

Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1972: Interim Report

By CHRISTOPHER J. YOUNG

SUMMARY. *The second season's work at the Churchill Hospital confirmed the existence of two phases of pottery manufacture on the main part of the site, the first dating to the late 3rd century, the second to the 4th century. The principal discoveries were a pottery drying area, ancillary structures and kiln of the second phase, showing that the layout and scale of this complex were similar to those of the first phase. The ditch system was further examined and is now considered to be the remains of an early Roman field system.*

In addition, work was started on the south-western part of the available site. This located more early Roman ditches and a kiln of the 4th century which is the best preserved so far discovered in the Oxford region. It is not yet possible to say whether or not this is part of the second phase workshop complex.

INTRODUCTION

DURING 1972 the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee carried out further work on the Roman kiln site at the Churchill Hospital, Headington, Oxford (SP 546057) under the joint direction of Mr. T. G. Hassall and myself. After two weeks of mechanical trial trenching at Easter, various areas totalling about 1,000 square metres were completely excavated during a six-week summer season. The total cost of excavation was £1,000 and we are grateful to an anonymous donor for a gift of £500, the Meyerstein Fund of Oxford University for a grant of £100 and the Haverfield Trustees for one of £75.

We thank Messrs. T. Harvey and I. Orger of the Churchill Hospital and Dr. I. Grant and Mr. P. Collins of the Regional Blood Transfusion Unit for their continued willing assistance and support. Many other members of both institutions provided valuable help. Once again I wish to thank Mr. Hassall for his efficient organization and advice. Messrs. B. Durham and G. Lambrick acted as site supervisors. Mr. N. Hawley was surveyor, Mr. B. Durham photographer, and Mrs. J. Young was in charge of the finds shed. I owe much to all of these.

This report summarizes the results of the 1972 season. A final report is in preparation and will be published in due course. An interim report of the first season's work has been published and this contains a fuller account of the site's topography and of its relationship to other Roman features in the area. It also illustrates the major products of the site.¹

THE SITE

The site lies in the south-eastern corner of the Hospital grounds on a sloping plateau bounded to the south-east by the gorge of the Lye valley and is surrounded

¹ C. J. Young, 'Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1971; interim report', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 11-32, referred to hereafter as *Churchill Hospital: 1st interim*.

