

Anglo-Saxon, Medieval and Post-Medieval (Urban)

by Brian Ayers

I. Introduction

Archaeology in towns is a complex practice, a symbolic reflection of the diversity of the archaeological resource which is encountered in the urban environment. The potential wealth of the available data raises immediate problems of access, interpretation, synthesis and archiving for the archaeologist but these are problems which must be addressed within challenging political and economic contexts. Increasing pressure on resource availability for urban archaeological work is currently matched by a crisis of confidence within the discipline.

A symptom of this crisis is arguably the current emphasis being placed upon management of the urban archaeological resource, a way of demonstrating that the problems and potential of towns *are* being taken seriously but that actual intervention to advance knowledge cannot be justified without a greater understanding of existing datasets and the capabilities of their inter-relationships. It is indeed unfortunate that the successes of urban archaeology in the 1970s and 1980s have yet to be fully absorbed, the lack of much overall synthesis together with large quantities of archived material hampering a constructive way forward.

It is probable, of course, that the development of initiatives such as the compilation of Urban Archaeological Databases for larger towns and the Extensive Urban Survey for smaller towns will have a major impact upon the practice of urban archaeology. As more UADs reach the assessment stage (UAA), the criteria for Urban Archaeological Strategies (UAS) will themselves become more clear. Such criteria, however, cannot exist in an academic vacuum. The UAAs will assess existing knowledge but such assessment will require critical interpretation to ensure appropriate targeting of future data collection.

Such targeting is philosophically, and indeed politically, sound within an emerging culture of sustainability. There is, however, another advantage of the management approach for urban archaeologists in particular. The development of coherent strategies ought to enable such practitioners to escape the perverse straitjacket which currently binds them: a psychological straitjacket wherein the very wealth of material evidence available in towns (and the consequent resource implications of its study) enforces a process of denial. An understanding of the resource, allied to a critical agenda, will remove this psychosis, allowing urban archaeologists to exploit the potential of towns for the benefit of archaeology in general.

An articulated academic agenda is a key element in this process. It was argued in *the Resource Assessment* (Ayers 1997, 59) that 'towns are complex and diverse institutions with complex and diverse relationships with their hinterlands'. Towns are in fact even more significant than this. They embody a fundamental development in society: that point at which economic conditions dictate that communities can exist beyond self-subsistence, with

concomitant political, commercial and cultural consequences.

The phenomenon of urban development is therefore a universal one and its study has universal application. This study can also exist at a series of levels and, while it is convenient to draw an agenda from the broad headings adopted for the *Resource Assessment* (Demography; Social Organisation; Economy; Culture and Religion; Environment), the agenda must exist within a broader environment. The large questions of historical dynamics *can* be addressed by archaeological methodologies and should not be ignored; the towns of East Anglia are closely inter-related to their agrarian hinterland but they are and were also foci within a network of commercial and cultural contacts which extend to much of Europe and beyond, encompassing wider developments than mere topographic or economic growth. The urban motor has always accelerated change; a research agenda for urban archaeology ought therefore to accelerate a better understanding and application of the role of archaeology in the study of society.

II. Gaps in knowledge

John Schofield (1994, 195) has suggested that 'archaeological investigation and study of medieval towns should go through three consecutive stages ... data gathering, the construction of chronologies and typologies, and the study of archaeological evidence of specific activities and of groups which functioned within towns'. It can, and will, be argued that objectives for archaeological work in towns should be broader than this but it is salutary to reflect that, for many of the towns of the East Anglian region, even the first of Schofield's stages has been but barely initiated. Indeed, in Cambridgeshire, 'the level of excavation and recording in many centres has been minimal over the last three decades' (Sperry, pers. comm.), an observation that can be extended to the majority of the small towns of the region and even to some of the major centres — such as King's Lynn, where there has been relatively little work since that of Clarke and Carter (1977), Wisbech and Great Yarmouth.

