fleeting opportunity offers the chance, will pierce the uncertainties which still surround the extent and character of the various military establishments now proved to exist beneath the Roman city. In the circumstances of modern development it is fatally easy for apathy, ignorance or plain absence of resources to miss these opportunities, and the task is made no easier by the great depth below the modern surface at which these earliest vestiges are often stratified; any excavation has to be sizeable to be worth while, and correspondingly expensive.

The publication of a great series of excavations may excusably be thought to mark an epoch, to be followed by a period of rest and contemplation, and perhaps by the switch of scarce resources elsewhere. This comfortable point of view must be resisted, if only because the tide of destruction caused by modern building-construction does not similarly take a siesta. The process of archaeological discovery can never be complete, for fresh facts and new outlooks continue to raise questions which were not, and perhaps even could not be, posed before, just as new techniques offer better opportunities of recovering a broader spectrum of historical or environmental information.

Fortunately Cirencester possesses a first-class museum professionally staffed, and the local authority has long shown enlightened interest in the archaeology of the town. Nor is local interest in archaeology confined to official circles. All this augurs well for future work. Meanwhile we eagerly await the further volumes of this important excavation report.

25 January 1978

## EDITORS' NOTE

The principal contents of this volume were completed six years ago. In order to forestall criticism from those people who are all too ready to draw attention to lengthy delays in the publication of rescue excavations, let it be made clear that the delays in this were entirely beyond the control of the joint writers and editors. They were due solely to the fact that two successive publishers were unable to reach decisions within a reasonable time, on whether to accept the manuscript. Neither can any blame be attached to the Department of the Environment. In both cases, officers of the Department and of the Excavation Committee were always ready to propose and accept reasonable compromises in order to try to break deadlocks: but to no avail.

J.S.W.  
A.D.McW.

