



We are grateful to St Albans Museums for permission to re-publish the photographs of the Verulamium excavations.

www.stalbanshistory.org

April 2015

Excavations at Verulamium

INSULA XVII, 1938

By K. M. RICHARDSON, B.A.

DURING 1934-35, while excavation of the theatre was in progress, the foundations of one side of a triumphal arch spanning Watling Street were uncovered to the east of the theatre. In the process of locating the base of the other side, which, however, was found to lie under Gorhambury Drive, some 80 feet of masonry forming the frontage of a substantial building were brought to light, but no further work was at the time carried out in that area, Insula XVII. As it seemed likely that a major building situated so close to the civic centre of Roman Verulamium, and just opposite the theatre, might prove to be of interest, permission to undertake this work in the Spring of 1938 was asked of Lord Verulam, and readily obtained. In this connection I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. H. E. Asprey, for making all local arrangements, to Mr. F. T. Negus for much incidental help, and to Mr. C. E. Jones, of the Verulamium Excavation Committee, for running the financial side of the matter, and I would like to voice the regret of all those who have worked at Verulamium, at his impending departure from St. Albans. My thanks are due likewise to Miss M. Whitley for her untiring support from start to finish; to Mr. M. Wedlake, my foreman and colleague, for his invaluable knowledge of walls, ghostly and actual; and not least to Mr. Philip Corder, for undertaking the ungrateful task of running the excavation for three weeks in my absence, and finally, I am most deeply grateful to Dr. R. E. M. Wheeler for his constant help and advice throughout.

Work was begun on March 15th and continued until June 4th. A week or so of excavation sufficed to show that the structure had suffered considerable robbing down to a depth of 6 feet in places, which entailed much shifting of unstratified material. However, with

the help of rubble footings and clay-cut wall-trenches, the plans of three successive phases of a stone building, Building I, were recovered. Beneath the earliest of these lay the remains of a wooden structure, and under this again evidence of yet earlier occupation. The history of the site as a whole thus falls into five phases.

Evidence was also found of the existence of two other buildings, one to the north, Building II, of apparently at least two periods, separated from Building I by a street running east and west, at right angles to Watling Street; and another to the south, Building III, but here there was no intervening side street.

PHASE I, c. 45 A.D.

The earliest occupation of the area is represented by a "green gravel" layer which lay over the natural gravel and filled two small gullies running east and west across the site. No structure contemporary with it was found, though a quite unworn metalled surface pierced by what might have been a wattle fence, belonged also to this period. Although the material from this layer comprised two Swarling brooches, an uninscribed Belgic coin of Tasciovanus c. 14-12 B.C., and much coarse Belgic ware including a little Terra Nigra and a few scraps of imported butt-beaker, it also produced a Claudian Mortarium form and Samian. As a group therefore the pottery would not be out of place in an early post-conquest context. One may therefore roughly assign this phase to the first decade of occupation by the side of Watling Street, falling between 45 and 55 A.D.

PHASE II, c. 55 A.D.

Stratified over the green gravel layer and covering almost all of the area excavated, there occurred a thick red layer consisting chiefly of daub burnt a brick red, and charred timbering. Although, owing to the overlying stone walls, the plan of a whole building could not be recovered, there was sufficient evidence to show that a fairly large wooden structure had existed, and that this had perished in a violent conflagration.

A sleeper beam was traced running for some 100 feet parallel to, or under, the verandah wall of the later stone building (Fig. 1). This lay in a slot cut in a tightly packed gravel make-up. Elsewhere sleeper beams and the uprights fixed into them were found together. Outside the stone building a corner and one side of a room was found with its walls still standing some two feet in height. The walls consisted of rectangular timber uprights set in a sleeper beam and supporting a framework of wattles (Fig. 7). This framework was faced and backed with clay which was impressed with a keying pattern to hold the final plaster facing, green or pink in colour. Much occupation material in the shape of pottery and fragments of glass and bronze was recovered from this "burnt layer." The evidence from this and the underlying occupation material incline one to find a date c. 55 AD. for the erection of the wooden building. The coarse pottery from the "burnt layer" is consistent with a pre-Flavian date, while the latest Samian is Neronian and need not be later than 60 A.D. Thus, as far as the dating evidence goes, the building was probably burnt down round about 60 AD., and it is suggested that the Boudiccan Rebellion of 61 A.D. would supply the historical moment for its destruction.