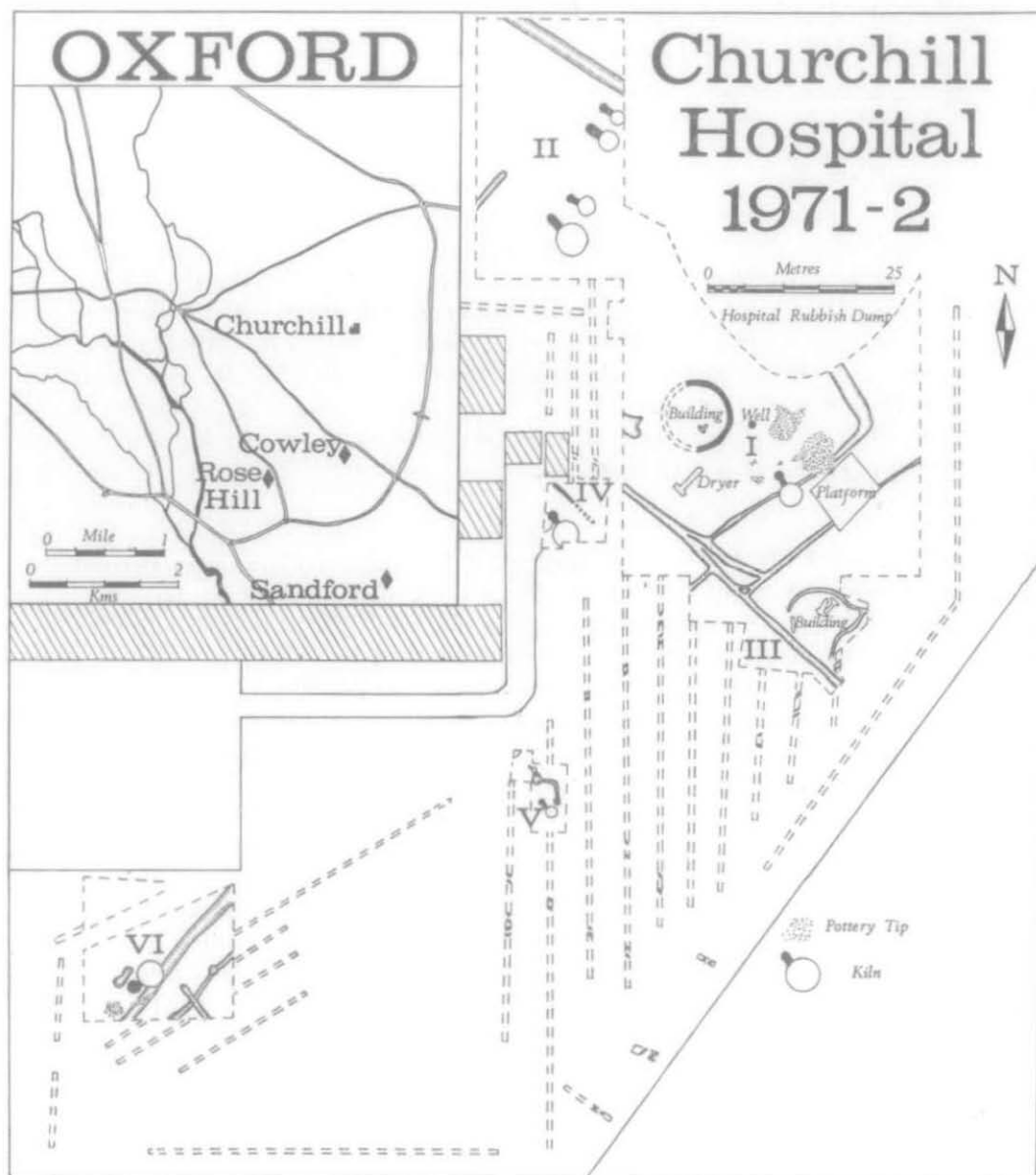


FIG. 1

to north and west by buildings. The natural consists of sand containing rafts of calcareous grit, overlying the Oxford Clay. It is one of an important complex of late Roman pottery manufactories.² In 1971, excavation of an area of c. 2,000 square metres discovered remains of two periods of potting activity. The first of these dated to the late third century and comprised a workshop, well, stone platform and four kilns. Its principal products were wide-mouthed jars, flanged bowls, beakers and flagons in orange ware and mortaria in white ware.³ Second phase remains were a kiln, a large T-shaped dryer and a number of pottery tips. The main products were mortaria in white ware, but some parchment ware and some coarse ware were also made. The occurrence of a coin of Valens (A.D. 368–374) in one of the pottery tips showed that activity continued into the last quarter of the 4th century. Prehistoric and earlier Roman activity in the area was indicated by stray finds.

THE EXCAVATION

Extensive trial trenching was carried out at Easter, 1972, with a JCB 3C mechanical excavator in the south and south-west parts of the site (see FIG. 1). This method was not entirely satisfactory as insubstantial remains tended not to be detectable in such narrow trenches. The trial trenches did, however, identify certain areas of interest, revealed traces of numerous ditches and showed that the hollow area in the south-eastern part of the site had filled with a grey silty deposit in late or post-Roman times.

It was decided to concentrate the main effort of the year on four areas. Sites III and IV were both extensions of Site I, dug in 1971. Site V lay 25 metres south-west of Site III, and Site VI further to the south-west was started to investigate an area shown by trial trenching to contain pottery dumps. The total area excavated was c. 1,000 square metres. As might be expected certain of last year's tentative conclusions have now had to be modified although the division of the pottery manufacture into two phases still seems correct. The following periods of occupation have now been identified:

I. *Pre-Roman*

This occupation is still only represented by stray finds of flints, and possibly, of pottery.

II. *Early Roman* (FIGS. 1 AND 2)

Excavation of further stretches of the ditch system discovered in 1971 on Site III showed that certain of the ditches, in particular F.204/227, had been dug out to a much greater depth as they descended the slope of the plateau. It became clear that late 3rd- and 4th-century pottery was found only in the upper layers of the ditch fills and that it occurred only in scattered concentrations. Pottery from the lower levels of F.204/227 which seemed to form the main trunk

² C. J. Young, 'The Pottery Industry of the Oxford Region', in A. P. Detsicas (ed.), *Current Research on Romano-British Coarse Pottery* (1973), 105–115.