An understanding of the available archaeological resource in towns is therefore a priority if meaningful decisions concerning research are to be drawn. In this context, the English Heritage initiatives concerning urban databases and assessments are most welcome (work is currently under way in Cambridge, Norwich and St Albans and should be followed soon by Colchester and Ipswich, see Appendix). Allied to this, a greater understanding of chronologies needs to be developed, an understanding which must be linked to work on archaeological typologies. East Anglia has a tradition of formative work on urban typologies (*e.g.* Jennings 1981; Margeson 1993) but this needs to be extended and, where necessary, chronologies should be re-examined (conquest period ceramic chronologies in Norwich are currently being questioned with potentially significant results for much of

the region). Within this context, the publication of material from Ipswich is of critical importance. Study of chronologies and typologies, linked to a greater awareness of the potential of the resource, will also allow a better understanding of the potential of given locations and deposits to address specific questions.

Schofield's third stage, that of examining evidence for activities and groups within towns, has probably received more attention across the region than the first two stages. This apparent paradox can be explained by the relative ease of defining research questions and designs for such urban issues. Investigation of dyeworking in Norwich (Carter and Roberts 1972), fishing in Great Yarmouth (Rogerson 1976) or the Dominican Friary in Ipswich (Youngs *et al.* 1986) could all be justified as increasing knowledge of specific areas while also contributing to an understanding of the first two stages. Importantly, however, each of these three projects was also conceived within a wider context: that of understanding the origins and development of the town itself.

This broader framework is one which has been addressed with considerable success in some urban centres (such as Norwich, Ipswich and Colchester) and with partial success in others (such as King's Lynn and Cambridge). In many towns, however, work has only just begun: important riverine or estuarine ports such as Ely, Wisbech, Great Yarmouth and Harwich all deserve much more intensive study while inland towns such as Huntingdon remain barely sampled. All such studies need to be undertaken within a context which explores urbanisation as a European phenomenon; this is particularly pertinent for East Anglia where examination of cross-cultural links and influences is potentially fruitful.

The complexity of towns as physical institutions requires careful examination. Recent work in Bury St Edmunds has demonstrated how great the potential still is for a clearer understanding of the proto-urban settlement which preceded the 11th-century abbey and planned town (Carr, pers. comm.). Similarly, careful analysis of the geographical situation and internal topography of a town such as Bungay (Penn, pers. comm.) can provide a framework for urban study upon which more detailed archaeological examination can be appended.

The 'development cycle' within towns needs to be explored. There has been considerable debate amongst historians concerning late medieval decline (*e.g.* Reynolds 1980; Dobson 1990), a perceived decline which is not necessarily always apparent in the archaeological record. Assumptions concerning urban growth in the 12th and 13th centuries could also be examined archaeologically while comparative work on specialised activities in towns may well reveal a more complex pattern of cyclical development and decline.

The role of towns within society is one which has yet to receive appropriate attention from urban archaeologists. The link between the town and its hinterland is clearly an area requiring study (Carver 1987 suggests a possible mechanism) and, once again, the English Heritage initiative concerning hinterlands is to be welcomed. The impact of towns upon hinterlands was dynamic and investigation should extend beyond mere questions of supply, distribution and victualling towards a greater understanding of the development of the society. The role and impact of small towns is of particular importance here

and use needs to be made of the opportunities presented by extensive urban surveys currently being initiated by English Heritage to ensure a more engaged and holistic approach to the problems and potential of these urban areas. The relationship between larger and smaller towns also needs to be explored, an exploration which should not only be intra-regional but which should also encompass the impact of London on towns in counties such as Hertfordshire and Essex. In addition, the hinterlands of many towns in the region included north-west Europe and this also needs to be a focus of research.

The influence of towns was recognised in 1993 by a working party of the Urban Research Committee of the Council for British Archaeology. This identified 'towns and innovation' as a major theme and concluded that towns assisted innovation in the following ways: as centres of information; as transmitters of innovation; as consumers of innovation; and as stimulators of innovation. There were five areas where innovation and towns could be studied:

- industrial and technological innovation
- economic innovation
- cultural innovation
- social innovation
- political innovation

A consistent theme in considering each of these areas is that of an inter-disciplinary approach, building upon the particular diversity of archaeological evidence in towns but also linking to economic and social development in the rural hinterland. It is here, at the point where towns impact upon society as a whole, that work to fill gaps in knowledge concerning raw data, the potential of the resource, chronologies and typologies, will have its most beneficial results.