PHASE III, c. 70-170 A.D.

The walls of the first stone building were of coursed flints with the corners and partition ends neatly finished in tiles, and the actual masonry work of this period compared favourably with that of the later phases. In plan, it consisted simply of a rectangle 96 feet long by 43 feet wide running lengthwise roughly east and west (Fig. 1). The two sides facing Watling Street and the side street were flanked by a metalled verandah. A row of small rooms 13 or 14 feet by 16 feet 9 inches were built along the north and south walls, leaving a courtyard down the centre which was probably open to the sky. The entrance at the west end of the building gave on to the verandah, but it is impossible to say whether in this phase the verandah opened into the side street or Watling Street. The floors of this period were probably of wood, or of

VERULAMIUM INSULA XVII BUILDING

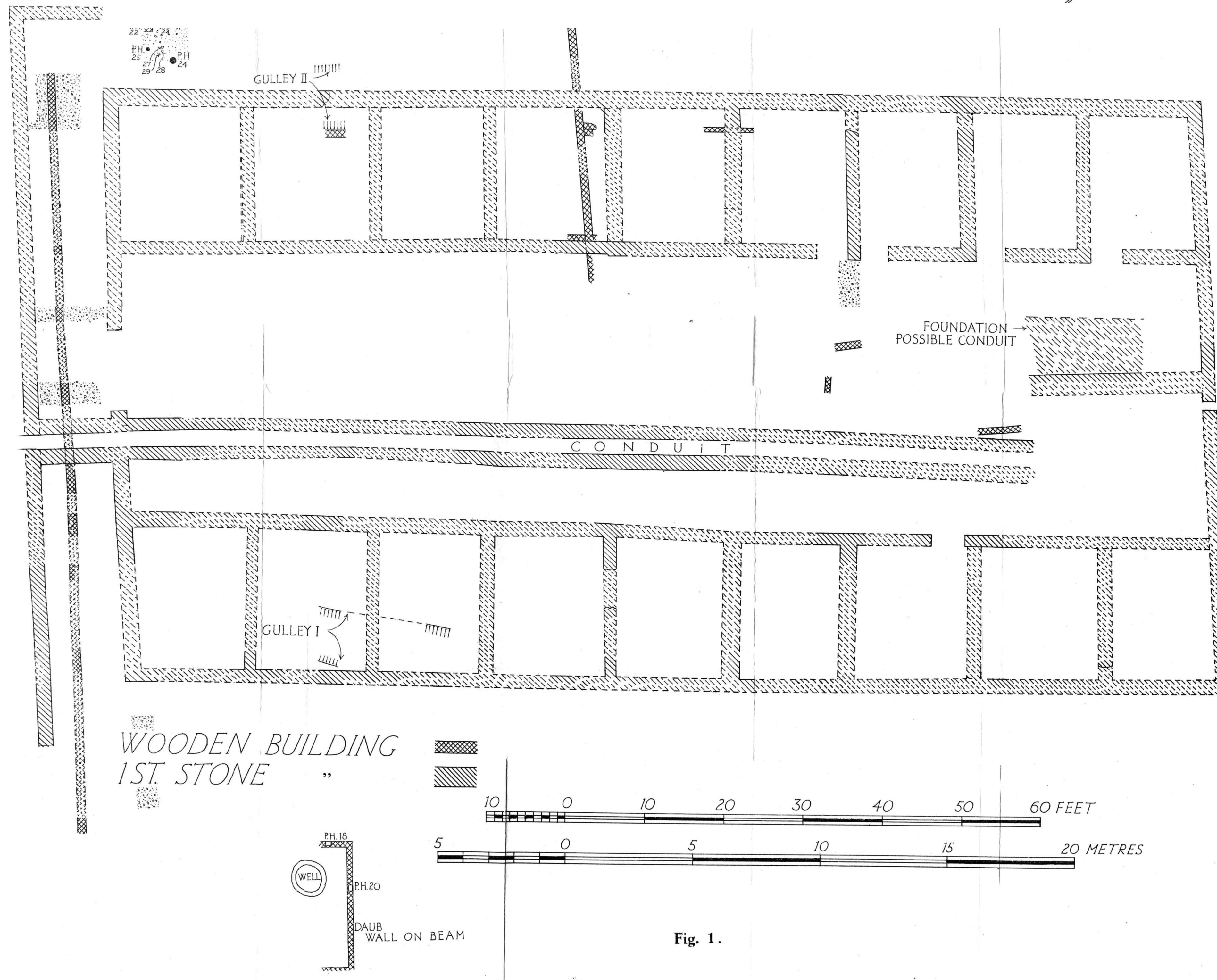
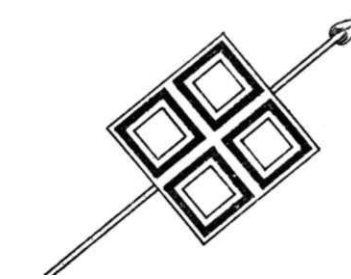


