

NORFOLK'S FIRST TOWN
A DRAFT PROPOSAL FOR NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT
CAISTOR ST. EDMUND

1. *Venta Icenorum*– a brief summary
2. Research history
3. The objectives of a new research project
 - i) *The town*
 - ii) *The regional context*
 - iii) *The national and international context*
4. Research methods
 - i) *Geophysical survey*
 - ii) *Environmental survey*
 - iii) *GIS-based desktop assessment*
 - iv) *Field survey*
 - v) *Excavation*
5. Interpretation and dissemination

Introduction

This document represents a draft proposal for new archaeological research at Caistor St Edmund in Norfolk, which is the site of the Roman town of *Venta Icenorum*. The site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument owned by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust and managed by South Norfolk District Council. In 1995 a Joint Advisory Board was established in order to set and implement a strategy for the development of the site. The Board has representatives from the Norfolk Archaeological Trust, South Norfolk District Council, Norfolk County Council, Caistor St Edmund Parish Council, The Parochial Church Council and Norfolk Museums Service. The research would be carried out under the directorship of the writer (working under the aegis of the University of Nottingham where he will shortly take up a post as Lecturer in Roman Archaeology) in collaboration with the Norfolk Archaeological Trust, Norfolk Museums Service and the Joint Advisory Board.

1. *Venta Icenorum* – a brief summary

The Roman town of *Venta Icenorum* (literally market-place of the Iceni) is situated to the south of the city of Norwich, close to the confluence of the Tas, Yare and Wensum rivers. It is generally thought that the town was established in the aftermath of the Boudiccan revolt of AD 61, as the Roman provincial government took full control of the land of the Iceni, who had previously been a client-tribe of Rome. The name *Venta Icenorum* is preserved in the 3rd-century document known as the Antonine Itinerary (Iter V *AI* 474 6; Iter IX *AI* 479 10), although Ptolemy (II 3.11) also refers to *Venta* in the 2nd century AD.

The origins of the town may lie in a military base that probably dates to the period immediately following the revolt. It is likely that this base was placed on the site of an earlier Iron Age settlement, although this continues to be source of debate. A street plan was laid out perhaps in the late 1st century AD, and public buildings including a forum and basilica were erected during the 2nd century AD (Frere 1971). The wall circuit, which remains the site's most visible feature, was probably built in the 3rd century (Davies 1992; Frere 2005), and enclosed a smaller area than that which was covered by the original street plan.

The fate of *Venta Icenorum* following the end of formal Roman rule in Britain in the 5th century is unclear, although the discovery of significant Anglo-Saxon cemeteries to the north, south-east and west of the town, together with concentrations of 7th and 8th century material to the west of the Tas, is certainly indicative of continued occupation of the area. It has been hypothesised that the site of *Venta Icenorum* continued to function as a centre of trade and exchange into the 8th century (Penn 2000).

2. Research history

The site of Caistor has been identified with the *Venta Icenorum* of the Antonine Itineraries since the 16th century (Davies 2001: 5). Archaeological interest in the site, however, really began in 1928, when a remarkable vertical air photograph was taken over Caistor. This image clearly showed the outlines of streets and buildings as a series of parch marks against the darker grass that covered the site. The discovery occasioned considerable excitement and an excavation committee was subsequently

formed by the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society. The excavation was placed under the control of Donald Atkinson who carried out excavations of the forum, a bath complex, the south gate, a house, and two temples between 1929 and 1935. These excavations unfortunately remained largely unpublished during Atkinson's lifetime, although a painstaking study of his records eventually resulted in partial publication of his work (Frere 1971; 2005).

The 1930s excavations also included work in the vicinity of the site, resulting in the discovery of an important early Anglo-Saxon cemetery on the high ground to the south east (Myres and Green 1973), together with other Roman remains. A similar cemetery at Markshall to the west of the River Tas was apparently destroyed in the 19th century (Myres and Green 1973). Excavations have also been conducted on other outlying sites, in particular that of a major temple some 1km to the north-east (Gurney 1986).

The street plan of the Roman town was further clarified by subsequent campaigns of aerial photography by the University of Cambridge in 1959 and 1960, which also resulted in the discovery of the amphitheatre. This record has been augmented by further campaigns of aerial photography by Norfolk Museums and Archaeological Service. More recent work to the north of the town, in advance of the A47 Southern Bypass, revealed two Iron Age settlements (Ashwin and Bates 2000) and a significant Middle Saxon cemetery at Harford Farm (Penn 2000).

