

EXETER  
A ROMAN LEGIONARY FORTRESS AND  
*CIVITAS CAPITAL*





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# EXETER

A ROMAN LEGIONARY  
FORTRESS AND  
*CIVITAS* CAPITAL

JOHN PAMMENT SALVATORE

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For †Christopher (Chris) Henderson  
and †Paul T. Bidwell

both formerly of Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit  
without whom this book could never have been written

*Videas bonas aves*



## Contents

List of Figures.....	iii
Author’s Note.....	xi
General Notes .....	xiii
Copyright .....	xiii
Note on the orientation of the fortress and town gates.....	xiii
Note on the dating of archaeological material from Exeter and the published source material. ....	xiv
Introduction.....	1
No time to lose (archaeological innovation and discovery at Exeter) .....	5
The ‘new’ archaeologists .....	5
Reaping the benefits.....	12
Halcyon days.....	14
The Legacy .....	16
The Roman army arrives at Exeter .....	19
The Roman army in the South-West .....	19
Exeter chosen as the site for a legionary fortress .....	26
The Legionary Fortress (and its stone-built bathhouse) .....	28
The setting out of the fortress (the Henderson ‘blueprint’).....	28
The fortress defences .....	33
The street system (more of the fortress plan revealed) .....	40
Cohort barracks (legionary accommodation) .....	41
The metalworking shop ( <i>fabrica</i> ) and workers accommodation .....	47
The legionary bathhouse.....	51
The headquarters building ( <i>principia</i> ) .....	60
Other specialised buildings .....	61
The Tilery .....	62
Summary .....	64

The purpose of the legionary fortress and its period of occupation.....	65
Real and perceived power.....	65
Period of occupation .....	66
Extra-mural sites of the <i>prata legionum</i> .....	70
The <i>canabae (legionis)</i> .....	73
The upper compound .....	74
The lower compound .....	74
St Loye’s civilian settlement ( <i>vicus</i> ) .....	76
The Topsham sites and a suspected barge-quay .....	86
A connected system .....	91
The occupants of the dependent sites.....	92
Period of occupation and abandonment.....	94
Military establishments outside of the fortress.....	95
The fortress and its garrison at the time of the Boudican revolt.....	99
The historical background .....	99
The dilemma of Poenius Postumus.....	100
Defensive measures? .....	101
The consequences.....	107
Exeter as a Roman town and <i>Civitas Capital</i> .....	108
The early town – a time of transition .....	108
A <i>civitas</i> capital (the early town and a new population) .....	110
Bathhouse to Basilica and forum.....	113
Other features of the early town.....	116
Late Roman Exeter.....	119
The Later town .....	119
Exeter as a Roman city .....	120
Third and fourth century developments .....	121
Topsham in the third and fourth centuries AD.....	133
The end of Roman Exeter and the beginning of a new story.....	136
Coin supply as evidence of decline .....	136
The end and a new beginning.....	137
Final Thoughts.....	140
Acknowledgements.....	142
Further reading.....	144
Roman Exeter and Topsham .....	144
Other Roman military sites .....	146
Roman Army.....	147
General Roman.....	148
Ancient Sources .....	149
Things to See and Do in Roman Exeter .....	150
Index .....	152



## List of Figures

\*objects may be seen at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter

- Figure 1. The gates of the fortress and the town (location and orientation). Drawn by David Gould.....xiv
- Figure 2.\* Roman Samian ware pottery. (© RAMM). .....xvi
- Figure 3. A Samian ware plate base with maker's mould stamp (NESTOR FE[C] = Nestor made this. (© RAMM). ..... xvii
- Figure 4. A coin of the Emperor Claudius celebrating the conquest of Britain. Left (obverse): the head of Claudius with his Imperial titles. Right (reverse): victorious cavalry and infantry troops atop a triumphal arch inscribed DE BRITANN. (© The Trustees of the British Museum). ..... xviii
- Figure 5. Distinctive Roman 'herring-bone' walling at the base of the rear of the Roman wall, Northernhay Gardens, Exeter. 2m scale. Photo: John Pamment Salvatore ..... 2
- Figure 6. Lady Aileen Fox in a Roman military period ditch at the South Gate 1964. (© RAMM). ..... 3
- Figure 7. View of the 1972 excavation of the Roman military bathhouse from the Cathedral roof. Photo by Rob Turner (© RAMM). Note the car-park still in operation..... 6
- Figure 8. John Collis at the Goldsmith Street site, Guildhall, 1971. (© RAMM). ..... 7
- Figure 9. Mike Griffiths excavating a Saxon 'charcoal burial' (which contained a gold ring) at the St Mary Major excavation, 1971. (© RAMM). ..... 8
- Figure 10. Chris Henderson on site in wet conditions at Goldsmith Street 1971.(© RAMM)..... 9
- Figure 11. Paul Bidwell on site at St Mary Major in 1971 or 1972. (© RAMM). ..... 9
- Figure 12. The heavily disturbed and fragmented walls of a Late Roman town house at the Guildhall site of Trichay Street 1972. 2m scales. (© RAMM). ..... 11
- Figure 13. Left: the Roman post-trench building technique drawn by J.R.L. Thorpe. Right: a Roman post-trench with surviving waterlogged posts - 30cm scale. (© RAMM). .... 12
- Figure 14. Section through Late Roman archaeological deposits at Goldsmith Street. At the base is the light-coloured natural clay of the Roman ground surface. Above