Fig. 1.

r OF A
(HISTORICAL]

'IV3I>101Sp
jo S:



FIG. 2. PHASE III CONDUIT BLOCKED BY PHASE IV
W ALL PHASE V BUTRESS ON RIGHT.



FIG. 3. PHASE III CONDUIT.

S T R E E T

PH. I



LATE
CHALK
FOUNDATIONS

LATE BEAMS

P.H. 16

□ Р.Н. 15.

PH 19.

☐

2 ND. STONE BUILDING
JRD. 95

77

A

D^{PH.12}

1

95

\mathbb{A}^1 OF \mathbb{A}^1
(HISTORICAL)

F HISTORICAL!



FIG. 5. PHASE III CONDUIT, PHASE IV DRAIN AND APSE AND MASONRY BLOCK OF PHASE

f-S OF >>
HISTCRICALL

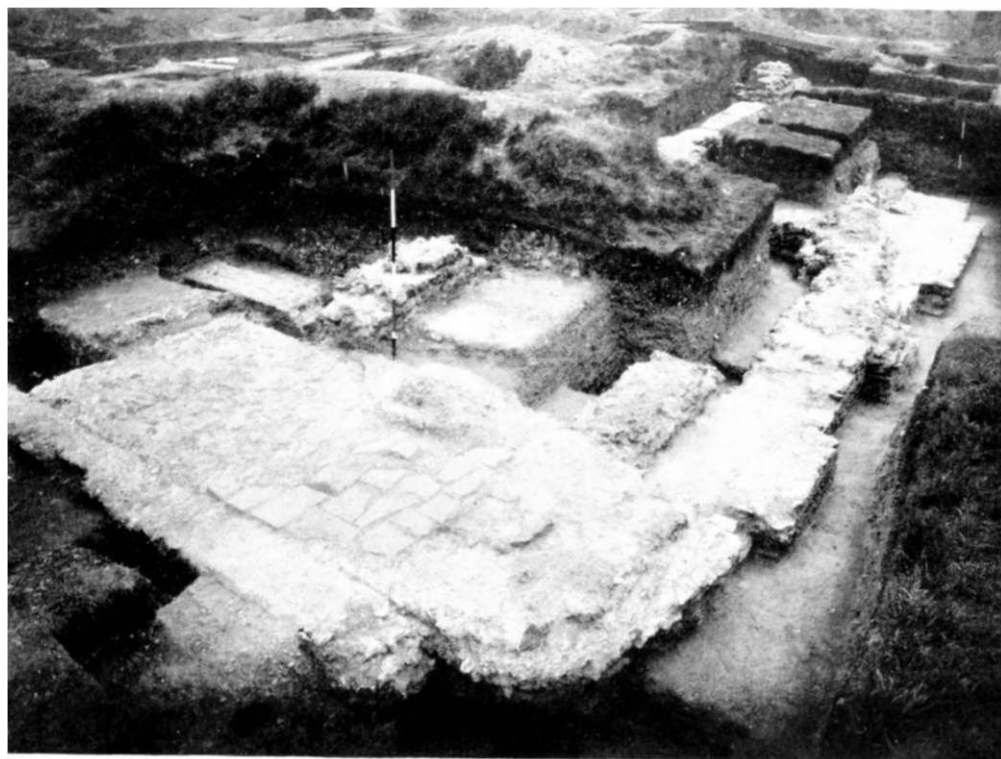


FIG. 6. W. FRONTAGE AND SIDE ENTRANCE, PHASE V.



FIG. 7 WATTLE AND DAUB WALL OF WOODEN BUILDING PHASE II.

OF
jHISTORICALI

beaten earth with a thinly metalled surface, as appeared to be the case down the central courtyard. But the floor levels of this and the following phases were practically non-existent, the second and third rebuild having destroyed those of Period III and IV, and the medieval stone robbers those of the last phase. This, combined with the extreme paucity of stratified coins, contributed no little to the difficulties of precisely dating each successive building.

The only other feature of Phase III was a water channel, 5 feet 6 inches deep, built in alternate tile and flint courses with a tiled floor (Figs. 2 and 3). It had been wrecked and robbed in the eastern half of the building, where its approach to the house could not be traced, but it ran straight through the western end and disappeared under the present road. Curiously enough, its floor was found to drop a foot in 50 feet, going from east to west, that is uphill and away from the river, so that it must have been in the nature of a conduit rather than a drain. A trench dug on the theatre side of Watling Street failed to show its continuation, at any rate in a straight line.

