

The Silchester 'Nymphaeum'

Article

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The Silchester 'Nymphaeum'

By

Michael Fulford

ABSTRACT

A carved coping stone found on the site of a spring near the amphitheatre, Silchester and first reported in 1873 was re-discovered in 2014. The stone does not compare in its carved detail with coping stones from the amphitheatres at Chester and London nor with that recovered from the West Gate, Silchester in 1890, nor does its basal width correspond with that of the arena wall of the Silchester amphitheatre. It is likely to have formed part of a monumental basin similar to that found at Coventina's Well, Northumberland and commemorating the location of a spring and its associated (unknown) deity. Similarity with the type and decoration of architectural stone used in the construction of the forum basilica suggests a Hadrianic-Antonine date.

Keywords: Silchester; spring; nymphaeum; amphitheatre; coping stone; Lower Greensand; forum basilica; Coventina's Well

In the third account of his excavations at Silchester given to the Society of Antiquaries in 1873 the Reverend James G. Joyce describes the following: 'and the inhabitants of the little farm at the amphitheatre state that after hot summers a road may be traced under the herbage passing onward to a beautiful spring of perennial water, where was probably a *nymphaeum*, large pieces of wrought stone having been found there.'¹ (Fig. 1). George Boon reported that he had seen 'one large coping-stone at this spot, with mouldings quite different from the coping of the (town) wall, but could not find it again in 1970.' He thought the stone, found near the spring in the field to the west of the amphitheatre, had possibly come from the coping of the outer wall of the amphitheatre.² This idea may have influenced a certain scepticism on his part about Joyce's interpretation as a *nymphaeum* 'there is no certainty that the stones were not carried there in later times to act as stepping stones to the spring.'³ In the summer of 2014 Ben Kolosowski of Chitty Farm, Silchester brought on his tractor to the excavations at Insula IX the coping stone illustrated here (Fig. 2). He had recovered it from the marshy ground overgrown with willow, where the spring rises at the north edge of the field west of the amphitheatre (SU 644626). Given the weight of the stone, it is unlikely to have been much moved around and it is therefore very likely that this is the same stone seen by Boon and one of the large pieces reported by Joyce in 1873.

The stone in question is almost square in plan, measuring c. 0.75m in length, with a maximum width of c. 0.74m and a height of c. 0.45m (Fig. 2). In profile the upper two thirds of the stone resemble that of a bell with a cyma moulding then reducing the width from its maximum to c. 0.45m at the base. There is a lewis-hole in the centre of the upper surface. The stone is of Lower Greensand, closely resembling the lithology of the Hythe Beds near Maidstone, Kent.⁴ The elaborate character of the carving immediately distinguishes it from coping stones associated with two other British amphitheatres, Chester and London, which have a simple, semi-circular profile,⁵ as does the coping stone found at the site of the West Gate, Silchester, which is thought to be indicative of the finishing of the parapet on top of the town wall.⁶ Moreover, the base dimensions of the stone described here do not match the width of the Silchester amphitheatre arena wall, which measures 0.8 to 0.9m in width, approximately double that of the basal width of our stone⁷. Thus, on the grounds of its fine carving and its dimensions, it is reasonable to dis-associate our stone from the amphitheatre.

Given its findspot at the edge of the settled area and outside the defences of the town from c. AD 200, the possibility that the stone formed part of a mausoleum or funerary structure cannot be excluded. However there are no records of any burials having been found in the vicinity and none were found when the trench for the mains water-pipe was excavated in 1988 alongside Church Lane 50m to the south.⁸ Although not possible across the boggy and wooded area where the stone was found, recent geophysical survey also gives no indication of possible masonry structures or of burials nearby.⁹ Therefore, emphasising the watery location of the stone(s), we may explore further Joyce's interpretation that the stones belonged to a *nymphaeum*. As Boon noted, monumental structures to contain natural springs have been found at Coventina's Well on Hadrian's Wall and at Chedworth villa, Gloucestershire.¹⁰ In the case of the former a rectangular, massive, stone-lined basin, c. 2.6 by 2.4m with a depth of c. 2.1m, was constructed centrally within a larger, rectangular, stone-built enclosure, c. 12.2 by 11.6m, c. AD 128-30.¹¹ There was no sign of coping stones. At Chedworth an early fourth-century, stone-built, apsidal building contained a small, octagonal, stone-built basin which captured water from the adjacent spring, acting as a reservoir to supply the villa.¹² While the rectangular form of our stone is consistent with it having formed the coping of either a rectangular or a polygonal basin, its findspot rather suggests the structure from which it derives was designed more to commemorate the spring and an, as yet unknown, deity, as at Coventina's Well, than to act as a reservoir for a nearby building.¹³

The only evidence for dating must derive from the block itself, the style of the carving and the type of stone used. Buildings within the Roman town which are known to have employed carved, architectural stone date between about the mid-first and the mid-second century AD, but the only building so far known to have used a similar Lower Greensand in its construction is the forum basilica of c. AD125-50, where, although the great majority of the architectural masonry was of Bath Stone, some of the large column bases used in the basilica are of Lower Greensand.¹⁴ Given the comparability in the quality of the carving of our coping stone and that of the architectural stone work of the forum basilica, it seems reasonable to suggest a similar, Hadrianic-Antonine date for the Silchester 'nymphaeum'.

The stone is currently located at Chitty Farm, Wall Lane, Silchester.

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¹ Joyce 1881: 346

² Boon 1974: 148, 330 (n.3); subsequent excavation of the amphitheatre showed there was no outer wall (Fulford 1989).

³ Boon 1974: 159-60

⁴ Dr K. Hayward, pers. com.

⁵ Chester: Newstead and Droop 1932, 21, pl. III, fig. 3; Thompson 1976, pl. LVIIIc; Wilmott and Garner, forthcoming; London: Bateman *et al.*, 2008, 167-8, figs 79 & 93

⁶ Fox and Hope 1891: 757; Boon 1974: 101; Society of Antiquaries Fox Collection IV, 38

⁷ Fulford 1989: 37

⁸ Fulford *et al.* 1997: 154-66

⁹ Creighton with Fry 2016: 216-21, Figs 6.41-6.43

¹⁰ Boon 1974: 159-60

¹¹ Allason-Jones and McKay 1985: 2-3; 11-12; Pls II-IV

¹² Goodburn 1972: 23-4, Fig. 3; pictured in Esmonde Cleary 2012, 8.

¹³ No other parallels have been found. Blagg does not record any coping stones in his corpus of architectural ornament in Britain (2002).

¹⁴ Fulford and Timby: 58-68; 573-6; Lower Greensand column bases in Reading Museum, examined by Dr K. Hayward (pers. com.)