

EXCAVATIONS AT MAGIOVINIUM, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, 1978-80

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Section 3 of 11:

EXCAVATIONS ON SITE 18

EASY ON-LINE ACCESS TO FIGURES AND PLATES:

This report runs to a total of 137 printed pages, which makes it too large for publication on-line as a single digital file. The report has therefore been split into eleven separate sections. Each can be downloaded separately and saved locally.

The report contains 56 drawings ('figures') and 12 photographs ('plates'). For ease of access these have all been saved into a single file titled 'Magiovinium – figures and plates'. The reader should open (or download) this file when reading any of the report's 11 sections. Individual illustrations referenced in the text can then be found by searching for 'Figure XX' or 'Plate XX', where 'XX' is the number of the figure or plate you wish to view.

The full details for academic source references given in the text can be found in the 11th and last section of the report: 'A bibliography of Magiovinium'.

Site 18

Site 18 ([Fig. 1](#)) is situated c.500 m north-west of Site 17, on land previously owned by Drop- short Farm, Excavations were first made there by others in 1975 and features found interpreted as sleeper beams, possibly belonging to a fort of the XIV Legion (see p. 4). This was a rash assessment considering that all the samian found, apart from a single sherd of Flavian date, was second century.

In 1977 a length of the easement was trial trenched for a distance of about 300 m but, as on Site 17, flooding was a serious problem and it was not possible to bottom features. When an attempt was made to bottom a pit by rapid machining the sides of the pit melted away as quicksand, The main feature is a Roman road with allotments on either side similar to those on Site 17, The archaeological story is also much the same but simpler—there is no evidence for occupation earlier than the Flavian period.

Summary of Phases

- I. Construction of the road and layout of allotment system.
2. Construction of huts over road

ditches. Phase 1

The Roman road runs on a north-south alignment ([Fig. 19](#)) and led directly south towards Dropshort Farm and presumably the main gate into Magiovinium. Its northern route is uncertain, possibly it linked with Harrold, Beds and eventually, perhaps, Irchester on the River Nene. It appeared as a distinct camber c.8 m wide defined on either side by shallow U-shaped ditches. It was built-up with deposits of fine gravel and had, on

later levels, a metalling of cobbles ([Pl. X](#)). The make-up was possibly taken from nearby because to the east and west were three large pits, that on the west (Section 119, [Fig. 20](#)) being c.8 m wide by at least 2 m deep, possibly quarries for the extraction of suitable hoggin. Trace of a fourth pit was found at c.530 m east by 50 m north (not shown on plan) with gullies associated with the allotments cutting across its fill. The pits therefore appear to be an early feature of the site but remained open as ponds or convenient places to dump rubbish for some considerable time.

Alongside the road, as at Watling Street, were traces of allotment defined by narrow gullies, some very regular and possibly timber-lined. The plots were c.20 m wide by possibly 60 m deep, the gullies draining into a deep ditch running parallel to the road. However, traces of intermediate gullies may indicate the depths of the plots to be 30 m—again a similar size and distribution to those on Site 17. A geophysical survey by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory {AML Report No. 3012) shows allotments south of the excavated area. Of significance, possibly, is that the present field system shares the same orientation as the Roman; perhaps the presence of these has influenced the later topography.

Phase 2

The road ditches were recut in the late first or early second century, but as on Site 17 were soon allowed to silt up, for they were never recut; they had horizons of occupation material sealing them, and contained an admixture of pottery up to the mid fourth century. These horizons were associated with hearths and limited



Plate X. Site 18. Surface of Roman road. View east. (Photo CEU)



Plate XI. Site 18. Burial pit 44. Publication Pot Nos. 370-2. (Photo CEU)

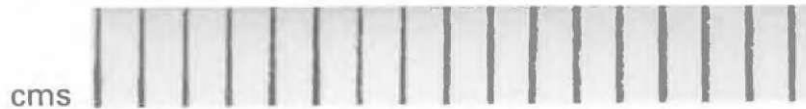


Plate XII. Site 17: (a) intaglio with parrot, small find No. 158 and (b) iron signet ring with cornelian intaglio portraying Ceres, small find No. 159. (Photos: (a) A. M. Laboratory, (b) Institute of Archaeology, Oxford)