III. Potential of resource

As stated above, (p.27) the potential of the resource has yet to be quantified although work is in progress across the region. There is much comparative study to undertake but it is likely that the urban archaeological assessments which will shortly start to emerge from the intensive and extensive urban surveys will provide considerable data for this purpose. Currently, however, in the absence of such objective information, a subjective assessment of potential must suffice.

Across East Anglia, the urban archaeological resource remains rich although everywhere it continues to be eroded. Not all of this resource is located within existing towns; there is considerable evidence emerging of early urban centres at places such as Burnham (Norfolk) and these need to be investigated where possible as they have considerable potential for increasing understanding of the development of society and the economy in the Middle Saxon period. Close interaction with the Committee for Research into the East Anglian Kingdom is clearly important. Allied to this, the publication of recovered material, particularly that from Ipswich, must be a priority. Syntheses are beginning to emerge (*e.g.* Ayers 1994; Crummy 1997) but more detailed work needs to be encouraged. There must be recognition that archaeological potential does not always reside in the soil; it can also rest in archives.

Of extant towns, the potential for a rapid growth in understanding remains still with the large towns. Not only do these frequently possess a large corpus of assessed data upon which to build but they often contain the best documentary evidence, the most appraised building stock and, not least, practitioners with considerable experience of the local area. The *Research Agenda* should foster this local experience; it is already possible to cite cases of information loss due to the application of inappropriate techniques by non-local organisations.

The potential of smaller towns must be realised as well. In particular it is likely that systematic study of groups of towns will bring beneficial results. The Fenland towns are a good example. Specifically excluded from the Fenland Survey, these towns nevertheless have much to contribute to a greater understanding of the economy of the Fenland basin. While estuarine locations such as Lynn and Wisbech were clearly ports of significance, examination of other towns such as Littleport and, importantly, Ely together with assessments of the ecclesiastical urban centres of Peterborough and, to a lesser extent, Crowland, Ramsey and, perhaps, Thorney should elucidate much concerning the role of towns in distribution and trade. There is much to be commended in an approach which seeks to undertake evaluation work in towns such as these, where there has been little or no recent development.

The role of the church in towns can be examined on both sides of the conquest. The case of Bury has already been mentioned (above, p.28) although that of Brandon should also be explored in a proto-urban context. Pre-conquest ecclesiastical study of an important centre such as Norwich still has much to do while the role of the church in post-conquest urban foundation — from Lynn to Yarmouth to Chelmsford — is frequently acknowledged but rarely examined in relation to the presumed demands of the church and any conflict which this may have had with developing urban concerns.

The commercial activity of towns in general retains considerable potential for exploration. In particular, deeply stratified deposits allied, where possible, to waterlogging remain an under-utilised resource which could transform current ideas with regard to exchange mechanisms and to the impact of towns upon their hinterlands. This impact may be greater than the immediate locality — the potential of urban archaeology to increase understanding of medieval society at a European level through the demonstration of economic and cultural links across considerable distances should not be underestimated.

Finally, the potential of the built environment in towns must be realised. Discoveries of medieval buildings or building elements continue to be made but the context of these buildings — streets, lanes, alleyways, property boundaries, parish boundaries, streams, neighbouring institutions — is itself an archaeological construct which needs careful record, assessment and prioritising. The importance of the archaeological study of buildings to an increased understanding of the urban resource cannot be over-emphasised; the opportunities presented by PPG15 too often remain to be realised and need to be exploited. Examination, assessment, synthesis and interpretation of the built environment will assist greatly in gaining a better understanding of the development of urban society. Urban archaeology, as much as any other archaeological

investigation, is a *social* discipline which cannot be undertaken in isolation from an awareness and, hopefully, understanding of society. Such a social awareness helps to define research themes.

IV. Research topics

Research needs to be undertaken within an awareness of developing concepts of the role of towns and the potential of towns to themselves elucidate wider themes. British archaeology has a strong tradition of fostering such an approach (*e.g.* Hodges 1982; Carver 1993), and recognition that archaeological endeavour ought to take place within a broader framework of academic enquiry will not only foster urban archaeology as a discipline, but enable it to engage more actively with others participating in urban research. It has been argued elsewhere that urban archaeology in East Anglia should be one which explores urban *processes* rather than mere elements of the urban fabric (Ayers 1993), asking the questions *why?* and *how?* The following themes are designed to illustrate how such a processual approach could be adopted for the towns of the region.

