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Verlamion and Verulamium

Modern St Albans was established around a thousand years ago, but another millenium before that the Roman town of Verulamium arose next to the river Ver, to the south-west of where the city centre now stands. Verulamium was not the first settlement on the site, but it stood for several centuries on Watling Street, one of the most important roads in Roman Britain, and became a key centre of Roman occupation and government, with a resident population estimated at around 5000 in the mid-second century CE.[1] The ruins of the town have carried both practical and symbolic significance in subsequent centuries. Medieval abbots quarried them for stone to build their abbey church; early modern antiquarians sombrely contrasted the 'ancient glory' and 'miserable desolation' of the Roman town as they faced their own age of political upheaval; and archaeological excavations in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have given Verulamium a prominent place in academic debates about the economy, society and government of Roman Britain.[2] Excavation has also drawn attention to even older settlements on the site, which have also left their mark on the landscape around St Albans. Full accounts have been written of the history of Verulamium, and this chapter only sketches its outline, as a prelude to the story of St Albans itself.[3]

New discoveries are continually adding to our knowledge and changing our understanding of the history of Verulamium. In the early 2000s, for example, a hitherto unknown villa was excavated at Turners Hall Farm, near Harpenden, and in 2012 a metal detectorist stumbled upon a significant hoard of gold coins near Sandridge, to the north of St Albans.[4] Meanwhile, excavations in London in the early 2010s brought to light a rare contemporaneous written reference to Verulamium, which has shed new light on aspects of its early history.[5] More important still, starting from 2013, a series of ongoing geophysical surveys has been carried out

Members of
the Community
Archaeology
Geophysics
Group undertake
a GPR survey in
Verulamium Park,
St Albans.
IMAGE COURTESY OF
KRIS LOCKYEAR.

by the Community Archaeology Geophysics Group (CAGG), involving volunteers from several community organisations.[6] These surveys use magnetometry, ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and earth resistance survey to explore what lies beneath the ground, and allow a much wider area to be explored than in a traditional archaeological excavation. Magnetometry is very good at detecting kilns, pits and ditches, while GPR and earth resistance surveys excel at identifying buildings and roads. The work of CAGG has revealed much of the layout of Verulamium and some surrounding areas, identifying some key features of the Roman town and suggesting some new interpretations of its archaeology and history. Further discoveries can be expected from geophysical surveys – and doubtless from excavations – in the future.

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The exact timing, nature and extent of human settlement in the area around modern St Albans is unclear, and likely to remain so. We know that there was some occupation of Hertfordshire in the late Stone Age, and there is evidence of farming in the Neolithic period (fourth millennium BCE) at, for example, Gorhambury and Colney Street.[7] In 2011–12 excavations near King Harry Lane, to the south of the city, uncovered pits from the late Bronze Age (*c.*1000 to *c.*700 BCE) or early Iron Age (*c.*800 to *c.*600

RIGHT: Mortimer
Wheeler and
others examining
pottery recovered
from Verulamium
during the
excavations of the
1930s.
IMAGE COURTESY OF
ST ALBANS MUSEUMS.

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BCE) containing burnt flint, and these finds are among a growing body of evidence of settlement in the archaeological record.[8] The middle Iron Age (*c.*400 to *c.*100 BCE) is also present, in the form of a curvilinear enclosure at Mayne Avenue, a site that – like many others in the county from this period – has also revealed evidence of later Iron Age occupation.[9] There was probably a network of routes through the landscape, connecting sites of habitation, agriculture and industry, from the late Iron Age onwards, if not earlier.[10] It was in the late Iron Age that the region's population seems to have expanded significantly and its distribution changed, giving rise to the early precursors of some modern towns and villages.

