The Wroxeter Macellum: A Foodway in Every Sense

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The macellum at Wroxeter is a building of particular interest, as it is a rarity in the province and there have been few detailed examples of macellum sites in the empire. The building can be seen as the focus of a street market which functioned through at least three centuries. The macellum – whose plan is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 – seems to have been built as part of the major phase of development from the 150s AD onwards and which formed part of the building programme whose main element was the baths and exercise hall. The classic studies of macella and markets in general are those by Claire de Ruyt and Joan Frayn. Of these, de Ruyt’s is an exhaustive study of all linguistic literary references to these types of structure, with some discussion about the type of building which comes under the definition of macellum and finally a gazetteer of all known sites. Frayn’s study also covers the literary and linguistic evidence, but takes the form of a more analytical study of the evidence.

So what was a macellum? In short, it was a structure, usually square or rectangular, with a row of shops or booths arranged around a central courtyard, at the centre of which was a fountain or water source. These varied in size, and although they are found throughout the Roman Empire, they are by no means a ubiquitous feature of all Roman towns. At Wroxeter, the macellum clearly conforms to the general pattern (cf. below, Figures 5 and 7); constructed as part of the complex which included a bath-house and which occupied an entire insula of the town, it comprised 12 booths, four to on each of the north, east and south sides. There was a latrine installed in the south-east corner, while the west side, which opened through two entrances on to a main street, took the form of a portico. The macellum itself was some 25m x 20m, while the ‘shops’ were about 3.5m square. There may well have been an upper floor accessed by a wooden staircase, following the pattern of shops at sites such as Herculaneum or Pompeii.

Wroxeter: The historical context

Wroxeter itself is regarded as one of the civitas or tribal capitals which were established in Britain during the period of ‘Flavian expansion’ after AD 70. Its Latin name was Viroconium Cornoviorum or ‘Viroconium of the Cornovii’; the Cornovii were a tribe whose territory overlaps much of modern Cheshire and Shropshire. Prior to the Roman occupation, it seems that the area was well-populated and productive:
Landscape analysis suggests a pre-Roman field layout with roads focused on a river crossing...aerial photography indicated numerous enclosed farmsteads in the area, though to be Iron Age in origin...and their numbers in the area around Wroxeter indicate a concentration of population...the Wrekin hillfort to the east represents a central Cornovian place, and the link between The Wrekin and Wroxeter is emphasised by the transfer of the name from one to the other.\(^5\)

**Figure 1:** Pre-Roman territory of the Cornovii (White & Barker Figure 13, p. 33).
The tribe may have been on good terms with the occupying Roman forces immediately after the invasion of AD 43 – certainly, the invasion did not affect them directly at this early stage – and it was only after attacks on the Roman-controlled south-east part of Britain (south of the Fosse Way, linking Exeter and Lincoln) that military counter-attacks against the Silures and Ordovices and in what is now Wales necessitated the establishment of bases in this area. Between c. AD 60 and 90 a succession of units seem to have been based on the site before the legionary fortress was abandoned and its place was taken by the capital of the tribe, now organised on Roman lines with an urban centre as its focus. Work on this is likely have begun in the 90s AD, but was given extra impetus during the 120s following Hadrian’s visit to Britain (see the reproduction of the forum dedication, Figures 3). The evidence provided by the archaeology is disputed; but at any event Wroxeter’s location was a principal reason for its evident prosperity. Wacher comments that it ‘lay astride one of the main natural routes into Wales. In this sense it early became a frontier town, probably enjoying benefits from trade not only with civilians, but also with army personnel stationed in the region.’ Its piazza, at 242 ft (74 m) by 225 ft (69 m), was nearly twice the size of the one found further south at Silchester; the nave of its basilica was about 170 ft (52 m) and 38 ft (11.6 m) wide, with side aisles and rooms and either end.

As can be seen from the site plans of Wroxeter, the *macellum* was evidently conceived as a separate, independent structure from the forum proper. It consisted of a square arrangement of booths or shops with a fountain (the archaeology not definite but probable).

