
For a short time during the second century AD, the frontier at the north-west extremity of the Roman Empire lay 150km north of Hadrian’s Wall, stretching between the Firth of Clyde and the Firth of Forth: the Antonine Wall. This volume concerns the results of excavations at one of the forts, located towards the western end of the wall. The fieldwork at Bearsden was conducted between 1973 and 1982, so this report has been a long time coming—but it has been worth the wait. It is a splendid and comprehensive publication that has greatly benefitted from recent developments in analytical techniques, particularly in relation to bioarchaeological remains and artefactual evidence. Its 400 or so pages are lavishly illustrated in colour with extremely well-produced and clearly labelled plans, photographs, and artefact and reconstruction drawings.

The volume follows a standard excavation report format, commencing with a brief summary of previous work at the site and an overview of the excavations of the fort’s structural components. Of particular note is the well-preserved bath house located in an ‘annexe’ on the east side of the fort; the annexe appears to have been constructed at the same time as the fort and is divided from it by a turf rampart. These initial chapters are followed by the specialist reports, comprising over half of the volume, and include chapters on soils, stone, brick and tile, pottery, glass, intaglions, metalwork, coins, bone and leather. The chapters on mortaria and archaeobotanical and archaeozoological remains are especially noteworthy, providing important information about how the fort functioned, how the garrison was supplied and on the identity of the unit stationed at Bearsden. For example, the chapter by Hartley on mortaria demonstrates that these ceramic vessels were manufactured in the vicinity of the fort, but that they can be attributed to a potter, Sarrius, who had workshops hundreds of kilometres to the south in the Midlands. Similarly, McLaren’s report on the infrared analyses of charred material adhering to potsherds identifies the presence of imported durum wheat. These specialist reports are followed by a discussion that draws out the full significance of the results and interpretations presented in the preceding chapters; it also includes two sections on the spatial distribution of specific artefact types across the fort site and on functional aspects of the artefact assemblages.

There is insufficient space here to give proper credit to all the varied aspects of this valuable volume, so I will briefly outline the two—to my mind—most significant parts of the report: the analyses of the plant remains and of the artefact assemblages and distributions.

The 60-odd page report by C. and J.H. Dickinson on the plant remains is predominantly concerned with waste that was emptied from the latrine into the outer east ditch of the fort and which provides
a wealth of information on the plant-based diet of the fort’s occupants and on the importation of foodstuffs from Rome’s other western provinces. The report also highlights the uses of other plant materials, from the likely use of moss for personal hygiene in the latrine to the types of wood used in the construction of the fort. The discovery of one fragment of non-native silver fir (*Abies alba*), associated with the headquarters’ building, is interpreted as a remnant of a wine barrel or a writing tablet, but could equally have come from a piece of furniture such as a chest; pieces of wood attached to hinges from doors and furniture from the *Insula del Menandro* in Pompeii were reportedly mostly *Abies alba*.

The analyses of artefact distributions, by Allason-Jones, and of artefact assemblages, by Giles, are particularly significant aspects of this volume, not least because of the much-lamented dearth of such sections in previous reports on Roman excavations. Their analyses illuminate, for example, the evidence for the preparation and consumption of food in the barrack-blocks, with Allason-Jones noting the presence of mortaria fragments in every room of the barracks. Allason-Jones also observes the prominence of evidence for drinking in the bath house, serving to emphasise the sociality of bathing for Roman soldiers, and the lack of brooches and other items of personal adornment when compared with other forts. Giles compares functional categories of artefacts at Bearsden with those from other forts in northern Britain, providing a fresh approach to the analysis of artefact assemblages, although some of her functional categories lack explanation (e.g. ‘Utilitarian’). I would have liked more intra-site analyses of entire artefact assemblages in order to compare the use of each building within individual forts and to better integrate these two types of analyses.

One of the important questions for the original excavation and for this volume concerns the identity of the military unit that was stationed there. On the basis of the layouts of the barrack-blocks, the author and many of the contributors seem convinced that the garrison for which Bearsden was constructed was a 64-strong cavalry unit. Yet there is little evidence to support this assumption. The analyses of plant remains, insects and parasites provide almost no evidence for waste from the stabling of horses, and nothing that cannot be explained by the presence of the odd pack animal. Of course, such waste could have been cleared and deposited outside the fort. But apart from one decidedly modern-looking horseshoe, there is no evidence for horse harnesses and other such equipment, despite a wealth of metal artefacts. The interpretation of this fort as the base for a cavalry unit is founded on a structuralist approach to the interpretation of building forms that is not backed up by any material evidence.

This quibble should not, however, detract from the importance of the volume. It is an extensive and valuable primary resource featuring many important analyses and discussions with wider
implications for Roman studies, including explanations for the presence of North African-type pottery on the northern frontier, for the shipment of pottery from southern Britain and grain from Spanish, and for the lack of artefactual evidence in the headquarters building and lack of any evidence for an external settlement around the fort. Yet one question on which I did not find any discussion still nags—why did these forts have annexes?

**Penelope Allison**

School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester, UK

(Email: pma9@le.ac.uk)