

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT THE EDGE OF EMPIRE



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Gary Devore and Michael Shanks



Binchester Barrack block turned abattoir – the late cattle ranch in the corner of the fort. The town extended beyond over much of the terrace above the River Wear (courtesy Michael Shanks)

The new excavations of Binchester Roman town in the north of England, running since 2009, are seeking new answers to old questions about the Roman empire and its administration, about the character of military occupation, the life and experiences of locals and the soldiers drawn from the far reaches of the Roman world, about the towns and military outposts built into ancient rural landscapes.

The borders between England and Scotland, the “debatable lands”, were once the northern edge of the Roman Empire. In the second century CE the emperor Hadrian had the frontier marked with a wall some 70 miles long, and the garrisons, totaling up to 15,000 troops, controlled a broad military zone organized around forts and a system of roads. To the west of the Pennine Mountains, a road linked Carlisle (Luguvalium) with Manchester (Mamucium) to the south. Forts along its route were spaced about a day’s ride apart and funneled provisions and traffic to and from the

frontier. On the eastern side of the Pennines was Dere Street, which began at the legionary headquarters of Eboracum (York) and ran north through the supply-depot town of Coria (Corbridge), at one time extending well into Scotland. The site of Vinovium or Vinovia lay on Dere Street, about 30 miles south of the Wall, guarding a crossing of the River Wear. Its name means “on the wine road” and suggests an important link with the sort of Roman imports valued along the frontier! Vinovium is now known as “Binchester”, “binns” – cattle mangers (Old English) in the ruined remains of the fort – “ceaster”.

Binchester has always been known as the site of a Roman fort; the remains of the distinctive fortifications are still visible in the fields of pasture, even when landscaped and incorporated into the grounds of the nearby 18th century manor house. Roman finds, including carved altars and especially coins (locals called them “Binchester pennies”), have frequently been found in the area from at least the 16th century.



Binchester 2010 season – a small bronze sculpted head (courtesy Michael Shanks)

In 1815, a horse drawn cart heading out of the manor's Home Farm fell into a hole that had opened up by the track. The raised hypocaust floor of the fort's buried bath suite had collapsed. Instead of filling in the void, the squire built a subterranean brick vault over the Roman remains. Visitors could descend some stairs

and see the bath's impressive heating system, crawling around the brick pillars of the hypocaust floor that had not yet collapsed. Soon afterward, the manor house changed hands and the new owner had little interest in antiquities. The stone altars that had been collected from the fields were repurposed as props to support shaft and tunnels in one of the many local coal mines. In 1836, the Church of England purchased the estate, halting further destruction to the ruins and artifacts. Forty years later, the first small-scale antiquarian excavations were started in order to trace the extent of the fort's defenses and its adjacent civilian settlement (vicus).

Renewed interest in the 1960s and 1980s brought excavations that uncovered most of the bath suite, one of the most impressive remaining in the northern empire, as well as the adjacent commandant's house (praetorium). Improved archaeological techniques were able to identify several phases of occupation, although still not much of anything that pre-dated the Romans' arrival. Probably built originally as part of the famous general Agricola's march north from York in 79 CE, Binchester seems to have been incorporated into the supply route for Hadrian's re-worked frontier, then possibly briefly abandoned when Antonius Pius established his Antonine frontier by the 150s up in the land of the Picts. It was back in service by the campaigns of Marcus Aurelius, possibly to police the valuable mines in the area. After the unrest of the third century, Binchester and other forts in Britain underwent a major change in their command structure, visible in the architecture. A long-standing timber praetorium was demolished and replaced with a much grander stone building that resembled a Mediterranean courtyard house with smart opus signinum floors, bathing chambers, and rooms heated from below via a hypocaust. Perhaps Binchester was now the prevue of a regional commander, newly appointed to restore order to an area of Britain that had participated significantly in the chaos of the third century. Over the next fifty years, the elaborate private bath suite (the one found by the horse drawn cart) was also added onto the praetorium as a separate structure: a facility suitable for entertaining quite a house party!