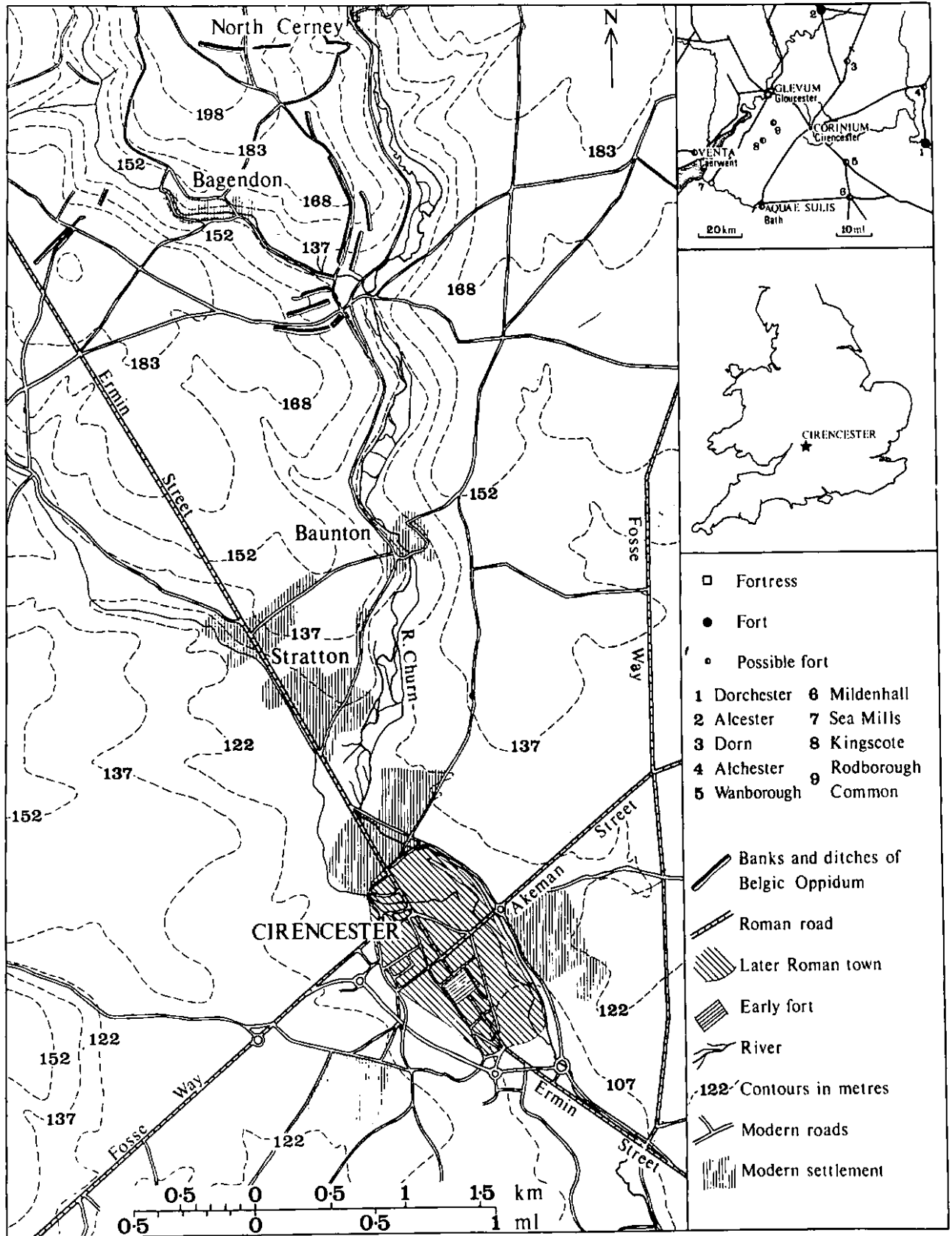


Fig. 1. Cirencester and district

## SITE CODING SYSTEM

The recording system used during excavations has been retained in this report. Pottery and small finds were labelled in a similar way beginning with site and year reference (e.g. CIR 61). This was followed by a trench or area number in Roman numerals and a layer number in arabic script contained in a circle; the circle has been omitted in this report. Further catalogue numbers were added for small finds, but these are omitted here. To save space the first part of the recording system has been condensed to a letter so that, for example, CIR 61 becomes A. Sites excavated by the Committee between 1960 and 1976 are listed in the following table which provides a key to fig. 2. Of particular relevance to discussions in this volume are nos. 21, 23, 28-32, 36 and 41.

