VINOVIVM



Update – a revised version now appears at – https://mshanks.com/2011/01/archaeological-research-at-the-edge-of-empire/

We are starting to plan for our excavations next summer of Binchester Roman town in the north of England.



Here is a short news item about this last summer, released yesterday.

July 2010 was the second archaeological field season for the Binchester Project. We are exploring the borderlands between England and Scotland, once the northern edge of the Roman Empire, excavating a key fort and town in the frontier system that included Hadrian’s Wall. Our excavation team of 46, drawn from Stanford’s Department of Classics, Stanford Archaeology Center, and 27 other academic institutions around the world, joined colleagues and friends from Durham University, the local County Council, and over 150 community volunteers in our ongoing exploration of Vinovium (the name used by the ancient Roman geographer Ptolemy). The project is run from Stanford by Melissa Chatfield, Gary Devore, David Platt, and Michael Shanks, and from Durham by Peter Carne, Richard Hingley, David Mason, and David Petts.

Last year, 2009, the first season, was very much a trial and reconnaissance. We had opened up a trench in the corner of the military base, immediately coming down onto what was left of the late Roman barrack blocks (300s and 400s CE), and also onto

tantalizing remains of some later rebuilding – after the links with Rome had been cut. One of our interests is in what happened at the end of the empire, so this year we continued to worry at the great spreads of cobble stones, the puzzling rubble-filled depressions, a substantial drain, the remodeled rampart, and cattle bones everywhere.

A Roman site like this always offers substantial remains. The house of the commanding officer has already been excavated; the suite of baths, getting on for 500 square meters and with two heating furnaces, is the best preserved in northern Europe. It is not difficult, troweling and shoveling in a trench, to see the remains of walls of buildings around you, and to appreciate that you really are in what is left of a bustling settlement. Bones and pottery are plentiful; there's a sprinkling too of bronze and iron artifacts. This year, like last, lots of coins turned up: over three hundred in just one week. (The site has long been known as a place to find ancient coins: they are locally called "Binchester pennies".) We had significant finds of jewelry made from jet, a mineral that polishes up to an attractive black luster; Whitby to the south was the source. And there are signs of industry and manufacture: some of the jet is unworked, and we are finding bits of melted glass.

It is much more difficult after the Romans. There's just less to find. And timber building is harder to identify and understand. Dating is difficult. But we work closely with Durham University's archaeology unit, a company of superb professionals. Without them we most likely would have missed much of the story now emerging of what happened when the supply of imperial gold ceased to arrive from Rome and Emperor Honorius sent his famous missive telling the people of Britannia to see to their own defense. Like other sites, Binchester is already showing that it was not a simple story of abandonment of the Roman facilities accompanying the collapse of imperial authority and the apparatus of the state. We seem to have something like a cattle ranch at Binchester – a new building and a remodeled barrack block fronting onto a cobbled yard sheltering behind the old rampart.

Vinovium was as much a town as a military outpost. Geophysical survey, using ground penetrating radar and the patterning in electrical resistance and magnetism to see beneath the surface, has already revealed the extent and density of building far beyond the fort. A second trench was opened this year in the vicus, the civilian settlement, just where the main road, Dere Street, leaves the fort and heads off

south to Eboracum, York. Again there are substantial stone buildings fronting the road, and stacks of cow bone. We are investigating differences in ways of living through the town and across military and civilian sectors.

The road was resurfaced perhaps after the end of empire; it would certainly have been a main thoroughfare in the sixth century and later. This was the route taken in about 600 by the army of the Gododdin, a British people of the Hen Ogledd or “Old North”, on their way to face the army of the invader Angles from north Germany. They met at the stronghold of Catraeth, modern day Catterick in North Yorkshire, just to the south of Binchester. According to the ancient Welsh poet Aneirin, the Gododdin were massacred to a man.

An archaeological excavation always involves connections like this with the history and archaeology of the region surrounding the site. And this is one of the richest archaeological landscapes in the world. To the north is Hadrian’s Wall, the largest work of engineering and frontier defense in the empire; its design and functioning still puzzles. Roman remains continue into Scotland alongside many prehistoric sites that take us back before the earliest farming communities. The medieval archaeology is no less rich, with over 500 fortified sites in an area little bigger than Santa Clara County here in California. Our team is taking up with gusto the challenge of using the excavations of Binchester to help develop understanding of the region. We have groups, drawing on undergraduate talent, tackling questions about the relations between towns and the countryside, the workings of the Roman economy, the character and diversity of the population changing through time. One of our Stanford special projects is concerned with the traditional craft of potting. With support from the Presidential Fund for Innovation in the Humanities and a private donor, we are actually building a replica Romano-British kiln on campus – experimental archaeology!

This fascination with the intellectual puzzles posed by an archaeological site like Binchester is the glue that holds together our community. This year nearly 400 were involved in different ways with the project. As well as students, most of whom spent four weeks on site, we had shorter term visits from the local community, elementary school parties to local history society members. A class run by Stanford Continuing Studies, 28 strong, came over for a week of touring the region and working on site. A group of students from a Palo Alto high school came over too. With Durham University Department of Archaeology we presented a seminar about Roman

frontiers. In another kind of experiment we have begun the digital rebuilding and reconstruction of Vinovium inside the online world Second Life. Ancient remains revived by the latest of digital design. [Link]

site – VINOVIVM.org

blog – [Link]



Barrack blocks turned into cattle farm? The corner of Binchester Roman fort, view out over the vicus/town