

# Yorkshire Archaeological Journal

A Review of History and Archaeology in the County

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/yyaj20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/yyaj20)

## Roman Catterick Re-Visited

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To cite this article: Martin Millett (2022) Roman Catterick Re-Visited, Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, 94:1, 181-186, DOI: [10.1080/00844276.2022.2090702](https://doi.org/10.1080/00844276.2022.2090702)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00844276.2022.2090702>



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Published online: 05 Aug 2022.



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## BOOK REVIEWS

### Roman Catterick Re-visited

**Cataractonium: Establishment, Consolidation and Retreat, Volumes 1 and 2** by Stuart Ross, and Cath Ross, Durham: Northern Archaeological Associates Monograph Series Volume 6, 2021, ISBN (Volume 1): 978-1-910794-19-7 (PDF, 373 pages). ISBN (Volume 2): 978-1-910794-20-3 (PDF 1016 pages; both volumes well illustrated in colour). ISBN (Two-part set): 9781910794210. <https://doi.org/10.5284/1078331>

The pair of digital volumes reviewed here (henceforth *CECR* 1 and 2) present the report from Northern Archaeological Associates (NAA) on the archaeological work undertaken during the improvement of the A1 road from Leeming to Barton. They are principally concerned with the sites investigated at Catterick and Bainsesse, but also include Roman material from other sites on the scheme (Scurragh House, Scotch Corner and Low Street). They complement the previous publications, *Death, Burial and Identity* (Speed and Holst 2018) and *Contact, Concord and Conquest* (Fell 2020) which dealt respectively with the human burials from the road scheme and the important late Iron Age–early Roman settlement discovered at Scotch Corner which I reviewed in an earlier volume of this journal (Millett 2021). Like those, this pair of volumes represents an enormous amount of work on which the authors and multiple contributors are to be congratulated. Although I have some concerns about the outcome of the work at Catterick which I outline below, this should not detract from the long-term value of the information presented here, and as in my previous discussion of the A1 project, my intention in providing a critique is to present ideas for future debate.

But, before turning to the material presented I would like to reiterate my concerns about the mode of publication. Like the earlier volumes, these are very lengthy (Vol. 1, Introductory material and presentation of structural evidence, 373 pp; Vol. 2 Specialist reports and synthesis, 1016 pp), and have been published as pdfs of pages that show every appearance of having been designed for print publication, taking no advantage of the nature of the digital medium. It is a real struggle to read or use the volumes with such huge pdfs and one really doubts whether they are going to attract the readership and research use that they deserve if they remain only available in this form. I would go further and question the value of this approach given the amount of public money that must have gone into the excavation and subsequent analysis. Given the emphasis of current policy on the ‘public benefit’ of the investment in archaeological work on infrastructure projects there must be better ways of making this information available.

A distinguished former colleague of mine in Cambridge once commented at the conclusion of a seminar by a PhD student that he was at one and the same time profoundly impressed and deeply depressed by what he had heard – I feel the same way about these two volumes. I am impressed by the sheer volume of work undertaken and its professionalism, especially in some of the specialist contributions in *CERC* 2. I am depressed by the failure to capitalise on this work to provide new insights to broader understanding of the

dynamics of Roman power in this region – and indeed, in the Roman frontier provinces more broadly. The amount of information we now have from Catterick and adjacent sites must make this area one of the most fully explored of any comparable landscape anywhere on or near the frontiers of the Roman Empire. Although this evidence is derived from a transect cut by the A1 road in its various stages of construction – and thus lacks broad spatial coverage, with little evidence from areas including the successive forts – we do now have an extraordinary amount of information. Much of the earlier work was completed under difficult conditions, sometimes using techniques that now appear crude, but they provided wide coverage and information about the plan of the complex and all were explored in detail in the key volumes edited by Pete Wilson (2002), which tenaciously and skilfully drew this difficult material together into a coherent chronological narrative. But that material – much of which was dug in 1959 – in general lacked the quality of finds and environmental data that we would expect to recover today. These older data are now complemented by the results of the NAA excavations, which although spatially constrained by the road strip, did deploy state-of-the-art excavation and analytical methods and also provide good, deep excavated sequences. Sadly, the great potential of this material is not fully realised in these publications. I will elaborate on this by exploring three interconnected themes: first the quality and potential of the excavated material, second the limitations of the approach followed and its implications, and third the confining conceptual framework of the interpretation provided.