MAGIOVINIUM Site 18

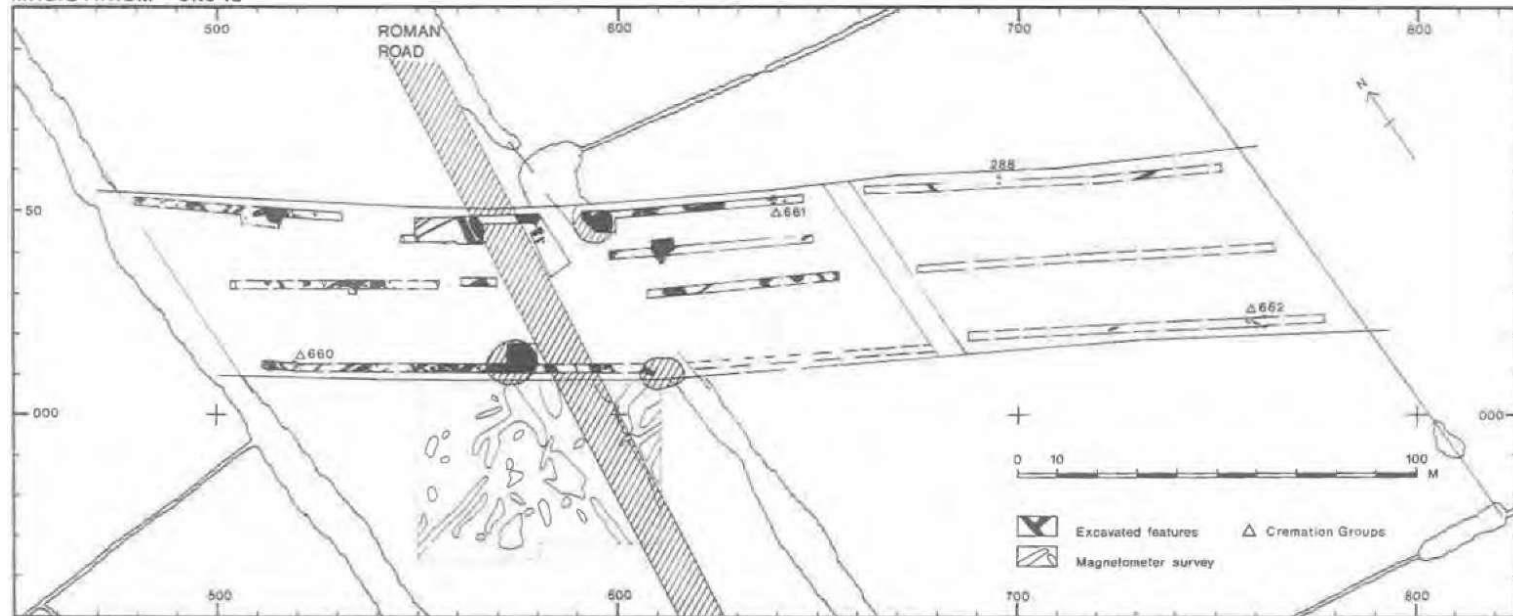
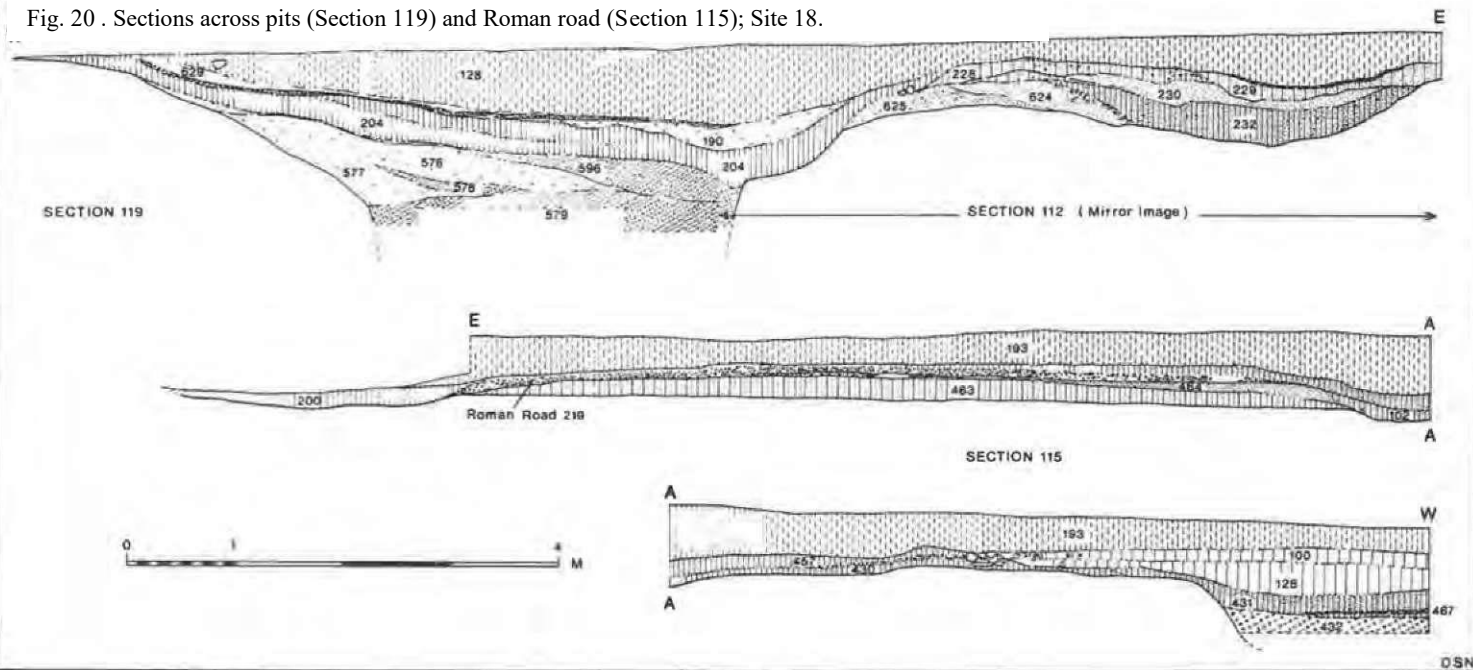