Figure 2: The *Old Work* at Wroxeter (photograph: C. Grocock). This huge wall joined the basilica to the baths complex.
Figure 3: The plan of the mature Roman town of Wroxeter (Wacher, Towns of Roman Britain, Figure 165).
Figure 4: The baths complex showing the *macellum* at the bottom right (White & Barker, Figure 46, p. 88).
Figure 5: Wroxeter forum dedication (White & Barker, Figure 40, p.78.

Imp(eratori) Ca[es(ari)] di[vi] Traiani Parthi\ci fil\O\) di[vi] N[erva\nep\i] Tra\i]ano \H[a\driano Aug\(usto) ponti[fi]\ci maximo trib\(uniciae) pot\(estate\ XXII[\I\(i\] \ci\(vi\) Corn\[i\o\])

For the Emperor Caesar Trajan Hadrian, son of the deified Trajan Conqueror of Parthia, grandson of the deified Nerva, pontifex maximus, in his fourteenth year of tribunician power, three times consul, father of his country, the civitas of the Cornovii (set this up).

Figure 6: Latin and English translation of the Wroxeter dedication inscription (LACTOR 4, no. 138).
Figure 7: The *macellum* at Wroxeter (G. Webster, *The Cornovii*, Figure 25).
The Wroxeter Macellum

Figure 8: The south-west range of INSVLA V (the *macellum* in bottom right) (photograph: C. Grocock)

Figure 9: The hypocaust rooms and the ‘old work’ (photograph: C. Grocock)
Classical literary references

There are a few references to *macellum* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, where it is defined as (1) ‘a provision-market; the provision-merchants, the trade’, and (2) provisions sold in the market.’ As will be seen from what follows, the most interesting ones come from the comic poets Plautus and Terence, which (arguably) provide just a little social or historical background from Rome in the late 2nd century BC. The translations are my own.

1. Plautus, *Amphitruo* 1010-12

(Amphitruo has been looking for Naucrates, a relative of his wife Alcmena).

\[\text{nam omnis plateas perreptaui, gymnasia et myropolia;}\]
\[\text{apud emporium atque in macello, in palaestra atque in foro,}\]
\[\text{in medicinis, in tostrinis, apud omnes aedes sacras}\]
\[\text{defessus quaeritando: nusquam inuenio Naucratem}.\]

I’ve crawled through every piazza, gymnasium and perfume-shop;
in the bazaar and in the *macellum*, in the wrestling-yard and in the forum,
in the doctors’, in the barbers’, in every sacred shrine
I’m exhausted by looking for him; I can’t find Naucrates anywhere.’

Here the obvious point to make, in the comic list of places to look for someone, is the fact that *macellum* is distinguished from *forum*, which in ancient republican Rome seems to have been more of a general place for public activity such as banking and negotiation. The same emphasis on specific types of produce is found in the examples which follow, too. In fact, we can identify a number of specialist retail outlets in ancient Rome in addition to the main *forum*: there was the *forum boarium* or cattle market (possibly livestock rather than butchered meat; Varro, *Lingua Latina* 5. 146, Livy 10. 23. 3); the *forum (h)olitorum* or greengrocery (Varro *Lingua Latina* 5.146, Tacitus *Annals* 2. 49); the *piscatoris forum* or fish market (Columella 8. 17. 15), and the *forum suarium* or pig market (referred to in Ulpian, *Digest* 1. 12. 1. 11).


(Euclio has been shopping for his daughter’s wedding).

\[\text{venio ad macellum, rogito piscis; indicant}\]
\[\text{caros; agninam caram, caram bubulam,}\]
\[\text{vitulinum cetum, porcinam; cara omnia}\]
\[\text{atque eo fuerant cariora, aes non erat}.\]

Draft Version: Not for Citation or Attribution
I come to the *macellum*, I ask for fish; they point out the dear ones; 
lamb is dear, beef is dear,  
so is veal, tuna, pork; everything is dear  
and all the more so as I hadn’t any money!'

The list of items which proved to be far beyond Euclio’s budget give us a clear indication of 
the kinds of produce which could be purchased in the *macellum* at Rome. It is all fish or meat.

