Reinterpretation: Thoughts from the Backlog

by Kate Steane

During the past four years (with several more years to run) the City of Lincoln Archaeology Unit post-excavation team has been working on a backlog of more than 40 sites, all excavated in Lincoln between 1972 and 1987. This means dealing with sites which most of us have never seen, so we are distanced from the close focus of excavation. However, as a team we have accumulated a working knowledge of a wide range of sites all over the city, leading to a new understanding of the stratigraphy.

Interpretation

Archaeologists are expected, even during excavation, to present a clear chronological sequence for each site to the onlooking public. In Lincoln, annual reports produced from 1973 onwards, available to the general public, developer and academic alike, provide initial interpretations of the results of each site excavated. This usually precedes any extensive post-exavation work but is useful as a quick reference to the sites. In Lincoln's Buried Archaeological Heritage (1990), a publication inspired by Museum of London DUA Archive Catalogue (1987), brief summaries of all the sites excavated between 1972 and 1990 were largely based on the original interpretations, as published in the annual reports.

But transforming a sequence of layers, cuts and features into a site narrative has many pitfalls. There are missing variables in the stratigraphy; truncation removes part of the evidence as does the decay of the strata in situ. We are all human and as such we selectively filter the information; working through all the processes of recording, initial on-site interpretation, post-exavation analysis and publication can change our perceptions on

Fig 1: A network of wattled fences in the mid 10th century had bowed out as a result of the still flowing channel (St Benedict's 1985)
Fig 2: St Paul-in-the-Bail: the Roman forum, the apsidal building and the single cell building with the cist burial

interpretation. Both working through the stratigraphic archive and integration of the stratigraphy with the finds can lead to fresh insights into the formation of a sequence. It is only recently, in the last four years, that Lincoln has fully enjoyed the benefits of an integrated computer system; this, more than anything else, has facilitated stratigraphic analysis.

Reinterpretation
Post-excavation work in Lincoln has provided many examples of the dynamic nature of site interpretation. A few of these are discussed below.

One of the key elements in reinterpretation is the context descriptions. During excavation at St Benedict’s in 1985 one feature was interpreted as a Roman drain to the River Witham which silted up and went out of use in the post-Roman period. During further analysis (examining sections and context descriptions of the silt layers) it was possible to see that, although the drain silted up, the water did not stop running; it merely followed a wider channel and continued into the late Saxon period. The flow of the channel, together with that of the river, had effected the collapse of a network of late Saxon wattles (Fig 1). Its continued existence also explained the later lack of structural features in the middle of the site.

In Lincoln the reassessment of the entire medieval pottery sequence has necessitated revision of the chronological sequence of a number of sites already published. One such site is Flaxengate (1972), particularly the stone phases (Jones R H 1980); some of the context records for this site gave only limited information regarding relationships, which led to the drawing of a matrix where grouped contexts ‘floated’, ie they did not interconnect horizontally. This ultimately meant that stratigraphic relationships had little influence in dictating the interpretation of the sequence across the site; pottery dating had to take the lead in linking one part of the site with another. With the recent changes in pottery interpretation the framework of the matrix has had to shift vertically either up or down.

St Mark’s church in Lincoln (Gilmour and Stocker 1986) is included in the current post-excavation programme (because the earlier part of the
site has yet to be published). This has led to several reinterpretations of the structural sequence, sometimes due to taking a fresh look at the finds. An example of this is an ashy layer with lead waste, interpreted on site as fire debris; recent analysis by one of our finds officers, Jane Cowgill, has shown that this layer is more likely to be part of a programme of refurbishment, leaving fragments of window cames within an ashy occupation layer.

Partly as a result of our reinterpretations of the backlog sites *Lincoln's Buried Archaeological Heritage* has been rewritten and will soon be available under its new name of *Lincoln's Recorded Archaeology*.

**Alternative interpretations**

It is not always possible to reach a definitive interpretation. The stratigraphy can be truncated and reworked with little or no associated pottery as happened at St Paul-in-the-Bail between the late Roman and Late Saxon periods. A timber apsidal building (church) was succeeded by a graveyard; this was then cut by a single cell structure (the core of the late Saxon church). A cist burial which held a 7th century hanging bowl 'floated' between all three events; there were no evident relationships. All these activities occurred in a central location with regard the earlier forum (Fig 2). Radiocarbon dates taken from inhumations sandwiched between the two buildings suggested the possibility of a Roman date for the apsidal building, although their standard deviation would also allow the inhumations to be Middle Saxon. There are many possible permutations of the St Paul-in-the-Bail sequence which is very tantalising, giving no clear-cut interpretations; Andrew Selkirk (1992) has examined these options creatively.

**Conclusions**

Often during excavation an interpretation is outlined and it is difficult to reassess the evidence in a fresh light. Post-exavation analysis in Lincoln has concentrated on the original record (particularly context sheets, plans, sections and slides), with an emphasis on integration with pottery and finds evidence. It may be possible to build up a history of the successive reinterpretations for many of Lincoln's sites. However, it is only relatively recently, with the advantages of computer technology, that we have been able to fine-tune the reinterpretation process, melding the stratigraphy with the finds, to reach an integrated understanding of the site.

**References**

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