Fig. 19. Overall plan of features; Site 18. The route of the Roman road is shown hatched.

Fig. 20 . Sections across pits (Section 119) and Roman road (Section 115); Site 18.



660

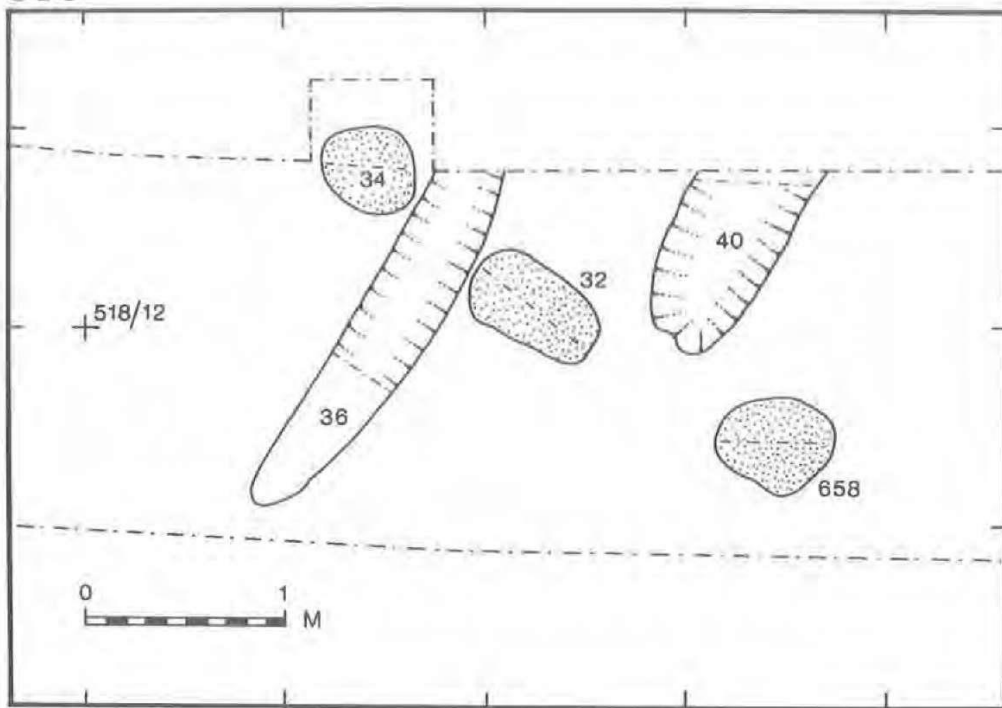


Fig. 21A. Cremation burials, Group 660; Site 18.