³ *Churchill Hospital: 1st interim*, 21.

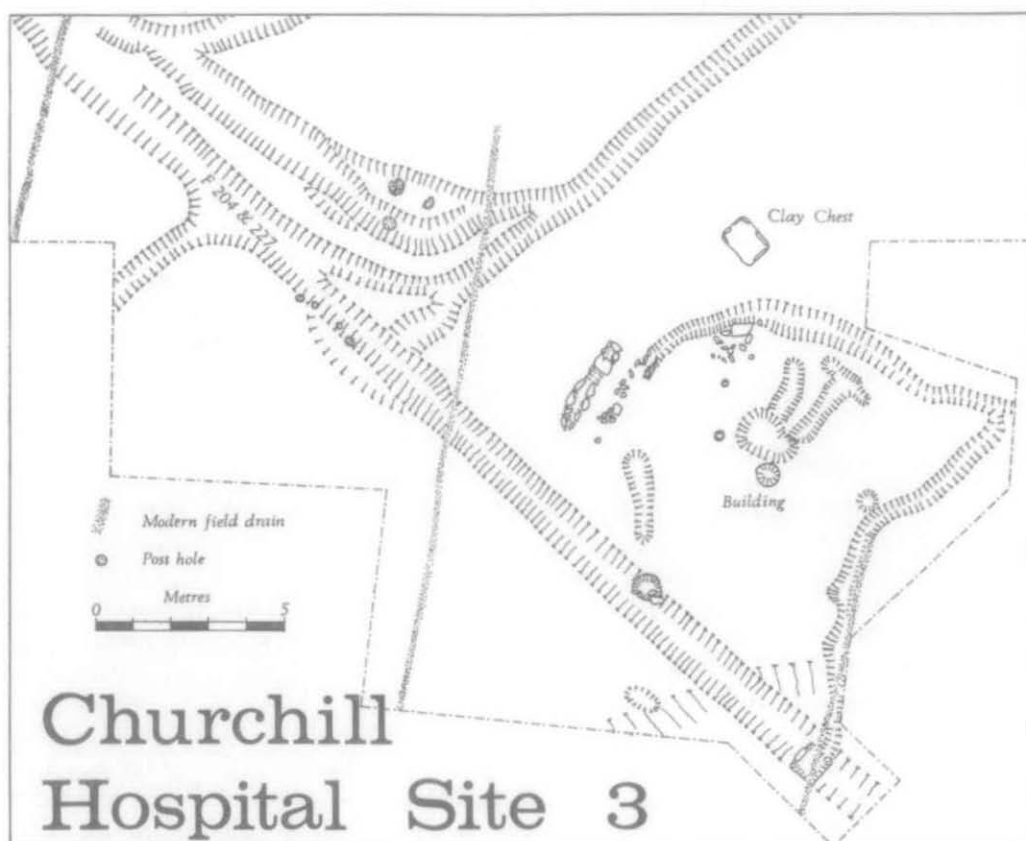


FIG. 2

of the system on Sites I and III dated entirely to the second century A.D. or earlier. Many of the shallower ditches contained little or no pottery but those on Sites I and II do form a regular layout based on F.204/227 and it seems likely that they are all of the same date and formed part of some sort of field system. In the south-east corner of Site III, F.204/227 cut two ditches which must be earlier and this clear indication of more than one drainage system means that it is not yet possible to attribute the ditches cut by the trial trenches to one phase or another. Their occurrence, however, does suggest that some sort of ditch system extended over large areas of the site.

III. Pottery Manufacture, Phase I (FIG. 1, PL. XIV, A)

Little new was added to our knowledge of this in 1972. Only one structure possibly belonging to it was found. This was a small kiln on the southern part of Site V (PL. XIV, A), lying well to the south of the other Phase I features. Unlike the four Phase I kilns found in 1971, which had stone-built furnace chambers, it was constructed entirely of clay. Its attribution to Phase I depends on the

occurrence in it of pottery fabrics, such as Churchill orange ware, which did not continue to be made after the first phase.⁴

The kiln had been badly damaged in antiquity and no trace remained of a tongue-pedestal or of any other method of floor support for the pottery chamber. Lumps of a permanent vent-holed clay floor were found in the fill of the kiln and it seems likely that it had originally had a floor of this type. In common with the other clay-built kilns of the Churchill it had been constructed by plastering clay around the walls of a pit to form the furnace chamber. It is so far the only kiln on the site to show signs of a definite rebuilding as it had been relined with a roughly built wall of lumps of kiln debris, pottery sherds and stones held together by clay. This clay was still soft and had obviously been only part-fired which suggests that the repairs were not successful.

