

100+ years of Archaeobotany: Late Iron Age and Roman Silchester

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Introduction

Silchester, or *Calleva Atrebatum*, is the site of a Late Iron Age *oppidum* and Roman *civitas* capital in central-southern Britain (A).

Archaeobotany has been a key part of the

- 'Town Life' Project excavations of Insula IX (1997-2014)
- Society of Antiquaries excavations of the entire town (1890-1909)

Charred, mineralised and waterlogged plant remains have provided key insights into **diet**, **agriculture** and **settlement environment**.

Method

- **Wet sieving** of at least 54 features (wells, pits), excavated from 1899-1909, produced over a 1000 plant remains and 54 taxa. The work of Clement Reid and Arthur Lyell has now been reassessed and is largely accurate.
- **Flotation** of 1000+ bulk samples from Insula IX, taken from all feature types including wells, pits and buildings.

Results

Diet

Late Iron Age food imports have been evidenced for the first time in Britain, with olive, celery and coriander recovered from waterlogged well sediments.

Roman diet was diverse, as evidenced by mineralised plant remains from Insula IX (cherry, fig, grape, lentil, mulberry, olive, plum) (C) as well as the only British evidence of medlar from the Reid collection.

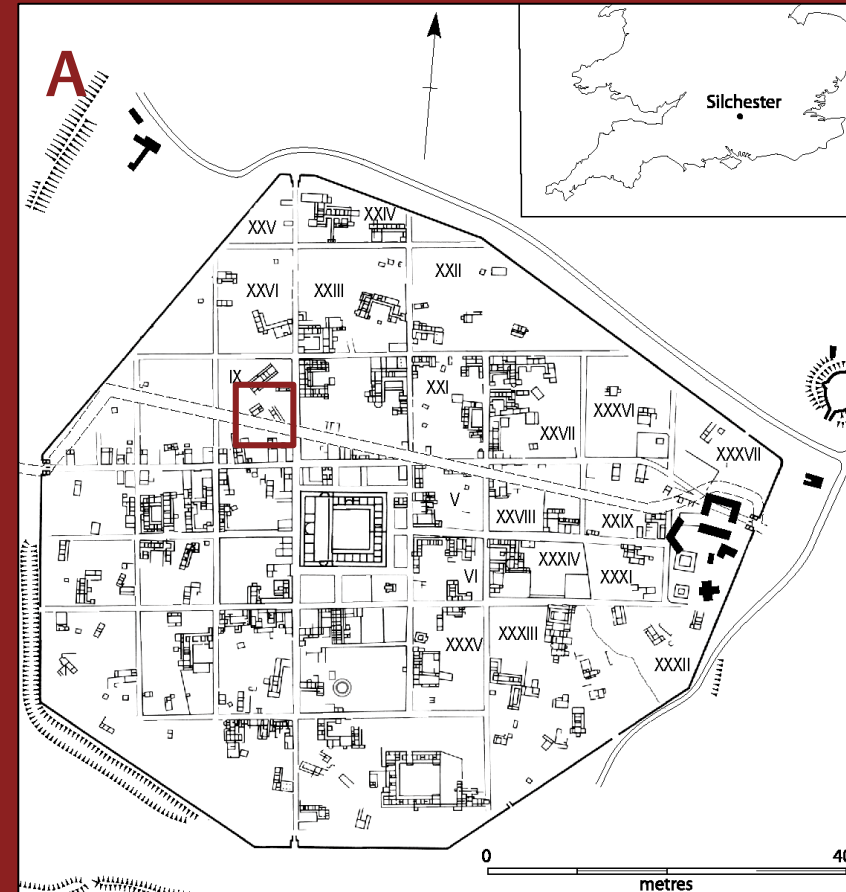
Agriculture

Crop-processing of spelt wheat and barley was a key site activity in the Late Iron Age and Early Roman periods (D). Crop-processing ceased around AD 125, after which the inhabitants became reliant on the import of processed crops. Based on the presence of *Spergula arvensis* and *Tripleurospermum inodorum*, crops were cultivated locally on sandy acidic soils.

Hay and **stable-flooring** material were major components of the Late Iron Age-Early Roman waterlogged plant assemblages from two wells. Key taxa include *Filipendula ulmaria* and *Rhinanthus minor* as well as flax seeds and capsules (E).

Settlement environment

Horticultural plots (celery, coriander) and plants of nitrogen rich ground (*Atropa belladonna*, *Urtica dioica*) were present within the Early Roman Insula (F).



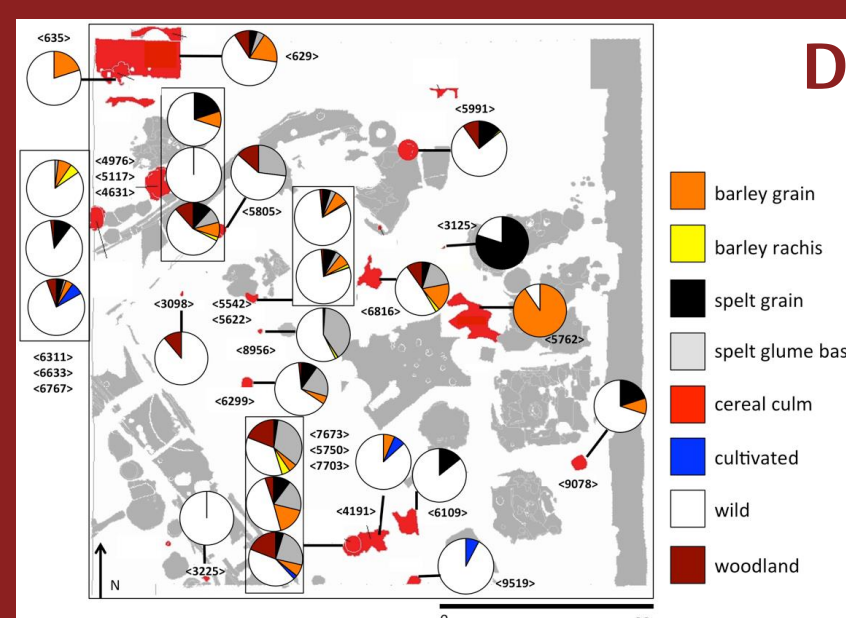
Plan of Silchester, with the Insulae investigated by Reid and Lyell labelled, and Insula IX highlighted.



Excavators in 1897 with wooden barrels from wells in Insulae XVII and XVIII.



Mineralised plant remains from Early Roman cess pits: Lentil, celery, hawthorn, mulberry, fig and pea. Scale bar = 2mm.



Site plan and composition of Late Iron Age charred plant remains from Insula IX.



Waterlogged plant remains from Late Iron Age wells, including Flax (H, I) and *Rhinanthus minor* (N). Scale bar = 2mm.



Reconstruction of Early Roman Silchester.



Communication of the results

Reid's analysis formed baseline data for understanding the later Holocene flora of Britain. The Insula IX results have been included in an art (G) and museum exhibition, open days and featured on the BBC.



Flotation by Jenny Halstead

Future work

The Silchester Environs Project (2014-18) is investigating the Iron Age origins of the *oppidum*, through a range of small-scale excavation (H), survey and palaeoenvironmental techniques, including palynology and archaeobotany.



Recent excavations of an Iron Age ditch and bank to the south of Silchester.

References

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