limited quantities of slag (but far less in quantity than Site 17) indicating industrial activity close by. Gully 395 situated at 558 m east by 47 m north cut the road ditch and contained a coin of Claudius II (AD 268-70).

Among the 2.8 kg of samples recovered from Site 18 were two basic types—smithing and fuel ash slags, often dribbles. There was a hearth bottom (No. 496) 10.5 cm in diameter. Among the small finds related to this activity was an iron object (Fig. 28, No. 104) identified as an unfinished hammer-adze. It was found in the upper levels of a filled-in quarry, located at £.575 m east by 12 m north.

To the rear of these properties, close to the 60 m field limit on both sides of the road, were four cremation groups perhaps representing separate family plots. The first (660, Fig. 21A), situated at c.520 m

east by 12 m north, had three pits, Nos. 32, 34 and 44, all with a cooking pot holding ashes. No. 32 had the base only of a cooking pot surviving (366, Fig. 47) but No. 34, apart from an urn (367), also had an ovoid beaker (368) and a samian cup from a Drag. 35 of Flavian date (pot 369). An analysis of the bones by Janet Henderson of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory has shown the burial to contain two cremations, that of an adult and a juvenile. In general however the sample sizes of the unburned bone were too small for detailed analysis. In addition to an urn (370), Pit 44 (PL XI) had a white-ware flagon (371) and a south Gaulish Drag. 18 dish (372) signed by the potter *Masculus* dated to the early second century. The next group, 661 (Fig. 21B), was situated on the opposite side of the Roman road at c.640 m east by 53 m north and appears to have had six burials, two of which were accidentally machined-out