3. *Terence*, *Eunuchus* 255-8

Gnatho, a ‘Parasitvs’ or professional hanger-on, is speaking:

> dum haec loquimur, interealoci ad macellum ubi advenimus,  
> concurrunt laeti mi obviam, cuppedinarii omnes,  
> cetarii lanii coqui fartores piscatores,  
> quibus et re salva et perdita profueram et prosum saepe...\(^1\)2

While we were chatting about these things, as bye the bye we came to the *macellum*,  
there run up happy to meet me all the confectioners,  
fishmongers, butchers, cooks, sausage makers, sprat-sellers,  
to whom I’ve done much good whether I was solvent or not, and often still do...

4. *Horace*, *Satires* 2. 3. 226-9

Horace talks of a spendthrift called Nomenclatus, and has a similar list to the one we saw  
in Terence:

> hic simul accepit patrimoni mille talenta,  
> edicit, piscator uti, pomarius, auceps,  
> ungentarius ac Tusci turba impia vici,  
> cum scurris fartor, cum Velabro omne *macellum*  
> mane domum ueniant.

As soon as this fellow received his legacy of a thousand talents,  
he proclaimed that the fruiterer, sprat-seller, poulterer,  
perfumer and the unholy crowd from the Tuscan quarter,  
the sausage-maker and the wastrels, the whole produce-market and the Velabrum\(^1\)3  
should come to his house in the morning.
The central areas of republican and imperial Rome. The Forum Boarium was at the centre; it is thought that the Forum Holitorium lay just to its right (Oxford Archaeological Guides, Figure 112).

Here again we see the *macellum* referred to as the source of high-class luxury goods, which typically meet with opprobrium in Roman authors. Susanna Morton Braund perhaps goes a little too far when she renders the word as ‘delicatessen’ in her translation of Juvenal, 5. 95, but the sense of luxury and good living is certainly implicit in the other depictions of the a *macellum* in literature which we have seen. Similarly Martial refers to *pretiosa fames conturbantorque macellus*, ‘costly hunger and the *macellum* which brings utter ruin.’

5. Anonymous, Moretum 83

*urbani...merce macelli*

with produce from the city’s provision market.
The ‘hero’ of the poem *Moretum* is described here as producing lots of salads and green vegetables such as radish, lettuce, cabbage, sorrel and leeks – all products with a short-shelf life – which he takes into town to sell: ‘on market days would carry his bundles on his shoulder into the city to sell them, and would return home from there with an unburdened neck and a heavy purse, scarcely ever with a purchase from the city’s provision market’.

It is possible that the perishables which Simulus produced were sold in a different place – Rome’s *forum holitorium* would be a suitable venue – and the poet is stressing that he spends very little on *meat*, for which – as seems likely from the references in Plautus and Terence – *macellum* was the appropriate term.


Pliny looks back in time to an era when households did not have slave-cooks:

*nec cocos uero habebant in seruitiis, eosque in macello conducebant.*

Neither did they keep cooks as slaves, and hired them in the *macellum*.

Wroxeter

To return to the site at Wroxeter. It is interesting to note that there may have been a *forum boarium* or cattle market on this site as well, in *Insula III*. This would have been the gathering place for livestock (and perhaps slaughter?) before butchery proper took place at the *macellum*. The *macellum* construction sequence is summarised by Ellis, with a brief overview by White *et al.*, who term it a ‘civic market hall’.

It was constructed using a layer of foundation material or ‘dump’ over the main drain running beneath the east range of rooms in *Insula V*, and then completed in a series of stages – nine have been identified – using first red and then grey sandstone, and was built as part of the entire complex of edifices in *Insula V* from the 120s or 130s AD to about AD 150. It had a courtyard surface formed of tiles laid in a herringbone pattern, and a latrine in one corner. It was use from the time of its construction right through to the end of the Roman occupation period and beyond: Ellis comments that

The success of the Wroxeter building, marked by its refurbishment and evidence for its use late in the fourth century if not in the fifth, might mean that the habits and wealth of an elite among its inhabitants maintained the building in something reasonably similar to its specialised function nearer the centre of the Empire. However it is also possible that the building was adapted to the special needs of the inhabitants over time. A possibility is
that the initial market buildings may have found a later use simply as lock up stores. Indeed the two building forms may not have differed very much.

In comparison to other examples of *macella*, however, Ellis notes that ‘the Wroxeter building itself does not suggest any deviation from the norm.’