There is insufficient space in this review to do full justice to the massive amount of material recovered from the NAA excavations of 2013–17. They explored a series of areas affected by the road construction (summarized in Table 1, *CERC* 1, pp. 4–5), often in narrow strips that were evidently extremely difficult to excavate adjacent to an extremely busy road and against very tight deadlines. On the site of Roman Catterick itself, the principal excavation areas were north of the River Swale on either side of the A1 at Brompton East and Brompton West, immediately south of the river at Agricola Bridge, and further south again at Fort Bridge. In addition there were a number of smaller interventions on the town site (*CERC* 1, Fig. 1.10 for a complete plan). More extensive strips were excavated immediately to the south of the Roman town at Brough Park and Catterick Racecourse (*CERC* 1, Fig. 1.10), and very extensive areas were also examined on the western fringes of the settlement at Bainsse (*CERC* 1, Fig. 1.14). All these were complemented by geophysical surveys which, along with the evidence from earlier excavations, provide a broader context for the narrow excavation strips. These excavations have extended and deepened understanding of the area in the Roman period. Key results from this work at Catterick have include knowledge of the earliest phases of the settlement on the south side of the river Swale where the examination of deep deposits, previously unexplored, touched on an early Flavian phase. The excavations have also provided sound evidence that the stone defences of the town, previously thought to be of the late third or early fourth century, can be assigned to the early third century. Similarly, the exploration of the later phases of the town provides important evidence for its later fourth century sequence. There is good evidence for the date of abandonment of the Roman site, and limited evidence of late fifth-early sixth century re-occupation (although whether this should really be labelled as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ might be debated). The enormous finds assemblages from the excavations also provide key new information about the Roman economy of the region. There are particularly important assemblages of pottery (including samian ware), glass and environmental material, and the specialist reports (*CERC* 2) will provide a valuable resource for researchers long into the future. There are also important finds from other of the sites explored, with important evidence for the origins and planning of

the settlement at Bainesse in the early second century, and the extremely unusual discovery of a pair of altars dedicated to Mars Condate and Mars Vol[...] from pits at Scurragh (*CECR* 1, 297, 302–3; *CECR* 2, 660–61).

This rich cornucopia of material is however extremely difficult to access. The text in *CECR* 1, which provides the richly illustrated stratigraphic description, is organised by Period (see further below), with the dense descriptive text running across the whole project area, so the evidence from each excavated area is atomised. When this is combined with the problems of using a huge pdf, it is all but impossible for the reader to get a clear feeling for the development of the sequence in any particular area. Similarly, the specialist reports in *CECR* 2. Throughout the two volumes, there is a commendable focus on ‘research themes’ and a series of 36 research questions (*CECR* 1, 14–15), but these seem too often to have constrained thinking rather than stimulating it. The quality of many of the specialist reports is excellent, and they contain some really good material and interesting ideas, but these are easily lost in a wealth of detailed description. It seems remarkable to me that although there is a long synthesis and discussion (*CECR* 2, Chapter 16), this draws comparatively little on this excellent work, so potential cross-linkages between different elements of these key finds and environmental assemblages are very limited.

One of the curious features of these volumes is the approach taken to the phasing with the sites across the whole project fitted into a scheme of Periods (summarised in *CECR* 1, 14 Table 1.2 and *CECR* 2, 892, Table 16.1). These continue those used for the Scotch Corner volume, hence beginning at Period 4 (late first to early second century) and running through to Period 10 (Early Anglo-Saxon). Although such a framework has a clear value in presenting data at a broad level of synthesis, both the structure and deployment of these Periods seem methodologically problematic at the level of analysis of individual areas.