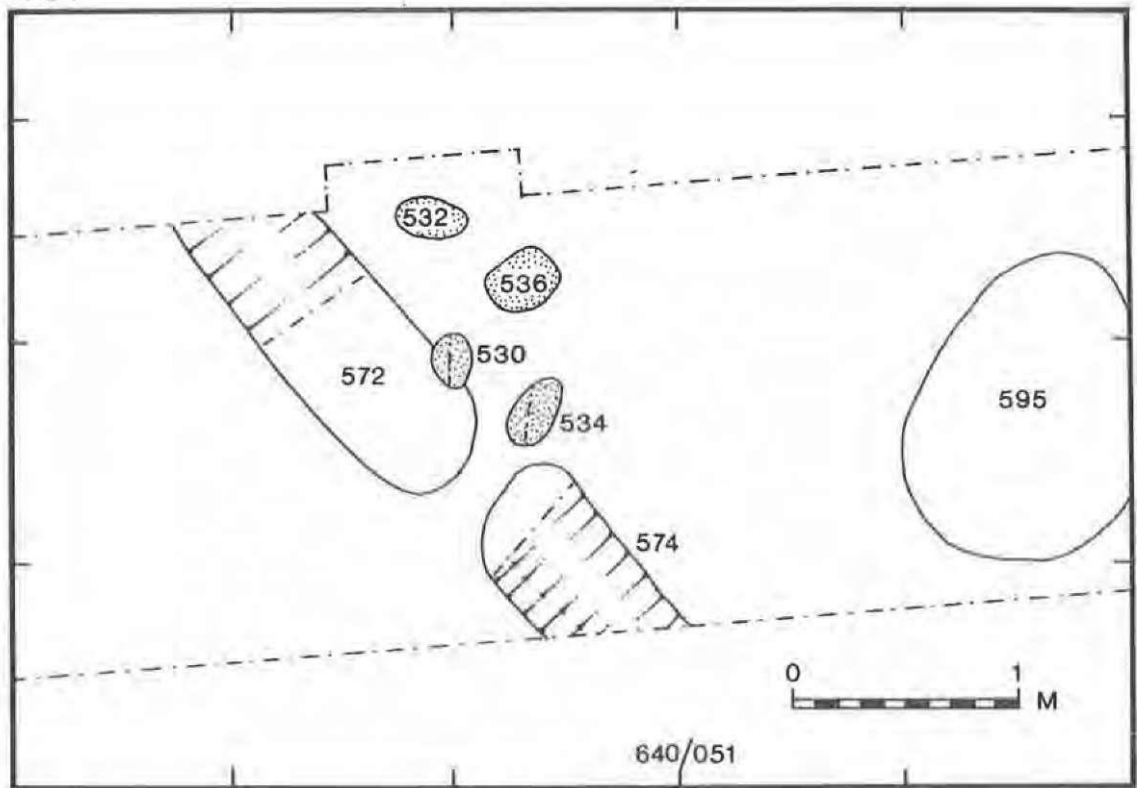


Fig. 21B. Cremation burials, Group 661; Site 18.

and their exact positions unfortunately unrecorded. Again, the ashes were contained in urns and accompanied by beakers and dishes (Fig. 47). Burial 530 was associated with an urn (373), a beaker (374), and a samian Drag. 36 dish (375) from central Gaul and dated to the Antonine period. The grave cut the filling of the allotment boundary ditch. Burial 532 had an urn (376) with a Trajanic south Gaulish Drag. 31 dish stamped Pater - clus. Grave 534 had a large urn only (378) and Grave 536 a large urn (379), a beaker (380) and a samian dish Drag. J8/31 (381) stamped Nicephor, dated c.ad 100-20, containing a mid first-century brooch (No. 14, Fig. 23).

Another group, 662, of 11 cremations (Fig. 21C) was found at 728 m east by 23 m north; and another single example

located at 695 m east by 57 m north. The ashes were not in urns nor accompanied by grave goods.

The coarse pottery and samian in each group appears to be consistent in date, yet the dates of the various graves range from Trajanic to Antonine; it is possible therefore that each group is a small family burial plot in use for some seventy years. Future excavations might reveal similar groups at the back of each allotment.

By contrast to Site 17, Site 18 produced a relatively higher proportion of fourth-century pottery, in particular from L492 and L505, the upper levels of Pit 491 situated at 651 m east by 41 m north. While there is a possibility that this represents rubbish being brought from the town for dumping into the hollows, the likelihood of fourth-century occupation