The quantities of animal bone waste found in the Wroxeter *macellum* support the idea that this location was used for similar purposes to those identified in both the literature and from Mediterranean archaeology. A huge collection of animal bone was excavated at Wroxeter – some 900 boxes of it – though it was not sieved, and only large pieces were retrieved. Much came from the infilling of the *natatio*, though much came from the *macellum* and the corridors and areas surrounding it. In her exhaustive account of the bone remains, Beverly Meddens notes that that the overwhelming majority of the bones found came from cattle (over 4,000 bones) and sheep (104 bones). This concurs with bone evidence from Silchester, another civitas capital in the south of the province. Not all the bones came from butchery waste; bones from other sources (and a semi-complete dog skeleton) were also noted, along with some household rubbish, though these may have been put in the west pits around the *macellum* at a later stage. Of the cattle, few were slaughtered as juveniles (i.e. for veal), and some of the pathologies noted may indicate that mature animals had been used for traction before slaughter. Tooth remains indicate that most were over 36 months old. The beef bones show evidence of systematic butchery. Moreover, from horn cores it appears that a variety of cattle were processed at Wroxeter. Sheep seem to have been on the small size by Romano-British standards, and these animals seem to have been slaughtered at three years or more – not as lamb, and not specifically for meat, despite Meddens’s comment to this effect. Again, butchery marks were common, and were more frequent from the period of the 3rd and 4th centuries than earlier. There was also a little evidence for pig production at Wroxeter, with animals being slaughtered either at 12 to 24 months or past 4 or 5 years. This largely concurs with evidence from Silchester, which shows that animals were slaughtered relatively late. The pig bone evidence seems less indicative as pig bones were subjected to gnawing more than any others and the carcasses may have been processed in a different way to other species (i.e. sold ‘on the bone’). Finally, Meddens notes the presence of nine bones from red deer, some woodcock, ducks and crane – the products of hunting in the area. The prevalence of beef production may have been due to the higher fertility of the soils than in other areas.

Other Romano-British towns thought to have a *macellum* – Cirencester, Verulamium, Leicester. (? CG wonders) Corbridge also where two sides of something resembling a *macellum* have been constructed.
Other sites

_Cirencester (Corinium Dubonnorum)_

This was a stone building with apparently timber internal partitions:

> a number of pits discovered both inside and outside the building were filled with sawn and cut animal bones, and the building has been interpreted as a meat market or _macellum_ (54412). The building may therefore represent a formalisation of pre-existing activity on the site. The _macellum_ was extensively repaired to a similar plan in the early fourth century.\(^{26}\)

There was ‘an apparently abortive attempt to construct a massive new building on the site of the _macellum_ in the adjacent _insula_ (II) in the fourth century’ – Holbrook links this to a possible increase in the administrative functions of _Corinium_ as a provincial capital, a point repeated briefly on p. 78.\(^{27}\) Elsewhere he notes the probable size of this building in Insula II as being in excess of 57m long by 16.2m wide, though adds the caveat that ‘whether the ranges returned to enclose a courtyard on three or four sides is uncertain’, and ‘taken by itself, the building resembled the wing of a forum, and it was suggested that it may have been a _macellum_, a covered market which traded in meat, fish, vegetables and bread’ (Wacher 1962, 9).\(^{28}\)

The size of this construction is significant. ‘If the Cirencester building extended as far as Ermin Street a length in excess of 57m would have made for a very large _macellum_, and one on a par with the major towns of the Mediterranean (de Ruyt 1983, 330); that at Wroxeter by contrast measured 25m by 21m (G. Webster 1998a, Figure 6.17).\(^{29}\)

He goes on to comment that Leicester and Cirencester are ‘necessarily less certain’ as _macella_ as they are not fully recovered...but that at Verulamium is more certain:
Figure 11: Possible macella on other Roman-British sites (Ellis, Figure 5.3).