	this are the pitched stones of a Roman floor foundation followed by occupation deposits; all then sealed by demolition layers. 1m scale. (© RAMM). ....	14
Figure 15.	The public look on whilst excavation takes place in front of the Cathedral's West Front. (© RAMM).....	15
Figure 16.	Front page of the Exeter Express and Echo (9 <sup>th</sup> July 1971). ....	15
Figure 17.	Paul Bidwell (back row, centre) and the St Mary Major digging crew 1972. Photo by Rob Turner. (© RAMM). ....	16
Figure 18.	Unit diggers from the Guildhall sites at the medieval Exe Bridge in 1974. Photo by Nigel Cheffers-Heard. (© RAMM).....	17
Figure 19.	Aerial reconstruction of Lake Farm fortress in Dorset based upon geophysical survey results. (© David John and Bournemouth University). ....	21
Figure 20.	The Fosse Way and Roman roads in Somerset and East Devon (after Toller 2014). Redrawn by David Gould.....	21
Figure 21.	The part-excavated and part-plotted defences of a large marching camp at Trerank, Cornwall. (© Sean Taylor CAU, Cornwall Council). ....	24
Figure 22.	Imaginative drawing of an eight-man legionary tent group ( <i>contubernium</i> ) breaking camp. (© akg-images/Peter Connolly). ....	25
Figure 23.	Illustration depicting the segmented armour ( <i>lorica segmentata</i> ) of a Roman legionary. (© RAMM). ....	26
Figure 24.	Aerial photo of Exeter showing the approximate line of the fortress defences in blue and the later town wall circuit in red. (© Frances Griffith Devon County Council). Additions by David Gould. ....	29
Figure 25.	An artist's impression of military surveyors ( <i>agrimensores</i> ) at work (author's collection). ....	30
Figure 26.	The Latin terminology employed for Roman fort and fortress plans. Drawn by David Gould.....	31
Figure 27.	The revised 'blueprint plan' of the fortress (by Bidwell and Gould) after Henderson. Scale 1:2500. Drawn by David Gould. Cohort blocks are marked A-J.....	32
Figure 28.	The V-shaped defensive ditch of the legionary fortress exposed in section at Mermaid Yard, 1978. 2m scale. (© RAMM).....	34
Figure 29.	Aerial view of the crop marks and features marking two successive auxiliary forts at Cullompton, Devon. The rounded corners of the smaller inner fort's double-ditch defences and its gateway entrances are clearly seen. Photo by F.M. Griffith. (© Devon County Council).....	34
Figure 30.	Plan of the legionary and later town defences at Rack Street, 1974-78. Drawn by David Gould. (© Cotswold Archaeology). ....	35
Figure 31.	Plan of the fortress features exposed at the Friernhay Street excavation of 1981. Redrawn by David Gould. (© RAMM).....	36
Figure 32.	Evidence of the log corduroy at the base of the legionary rampart at Friernhay Street. 2m scale. (© RAMM).....	37
Figure 33.	Interval tower post-pit (half-sectioned to show position of the post). Friernhay Street. 20cm scale. (© RAMM).....	38
Figure 34.	Top: Roadworks trench which exposed the north-western corner of the fortress defences at the corner of Upper Paul Street and Gandy Street. On the left of the	

