

Peter Davenport, *Roman Bath: A New History and Archaeology of Aquae Sulis* (Stroud: The History Press 2021). 249 pp., 118 ill. Cardcovers, £20. [ISBN 9780750995566].

The city of Bath is situated a little way south of Gloucestershire's County boundary and arguably lies outside the territory normally covered in these *Transactions*. It is important to remember however that shire counties are post-Roman constructs and while this boundary is significant to many people today, it would have been meaningless to the inhabitants of *Aquae Sulis*. The residents of this Romano-British town would almost certainly have looked north for their regional administration, initially to *Glevum* (Gloucester) and subsequently to *Corinium Dobunorum* (Cirencester) when the latter took over as the administrative capital of this part of Roman Britain.

Bath's Roman heritage has been well researched, and a wealth of publications cover this period of the city's history, serving the needs of both specialist and popular audiences. This latest publication appears to be designed primarily for the general reader, but the contents are clearly presented and the complex history of Roman Bath is accurately portrayed, making this a useful reference source for anyone interested in the city's history.

This is the first major account of *Aquae Sulis* to be published in the last decade and benefits from the fact that significant new information has come to light during this time, particularly in the western part of the Roman settlement and in the extramural areas to the north and east of the city walls. These discoveries improve our understanding of the location of the main baths/temple complex in relation to other significant buildings within the walled area and allows us to consider Roman Bath's urban layout within the wider context of its extramural settlements and rural hinterland.

*Aquae Sulis* was not a conventional Romano-British town. The settlement's importance lay in the Roman engineers' ability to tap *Britannia's* only thermal springs to feed the town's iconic baths. Hot mineral springs are rare geological phenomena. Similar thermal springs, exploited during the Roman period, are rare in Britain and this is the only known example in our area. The Romans had encountered thermal springs on the Continent however and possessed the technical capabilities to make use of these important natural resources.

The classical temple and bathing complex which developed around the Sacred spring when the waters had been harnessed rightly take centre stage in any account of Roman Bath. It is important to remember however that visitors to the site today are met with a palimpsest, in which structures from many periods lie side by side. The principal features of the temple forecourt, the Sacred spring's enclosure and the Great Bath have changed little over time and the functions of these parts of the site can be easily understood; but this is not the case for all parts of the bathing complex. Both the East baths and the West baths experienced significant alteration throughout the Roman period and many of the structural deposits which are now visible have been mutilated by successive phases of rebuilding. This has left a confusing jumble of remains, which are often difficult for visitors to interpret.

The relationships of the Greco-Roman style temple, the Sacred spring and the grand bath-suites are outlined by the author and the chronological stages in their construction are clearly explained. This enables the reader to focus on each of the four main periods in the development of the bathing complex and to relate each stage of its evolution to the contemporary changes which were occurring elsewhere in *Aquae Sulis* and its suburbs. Allowing the reader to step back in this way to examine the relationship between *Sulis Minerva*'s magnificent baths/temple complex and its surrounding settlement is one of the key features of this new history of Roman Bath.

One of the benefits to be gained by examining Bath's Roman remains within their wider contextual setting is that associations which may hitherto have eluded us may be revealed and fresh insights obtained into possible relationships between the individual structures. This encourages previous evidence to be re-examined and re-interpreted, allowing existing theories to be challenged and new possibilities considered.

Several examples of how recent research within the city may advance our understanding of *Aquae Sulis* are illustrated in this new study. The first of these concerns the nature of a monumental structure which is known to lie immediately to the east of the temple precinct. There has been much previous speculation as to what this building might have been, but the author's suggestion is that it may be the remains of a Greco-Roman theatre. Locating such a building close to a major temple would be entirely in keeping with notions of Roman civic planning, as theatres are known to have hosted religious events as well as civil ceremonies. Any hypothesis concerning the nature of this building is likely to be impossible to test however, as its structure lies buried deep beneath the basilica of Bath Abbey and this crucial evidence will forever remain beyond our reach.