In the late Iron Age – probably in the last couple of decades BCE – a new settlement, now known as Verlamion, emerged near the site of modern St Albans. It comprised a series of zones delimited by ditches and banks, amounting to an area now estimated at around seven square kilometres.[11] Some of its remains lie in Prae Wood, to the west of the modern Bluehouse

Hill, where banks and ditches were excavated by Mortimer and Tessa Wheeler in the 1930s, alongside their more substantial investigations of the subsequent Roman town. At the time Mortimer Wheeler described what they found in Prae Wood, with considerable exaggeration, as 'relics of a city which was at one time no less than the metropolis of a considerable part of Britain'.[12] The Wheelers suggested that the ditches in the wood had been dug quickly, and were reinforced by palisades that may have had a defensive function; the ditches had been filled in with ash and pottery dating from the late first century BCE to around 40 CE, and subsequently sealed with a layer of Roman brick and pottery. There was evidence of textile and iron working, and some imported pottery from Italy, Gaul and Belgium, as well as locally produced imitations of inferior quality. Subsequent excavations by Sheppard Frere in the 1950s and 1960s revealed further traces of Verlamion in the Ver valley, to the south of which the later Roman town stood. The name of the settlement – which may be Roman in origin – is known from coins that were produced there, and may mean 'above the pool': there was a large fishpond on the other side of the river, which caused political controversy in the medieval period (see chapter 2).[13]

Verlamion has often been described as an *oppidum* (plural: *oppida*), a type of settlement that spread very quickly in the region in the late first century BCE and early first century CE. These settlements were once seen as proto-urban centres – and in parts of continental Europe this does seem to have been the case – but in southern Britain many *oppida* probably functioned more as meeting places. There is some evidence of habitation at Verlamion, as well as industrial activity and coin production, but it may have been equally or even more important as a centre of ritual activity. There are a number of known burial sites in and around the complex, and it seems likely that Verlamion was some kind of 'royal compound or palace site'.[14] It was one of six settlements in modern Hertfordshire that have some claim to be called *oppida*. There were others at Braughing and Baldock in the east of the county, and Braughing in particular may have sustained a more substantial population than Verlamion. *Oppida* have also been suggested at Welwyn and in the Bulbourne valley to the west of St Albans, and the Wheelers believed that there was one at Wheathampstead, though this has since been seen as a much less significant settlement.[15] Even among the examples in Hertfordshire, there was considerable variety of size and function among *oppida*, and it has recently been suggested that

'[t]he term "oppidum" no longer appears adequate, as they are all different'.[16] More specifically, Verlamion has been identified as a 'territorial' *oppidum*: that is, a site 'composed of large tracts of countryside partially defined by discontinuous lengths of linear earthworks'. It was not substantially protected by defences, as would be a hillfort or an 'enclosed' *oppidum*, but it was clearly a site of some importance.[17]

The development of *oppida* in southern Britain reflected political and economic changes in the late Iron Age. It appears that a more stratified society was developing in this period, with groups – sometimes referred to as 'tribes' – becoming unified under a version of 'kingship' that may have been influenced by developments elsewhere in the Roman empire.[18] Among them were the Catuvellauni, whose king or 'chief' Cassivellaunus was defeated in a battle by Julius Caesar when the latter invaded Britain in 55 and 54 BCE. Mortimer Wheeler was convinced that the site of this battle was Wheathampstead, but there is no supporting evidence for this, and another site – probably in Essex – is much more likely.[19] In any case, some time after this – under the leadership of either Tasciovanus (d. *c*.10 CE) or his successor Cunobelin (who ruled from *c*.10 to *c*.40 CE) – the Catuvellauni were united with another 'tribe', the Trinovantes, into a larger 'eastern' kingdom.[20] Tasciovanus and Cunobelin issued coins, including some that were produced at Verlamion, and their design often reflected continental influences, suggesting a deepening relationship, at least at the elite level, with the Roman empire. Such cultural exchanges may have been fostered by the practice of 'hostage'-taking, which is known to have been a strategy of Caesar and his successors. 'Hostages' may have travelled voluntarily to Rome – an 'empowering' experience rather than a 'restrictive' one – and become 'friendly kings' who subsequently paved the way for a relatively smooth Roman conquest of Britain in 43 CE.[21] Cunobelin, referred to by the Roman writer Suetonius as 'king of the Britons', certainly fostered trade and possibly diplomatic relationships with Rome.[22]

A key to the economic success of the *oppidum* at Verlamion lay in its geographical position, on an important trade route running across Hertfordshire from south-west to north-east. The area around Berkhamsted was fairly well populated, and iron was extracted and worked at Northchurch and Cow Roast on the Bulbourne river; at Welwyn there is evidence of a pottery industry; and Braughing was on a route that ran through Welwyn and Verlamion and then west to Cow Roast.[23]