	Museum side entrance is Neil Holbrook. Bottom: by coincidence, the course the outer lip of the ditch matches the run of kerb stones. 2m scale. (© RAMM). ....	39
Figure 35.	Imaginative reconstruction of the east gateway of the Neronian fortress at Usk, Wales. Drawing by Martin Dugdale (© W.H. Manning, University of Wales Press). .	41
Figure 36.	Theoretical plan of an Exeter legionary cohort block by C.G. Henderson. Scale in Roman feet ( <i>pes Monetalis</i> ). (© RAMM). ....	42
Figure 37.	Plan of the cohort barracks 2 and 3 (and the <i>immunes</i> barrack to their rear) at Goldsmith Street 1971. Drawn by David Gould. (© Cotswold Archaeology) .....	43
Figure 38.	Left: plan of the post-trench barrack remains recorded in Cohort Block G at the Bartholomew Street East site. Right: an excavator stands in each of the rear four <i>contubernia</i> of Barrack Block 2. (© RAMM). ....	44
Figure 39.	Cut away drawing of a barrack to reveal the rooms of the <i>contubernia</i> . (© akg-images /Peter Connolly). ....	45
Figure 40.	Replica shield ( <i>scutum</i> ) of the type used by legionaries. Note that the shield has seen 'action' with the boss of the shield having been used in attack. (Photo John Pamment Salvatore). ....	45
Figure 41.*	Left: a Samian cup base with the graffito of <i>L IVLI IPPONIA</i> : Restored as the property of LUCIUS JULIUS HIPPONICUS. (© RAMM).....	46
Figure 42.	Re-enactment group from <i>Legio Secunda Augusta</i> (UK) and <i>Legio Secunda Augusta</i> (Netherlands). They are portraying legionary soldiers of the mid-to-late 1st century AD. (author's collection). ....	46
Figure 43.	Deep post-trench of the outer wall of the aisled hall ( <i>fabrica</i> ) at Trichay Street 1972. 30cm scale. (© RAMM). ....	47
Figure 44.	The excavated interior of the aisled hall of the <i>fabrica</i> with its twined internal post-pits marked with red spots. Looking south-east. 2m scale. (© RAMM).....	47
Figure 45.	Conjectural reconstruction drawing of the aisled hall ( <i>fabrica</i> ) at Exeter. Drawn by Roger Oram for Paul Bidwell. (© RAMM). Note the twinned post-pits for roof supports.....	48
Figure 46.*	Top: an iron dagger sheath found near the <i>fabrica</i> at Trichay Street, 5cm scale. Bottom: a reproduction sheath and dagger ( <i>pugio</i> ) on display at the RAMM, Exeter. (© RAMM). ....	49
Figure 47.	Detailed plan of the suspected <i>immunes</i> barrack at the Goldsmith Street site 1972. (© RAMM). Redrawn by David Gould.....	50
Figure 48.	Plan of the excavated remains of the bathhouse in relation to the Cathedral. (© ECC.).....	52
Figure 49.	The <i>caldarium</i> (hot room) of the legionary bathhouse looking south-east. The tile stacks of the below-floor hypocaust system are revealed, The massive walls of the later basilica overlay them. 2m scale. (© RAMM). ....	53
Figure 50.	Rows of tile stacks ( <i>pilae</i> ) which supported the floor ( <i>suspensura</i> ) of the <i>caldarium</i> . 30cm scale. (© RAMM). ....	53
Figure 51.	One of the arches which allowed a restricted flow of hot air from the hot room ( <i>caldarium</i> ) to circulate through to the warm room ( <i>tepidarium</i> ). (© RAMM).....	54
Figure 52.	Detail of the south-west furnace flue which fed hot air to circulate beneath the floor of the <i>caldarium</i> . It also heated a hot water boiler mounted above it. 2m scale. (© RAMM). ....	54