Demography

The *Resource Assessment* (p.59) indicated that little exploration has been made of the relationship of demographic indicators to settlement growth. It will remain difficult to appreciate fully the mechanics of urban development in the post-Roman period without a much greater understanding of the social and economic pressures which ensured the success of the urban idea. This is an area of research where a fusion of urban and rural research criteria is of paramount importance. The following are research areas where the acquisition of greater data, together with the adoption of sophisticated analytical techniques, would increase current understanding greatly:

- intensive study of settlement patterns through time
- spatial analysis of such settlement within a chronological framework
- quantification of population density and mobility
- definition of non-urban, proto-urban and urban settlement

Within towns themselves, the lack of information concerning population density and growth inhibits an understanding of urban development. This is particularly the case for the early period although the partiality of later documentation also renders an accurate assessment of urban potential and achievement difficult. Targeting of the following research areas would again increase both knowledge and understanding:

- assessment of populations and population structure through time
- comparison of population structures within towns and between towns
- correlation of population density with economic indicators for urban sustainability
- analysis of immigration and emigration as factors in urban development
- rural interaction and colonisation

Methodologies will clearly need to be developed to address some or all of these research questions and these



Plate VII Excavation of a complex of pits at the Millennium Library site, Norwich. (Photo: Jason Dawson, copyright Norfolk Archaeological Unit)

methodologies will need to engage with other studies. It is especially important that the wealth of historical data available for later medieval and post-medieval towns is complemented and, if necessary, challenged by archaeological research. Areas of such interaction should include:

- population growth and density
- the structure of urban populations
- mortality and population renewal
- demographic indicators such as housing and provisioning

Social organisation

Considerable work needs to be done in order to approach an understanding of the complexity of urban development. Once again, the inter-relationship with rural considerations is extremely important. The social determinants of growth are little understood. The role of institutions and powerful individuals at an early period is particularly hazy and research would benefit from:

- study of the relationship of royal villis to later urban centres
- analysis of the impact of the church on urban settlement
- examination of early estates and their relationships to towns
- definition of territorial and other boundaries in relation to proto-urban and urban settlement

The effects of political development at a national level, with its consequent economic and social impact on urban growth and organisation, needs exploration. Differentiation of such determinant factors in urban growth could be examined for towns at the following periods: pre-Danish settlement; Anglo-Scandinavian towns; Late Saxon growth; the impact of the Normans; the

12th-century 'renaissance'; later medieval expansion, contraction and renewal; post-medieval change; early-modern development; and industrialisation.

Such work, however, should not mask the many lacunae which still exist in many of the towns of the region. Almost all the small towns and several of the larger ones lack the basic data necessary to allow the establishment of chronological sequences, the definition of social differentiation or the characterisation of economic life. Priority questions, therefore, for towns both large and small are often fundamental but need to be stated, with data acquisition targeted towards:

- the establishment of basic chronologies
- the ranking of settlement
- the examination of settlement morphology
- the definition of status

The question of status is one which can be explored at national and international levels as well as locally. Research questions should be formulated to examine the role of the town in society at different dates and in differing economic regimes. The urban experience, while universal, is not and was not uniform. The inter-relationship, or lack of relationship, between towns as well as between the town and the hinterland requires study. Methodological advances will be required but areas for examination should include:

- a more developed understanding of spatial analysis in towns
- detailed examination of buildings, their location, function and form
- study of the acquisition and use of raw materials
- analysis of industrial productivity and product distribution
- the distribution of wealth within and between towns
- the adaptation of urban life to specialisation

Social organisation is an archaeological concern and definition of parameters for its study must not be left to historians. Archaeologists have access to a much wider material resource which, with developing methodologies, can be used to marked effect in the exploration of urban societies. Research questions which will throw light upon such societies include:

- examination of the market and commercial activity
- study of the impact of major institutions
- detailed investigation of corporate activity
- resource acquisition and dispersal

Economy

The surplus economy which is a characteristic of towns is a concept which has been rarely articulated by archaeologists. This is unfortunate as the development of commercial structures to support the surplus economy is arguably one of the more accessible ways to approach characterisation of urban development. Failure to develop such structures leads to urban failure; success entails growth. The rich material culture of towns, often present in dense quantities, must continue to be assessed and the results analysed and synthesised in order to increase understanding of the economic foundations of towns. Research work must target:

- evidence for commercial and industrial activity
- definition, specialisation, marketing and distribution of products
- linkages between social and political development and economic activity
- communications between towns and with the hinterland

The relationship of economic development to the chronology of the urban experience requires greater attention. The late medieval town was almost certainly a much more complex entity than any pre-Danish settlement and yet both were engaged in manufacture and commercial exchange. This increasing complexity of economic organisation should be characterised and its effects upon urban and rural society studied.

