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Amphitheatres on the fringe

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MICHAEL FULFORD, *THE SILCHESTER AMPHITHEATRE. EXCAVATIONS OF 1979-85* (Britannia Monograph Series no.10, London 1989). Pp. xxiv + 197, figs. 84, pls. 40. ISBN 0-907764126. £18.

Within the practical constraints of a 7-year training excavation, Fulford has done a remarkable job in disentangling the complicated architectural development of the Silchester amphitheatre, including its post-Roman history. He has also produced what must remain a model report for such buildings, incorporating stratigraphy, artefacts, architecture, environmental studies, and finds into an interlocking whole.¹ Fulford has made great efforts to ensure that the reader understands the nature and limitations of the evidence upon which conclusions are based. Where there is insufficient evidence for firm conclusions to be drawn, he usually elucidates the possible interpretations which the data might support and then gives his personal preference. Such personal interpretations based on his long experience at this site carry an authority which is hard to quantify but which must be given due weight.² His analysis and presentation of the archaeological evidence is judiciously fair and clear.

The excavation trenches were laid out in what has become a familiar strategy for British amphitheatres (e.g. Cirencester, Carmarthen and Maumbury Rings). The arena with its associated architectural features and the main entrances into it were the main focus; one substantial trench was driven through the west seating-bank and beyond to provide information about the *cavea* and the exterior of the monument. Fulford himself knows, however, that there is more that needs to be done.

PART 1: THE MAJOR PHASES OF THE SILCHESTER AMPHITHEATRE

1. Pre-amphitheatre occupation (Fulford fig.2)

Except in the driest conditions, the site must have been rather waterlogged with sluggish drainage towards the northeast where the ground level slopes down gently. The pollen analysis (pp.147-59) has shown that in pre-Roman and Roman times the landscape of Silchester (*Calleva*) was open with few trees. There was predominantly pasture with some hay meadow, arable land and heath. After they were built the seating-banks became prone to colonization by oak and fern — surely surprising for a public monument if it were in full-time use and carefully managed. The original ground surface beneath the amphitheatre was slightly higher beneath the middle and southern part of the west *cavea* and tailed

1 The specialist reports include coins (G. C. Boon), ceramics (J. Timby, J. Bird, B. M. Dickinson, P. Cannon), glass (D. Allen, J. Timby, M. Fulford), metal objects (M. Corney, M. Fulford, D. Richards), stone artefacts (M. Fulford, R. Bradley), building materials (J. Watson, B. Sellwood, M. Fulford, J. Timby), and particularly impressive reports on the animal bones (A. Grant), environmental pollen samples (A. van Scheepen), and the architectural reconstruction of the phases of the amphitheatre (N. Sunter).

The text is carefully edited and the plans, sections and plates are legible and clearly labelled. However it may be noted that fig.38 (the sections from the south entrance passage) is misplaced after fig.20 to face p.38, not p.68, as it should have been. This makes it difficult for the reader to cross-check stratigraphic references in the text. The excellent series of 4 plans (scale 1:150) at the end, one for each of the 4 main phases of the amphitheatre, could have been usefully complemented by a single plan with each phase represented in a different colour so as to give a better idea of the degree of overlap of the different phases. Alternatively, a series of transparent overlays in different monochrome patterns could have been used. But these options may have been ruled out in order to keep the price of the volume as reasonable as it is.

2 For example, see Fulford's treatment of one feature atop the *cavea* (F230) and another in the southern entrance-passageway (F24); they cannot be assigned a date but are considered as a possible rear retaining wall for the seating (p.16) or as a possible palisade associated with the mediaeval single-aisled hall within the arena (p.62). He then cites his reasons (pp.193-95) for preferring the latter interpretation.