Figure 53.	Conjectural reconstruction drawing of the south-west furnace house of the <i>caldarium</i> . Drawn by Eric W. Haddon. (© RAMM).....	55
Figure 54.	Architectural reconstruction drawing of the bathhouse as envisaged by C.G. Henderson. Dimensions are in Roman feet ( <i>pes Monetalis</i> ). Drawn by T. Ives (© RAMM).....	56
Figure 55.	A cut-away model of the bathhouse <i>caldarium</i> by Eric W. Haddon. (© RAMM).....	57
Figure 56.*	Purbeck standing marble basin ( <i>labra</i> ) rim from the Exeter bathhouse (top left) plus complete examples from Pompeii and Herculaneum. (© RAMM and John Allan).....	58
Figure 57.*	Fragment of polychrome mosaic from the legionary bathhouse. (© RAMM).....	58
Figure 58.*	Box tile, employed in heating the walls of the bathhouse. 5cm scale. (© RAMM)...	58
Figure 59.	Roman roofing tiles shown in the arrangement in which they would have been fitted on the bathhouse roof (Wikimedia Commons, photo: Immanuel Giel).....	59
Figure 60.*	An antefix of the type found at the bathhouse. It depicts what appears to be a female face derived from classical <i>gorgoneia</i> . This example from the St Loye's site is blackened by wood smoke from its likely proximity to a furnace vent or chimney at roof level. 10cm scale. (© RAMM).....	59
Figure 61.	Imaginative illustration of the construction of a legionary timber barrack (foreground) and the headquarters building ( <i>principia</i> ) behind. The panels of the <i>principia</i> are being rendered with plaster (© akg-images/Peter Connolly).....	60
Figure 62.*	A <i>pila</i> tile with an alphabet graffito inscribed before final firing. 10cm scale. (© RAMM).....	62
Figure 63.*	Dolphin <i>antefixa</i> from the same mould recovered at both Exeter and Caerleon. Left: fragments from the Exeter bathhouse. Right: replica from Caerleon (© RAMM).....	63
Figure 64.	The Caerleon gravestone of 100-year-old veteran Julius Valens of <i>Legio II Augusta</i> . His wife Secundina and his and son Martinus set it up (author's collection).....	63
Figure 65.	An architectural 'skeleton' view of the bathhouse against a 1970s backdrop gives some idea of scale. Only the Cathedral is an appreciably larger building. (© RAMM).....	67
Figure 66.	A Roman road with parallel side ditches at Middledown, Bow, Devon, revealed as a cropmark on a satellite photo (image reproduced from Google Earth Pro 2011 by S. Kaye).....	68
Figure 67.	A stone-built barrack of <i>Legio II Augusta</i> at the Caerleon legionary fortress in Wales. (© Nigel Mykura and licenced for reuse under cc-by-sa/2.0).....	69
Figure 68.	Roman military-period sites in the vicinity of the legionary fortress. (© Stephen Kaye).....	72
Figure 69.	The location of the <i>canabae</i> sites immediately outside the south-east gate of the fortress. Drawn by Tony Ives (© ECC).....	73
Figure 70.	Buildings recorded in the upper compound of the <i>canabae</i> . Drawn by Tony Ives (© ECC).....	75
Figure 71.	The development of the south-west corner of the lower compound at the Lower Coombe Street site. Drawn by Tony Ives. (© ECC). Re-drawn by David Gould. ....	77
Figure 72.	Plan of the Roman military-period civilian settlement ( <i>vicus</i> ) at the former St Loye's College on Topsham Road. Drawn by Tony Ives. (© ECC). Re-drawn by David Gould.....	78