Industrial output, either from craft industries or early modern large-scale processes, will affect the urban environment. The impact of the economy can therefore be explored by:

- examination of evidence for industrial zoning
- study of the relationship of industrial and commercial sites to distribution routes
- correlation of evidence for status with product specialisation and output

Archaeological material has the potential for increasing understanding of the role of towns within the overall economy. The market seems to have been a dominant factor in urban success but the relationship of market centres, either one to another or in relation to the major towns, remains largely unexplored. Research is required which leads to a greater understanding of the role of individual towns within a broader economic framework.

Culture and religion

The exploration of culture through the medium of archaeological study needs to be broadened beyond mere cataloguing of technological and artistic innovation. The

development of urban living and with it an urban lifestyle created a distinct culture which is visible in the topography of urban locations and buildings. The relationship of urban institutions one to another reflects this particular culture and archaeological projects and methodologies need research aims which explore this particularity.

It is necessary, therefore, to go beyond tenement identity and chronology to investigate meaning within the urban landscape. The specific requirements of an urban population dictate forms of living, types of housing and varieties of services which characterise urban life. Archaeological research must:

- identify characteristics of urban culture
- develop methodologies for interpreting the growth and complexity of urban culture
- explore the dissemination of urban values and ideas to the wider community

The details of material culture need to be studied as well. Each of the above research areas will be well-supported by careful examination of technological innovation, the adoption of new materials and practices, the production of specialised manufactures and the pattern of artistic influence.

Within urban culture, as in the rural hinterland, the church with its organisation, its role in society and its economic power deserves special attention. The following areas of research need to be amplified:

- the relationship of the church to urban foundation
- ecclesiastical development within growing towns
- the organisation of parochial life
- the impact of ecclesiastical institutions upon the urban environment and urban living
- the economic influence of the church
- the technological and artistic importance of the church to the local economy and culture
- the social role of the church

The church, as an international institution, also highlights the importance of towns as agents for the dissemination of an international culture. This is of especial importance in East Anglian towns with their close links to continental Europe. Archaeological research can help to define meaning in the concept of urbanism and should therefore target in general:

- data which increases knowledge of urban processes
- methodologies which increase understanding of the urban dynamic

Urban environmental archaeology

by Peter Murphy

The taphonomic complexity of urban deposits, combined with problems of residuality, present interpretational difficulties. Where time and resources can be devoted to unravelling the inputs to complex urban deposits, the results may be very rewarding (e.g. Kenward and Hall 1995). However, such work is very time-consuming and depends upon extensive sampling at large sites to be fully effective. At the small-scale evaluations which typify urban archaeology in the late 1990s such extensive study is rarely possible. It therefore seems appropriate at present to target the available resources towards particular aspects of the urban economy and environment. These fall into three main categories:

- Events. Assemblages resulting from discrete (commonly catastrophic), events of short duration produce biological assemblages which are unequivocally interpretable in terms of on-site activities immediately before the event (*e.g.* fires, where constructional wood and timber, and products stored within buildings may be preserved by charring) or relate directly to that event (*e.g.* floods).
- Processes. Amongst the on-site processes which have been distinguished from biological evidence at urban sites are textile processing, dyeing, malting, the processing of shellfish, bone and/or hornworking, all of which generate distinctive wastes. Wherever characteristic residues from activities of this type are encountered, extensive sampling is necessary to define the spatial layout of activity and details of the process.
- Relationships with producing sites in the rural hinterland. There are very few assemblages of bones and charred crop from rural farm sites. This is particularly the case for the Middle Saxon to post-medieval periods. Those which have been studied are sparse and sites such as Canvey Island which may have been associated with fish processing, consumption/use and waste disposal are rare. Without more information on producing and processing rural sites our picture of urban economies will remain severely biased.

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