In theory all archaeological analysis of sequences should work from the stratigraphic relationships of deposits which are then calibrated using the finds evidence and/or radiometric data. Period and Phase boundaries are thus defined by key changes in the nature of the deposits and structures uncovered, and hence are very likely to vary between different areas of a single large site. Once the sequences and dating for individual areas are completed and understood, then they can and should be correlated with one another and then compared to historical evidence in order to draw broader conclusions. Of course there are instances, especially in rural situations, where stratigraphic relationships between features are very limited, so spot dating based on finds becomes more important, but the underpinning principle of building sequences upwards from evidence before linking them to historical events ought to remain key. It is not at all clear to me how the sequences in this project have been linked together, and why the overarching structure is one that seems historically driven (following imperial reigns) rather than being based primarily on finds dates and stratigraphy. Given the quality of the excavations, I do not doubt the broad dating offered, but I am surprised that the report is constrained by an historical framework which is itself questionable (see below). This approach fails to highlight key changes in the sequence – for instance, the earliest deposits of the early Flavian period (starting *c.* AD 70) seem to me very different from the slightly later deposits, dated to *c.* AD 80/85 onwards, but they are both treated as parts of one period – Period 4 – hence obscuring or under-estimating the importance of a potentially key change on the site.

This is not simply an issue of methodological purity since the imposition of such a broad historical framework across the whole project area – apparently driven by general models for the Roman military history of the region – also means that we lose any sense of how different sequences may have varied in their speed and intensity of development.

Furthermore, it also subliminally reinforces a tendency to relate change to particular historical events or episodes, thus potentially playing up the role of the Roman state and underestimating the agency of the local inhabitants. Finally, by focusing on broad historically defined periods, it places less emphasis than is desirable on rigorous discussion of dating problems (for instance, in the context of the first century activity, reconciling the differences in emphasis in the dating based on samian, coins, coarse pottery and glass).

The structuring of this volume on the basis of a periodization founded on text-based historical framework is symptomatic of my broad dissatisfaction with the approach followed which is most clearly demonstrated in the discussion chapter (*CECR* 2, 891–951). Here, in the chapter to which many consulting the volume will turn to read the outcome of the project, the conceptual framework becomes very clear, with the principal emphasis on a straightforward narrative history which is largely conceptualised in terms of the role of the Roman military. Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach, which after all dominated the study of Roman Britain in the middle of the twentieth century, it does need to be very firmly based on a careful and much more critical awareness of the textual sources (e.g. how far should we really believe Ammianus *CECR* 2, 928 or Gildas *CECR* 2, 949, let alone base interpretation of the sequences on them?). Equally, in the context of an archaeologically rich landscape like the one examined here, it is surely important to move beyond this to consider the other types of history that complement this traditional approach. I trust readers will forgive me if I illustrate these concerns by exploring just a couple of aspects of the work.

The chronological synthesis begins with the statement “There is no doubt that *Cataractonium* began as a military *vicus* ...” (*CECR* 2, 891). This statement is problematic and raises two problems for me which illustrate more general issues. The first concerns the nature of the earliest settlement at Catterick, for although there is now very good evidence provided to show that there was activity on the future site of *Cataractonium* from sometime around AD 70, the nature of this occupation remains uncertain and there is no evidence for the presence of a fort. It is argued that this early phase was associated with the construction of a bridge for the Dere Street, and that the building of this was associated with the military consolidation of this key route. This is certainly a possible explanation and although I have argued elsewhere that the Dere Street was not constructed until later, perhaps after AD 80 (Ferraby and Millett 2020, 94), I am quite happy to be proved wrong. However, this does require the issues to be debated, and in the context of NAA’s work on the A1, it is worth exploring what the nature of the evidence for the early phase at Catterick represents. The material certainly indicates access to imported Roman material, but such material need not necessarily have reached here through the agency of the army as the finds from Scotch Corner have demonstrated. Equally, if there was a military presence at this date, this does not necessarily indicate that the main road to the North was being constructed at this stage since the Scotch Corner evidence also indicates that there was a pre-existing route running South. On that basis, the Roman military occupation may have been expanding southwards away from land already controlled in the Tees valley, and a regular expansion northwards is simply based on supposition. Equally, as noted in passing (*CERC* 2, 894), the early evidence at Catterick may indicate the presence of a hitherto unrecognised pre-Roman settlement in this area with access to the types of goods circulating as a result of indigenous contacts with the Roman Empire. These are all possibilities which show that there remain a number of questions to answer about this phase and to which the evidence from these excavations might contribute, but this requires the exploration of a range of ideas rather than simply fitting the interpretation to one preconceived model.