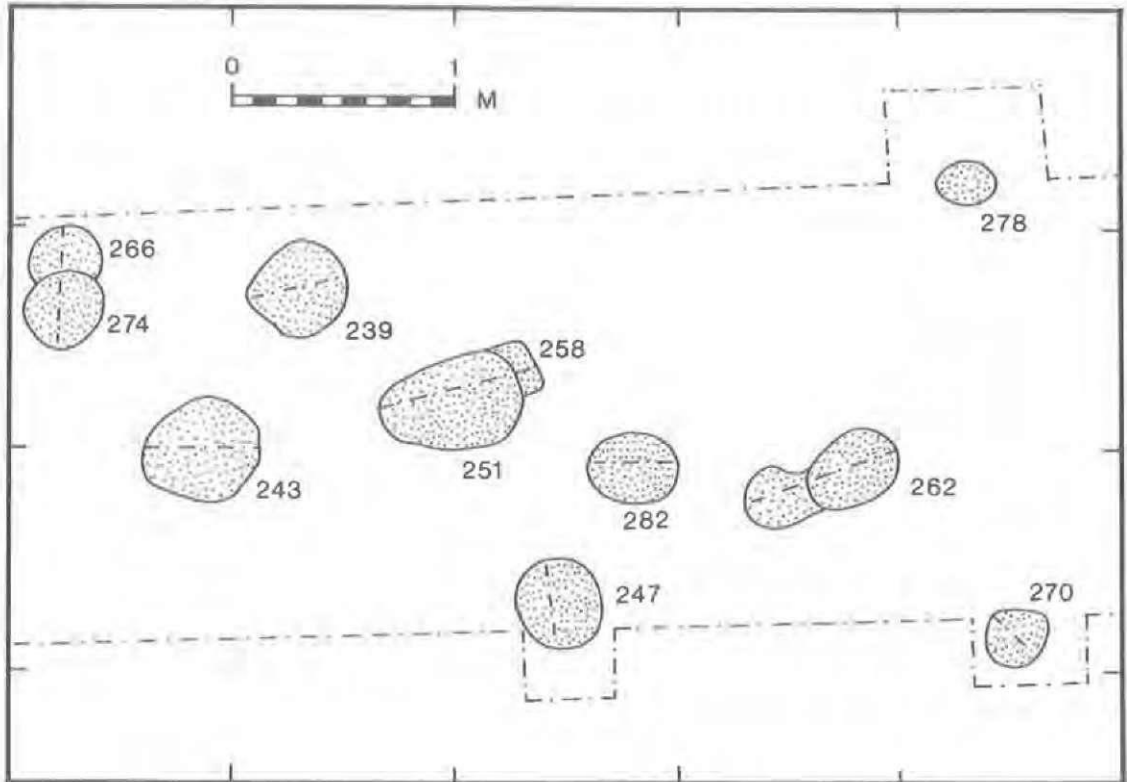


Fig. 21C. Cremation burials, Group 662; Site 18.

should not be dismissed, especially as horizons (for example L96/1G0) with third and fourth-century pottery were found along both sides of the road (but not, unfortunately, associated with obvious structures, apart from the occasional large stones which could have been pads for sleeper beams). If this is so, the structures were of the most ephemeral kind. However, the coins from Pit 491 are later than elsewhere and range up to AD 387-8, further evidence perhaps that the pit was being used as a dump for material from the actual town and therefore that the site itself was now abandoned.

General Discussion

The presence of native wares indicates pre-conquest occupation at Magiovinium, perhaps associated with a settlement or settlements alongside the River Ouzel. It may signify a movement into the valley

from the hill-fort at Danesborough situated to the north-east. Late Iron Age pottery production centres at Caldecote and Saffron Gardens, 2 km apart, on the opposite bank of the river, suggest that Iron Age settlement was extensive.

The Roman fort probably formed a bridgehead on the secured river bank as part of the north-west advance by XIV Legion. It is likely to have been quickly abandoned or reduced in strength, although the aerial photographs indicate a secondary phase, possibly a reconstruction related to the Boudiccan rebellion of AD 61-2.

It is significant that Watling Street is neither oriented on the fort nor with the agricultural plots east of the town. The explanation is that the road originally ran towards the fort in a more southerly

direction and that the agricultural plots were set out at right angles to it. However, Iron Age features might indicate that the orientation of the fort was partly dictated by the existing landscape. A realignment of Watling Street, bypassing the fort, took place c. AD 70; the new routes took the road across the existing agricultural plots,

As with many forts a *vicus* grew up close by, but it is questionable whether its focus was the fort itself. More probably, perhaps, the native British took advantage of the military and civilian trade which a river crossing would have generated. The result was a settlement situated closer to the river crossing than the fort; a settlement which gradually expanded along Watling Street with ribbon development stretching over 0.8 km south-east of the river. Indeed, Roman occupation found in the garden of Tylers by the writer on the western outskirts of Little Brickhill 1.2 km from the river points to considerable roadside trade.

River trade is possibly indicated by the movement of pottery from the kiln-sites at Harrold, Felmersham and Clapham, Beds. Although the River Ouzel follows a circuitous route from Magiovinium, and roads are far more direct, river traffic might explain the frequency of querns from Snettisham, Norfolk, which could have been transported via the River Ouse (for further comment related to pottery production and river transport see p. 95).