Figure 73.	A satellite image of the St Loye's site under excavation in 2010. The Burnthouse Lane Housing Estate is seen top right.(image: Bing Maps /Microsoft/Digital Globe).....	79
Figure 74.	Plan of a Late Iron Age enclosure (shown in green) at the St Loye's site overlain by Roman buildings. An earlier Iron Age enclosure is shown in red. (© ECC).....	80
Figure 75.	The Late Iron Age enclosure ditch at the St Loye's site infilled with Roman material. following its abandonment. 2m scales. (© ECC).....	81
Figure 76.	Types of imported Gaulish and Lyon pottery found at the St Loye's settlement. (© Charlotte Coles).....	81
Figure 77.	Roman buildings at St Loye's including an aisled hall and a probable accommodation building. Drawn by Tony Ives. (© ECC).....	82
Figure 78.	High-level photograph of the aisled hall at the St Loye's settlement site Taken in summer, the deep shadows accentuate the depth of the foundations required for a building of this size. (© Jon Short, Aerialimage Highmast Photography and ECC).....	78
Figure 79.	Plan of the aisled hall ( <i>fabrica</i> ) at the Exeter fortress (left) and the aisled hall building recorded at St Loye's (right) drawn to the same scale. Drawn by Tony Ives. (© ECC).....	83
Figure 80.*	An amphora of the type which arrived in significant numbers at the St Loye's site.(© RAMM).....	84
Figure 81.	Top: the parallel double-ditch defences at St Loye's seen in section following excavation. (© ECC). Right: the author 'trapped' with a 2m scale in a Punic ditch at Mermaid Yard, 1978. (© RAMM).....	85
Figure 82.	Excavation plan of Roman military-period open-ended strip buildings and later Roman features at the Aldi site, Topsham. (© Cotswold Archaeology).....	87
Figure 83.	Top: the suggested northernmost limits for both barge-quay and sea-port locations on the River Exe estuary (© Stephen Kaye). Bottom: Aerial view of the estuary showing known and suspected Roman sites of the mid-first century AD...	89
Figure 84.*	Top: fragments of an imported glass beaker of the first century depicting a chariot race between Crescens and Pyramus, Found at Topsham. Bottom: drawing as reconstructed from known examples. (© RAMM).....	90
Figure 85.	Left: detail of the prow of a 25m long, second century Roman river barge on display at the Museum Castellum Hoge Woerd, Holland. Right: a model of a Roman river barge of the same period. Photos: John Pamment Salvatore.....	91
Figure 86.	Imaginative illustration of a loading quay of the late-first century on the Corbulo Canal at <i>Forum Hadriani</i> (Voorburg-Arentsburg) in the Netherlands. If it existed, then a mid-first century AD barge-quay at Topsham may have looked similar. Illustration by Mikko Kriek. Copyright: Driessen and Besselsen.....	92
Figure 87.*	Fortress Ware jars (left) and a locally produced flagon (right). (© RAMM).....	93
Figure 88.*	A carrot amphora from the fortress <i>canabae</i> . A type often used for the importation of fruits, such as dates, from the Eastern Mediterranean (© RAMM).....	93
Figure 89.	The Punic ditch at the St Loye's site showing the backfilled rampart material which appears light yellow due to the decayed organic content of the original turf blocks. 2m scale. Photo: John Pamment Salvatore .....	95
Figure 90.	Location of sites immediately outside of the fortress defences. (© Cotswold Archaeology). Re-drawn by David Gould.....	96

Figure 91.	The defences of a possible fort site at Princesshay 2005. Top: photo of the interval tower post-pits; the position of the posts are marked with red dots 2m scales. Bottom: plan of the defensive ditches (II and III) and the interval towers (© ECC). .....	97
Figure 92.	The legionary standards of <i>Legio XX</i> and <i>Legio XIV</i> (both carrying post-Boudican battle honours) and the standard of <i>Legio II Augusta</i> (author's collection).....	100
Figure 93.	Archaeological evidence of fire-ravaged buildings at Colchester destroyed by Boudica (author's collection). .....	102
Figure 94.	Detail of the defences and features at the south-west corner of the Lower Coombe Street site. Lower Compound of the <i>canabae</i> . Drawn by Tony Ives. (© ECC). .....	103
Figure 95.	Top: V-shaped defensive ditch at Lower Coombe Street with 2m scale. Bottom: section drawings of the rampart, ditch, and palisade trench. (© ECC). .....	104
Figure 96.	The defensive (Punic) ditch of the early town at Rack Street in 1977. 2m scale. (© RAMM).....	109
Figure 97.	Plan of the post-AD 75 ovens behind the rampart at Friernhay Street. (© ECC). ...	110
Figure 98.	The plan of the early town. Re-drawn by David Gould. ....	111
Figure 99.	The Exeter Guildhall celebrated 1900 years of the city (AD 80-1980). With legionary re-enactors from left, Oly Martin, Kevin Mills, and Kevin Orton (author's collection). .....	112
Figure 100.	Plan of the basilica walls and steps (brown) shown overlaying the <i>caldarium</i> of the bathhouse. The original bathhouse walls are in blue (some were retained for the basilica building) (© ECC). Inset (top left) shows schematic version with the 'new' basilica walls shown in orange and bathhouse walls in red. (© RAMM) .....	114
Figure 101.	Plan of the basilica, forum and the external market place. (© RAMM). .....	115
Figure 102.	The steps leading from the forum into the basilica. 30cm scale. (© RAMM). Note the <i>pilae</i> tiles of the demolished bathhouse below the lowest step.....	116
Figure 103.	The remains of wooden posts which supported a bridge to carry the aqueduct launder where it crossed the partially infilled ditch of the town defences.1m scale. (© RAMM). .....	117
Figure 104.	An <i>opus signinum</i> (mortar) floor within a timber building of the early town in <i>Insula IV</i> at the Trichay Street site. 2m scale. (© RAMM). .....	117
Figure 105.	Pipe-clay statuette of the goddess Venus probably from a household shrine. Late first-early second century AD. (© RAMM). .....	118
Figure 106.	The plan of the later town. Re-drawn by David Gould.....	120
Figure 107.	Excavation at North Gate, Paul Street showing the original town rampart at the base of the sequence (with 2m scale) and the later (c. AD 200) stone wall (on the left) and its accompanying raised bank. 2m scale. (© RAMM). .....	121
Figure 108.	Roman City Wall at Quay Lane. Roman facework of volcanic blocks to full height on the original plinth. Later works have reduced the original ground level leaving the plinth exposed; this was underpinned in the 19 <sup>th</sup> century with rough stonework including Breccia blocks (© ECC). .....	123
Figure 109.	A conjectural reconstruction drawing of the early third century South Gate according to C.G. Henderson. Drawn by Piran Bishop. (© RAMM). .....	123
Figure 110.	Top: exposed foundations of the western tower of the South Gate with 25cm scale. (© RAMM). Bottom: drone image of the same tower marked out by zig-zag tiles in South Street. (© Jonathan Newell). .....	124