Following the acquisition of the extra-mural area of the site by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust, metal detector surveys and field walking were carried out to the north, south and west of the site (Percival 1996; Bellinger and Sims 1996). Notably this work revealed concentrations of Iron Age material around the north-west corner of the town and Middle Saxon material to the west of the Tas.

3. The aims of a new research project

The research objectives outlined in this section have been developed in the context of the ALGAO Eastern Counties Research Agenda and Strategy (Brown and Glazebrook 2000). They encompass (i) research objectives specific to the town of *Venta Icenorum* itself; (ii) research aimed at establishing a multi-period regional context for the town; (iii) research objectives that examine the town and its region within the context of national and international debates regarding the Roman town and the role of urban centres in the complex relationship between conquerors and conquered that is sometimes defined as "Romanization".

These objectives clearly overlap and should therefore be addressed as far as possible within the context of a unified research design.

i) The town

The research briefly outlined in Section 2 has resulted in an extensive body of data relating to *Venta Icenorum* and its surroundings. However, our knowledge of the town and its hinterland remains very limited, partly because of the nature of the early excavations and their publication. Concluding his publication of Atkinson's work, Frere highlighted the need for high quality stratigraphic excavations to clarify the results of the earlier research (Frere 2005: 326). The need for further research at Caistor itself was also noted in the ALGAO East Research Framework for the Eastern

Counties (Goings 1997: 35). Certainly, in comparison with Silchester and Wroxeter (the only other major Roman towns in Britain that are unencumbered by later urban development) our knowledge of Caistor is very limited. The proposed project would aim to address four principal issues within the town and its immediate environs.

1. The origins of the site

Was the Roman town established on a new site or on a previously occupied Iron Age centre? Much of the evidence points to the latter, but the nature and extent of this site remains to be demonstrated. The possible presence of a military base as a precursor of the town (suggested by triple ditches to the south and west and finds of early Roman military equipment) also requires investigation.

2. The development of the town in the later 1st and 2nd century.

Our understanding of the early Roman town is largely based on aerial photographs which demonstrate the presence of a street grid thought to be laid out in the later 1st century. However, the forum excavated by Atkinson apparently dates to the second half of the 2nd century, although it is possible that the masonry structures revealed in the excavations replaced wooden predecessors. The later history of the forum, which includes two episodes of destruction by fire in the 2nd century (for which the evidence is inconclusive), remains elusive. The nature of occupation in the other *insulae* (where little is apparent from the aerial photographs) is also unclear. We do not know, therefore, to what extent the rest of the town was ever fully occupied or what forms that occupation took.

3. The nature of the late Roman town

The town of the 3rd century and later is also little understood. In particular the precise date of the defensive wall has not been established, although Frere's analysis of the Atkinson archive and available parallels suggest a date of AD 275-80 (Frere 2005). Shortly after this date the forum seems to have been rebuilt, its predecessor having been completely destroyed or demolished. The presence of glass working furnaces within the earlier buildings of insula IX from c. AD 300, however, shows that the use of urban space was changing during the 4th century (as is apparent from other towns in Britain and Europe). The extent to which the walled settlement of the 4th century continued to be a monumental town requires clarification.

4. The end of the town and the nature of occupation in the post-Roman period.

Numismatic evidence shows that Caistor survived in some form into the 5th century, while significant quantities of supposedly unstratified late Roman material was found in the upper levels of the Atkinson trenches (Frere 1971: 13). Furthermore, the Early-Middle Saxon cemeteries that have been identified to the north-west, north and east suggest that occupation of the area continued until as late as the 8th century. The location and extent of this later occupation, however, is unknown, as is the question of whether occupation continued within the walled area itself. Nonetheless, the evidence could suggest that the end of Roman life at the site may have been less sudden than is often believed. There is thus a significant opportunity to investigate post-Roman life at the town (in an area that apparently saw significant Anglo-Saxon settlement).

ii) The regional context

In the Roman world a town and its territory were considered as indivisible parts of the same entity. Therefore an attempt to address the *lacunae* in our understanding of

Caistor has much wider implications for research within the region. In particular the impact of the town's foundation on settlement patterns within the Tas valley remains little understood, and the region was identified in the ALGAO East Research Agenda as a key area for future research on the late Iron Age in the Eastern Counties (Bryant 2000: 17). Going and Plouviez (2000: 19) also highlight the fact that there has never been a field survey project within the Eastern Counties that "has taken a Roman urban settlement as its defining feature".