IV. Pottery Manufacture, Phase II (FIGS. 1 AND 2 ; PLS. XIV, B, XV, A, B)

In 1971, a kiln, a T-shaped dryer and a number of pottery tips were attributed to this phase which was shown to have continued into the late 4th century (see above, p. 209). The excavation of Sites III-V produced valuable new evidence, including structural remains, a clay chest and two kilns.

Of these the most important were the structural remains (FIG. 2, PL. XIV, B). These had unfortunately been largely destroyed by ploughing and pose considerable problems of interpretation. The principal feature to survive was a gully running in an arc from west to east. At its eastern end it straightened and continued out of the excavated area. Joining it was another gully which ran to the south, dog-legged to the west and then continued south and terminated in a rectangular pit cut through the fill of F.227. At the angle of the dog-leg it impinged upon a small pit containing pottery that is possibly prehistoric.

The arced section of the east-west gully contained many stones and at the west end these continued beyond the apparent end of the gully for a short distance and seemed to be pitched footings. To the west of this patch of stone was a slot, slightly curved and running north-south, 2.75 m. long and 0.5 m. wide. This was lined with large pitched slabs of stone and contained a sherd of a stamped mortarium of Vossullus, which must be residual if the slot is connected with the features under discussion. About mid-way along the curved section of the east-west gully was a patch of pitched stone footings supporting a flat stone slab.

At the centre of the arc made by the gully was a hole 0.5 m. across and 0.1 m. deep and cut into the fill of F.227 was another hole, filled with stones and red ash, on the same radius from the first hole as the curved gully. It should be noted that neither of these features produced definite dating evidence to associate them with the gullies. Both could be post-holes. The area between the presumed central post-hole and the curved gully had been slightly dug out in antiquity, thus producing a level platform on the gentle slope of the plateau.

Within the area enclosed by these features were three small pottery dryers. Two of these were of the T-shaped variety found in the Phase I workshop in

⁴ *Idem*, 23.

1971⁵. Both were radial to the building and one had replaced the other. The first had its cross-arm near the central post-hole and its stokehole next to the gully while the second was on a reversed alignment, its stokehole being placed in the cross-arm of the first. Some of the pitched wall stones of this dryer survived *in situ*. The third dryer was a slot 2.00 m. long, wider at its northern end than its southern end. This is not of the usual type but the presence of ash and charcoal in the narrower end shows that it was used for some process involving heat. It seems most likely that it was a simple pottery dryer.

The interpretation of this area is difficult since it has been so badly damaged. It seems from the presence of the dryers that it was used for drying pottery before firing. The gully to the north was obviously intended to drain off surface water coming down the hill and discharged itself through the dog-leg gully into a sump inserted into the fill of F.227. The patches of stone footings and the two post-holes must be the traces of a shelter or shelters over the dryers. If this interpretation is correct it seems that this was part of the preparation area of the Phase II complex and was used in particular for drying pottery before firing.

The existence of such a preparation area is further supported by the finding of a clay chest, 1.1 m. long and 0.8 m. wide, lined along sides and bottom with slabs of stone. This was filled with light bluish-grey, plastic clay containing many large sherds of pottery (mainly mortaria). North-west of the workshop, the area where several of the 2nd century ditches intersected had been used as a pottery dump. A number of post-holes were found in this area. Several of these were cut into the ditch fills and most of them were stone-lined. One contained a charcoal stain of its post and was surrounded by charcoal and ash. The alignment of the post-holes suggests that they may have formed the supports of a foot-bridge across the silted, but presumably water-logged, ditches.