Figure 111. Town house mosaic of the late-third or early-fourth century subsided into the earlier legionary fortress ditch at St Catherine’s Almshouses. (© RAMM). .....	126
Figure 112. An oven of the late-third to early-fourth century in a bakehouse building at Rack Street. 1m scale. (© RAMM).....	127
Figure 113.*A Christian Chi-Rho symbol incised onto a pot sherd (probably of the fourth century). Found in South Street by Lady Fox. (© RAMM). .....	128
Figure 114. Plan of the Late-Roman townhouse, <i>Insula IV</i> , Trichay Street. Drawn by David Gould. (© Cotswold Archaeology). .....	129
Figure 115.*Sculptured marble head of a man. Stylistically of late-first century date it may have been curated as a memorial bust set up in a private house. (© RAMM).....	130
Figure 116. Imaginative drawing of a mid-fourth century mother and daughter spinning wool at an Exeter town house. (© Graham Sumner).....	130
Figure 117. A plan of the stone buildings (including a bakehouse) flanking a Late Roman street at the Rack Street site. Drawn by David Gould. (© Cotswold Archaeology). .....	131
Figure 118. Late Roman street at Mermaid Yard 1978. Full width cut by later features. 2m scales. (© RAMM). .....	132
Figure 119. Imaginative view of the City of Exeter as it may have looked <i>circa</i> AD 350. (© RAMM). Volcanic stone for the city’s buildings was quarried from the Rougemont quarries (shown top and right of centre on the image). .....	133
Figure 120. Top: photo (looking south) of the masonry aisled building at Wessex Close, Topsham with 2m scales. Bottom: plan of the same building. (© AC Archaeology).....	134
Figure 121. The foundations of a Roman town house wall survived beneath the medieval Cathedral cloister walls. The medieval wall rides up over the Roman wall on a different alignment. 0.5m scale. (© AC Archaeology) .....	138
Figure 122. The Spire of the demolished St Mary Major Church retained on Cathedral Close and located above the Roman bathhouse and basilica remains. Photo: John Pamment Salvatore.....	141





## Author's Note

In the Autumn of 2022, a chance conversation with Roger White, senior lecturer in archaeology at the University of Birmingham, was followed by discussions with David Breeze at the Roman Limes (Frontiers) Congress in Nijmegen Holland. I was subsequently offered the chance to write this book on Roman Exeter for the Archaeopress Roman sites series. Given my 50-year association with the archaeology of Roman Exeter I had no hesitation in accepting and am most grateful for the opportunity.

I arrived in Exeter from London in 1972, intending only a short stay whilst awaiting my first archaeological 'digging' post, a summer season at Dewlish Roman villa in the neighbouring county of Dorset. However, quite unexpectedly there arose the prospect of joining excavations in the city centre being carried out by the Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit. Initially signing up for six weeks, this fortuitous decision proved to be life-changing as I was very rapidly and expertly tutored in the techniques of urban multi-period open-area excavation by the late Christopher 'Chris' Henderson. I went on to stay in Exeter for 10 years beyond those first six weeks, during which I participated in numerous archaeological investigations within the city, many of which have provided the foundations for this book.