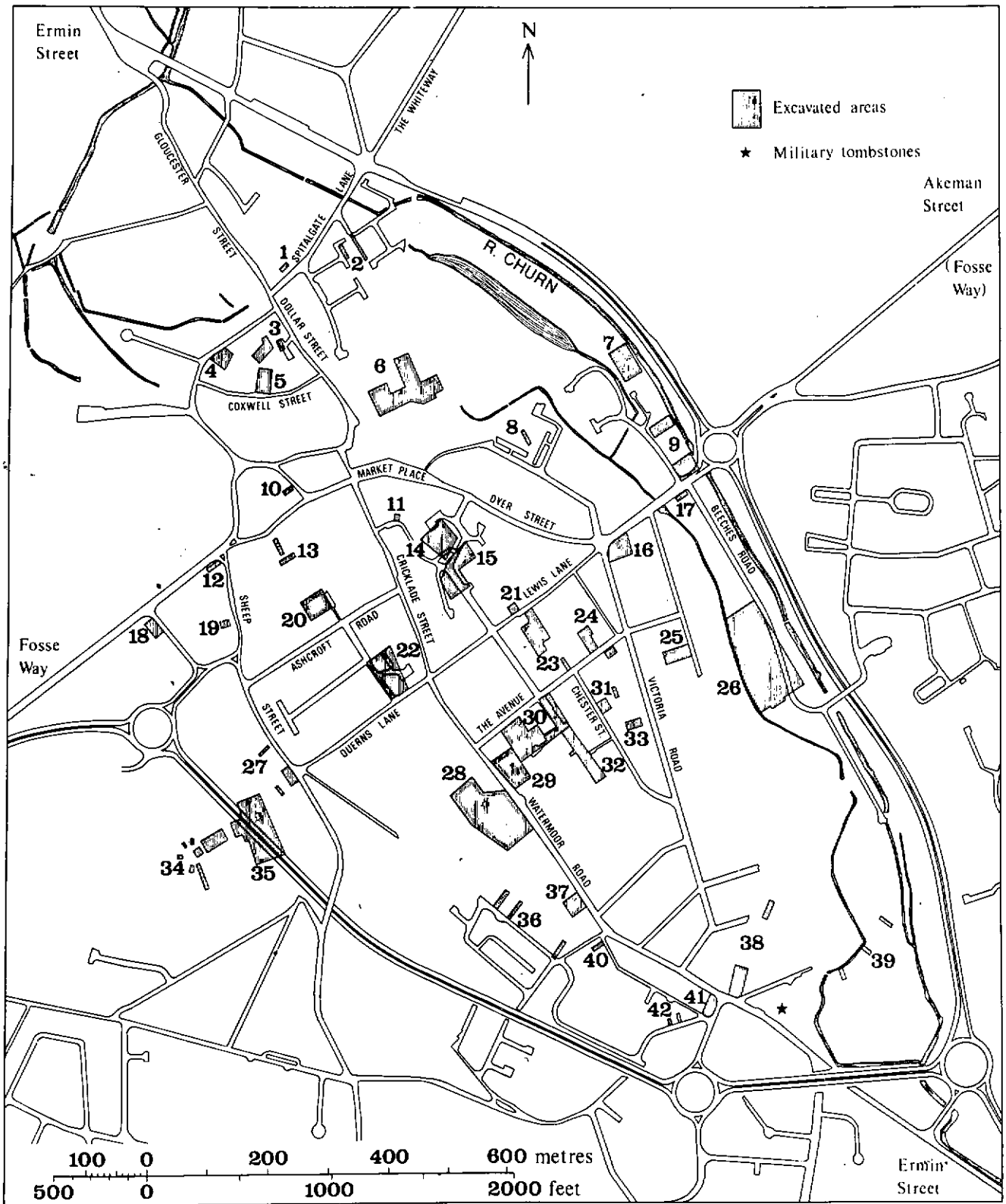


Fig. 2. Cirencester, showing positions of excavated areas between 1960-76

TABLE 1: Sites excavated 1960-1976, to accompany fig. 2.

1.	St. John's Hospital	CW	1971 and 1976
2.	Northern Defences	BQ, BR	1965
3.	Dollar St.	BW	1966
4.	Thomas St.	BS	1966
5.	Coxwell St.	AP	1962
6.	The Abbey	BG-BP, BT, BV	1964-66
7.	North-East Defences		1966
8.	The Waterloo	CK	1968
9.	North-East Defences and Verulamium Gate	AA-AC	1960
10.	Lloyds Bank	BF	1964
11.	King's Head Yard	AZ	1963
12.	Town Station Yard	CF	1967
13.	Bridges Garage	CR	1970
14.	Police Station	AS	1962
15.	Police Station	AR	1962
16.	Gaumont Cinema	BD	1964
17.	London Road	DC	1973
18.	Oakley Cottage, Bridges Garage observations		1960, 1975
19.	Town Station Yard	CN	1967
20.	Ashcroft		1951, 1961
21.	Telephone Exchange	BB	1963
22.	Ashcroft House	BE	1964
23.	Forum between Lewis Lane and The Avenue	AY	1963
24.	17 The Avenue	AH	1968
25.	Purley Road	DB	1972
26.	The Becches	CQ, CX, CY, DE, DF	1970-1973
27.	The Bath Gate	DX	1975
28.	Parsonage Field, and Health Centre	AX	1958-9, 1963
29.	Price's Row	DA	1972
30.	Leaholme Garden	AD-AH, AK-AM	1961
31.	Chester Mews	BC	1964
32.	St. Michael's Field	DG-DN, DQ	1974-76
33.	Victoria Road	CJ	1968
34.	Amphitheatre	AN, AU, CA	1962-3, 1966
35.	Cemetery and Extra-mural building	CS, CT	1969-1975
36.	Watermoor Hospital Gardens	AW	1963
37.	Watermoor School	CC	1967
38.	South Gate	DP	1974
39.	City Bank	AQ	1962
40.	Midland Road	BY	1967
41.	The Sands	BZ, BG	1966-7
42.	36 Stepstairs Lane	CV	1971

In the finds section of this report the site, trench and layer number are quoted when describing pottery and small finds. For example, DK I 81 refers to excavations carried out in 1974 at St. Michael's Field, I is the trench number and 81 the layer number. Correlation tables are provided on pp. 80-3 in advance of the individual reports on the finds, and show the significant contents of each layer, which are commented upon in this volume.

## CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY (JSW)

The excavations have established the existence of a fort at Cirencester in the decades following the invasion of A.D. 43. Although at least three phases of military occupation are indicated, the evidence is too circumscribed to permit more than the basic outlines of chronology and structure to be established. Most was revealed about the second fort (Period II B); it has proved possible to suggest its boundaries and something of its internal arrangements. In the text the following chronological sequence has been adopted:

- Period I : Native, pre-Roman occupation.
- Period II A : First fort, established *c.* A.D. 45.
- Period II B : Second fort, established *c.* A.D. 50.
- Period II C : Replanning, probably within the boundaries of the second fort, *c.* A.D. 60.
- Period II D : Abandonment and general evacuation of military forces, *c.* A.D. 75.