The field plots appear to have been laid out with a degree of regularity which raises the question as to whether their size is based on a standard unit of measurement. Two sizes of plot are present, the larger measuring c. 38 by 56 m and the smaller half the size, c. 19 by 56 m. When these areas are converted to square feet, 22,895 and 11,447 respectively, and further converted to Roman square feet, 23,810 and 11,905, we find that they approximate to a Roman *dextans* (24,000 Roman square feet) and a *quincunx* (12,000 Roman square feet), both described by Columella (Book

VI, 9-13). The *dextans* and *quincunx* represent respectively ten twelfths and five twelfths of the *iugerum* (28,800 Roman square feet). Attempts to make comparisons between the classical model and units of land in Roman Britain are fraught with difficulties, but it is interesting to note that field divisions based on 19 m have been noted at Towcester (C. Woodfield, pers. comm.). Whatever the measure, uniformity of plot size is evident. This pattern of development is typical of many towns which originated as forts. Typical too is that the construction of defences around Magiovinium truncated much of the peripheral settlement. Such fortifications are to be found around many small towns including nearby Towcester and are generally believed to have been the work of Albinus, who proclaimed himself Augustus in AD 196. However, the evidence from Towcester suggests the construction of defences c. AD 170-80 (C. Woodfield, pers. comm.). Although no excavations have been made on the defences of Magiovinium to suggest a similar date, the clearance of roadside settlements at the end of the second or beginning of the third century may suggest that the two events were linked. For lack of excavation within the town our knowledge of the defended area is pitiful—most chance finds coming from beyond the defences. The northern half of the town is under pasture, the southern arable, but here there is a marked lack of heavy building rubble (compared to many other sites of Roman buildings), merely the occasional fragment of worked ironstone. It is probable that this indicates that the buildings within the town were modest—nor were significant quantities of building stone found in the extra-mural areas. The picture which emerges is one of a very busy town, probably with a *mansio* or posting station, where the messengers of the Imperial post changed horses. The rest of the settlement is likely to have been seedy and relatively poor.

At Towcester, in contrast, a number of well-constructed masonry buildings are

known, one being situated beneath St Lawrence's church (C. Woodfield, pers. comm.). Architectural and sculptural fragments are also known (e.g. Woodfield 1978, 76, [Fig. 2](#)), including a stone head of an underworld goddess possibly from a funerary monument (Toynbee 1962, Pl. 52), which suggest considerable wealth and the presence of monumental buildings. The situation of Towcester on two roads, Watling Street and a main route leading south to Alchesler and Dorchester-on-Thames, may have brought increased trade and prosperity but other economic factors may be relevant. As already stated Towcester lies on the limestone bell, rich agricultural land which was exploited by a network of villas and country estates. It was a market for villa produce and a purveyor of supplies.

The closest known villas to Magiovinium are those at Newton Longville (SP 8431) and Bancroft, Milton Keynes (SP 827405), respectively 4.8 and 8.8 km from the town. However, these sites are both on the west side of the Ouzel and, even though poorer class settlements have been found, there are no known villas between Magiovinium and the villas along the Icknield Way following the north-facing slope of the Chilterns. Such sites, for example, include Totternhoe (Mathews 1963) and Ivinghoe, 16 and 21 km respectively. What is the reason for this dearth of villas? It may merely reflect lack of fieldwork but possibly the soils were less fertile and agriculture uneconomic. Large areas east of Magiovinium are heathlands which stretch from Heath and Reach in the south, northwards over much of the Woburn estate including Aspley Heath and Wavenden, Eastwards, along Watling Street the heath stretched for about 9 km. Although such areas were farmed in medieval times this type of soil was not favoured in the Roman period. A study of the distribution of villas elsewhere in Britain shows their marked absence on the heathlands of Berkshire and Surrey and, even where villas do exist, e.g, Rapsley, Surrey (Hanworth 1968), they are of a

poorer class and related to the production of tile.

Magiovinium, therefore, is unlikely to have been a market for villas and must have concentrated primarily on its *mansio* and transport- related trades,

Roman Watling Street, though presumably better metalled, was probably not unlike Daniel Defoe's description of the same stretch of road. He writes: 'On this road after you are passed Dunstable ... you enter the deep clays, which are so surprisingly soft that it is perfectly frightful to travellers ... indeed the great number of horses every year killed by the excess of labour in those heavy ways has been such a charge to the country, that new building of causeways, as the Romans did of old, seems to me to be a much easier expense' (Defoe 1738), Horses, would have rested and grazed in roadside plots while others ended their lives here worn out by toil.

This article continues in
[Section 4: Finds — The coins, brooches and copper alloy.](#)