The arrival of qualified archaeologists at Exeter in the 1970s saw the development of innovative archaeological techniques which paved the way for a major breakthrough in the understanding of the origins of the city as a Roman military foundation. This book illustrates how the remarkable archaeological exposures from those early years of intense investigation built up a picture of

the evolution of Roman Exeter, which was hitherto completely hidden from view. The archaeological work of the last decades of the 20th century was followed by the further discoveries and research of the first two decades of the 21st. This allows the story of Roman Exeter, from its beginnings until its ultimate demise, to be told with much greater confidence than at any time previously. The account which follows draws upon a vast amount of existing literature, all of which is listed in the section marked Further Reading at the end of the book.

It is my earnest hope that the book will be well received, both by the citizens of Exeter and by those beyond, interested in the story of a legionary garrison fortress that rapidly evolved into a Roman city on the very western edge of the Roman Empire.

John Pamment Salvatore  
*Isca Dumnoniorum*  
MMXXIII

## General Notes

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### Note on the orientation of the fortress and town gates

The Roman city of Exeter has its major street axes set out not in accordance with the cardinal points of the compass but approximately NE to SW and NW to SE. However, the city gates on all four sides of the town wall have, since time immemorial, been referred to respectively, as the North Gate, South Gate, East Gate and West Gate, and these names, still in everyday usage, are retained throughout this book. This ‘constraint’ does not apply to the gates of the earlier legionary fortress, which are described and shown with their correct geographical orientation (see Figure 1).

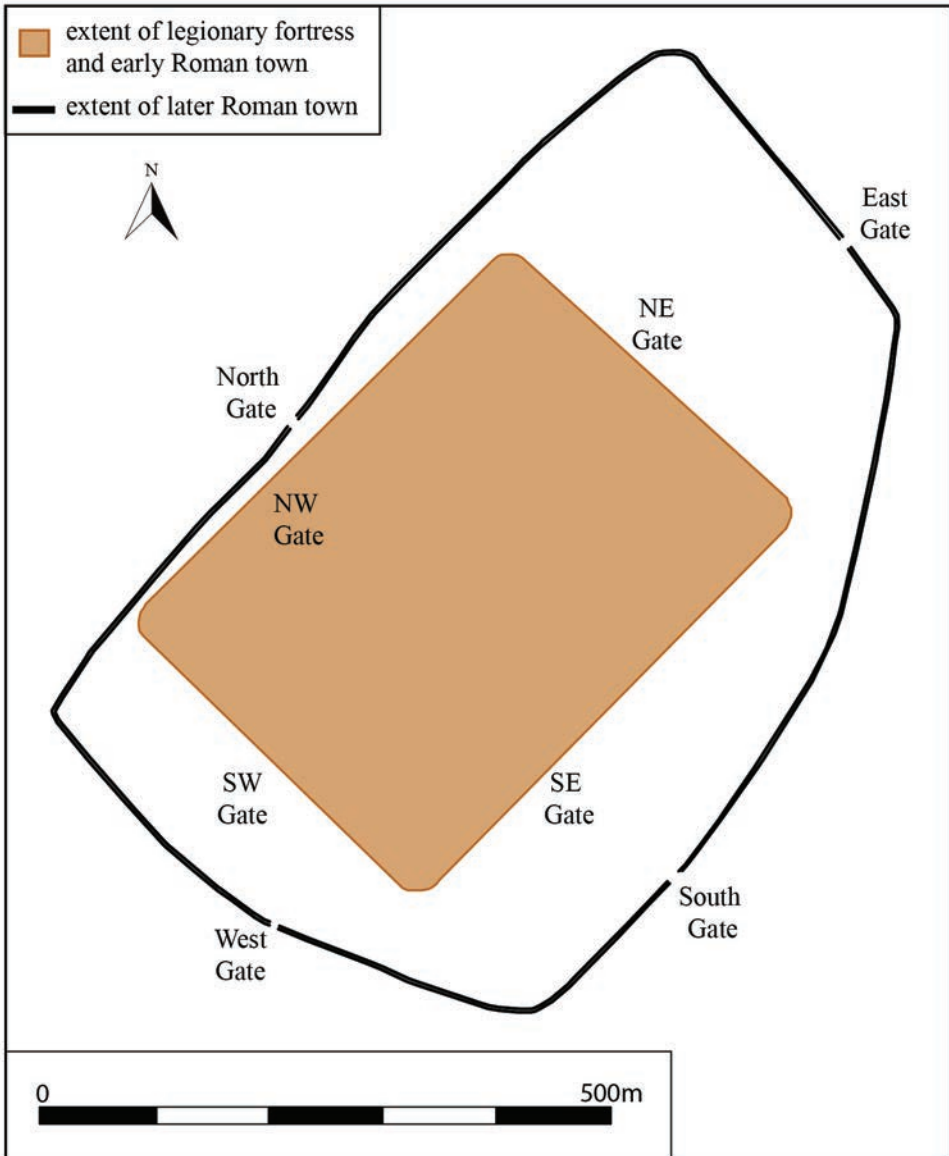


Figure 1. The gates of the fortress and the town (location and orientation). Drawn by David Gould