Since no actual floor levels can be assigned to the Phase III building, its erection can fall anywhere within the hundred years between 61 A.D. and 170 A.D., the approximate date of the first rebuild. As, however, nothing later than pre-Flavian was recovered from material ante-dating Phase III, it is tempting to favour a date at the early end of the bracket, though up to the present very few of the stone buildings excavated in the southern part of the town antedate the reign of Hadrian. However, public buildings would be the first to be built in stone, as for instance, the Temple west of the theatre, which was erected not much later than the last two decades of the first century A.D., and, as such, Building I is probably early in date.

PHASE IV, c. 170 A.D.

The masonry work of this next period does not differ appreciably from that of Phase III; there was, however, a drastic reduction in the size of the earlier building (Fig. 4). The eastern half was destroyed, and the ground levelled up over the foundations with a

layer of clay and rubbish. The western half was also pulled down, but the footings were re-used in the erection of a second building, the main walls of which conformed fairly accurately with the underlying masonry. A new outer east wall was built and this and the rebuild of the main west wall blocked the water channel and put it out of commission as a conduit (Fig. 2). Inside the building the surviving small rooms apparently continued in use. The main addition was an apse placed centrally 8 feet back from the east main wall (Fig. 5). A length of the conduit was also re-used. With its floor raised to a higher level and additional channels, it now formed a rectangle, its eastern section running behind the apse and continuing north and out through gaps in the main and verandah walls. Its function was now probably that of a drain to carry away the rain water from the open central courtyard.

The pottery and Samian from the clay and rubbish levelling over the earlier walls, and from pits subsequent to the second construction combine to give a date, c. 170 A.D., for this reconstruction. It thus falls into the later years of the Hadrian-Antonine period of expansion of the city.

PHASE V, c. 300 A.D.