The establishment of *Venta Icenorum* within the Tas valley is likely to have had a significant impact on regional patterns of settlement and land-use. Indeed the marked lack of Romano-British sites noted in the watching briefs and excavation in advance of the A47 southern bypass may be important in this respect, although the apparent decline of activity in the area before the late Iron Age means that we should be wary of any simple relationship between the establishment of the town and changes in settlement (Ashwin 2000: 241). It has, however, been suggested that the region to the south of Caistor was the subject of a programme of Roman land division (centuriation) (Peterson 1988; 1993), with all the implications that this holds for pre-existing settlement patterns and structures of land-ownership. It is therefore important that any project includes a strategy for the investigation of the Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman landscape in the vicinity of Caistor.

The local and regional environmental context of Caistor will have had considerable influence on the town and its inhabitants, yet key aspects remain little understood. Of particular importance in this respect is the extent to which the Tas was navigable during, before and after the Roman period. In the 18th century, John Kirkpatrick recorded "ringbolts in the walls [of the town], whereto ships were fastened" (cit. Davies 2001: 5) and it is widely held that the town was accessible to maritime trade. Indeed the concentration of Middle Saxon coins in the area to the west of the town could suggest that this continued to be the case until at least the 8th century. It is thus important to establish the morphology of the river channel in the vicinity of the town and further afield, and to establish a chronology for the changes that occurred within the river that eventually resulted in the narrow channel that flanks the site today. Equally, a programme of environmental sampling in the area of the River Tas is likely to yield significant information relating to past environments and past agricultural regimes.

iii) The national and international context

The creation of a common elite identity that transcended geographical and political boundaries was, in many ways, the Roman Empire's most enduring and successful achievement. The towns played an essential role in this identity. Their public spaces formed an acceptable context for displays of elite status through conspicuous expenditure on buildings, and aggrandisement of one's town or city became an essential practice for those seeking public office. The urban form, moreover, was fundamental to the Roman world view. In contrast with the Greeks, who viewed the *polis* as a body of citizens rather than a collection of buildings, the Romans tended to characterise the town as the sum of its physical attributes. A town, according to writers like Pausanias, could scarce be counted as such if it possessed "no state buildings, no training-ground, no theatre, and no market square" (Pausanias X, 4). It was urban life (and the symbiotic relationship between the town and its agricultural

hinterland) that for writers like Pausanias and Strabo separated Rome from the barbarians who lived beyond its frontiers.

The expansion of Roman rule to the north of the Alps brought the Romans into contact with areas where urban life (at least in a classical Mediterranean form) was previously unknown. As a result, the introduction of towns into areas such as Britain has been seen as a key element of the much debated process that is often referred to as “Romanization” in which it is suggested that subject populations either willingly embraced or had thrust upon them a set of cultural values and material culture that can be termed “Roman”. The extent to which the towns were part of this process has been the subject of considerable debate (e.g. the papers in Fentress 2000). It is apparent, however, that the urban ideals present in literature in which these “colonies seem to be, in a manner of speaking, small representations and images [of the Roman people]” (Aulus Gellius) covered a myriad of local variation, rather than constituting evidence for the spread of uniform urban centres.

A well-defined project at *Venta Icenorum* could contribute significantly to the debate regarding the expansion of Roman-style urban centres and the ideological and functional role that these towns fulfilled for their inhabitants and those who lived in their vicinity, however “Roman” (or otherwise) they considered themselves to be. Furthermore, it is often suggested that much of East Anglia was less “Romanized” than the southern and central areas of Britain and it is certainly true that the settlement types and material culture associated with Roman rule in Britain are found less frequently in Norfolk and Suffolk than they are elsewhere. It is therefore important that this is explored within the context of the only major Roman town in the area. A better understanding of the nature and chronology of occupation at Caistor is vital if we are to explore the penetration of *romanitas* into East Anglia and the extent to which the local aristocracy adopted the common elite identity that was the hallmark of the Roman Empire.

