

Art and architecture in Roman Colchester

Mark Davies

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Report by G Adams

The first lecture of the season was given by Mark Davies FSA, long-standing member of the CAG and former assistant curator at Colchester Castle Museum. It was titled 'Art and architecture in Roman Colchester' and it was fully illustrated with nearly 60 slides. Mr Davies presented a selection of the art and architecture of Roman Colchester in comparison with examples from the Continent, as at Autun, Lyon and Orange in France, and Aphrodisias and Hieropolis in Turkey, as well as Chester and St Albans in Britain.

The first image was a reconstruction painting of Roman Colchester in about AD 48, from the CAT popular book *City of Victory: the story of Colchester, Britain's first Roman town* (painting by Peter Froste). Using the evidence from archaeological excavations in and around the town, and a number of CAT excavation photos, Mr Davies took the audience through the early history of Roman Colchester: from AD 43 and the Roman fortress to the civilian town and its public buildings, such as the Temple of Claudius and its adjacent theatre, plus a possible basilica, in the formal civic area at the eastern end of the town. There was also a temple dedicated to Jupiter on the site of St Helena School outside the walled town. Fragments or representations of Roman emperors, such as the bust of Caligula from Colchester, the head of Nero or Claudius from Suffolk which may have come from Colchester, and two large bronze fingers from Colchester, suggest that Roman Colchester featured imperial monuments with bronze statuary.

The Roman temple at Aphrodisias in Turkey was dedicated to the imperial cult and Mr Davies related it to Colchester's Roman temple which is also thought to have been dedicated to the imperial cult. Aphrodisias was the provincial capital of the province of Caria in the Roman empire. Mr Davies related the Roman arch at Autun in France to the Roman arch which is now the Balkerne Gate in Colchester. Autun (the Roman town of Augustodunum) was also a provincial capital within the Roman empire, as was Roman Colchester for a while. The Roman cemetery at Hieropolis in Turkey was considered in relation to the approach to Roman Colchester from the west, through a cemetery area and including roadside funerary monuments and shrines, such as the two famous monuments to Roman soldiers Longinus and Facilis.

Within the walled town, houses in Roman Colchester ranged from the modest to the very large courtyard house excavated by CAT on their site at Lion Walk and are similar to Roman houses at Pompeii and Herculaneum. A plan of the Roman town here showed the large number of mosaic floors which have been recorded in Colchester, for example, one in Head Street; one in Lion Walk; three mosaic floors from sites on North Hill; the 'Berryfield mosaic', now displayed at Firstsite; and the Middleborough mosaic, now displayed at Colchester Castle Museum. (Conserving the 'Berryfield mosaic' was Mr Davies' first project when he started work at Colchester Castle Museum.) Colchester has also produced 'everyday' Roman devotional objects such as small metal figurines, including one of the goddess Minerva.

The larger Roman figure of the god Mercury was discovered at Gosbecks near Colchester. Mr Davies linked the Roman theatre at Gosbecks with the Temple of Claudius and its adjacent theatre and discussed them in relation to Roman public entertainments as at the Roman theatre at Orange in France. Mr Davies showed a series of slides of Roman artefacts from Colchester, including a picture lamp decorated

with a theatrical mask, and the figurine of an actor, and the famous Roman 'circus vase' which is held by the British Museum and which shows scenes from a chariot-race in a Roman circus.

There is evidence of some high-quality Roman art and architecture in Colchester, which Mr Davies considers to be as good as any examples at Pompeii or Herculaneum. He concluded that, if you had enough money here in provincial Roman Colchester, then you could buy the best-quality products. Mr Davies also observed that there is still a very large area within the walled town centre which has not yet been archaeologically investigated, so there is more evidence of Roman Colchester to come!

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