The third and last rebuild may easily be distinguished from the earlier phases by the coarseness of the masonry work, the somewhat slipshod building, and the heavy style of the new plan. At this stage further additions were made to the main plan (Fig. 4). A massive frontage now replaced the west verandah wall on Watling Street (Fig. 6). From this ran two walls with piers at 10 feet intervals, eight in all. The small rooms were presumably suppressed. The apse was also levelled; abutting on its west wall, however, and between the north and south drain walls was inserted a solid block of masonry 17 ft. 9 ins. by 10 ft. 3 ins. and some 8 ft. in depth, behind which ran a wall parallel to the outer east wall (Fig. 5). A similar block 14 ft. 6 ins. long was placed, again between the drain walls, 10 feet to the west of the first, and a

third at the north-west corner between the building and the verandah wall. The latter (Fig. 6), over which ran a cement and metalled layer, had two other masonry blocks abutting on to it and appears to have been built to support an archway for a side entrance, though the main entrance would still be at the west end. The two central blocks can only have been erected to carry some great weight such as two large statues. The central area between the piers probably remained open, in which case the drain would continue in use.

The material available for dating this last rebuild is of the scantiest, but it would appear to be contemporary with the late third—early fourth century revival under Constantius, a date borne out by the rough masonry and the massive style of the building, typical of this period in other parts of the city.

One may assign to this phase also the chalk footings of walls which were traced in the area comprising the levelled half of the first stone building, and again to the south of it. Such chalk footings appear to be characteristic of the late third—early fourth century period of re-building in Verulamium. Owing to the absence of levels contemporary with this last phase it is impossible to say how long Building I continued in use, but judging from the pottery and coins from the "robber layers," it did not perhaps last much beyond the end of the fourth century. The well which had been dug to the south of the building proved to be medieval, and produced some thirteenth-century pottery.

As regards the function of Building I during its three phases, one dare only make tentative suggestions. A combination of all three plans might have produced some recognisable type, but taken in turn their features are indeterminate. Moreover it is not always easy to tell how much of an earlier building has been incorporated in its successor. The first stage, with its two rows of small rooms and long central courtyard, suggests something in the nature of a barracks such as that which housed the gladiators who performed in the Pompeian arena. The water conduit, with its floor dropping as it approaches the theatre, might have been

constructed to supply water for flooding the central area of the theatre and so converting it into a lake for staging nautical displays. Aqueducts serving this purpose have been found at Nîmes, Pozzuoli, Capua, Rome and elsewhere. Such speculations are unfortunately inconsistent with an early second century date for the building, which would prevent one from connecting it with the erection of the theatre, c. 140-150 A.D. Again, the type of building in use as a *palaestra* or gymnasium at Pompeii or Ostia consisted of an open courtyard with adjacent cubicles for changing, and a water supply for a shower or bath of some sort. Whether the youth of Verulamium were gilded enough to require a gymnasium is another matter. Phase IV, with the apsidal end and the small rooms, and Phase V, without the rooms and apse, but with the double row of piers, both suggest a basilica type of building. The Roman basilica allowed for a variety of uses, the dispensing of justice, or other civil administration, or the carrying on of business. It might serve also as a kind of covered market, though in this case the central area would have been roofed over.

To conclude, one may say that the successive phases of Building I, Insula XVII, conform very fairly with the general historical background of the city as revealed by the 1930-1934 excavations. The site does not appear to have been occupied prior to the Claudian conquest, and the first indications of any sort of settlement equate with the squatting of the former inhabitants of Prae Wood by the side of the newly constructed Watling Street during the period 45-55 A.D. Shortly after the middle of the first century we have the erection of a timber building, reflecting by its size the rapid growth in importance of the new Roman city. Its utter destruction by fire is well dated to a period so close to that of the Boudiccan revolt as to suggest, if not to prove, the association of the two events. The city recovered fairly quickly and Building I, in its first stone phase, may well be one of the first-fruits of reconstruction. Although in its second period it shows a reduction in size, the date of its rebuild corresponds to the later years of second-century prosperity. Like

the rest of the town, no doubt, it fell on evil days during the course of the third century. The late third and early fourth century period of temporary recovery supplies the right background for the ostentatious rebuild of Phase IV, but the almost complete removal of the topmost layers prevents us from estimating either final end.