4. Research methods

It is proposed to approach (and refine) these questions through a two-stage project. The first stage will take the form of an extensive evaluation of the resource, which will inform the structure and methodologies of the second stage. The evaluation would be largely non-intrusive and would ideally include the following components:

i) Geophysical survey

Caistor and its immediate surroundings have never been the subject of significant geophysical survey, although UEA’s School of Environmental Sciences has conducted some exploratory work in the area of the amphitheatre. Consequently geophysical survey of the entire town must be considered a priority. This should cover all areas shown to be of archaeological significance in the aerial photographs of the site and its environs. Although this represents a substantial area, geophysics will be a cost-effective way of establishing the extent and nature of the sub-surface remains. It will be particularly important in the *insulae* that appear “empty” in the aerial photographs and in the areas beyond the walls that have produced significant quantities of metal detector finds. The survey will also provide data that will inform subsequent conservation strategies for the archaeological zone including the extension of the scheduled area which at present only covers the walled town. It is important to

note, however, that in isolation geophysical survey will not provide data regarding the chronology of sub-surface remains.

ii) Environmental survey

Caistor is a site that has great potential to provide significant data relating to past environments. Of particular importance is the area of the Tas immediately to the west of the town, which is likely to produce waterlogged deposits with all the implications that this has for the preservation of environmental indicators. As noted above, one of the aims of the project should also be the recovery of data relating to the course(s) and form of the river channel itself over time. While it is obviously paramount to gain information relating to the Roman period and the immediate pre- and post-Roman periods, any environmental work should also include earlier and later periods within its aims and remit.

It is therefore proposed that a series of cores should be taken to the west of the town (the location and number of which remain to be determined), which will allow the profiling of deposits across the river channel. This will also determine the extent to which useful environmental information survives in this area and will thus condition future approaches to environmental survey within the project.

iii) GIS-based desktop assessment

Any new project at Caistor should involve the collation of all spatially definable archaeological data within a GIS platform. This should encompass the hinterland of the town within a defined area and include all SMR data (initially within certain chronological and practical parameters), together with data derived from the Portable Antiquities Scheme and that deriving from aerial photographs. This last data set is currently being digitised within the context of the National Mapping Programme.

As well as constituting an important research tool which in particular will inform the field survey strategy (see below) this GIS platform will provide a means of structuring digital data generated by the project. This should ultimately form an on-line resource within Norfolk County Council's Department of Cultural Services, accessed via NOAH (Norfolk Online Access to Heritage) (Gurney 2004). In order to gain the maximum "added value" from this data, this system should be developed from the outset in full consultation with all parties engaged with the historic environment within Norfolk.

iv) Field survey

As noted above it is axiomatic that any Roman town can only be understood in the context of its hinterland. Consequently research within the town must be accompanied by a programme of field survey informed by the desk-top assessment described above. The strategy and extent of a field survey will be determined to some extent by this assessment but at present I would suggest that a combination of intensive survey of sites known from crop-marks or concentrations of metal detector finds and extensive survey across selected transects of land would yield the most information. The scope of the survey should encompass the Tas valley as far as is possible although the size of the area involved will inevitably mean that the intensity of survey will vary. Some consideration should also be given to the eastern extent of the survey area in order to include areas that are away from the immediate line of the Roman road that runs south to Colchester (approximately along the line of the present A140).

Although the research aims of the project as a whole are focused on the late Iron Age, Roman and Early – Middle Saxon periods, the field survey should be diachronic in order to maximise the archaeological information generated and the benefit to the wider archaeological community (Wade and Brown 2000: 52).

v) *Excavation*

Caistor is a scheduled ancient monument and the greater part of the site is now unthreatened by either development or agriculture, although illegal metal detecting remains a problem throughout the region. Consequently any new excavation should be within the context of clearly defined research objectives and carried out to rigorously high standards. That said, a number of the key issues relating to the site's occupation history (in particular those outlined in section 3.i) will ultimately only be resolved through excavation (a factor that will be recognised by research funding councils). It is also of note that high quality and pioneering excavation programmes at Silchester and Wroxeter (which are the closest parallels to Caistor in terms of the survival of archaeological deposits) have contributed significantly to a wider understanding of Roman Britain. In view of this it is proposed that the evaluation phase of the project should involve some limited excavation. This could include:

1. Re-examination of some of the earlier trenches in order to record surviving stratigraphy and to test the structural sequences extrapolated by Frere from the Atkinson records.
2. Trial trenches to test the archaeological sequence elsewhere in the town (outside and within the walls) and to provide control data to aid the processing and interpretation of the results of the geophysics.