Bitchingham – the hypocaust heating in one of the caldaria (hot rooms) of the Commanding Officer's Bath House (courtesy Michael Shanks)

Eventually, as Roman influence in the area began to wane throughout the fourth century, another change in the command structure seems visible in the ruins. The praetorium was divided into smaller apartments, and the bath building was made more public, servicing more than just the commander, his family and guests. Maybe the regional commander, important at the end of the third century, was transferred to a central post elsewhere, and the garrisoned fort split up what had previously been the property of the elite. By the time Roman control of the province unraveled in the early fifth century, Bitchingham was in a sorry state. Soldiers, abandoned without pay, became local petty warlords or were absorbed into neighboring communities trying to resist attacks from Saxon pirates and other enemies. The once grand rooms of the praetorium were turned over to blacksmithing and the butchery of cattle. The bath building's pipes and hypocaust system were hopelessly clogged with ash and garbage, and part of the walls had collapsed. By the sixth century, occupation of the central portions of the military site had all but come to an end,

evidenced by the burial of a young Saxon woman inside the rubble of the collapsed furnace room of the baths.



Binchester in the online world Second Life, the plan of the current excavation trench bottom right (courtesy Gary Devore))

Although this rough sequence of events is informed by the excavation of the praetorium and baths building, details are in short supply at Binchester. The site, a prominent hill and terrace controlling an important crossing the River Wear, suggests there should be some Iron Age or earlier occupation, but excavations have been too small in scope or have not been able to go deep enough to discover any trace of pre-Roman activity. The late third and fourth century praetorium and bath building are well studied, but they represent only two of the many buildings that would have serviced a substantial garrison for over four centuries. Apart from some antiquarian trenching, the extensive vicus, the town outside the fort, has been ignored, although some finds show that it may have been occupied well past the fifth century. Televised excavations in 2007 by the Time Team (Channel 4 UK) even found tantalizing glimpses of a monumental cemetery at the edge of the vicus – a street of mausolea. In order to uncover more of the site, to seek answers about the entire area over a long duration, and to plug all findings into a larger regional survey, a team of archaeologists from Stanford University in the US and Durham University in the UK joined forces with the support of the local Durham County

Council. The project is run from Stanford by Melissa Chatfield, Gary Devore, David Platt, and Michael Shanks, and in Durham by Peter Carne, Richard Hingley, David Mason, and David Petts.



Teddy Bowers (Stanford) cleans a cattle skull (courtesy of Michael Shanks)

July 2010 was the first full archaeological field season for this Binchester Project. Two main trenches were opened, one inside the fort and one outside, in order to coordinate findings and explore any distinctions between military and civilian on this northern frontier. In the fort, the trench occupies the north-eastern corner immediately inside the defenses where geophysical survey suggested at least one barracks building and various intramural defensive towers. Immediately under the topsoil, the team found great spreads of cobble stones, puzzling rubble-filled depressions, a substantial drain, areas where the defensive rampart of the fort had been remodeled, and spreads of cattle bones everywhere. Painstaking, detailed work on the remains has revealed that in the post Roman period this area of the fort was taken up by a busy abattoir. The workers, be they native Britons,

disenfranchised former soldiers, or a mix of the two, had taken over the crumbling remains of a stone barracks block. The building was subdivided and Roman building stone was used to construct a smaller utilitarian building set into the ramparts. (Reused stone was also taken across the river in the 630s to build the still-standing Saxon church at Escomb.) A few wooden pens held cattle until they were led into the former barracks to be slaughtered. This was the source of the plentiful cattle bone uncovered by our excavators. Its discovery has given us the opportunity to pay careful attention to a phase that often gets disregarded on Roman fort sites: the transitional early Medieval period. Life in Britain after the Romans left was substantially different to what had come before. The loss of Roman goods means that today there is much less to find archaeologically from that period. Most buildings would have been of timber, which is harder to identify and understand than stone. Dating is also difficult because Roman coins, a chief tool of dating, stopped being imported. The story now emerging is not a simple one of abandonment brought on by the collapse of imperial authority and the apparatus of the state. In fact, it seems that there was a deliberate attempt to try and keep Binchester going as a settlement after it stopped being garrisoned, perhaps even by former soldiers that had once been employed by Rome.