**Note on the dating of archaeological material from Exeter and the published source material.**

The archaeology of historic cities is usually described as being multi-period and deeply stratified. This is true of Exeter where the Roman levels in the city centre may be found below medieval and post-medieval deposits sometimes

3m or more below the modern ground surface. The archaeological deposits often comprise of successive layers of building debris and discarded rubbish. Cities which have been continuously occupied for hundreds or even thousands of years will accumulate sometimes significant depths of successive building remains on the same site. Due to the labour involved, and before the advent of earth moving machines, re-building would often see the demolition of the old followed by construction of the new without any large-scale clearance having taken place. Likewise, before relatively modern, and organised waste disposal, domestic rubbish was often discarded into the nearest redundant ditch, well, or pit. These rubbish deposits may contain material which can assist in the dating of the sequence when recovered during controlled archaeological excavation.

The dating of archaeological deposits from Exeter relies on two main sources, coin loss and pottery evidence. The reliability of coins and pottery as dating evidence varies considerably for the Roman occupation of Exeter - which broadly spans the period from the mid-first century AD until the last decades of the fourth. Pottery, particularly *terra sigillata* (or Samian ware as it is commonly known), is useful for establishing a chronology for the first few hundred years of Roman occupation. Samian is a high-quality, fine table ware which arrived in Britain in huge quantities following the Roman invasion of AD 43 and was in common usage by the Roman army and amongst the civilian Romano-British inhabitants in Romanised areas of Britain. The ware was mass produced in central and southern Gaul (modern France). A dish, bowl, or cup in Samian ware could be produced quickly by putting the initially wheel-thrown clay into a pre-prepared mould where the decoration had been applied in relief. The firing process produces the appearance of a high, shiny red gloss. Samian ware found in excavation at Exeter after nearly 2,000 years in the ground, can have the appearance of having been newly made (Figure 2).

It is often the case that a mould-maker's name will be stamped on the base of Samian vessels and sometimes those of individual potters. Furthermore, each mould-maker or potter would have had a working life. This allows pieces to be relatively closely dated, providing a chronology for other finds. For example, it will be self-evident that stamped Samian ware found damaged within the burnt destruction layers at Colchester, resulting from the sacking of the town during the revolt of Boudica in AD 60-61, must have been made before that date. The name stamp on the bottom of the Samian plate from Exeter shown in Figure 3 reads NESTORFE[C] (which may be read as *Nestor fe[cit]* = Nestor made this). A study of this mould-maker's stamp by Brenda Dickinson has produced an estimated period of production between c. AD 45-65. At Exeter, the ability to obtain close dating from Samian ware becomes more difficult in the final decades of the second century, whilst the supply to the city appears to



Figure 2. Roman Samian ware pottery. (© RAMM)

dry up in the early third century. Exeter is fortunate in that the Roman finds, including the pottery and coins recovered from all sources up until 1980, have been published by Neil Holbrook and Paul Bidwell as an Exeter Archaeological Report (1991, Vol. 4). It was supplemented the following year by a journal publication which took the study forward to cover the years 1980 to 1990.

Coins can offer good dating evidence given that they carry information about the emperor depicted, his current term of office, and when and where the coin was minted. Sometimes a known historical event is commemorated. For example, the coin of the Emperor Claudius seen in Figure 4 celebrates the capture of Britain (DE BRITANN inscribed on a triumphal arch) which means the coin must have been minted after the invasion of AD 43. In fact, the inscription around the head of Claudius tells the specialist that the coin was minted in Rome in AD 46-47.

The account of Roman Exeter which follows draws upon a vast amount of existing literature. All published source material, both ancient and modern, is listed in the section marked Further Reading at the end of the book.



Figure 3. A Samian ware plate base with maker's mould stamp (NESTOR FE[C] = Nestor made this. (© RAMM)