North of this were the kiln and the large T-shaped dryer found in 1971. Another kiln of identical design, associated with Phase II products was found on Site IV (PL. xv, A). It had been cut into the filled-up stokehole of another kiln which it was not possible to excavate. Apart from a stone-lined flue it was constructed entirely of clay and was in a good state of preservation. The furnace chamber had been constructed from puddled clay in a pit, slightly larger than the kiln which had then been backfilled. The floor of the pottery chamber, 0.08 m. thick, survived and was supported on the tongue pedestal and on corbels around the side of the furnace chamber. There were large vent holes between the corbels and there were further smaller vent holes in the centre of the floor. The walls of the pottery chamber had disappeared completely. North of the kiln the footings of a wall ran diagonally across Site IV. This had been badly robbed out and it was not possible to trace it beyond this trench. Its date is uncertain.

Other features containing Phase II pottery were found on Site V. In the north-west corner of the trench was a very small tongue-pedestal updraught kiln (PL. xv, B). Only the furnace chamber survived. This was 0.8 m. long and 0.05 m. wide and the stokehole was so shallow as to be almost indistinguishable.

⁵ *Idem*, 15-16.

Four post-holes around the kiln suggest that it may have had some sort of shelter over it. Adjacent to this was a rectangular pit dug out to below the water table with an overflow channel running to a smaller pit. In addition, part of a pit or a stokehole was found in the north-west corner of the trench. Since all these features contained Phase II pottery and contained little typical of the earlier activity it is likely that they are associated with the Phase II workshop.

The results of the 1972 season therefore confirm the existence of a second workshop complex, similar to that identified in 1971. Once again there seems to be a division between a firing area containing kilns and a preparation area. The finds from Site V suggest that kilns existed also to the west of the preparation area. This complex was certainly still working in the late 4th century (see above p. 209), but it is not yet clear when in the 4th century it commenced operations. The manner in which all the Phase II features, except pottery dumps, avoided the area of the Phase I workshop may well suggest that this area was still encumbered by ruins when the later complex was established.

Site VI (FIG. 1, PL. XVI, A, B)

The features on this site are discussed separately since it is some distance from the main excavation. Without excavation of the intervening area it is not possible to establish a positive correlation with the occupation phases defined on Sites I to V. A 20-metre square was excavated completely apart from a baulk containing a power cable which ran across one corner of the site. As on the other areas the natural consisted of sand rafts of calcareous grit.

Several ditches were discovered. Apart from a large ditch running from south-west to north-east across the site, these contained little pottery. The few sherds in the large ditch were early Roman. It is possible that the ditches are connected with the system or systems identified to the north-east (see above, p. 209).

Remains of pottery manufacture were found. The principal feature was a large kiln (PL. XVI, A). This kiln is the best preserved and one of the largest so far found in the Oxford region. It was of the same type as the Phase II kilns and built entirely of clay apart from the flue which had been revetted with pitched stone slabs, one of which had collapsed across the flue. The furnace chamber had a tongue pedestal projecting from the back wall and corbels around the sides which supported the floor of the pottery chamber. The floor had survived apart from the collapse of its centre (PL. XVI, B) and was formed of a thick layer of clay. Between the corbels were large vent holes. A row of four smaller holes had been pierced through the floor where it crossed the flue and traces of similar holes were found around the collapsed area of the floor.

It is probable that the floor had collapsed during a firing; several complete or near-complete mortaria were found in the furnace chamber and a very thick layer of debris and mortarium sherds was found immediately above the ash and charcoal layer which had accumulated on the bottom of the stokehole. This is probably the wreckage from the last firing.

Although the kiln is identical in design to those of Phase II found on Sites I

and IV it cannot necessarily be attributed to that phase because of the distance of Site VI from Sites I-IV. The fact that the alignment of this kiln is at right angles to that of every other kiln so far found on the Churchill site also urges caution in attempting any correlation. The principal product of the kiln was the Type A mortarium,⁶ current from A.D. 250 to A.D. 400+. The near total absence of Phase I fabrics such as Churchill orange ware suggests a date in the 4th century rather than one in the late 3rd for this kiln.

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⁶ *Idem*, 25-27.