For most of its history, Binchester seems to have been as much a town as a military outpost. Geophysical survey, using ground penetrating radar and other techniques to see beneath the surface, has already revealed the extent and density of building far beyond the fort. To investigate this, the team opened a second trench this year in the vicus, the "civilian" settlement, just where the main road, Dere Street, left the fort and headed off south to Eboracum. In the latest, uppermost layers we have found substantial stone buildings fronting that road, as well as more cow bones. As we analyze the material, we will eventually be able to investigate the differences in the standard of living between the military and civilian sectors of Binchester.

This opens up a wide research agenda covering the character of urban and rural settlement in this imperial colony, the way administrative control manifested itself in daily life, trends and changes over several hundred years and more of pre-colonial settlement, invasion, occupation and aftermath.

There are some evocative hints of later phases of English history. The main road running through the vicus was resurfaced perhaps after the end of Roman rule. It

would certainly have still 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 northern Germany. The two forces 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 British Gododdin were massacred to a man.



Debatable Lands – Hadrian's Wall at Walltown Crag, looking east (courtesy Michel Shanks)

Archaeological sites such as Binchester fascinate with the intellectual puzzles they pose, and this attracts a large and diverse community of students, scholars, specialists, and enthusiasts. This past summer, nearly 400 people were involved in different ways with the project. As well as students, most of whom spent four weeks on site, there were shorter term visits from neighboring communities, including elementary school parties and 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 as well. In another kind of experiment we have even begun the digital rebuilding and reconstruction of Vinovium inside the online world Second Life (<http://rebuiltromans.blogspot.com/>).

Binchester is in the heart of a post-industrial landscape that has seen better days; this was once a heartland of the industrial revolution in England. The project is committed to the complete integration of its work within the local community, whether that be through sharing the labor, in the stories and accounts we fashion, or in the interpretation center we plan eventually to build.

The Binchester project will be excavating the site for at least another four seasons, continuing to unite international scholars and students, and to give them an opportunity to excavate in a rich historical landscape. Follow the story on our web site at <http://vinovium.org>; photo galleries can be found at <http://archaeographer.com>.

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

BINCHESTER 2010





The excavations of Binchester – Vinovium – continue this month as the international team arrive from Stanford, Texas Tech and a host of other universities. Community involvement is substantial this year too, with 20 people a week joining the project.

website – Vinovium.org

website – dur.ac.uk/binchester.fort

blog – binchester.blogspot.com/

VINOVIVM



Our project to explore the Roman town of Binchester – Vinovium – reached the news at Stanford today – [\[Link\]](#)

The report took an appropriately student-centered focus. And we certainly had a wonderful team last year.



Project site – VINOVIVM.ORG

METAMEDIA AT STANFORD



Reception yesterday in our lab at Stanford.





Metamedia – because there can be no archaeology without media(tion) – the past is turned into something else – that we may attempt understanding. As archaeologists we displace the remains of the past, translate, write, draw, photograph ...

A lab – devoted to collaborative experiment.

[Link]



“SEEING THE PAST” – ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE AT STANFORD



I wound up a fine conference at Stanford today – Seeing the Past – Building knowledge of the past through acts of seeing. Congratulations to the organizers – Stacey Camp, Sarah Levin-Richardson and Lela Urquhart.

All the papers are on line and available for comment – [\[Link\]](#). It is a high quality collection and worth a look – not least for what it shows of some cutting edge thought in academic archaeology.