At this stage it is envisaged that all trenches would be back-filled upon completion.

5. Interpretation and dissemination

Any archaeological project is only as good as the ways in which its results are made available to a wide range of audiences. Consequently widespread dissemination of the results should be considered at the project's outset. As well as the more traditional routes of archaeological publication (peer-reviewed journals, conferences, edited volumes etc), given the significant local and regional interest that the project is likely to generate, all available forms of popular media should be employed and encouraged as a matter of course. In particular, considerable attention should be given to developing on-line access to the project and its results. This in turn should provide access to (and be accessible from) the NOAH portal.

The project also has significant implications for the future presentation and interpretation at the site itself. New on-site interpretation was envisaged in three of the four schemes presented in the Strategic Leisure public consultation document (presented to the Joint Advisory Board in 2002). At present the existing guidebook (Davies 2001), site panels and Norfolk Archaeological Trust website constitute an accurate and informative presentation of the available information regarding the site. Although the media through which this existing information is presented could be enhanced and expanded, any significant development of the site in terms of public access and dissemination would ideally require a greater degree of knowledge about

the site itself. Consequently a new project could (and should) be used to drive new interpretative initiatives, and thus enhance public enjoyment of what is one of East Anglia's most important ancient monuments.

William Bowden – University of Reading (16.01.06)

Bibliography

Ashwin, T. 2000. "Synthesis" in Ashwin and Bates 2000: 230-242.

Ashwin, T. and S. Bates 2000. "Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass 1989-91. Part I: Excavations at Bixley, Caistor St Edmund and Trowse", *East Anglian Archaeology* 91.

Bellinger, R. and J. Sims 1996. "Caistor St Edmund Fieldwalking Project 1992-1994", *The Annual (Bulletin of the Norfolk Archaeological and Historical Research Group)* 5: 11-20

Brown, N. and J. Glazebrook 2000. *Research and Archaeology: A Framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research Agenda and Strategy* (EAA Occ. Pap. 8) (Norwich)

Bryant, S. 2000. "The Iron Age", in Brown and Glazebrook 2000: 14-17

Davies, J. A. 1992. "Excavations at the North Wall, Caistor St Edmund, 1987-89", *Norfolk Archaeology* 41: 325-337

Davies, J. A. 2001. *Venta Icenorum. Caistor St Edmund Roman Town* (Norwich)

Fentress, E. (ed.) 2000. *Romanization and the city: creations, transformations and failures*, (Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Volume 38) (Rhode Island)

Frere, S. S. 1971. "The Forum and baths at Caistor by Norwich", *Britannia* II: 1-26

Frere, S. S. 2005. "The south gate and defences of Venta Icenorum: Professor Atkinson's excavations, 1930 and 1934", *Britannia* XXXVI: 311-327

Going, C. J. 1997. "Roman", in J. Glazebrook (ed.) *Research and Archaeology: A Framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource Assessment* (EAA Occ. Pap. 1) (Norwich): 35-45

Going, C. J. and J. Plouviez 2000. "Roman" in Brown and Glazebrook 2000: 19-22.

Gurney, D. A. 1986. "A Romano-Celtic Temple Site at Caistor St Edmund", in A. K. Gregory and D. A. Gurney, "Excavations at Thornham, Warham, Wighton and Caistor St Edmund", *East Anglian Archaeology* 30: 37-58

Gurney, D. A. 2004. "Norfolk on-line access to cultural and historic environment resources", in *East of England Archaeological Research Framework Review* <http://www.eaareports.demon.co.uk/index.html>

Myres, J. N. L. and E. B. Green 1973. *The Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of Caistor-by-Norwich and Markshall, Norfolk* (Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries 30) (London)

Penn, K. 2000. "Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass 1989-91. Part II: The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Harford Farm", *East Anglian Archaeology* 92.

Percival, S. A. 1996. "Caistor St Edmund Metal Detector Survey 1993", *The Annual (Bulletin of the Norfolk Archaeological and Historical Research Group)* 5: 21-3

Peterson, J. W. M. 1988. Roman cadastres in Britain: I - South Norfolk A, *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 14: 167-199.

Peterson, J. W. M. 1993. *Computer-aided investigation of ancient cadastres*. PhD Thesis. University of East Anglia.

Wade, K. and N. Brown 2000. "Research strategy", in Brown and Glazebrook 2000: 50-58.