PLATE XIV

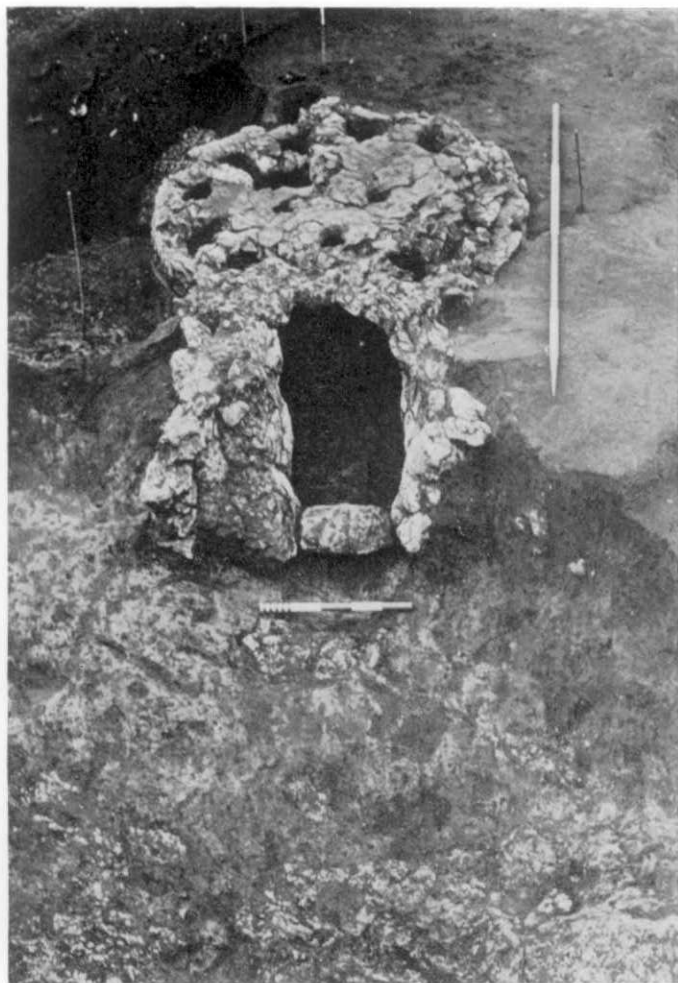


A. Phase I kiln, Site V. Scale = 0.5 m.

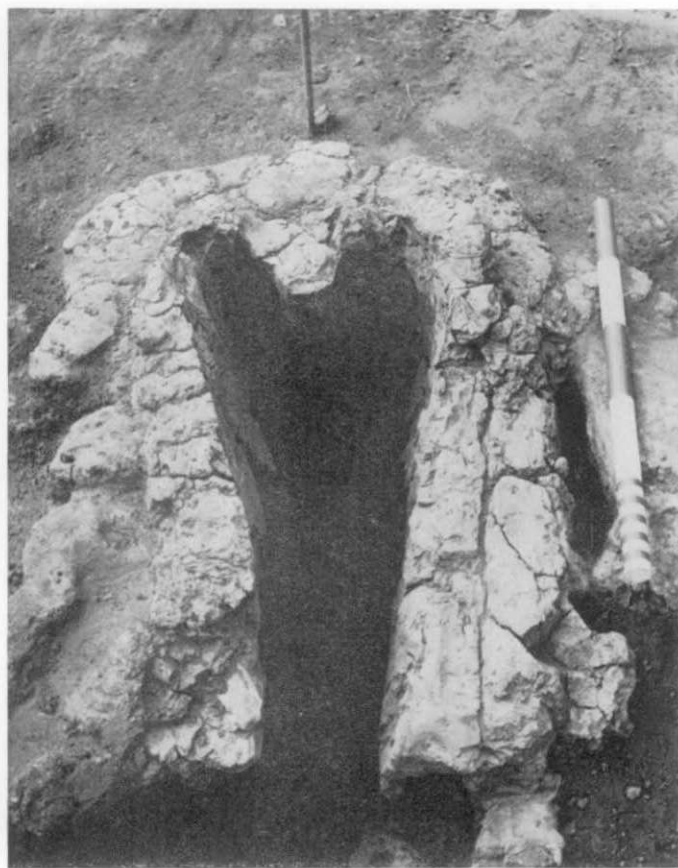


B. General view of Phase II pottery dryers and structural remains, with second century ditch in foreground. Scales = 2 m.