My second concern surrounds the concept of the site as a *vicus* not only at this stage but through its subsequent development. After the establishment of a fort which is dated on ceramic grounds to the mid to late 80s, the account describes the settlement as a *vicus* “the type of extramural settlement that developed outside most auxiliary forts occupied for any length of time...and most likely served the requirements of the garrison...” (CECR 2, 891). I am not sure how useful or appropriate this concept is in this context – and its continued use to label the settlement later is even more difficult. This issue goes to the heart of the nature of *Cataractonium* and its role in the region. There can be little doubt that its existence was bound up with the mechanisms of Roman power and the supply of the army in the North as illustrated both by references in the Vindolanda tablets (CECR 2, 899) and throughout the study of the finds, so a link with the military from the mid 80s is uncontroversial, but the nature of that link needs further thought and exploration. It seems clear on the basis of the scale of the settlement at Catterick that it was not dependent on the fort, but linked to the broader support of the Roman army in the North: as such labelling it as a *vicus* is positively misleading. As at Aldborough, we seem to have a settlement dependent on the military economy not on a single fort, although we lack a Latin term to label such a centre. A broader supply function would provide an explanation of the continued development of the site through the period when the local fort was apparently abandoned in the second quarter of the second century. Furthermore it opens up a discussion about the nature of the settlement, and especially its inhabitants and their broader role. There is some discussion of this wider role (CECR 2, 903 ff.) but the social implications of this are not fully appreciated or explored. Where did the population come from, to what extent were they local indigenes, and how far did the economic honeypot of the frontier attract people from elsewhere in the Province or from Gaul, Germany and beyond? In the account provided in this volume the people living at *Cataractonium* are consistently presented as passive, with the agency for change wholly left in the hands of Roman military or officials. It is presupposed that governance was in control of the military without any debate of the nature of control and the potential for the development of a self-governing community. This leads to some very odd conclusions, for instance, in the context of the development of the defences we are told that the “distinctive rounded corners to the North suggest the enclosure was constructed under military supervision” (CECR 2, 911). Such comments betray an extraordinarily colonialist view of the capacity of the site’s population.


Complex sites like Catterick surely suggest not a passive and servile people, but a dynamic population that came together under the influence of the new circumstances of the Roman world and developed a society and economy that although dependent on the Roman military and its extraordinary spending power, also had its own cultural dynamics. Comparable aspects of this complex pattern are seen elsewhere in the region with a strong pattern of development that focused on the communications networks (both road and riverine), through which the resources from further afield could be drawn into the supply network. Connections up the valleys and dales, and from far across the region were operationalised presumably by both local people as well as incomers to support the Roman army, but the mechanisms of this have hardly been explored. Aspects of these processes are richly illustrated by the material from Catterick itself, whilst the other roadside sites examined in this project as well as the probable river-port at Bainesse provide complementary insights into these processes. Aspects of the finds assemblages, for instance the evidence for literacy or locks and security have the potential to enrich understanding of these processes, but they are sadly sidelined here in an interpretation that prioritizes a history of the military. Whilst passing soldiers and periods of garrisoning were no doubt

important, the settlement cries out to be understood in terms of a much broader and richer social and economic history.

My depression is lifted because of the quality of the material included here and in the associated ADS archive. There is the raw material available from this project to re-write a significant part of the history of the region and I hope that a generation of new scholars will utilise it. One of my own PhD students is already drawing on the material that has been collected and I am confident he is making good use of the material. I am only sorry that the publication under review did not take advantage of the material in a more contemporary frame.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00844276.2022.2090702>



**Life and Death and Rubbish Disposal in Roman Norton, North Yorkshire: Excavations at Brooklyn House 2015–16**, by Janet Phillips and Pete Wilson, Oxford, Archaeopress Roman Archaeology, 2021, 77 pp., vii + 283 Illustrations, 209 many in colour, ISBN 9781789698381

At first glance the title of this volume reads like a satirical take on *Life, The Universe and Everything* in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe* series. However, it neatly encapsulates an account of an excavation in the Roman settlement at Norton on Derwent. The fort and *vicus* at Malton on the opposite side of the river have been well known to archaeologists since the nineteenth century, but until recently the settlement at Norton less so. None the less, it is becoming increasingly clear that in the late Roman period, at least, Norton was a large and significant place in its own right. This report on an excavation, clearly conducted to a high standard, is therefore to be welcomed. North Yorkshire County Council is to be congratulated for making ample funds available for a thorough and detailed report on the sequence and the finds.