Fortunately, more promising research opportunities exist elsewhere in the city. One such question concerns to the nature of the deities associated with each of Bath's thermal springs. Since the famous discovery of the bronze statue head of Minerva in 1727 beneath Stall Street and the subsequent retrieval of key parts of the Gorgon-headed frieze which once adorned the temple pediment, the Sacred spring complex has been clearly associated with the Romano-Celtic deity *Sulis-Minerva*. It is important to remember however that *Sulis-Minerva* may not have been the only pagan god or goddess venerated within the walls of *Aquae Sulis*. When the Hot spring in the west of the city was originally excavated in 1776 an altar dedicated to the goddess Diana was discovered. While Diana is best known as the legendary goddess of the hunt, she was also venerated as a lunar deity adorned with magical powers, and as both the guardian of female fertility and a protector of women during childbirth. These are likely to have been regarded as attractive attributes for the guardian goddess of a mystical spring. Meanwhile, an impressive stone relief of similar date was recovered from the nearby Cross spring during excavations in 1885, which appears to recount the myth of *Aesculapius* (also known as *Asclepius* / *Hepius*). *Aesculapius* was the Greco-Roman god of healing, best known to us today by his representation as the bearer of the snake-entwined staff on some medical symbols. To the Romans, this guardian deity, together with his five daughters *Acaso* (goddess of healing), *Aegle* (good health), *Hygieia* (cleanliness), *Iano* (recuperation) and

*Panacea* (universal remedies) were critical protectors of physical health and wellbeing. What better guardian for an important medicinal spring?

The discovery of a single artefact from each of these locations is hardly conclusive proof that the deities concerned were tutelary guardians of the respective thermal springs of course. Further evidence to support such a claim might be offered by the discovery of two contemporary canine pipeclay figurines which have subsequently been found on nearby sites. Effigies of this kind are known to occur at other Romano-Celtic temple sites in our region, where dogs are believed to have been used as part of the local healing rituals. There is clear scientific evidence that the thermal characteristics of Bath's three hot springs differ slightly, the Hot spring being a few degrees warmer than the others. If the residents of *Aquae Sulis* appreciated these differences and the individual springs were perceived to have distinct properties, each may have become associated with a different guardian deity. The attributes of each may have attracted different groups of supplicants' and become the focus for separate sets of rituals. While an opportunity to undertake further excavation at the Cross spring or the Hot spring is unlikely to present itself any time soon, further analysis of the material we already possess may prove quite rewarding.

Other fruitful research avenues may lie in the opportunity the holistic study of *Aquae Sulis* and its environs provides to enrich our understanding of how the separate areas of the town functioned and how the activities within the Roman walls differed from those in the extramural areas. As we have already seen, *Aquae Sulis* was not a conventional Roman town. For this reason, we need to look beyond the normal urban-suburban patterns we find in other Romano-British *civitas* capitals or small towns. An interesting feature which has recently been observed is how closely the plan of Roman Bath's walled circuit corresponds to the shape of the enclosure surrounding the Sacred spring. The similarity is remarkable and raises the possibility that the walls of *Aquae Sulis* were not intended as a defensive feature, but were designed to delineate a *tenemos*, or sacred enclosure. If this is the case, the buildings lying within the Roman walls may all conceivably have been under religious and/or state administrative control and formed part of a single entity. A review of what we already know of the buildings in the walled area may be instructive, while any further archaeological discoveries within the city may be used to test this hypothesis.

The value of a new history of archaeology and history of *Aquae Sulis* which draws together the most recent excavation evidence and the latest theories of Roman Bath's function and development is clear. By drawing extensively on recent archaeological discoveries from the Roman suburbs and elsewhere in the settlement, the author extends the readers' horizons beyond the city's celebrated temple and baths and reminds us that not only was *Aquae Sulis* a unique settlement in Roman Britain, but that it may also have been far more diverse than we have previously imagined.

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