Phh. : B. G. Durham

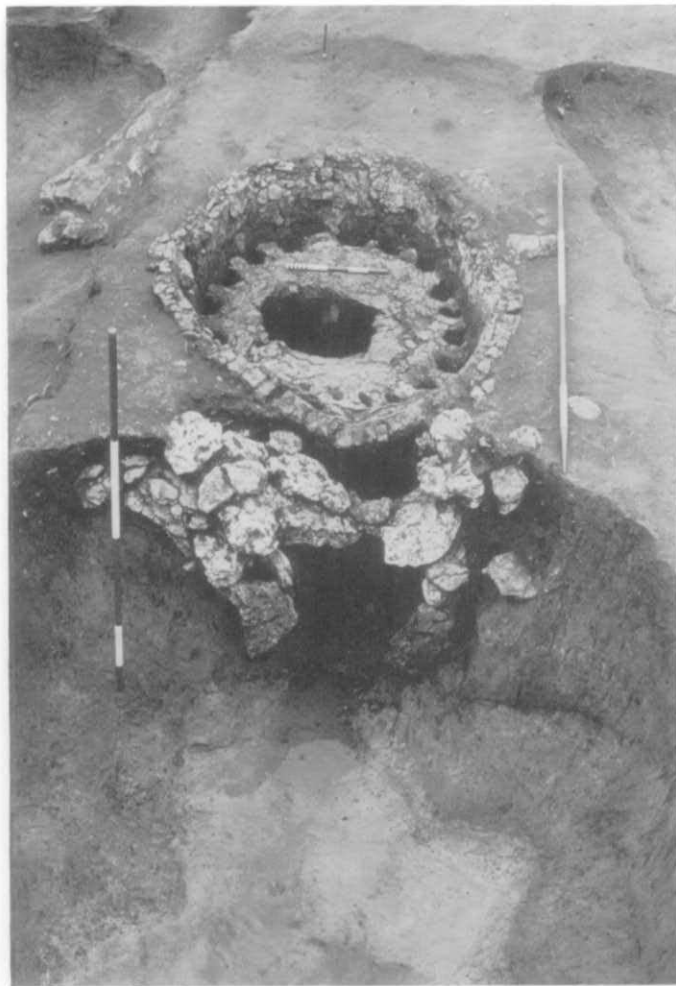


A. Phase II kiln, Site IV. Scales = 0.5 and 2 m.

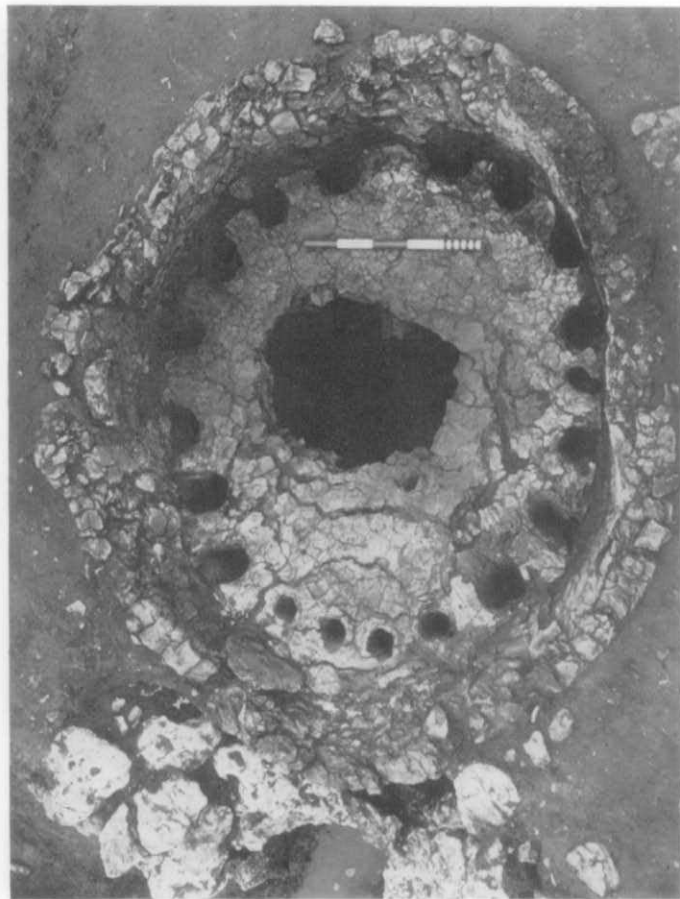


B. Phase II kiln, Site V. Scale = 0.5 m.

Phh. : B. G. Durham



A. General view of 4th century kiln, Site VI. Scales = 0.5 and 2 m.



B. Floor of 4th century kiln, Site VI, from above. Scale = 0.5.

Phh. : B. G. Durham