There were papers that explored visual culture in the past – Celtic coins, sex scenes at Pompeii, the Mausoleum of the emperor Augustus, Greek drinking parties. Criticism of the distorting uses of imagery in archaeology, how ways of seeing

direct attention to certain aspects of the past rather than others – aerial photography, for example, or simply a predisposition to look rather than use all available senses in exploring the past (Ruth Tringham was at her best on an immersive exploration of that amazing early farming settlement at Catal Hoyuk in Turkey).

My points?

Work on the irony at the heart of our seeing the past. That we can never see what happened – it is gone. Yet it is all round us to see – in its remains and in what it has become for us now. This is a classic “undecidable”, in Derrida’s sense – [Link]

So [put to one side the usual distinction between the real past and its representation, the authentic past and its secondary representation](#). This is not the way I see images of the past at all.

Photos, drawings and diagrams aren’t so much representations of our archaeological data – pots, sites, any other kind of facts – so much as [acts of inscription](#) – ways we deal with the past. They are part of the way we engage with the past and others who have an interest – colleagues, or anyone else with an interest in the archaeological past.

Key term – [intermedia](#) – this refers to the fungibility that we are so familiar with now as one traditional medium merges into another – because a medium is no longer to be defined by its material or substance – paint, film, magnetic tape. My iPod deals in sound, radio programs, voice memos, snapshots, lecture presentations, calendar items, my address book. All can be interchanged and combined because of digital computation.

Key term – [mixed realities](#). Rather than separate reality and representation, think of how we live in a world of subtle gradations from the hard reality of mortality through to wild unrealized utopias – and there are all sorts of inscriptions along the way.





Working on the fungibility of image and text – here an experiment in layout and typography dealing with the deep mapping of three archaeological encounters in Wales UK, Sicily and California – a Visual Primer for the Three Landscapes Project (Stanford 2001 -).

Key term – **sensorium**. By this I mean that we should treat sight as part of a particular array of all the senses (this is what I mean by sensorium). A way of seeing is connected with ways of hearing, touching, feeling. Nowadays we tend to value rich photographic verisimilitude and are less attuned to the subtle difference of feel of material surfaces, for example. What then of past soundscapes (a new area of interest and research in archaeology)? Or the smell of the past? – archaeologists have researched the olfactory cityscape of Novgorod (tanning factories within the city walls stinking out the whole place). Chris Witmore did a great presentation on ancient and modern Greek soundscapes.

Key term – **manifestation**. It's not just cause and effect or making sense of an ancient temple that matter. Simply manifesting the past to people is a good thing – letting them experience what is left of the past in all its richness.

An **exhortation**. Too many talk about what's wrong with imagery and representation in archaeology. Cut down on talking about seeing and get on with the looking and

imaging. Practice as the best form of critique.

An example of good practice – architects like Daniel Libeskind who have pioneered new ways of seeing building, embodied in the way they draw and plan as well as the buildings themselves. Architectural drawing here not as a “representation” but as a crucial part of architectural practice – from visionary beginnings through concept definition, persuasion of client, through engineering calculation to the logistics of building. None of these plans, diagrams, renderings are simply “representation”.

A few traditional aphorisms and gestures.

Adorno – [the best magnifying glass is a splinter in the eye](#). [Link]

Bertold Brecht’s gesture of [verfremdung](#) – interrupting the illusion of a theatrical performance – stopping the flow of “representation” and the storyline with comments directly engaging the audience.

Walter Benjamin reflecting on the Nazi expertise in new mass media – [political progress is now intimately and inextricably intertwined with technical facility. If we want to reach out to people with enlightening stories of the archaeological past we have to go one better than Disney](#). [Link]

Seeing the past? I want archaeologists to help us all to see it freshly. Not as another hackneyed image.

And I think these are some ways of achieving that goal.