Verulamium
Here, it seems that the macellum was first built in timber following the destruction of the town in the revolts led by Boudicca in AD 60/61. It burned down in the second quarter of the 2nd century AD and was then rebuilt in masonry. It continued to function until the
end of the Roman occupation. The site suffers from being excavated fairly early – before the second World War, but Rosalind Niblett comments:

field walking since has recovered quantities of cattle bone and teeth in this area, while a watching brief on a pipe-line trench approximately 120m to the north recorded an enormous dump of animal (mainly cattle) bone in a Roman rubbish pit just outside the town wall. That cattle were being butchered in third-century Verulamium on a commercial scale was demonstrated by the tips of cattle bone in the upper filling of a pit on the Folly Lane/ Oysterfield site. The tips contained bones from the hindquarters of 37 cattle, all showing signs of intensive butchery typical of large-scale meat processing.\textsuperscript{30}

Discussion
To what extent does the \textit{macellum} at Wroxeter indicate a major change in foodways during the Romano-British period? The obvious conclusion is that it was a revolutionary innovative structure for a pre-Roman society, and that its very existence and function shows the imposition on or acquisition by a Celtic tribe, the Cornovii, of Mediterranean ways of exchange, processing and acquisition of a variety of food products as a result of their contact with the incoming Roman culture. That there was ‘change in the air’ in agriculture even before the Romans is now becoming clear, and it is also evident that the south and east of Britain by and large saw greater change under the Romans than the north and west did;\textsuperscript{31} Wroxeter may represent the edge of this process, for reasons which may have as much to do with its geography and topography as Romano-British politics or the presence of the Roman army; the area seems to have been an ‘outlier’ in pre-Roman days, with a society organised around a hill fort, as was the norm further to the south-east.

Commenting on the case of Silchester, Claire Ingrem had some necessarily tentative thoughts about the places where cattle were raised in relation to the urban centre where they were processed:

the extent to which the town was self-sufficient is uncertain, although the presence of very young animals indicates that livestock were raised close by. A number of buildings have been interpreted as barns, cattle stalls and pig sties, whilst pollen analyses indicate that the surrounding land was used for cattle pasture. It is also possible that stock, particularly cattle, were driven to Silchester from rural settlements.\textsuperscript{32}

What seems evident at Wroxeter is that a pre-Roman culture in which the land was largely used as cattle pasture was intensively developed, and that pastures of say 20 – 30 km
distant could have been used extensively, and that the roads which lead to Wroxeter could have acted as drove roads, perhaps with appropriate holding pens en route.

Estimates of population and production

It goes practically without saying that attempts to quantify either the agricultural production from sites in the ancient world or the population which consumed it (or represented a demand for it) are all *ipso facto* hostages to fortune and open to challenge. This is the overwhelming conclusion of recent studies, though it is equally true that a number of theoretical models have been put forward which can be used to indicate plausible parameters or approximations which are very helpful in achieving a better understanding of the ways in which ancient foodways may have functioned. Roger Bagnall sums up such a theory as ‘an interactive model in which every user is free to choose different values for particular variables, and which is created with as plausible a set of values as we can deduce.’ One interesting model, whose ultimate aim was estimating a given area’s capacity to support a population, was put forward by Franco de Angelis. This depends to a great extent of the potential for cereal production of the area in question, and obviously requires a certain amount of value-judgement in identifying or apportioning which areas of land might have been considered appropriate for different uses – using modern maps, historical archives, and archaeological evidence where it is available. The theory put forward by Robin Osborne starts from the assumption that an ‘average household’ required between 3 and 4 hectares of arable land and housed a family of five. Again, careful analysis of an area is needed to try to identify the amounts of arable vs non-arable land within a given distance from the urban centre being studied.

A recent study of the countryside of Roman Britain by Mike McCarthy builds on the idea of regionalism and suggests ways in which modern resources such as maps provided by the Ordnance Survey or the records of the Soil Survey of England and Wales can be used as a broad basis for understanding what the landscape potentials of Britain in ancient times might have been. Assessment of soil groups is one way of assessing land capability; so is height, climate and wetness. Seeing Wroxeter in the context of its landscape, including such features as rivers, roads, other known buildings, and taking into consideration such factors as soil type and height and area of different types of land, was something already undertaken in a fairly simple but illustrative way by Graham Webster, as long ago as 1975. In more recent times, Helen Goodchild has shown how the techniques available to scholars such as GIS (Geographical Information Systems) might be used to produce maps which indicate suitability for different agricultural activities. She counters criticism of the use and value of such modelling techniques with a citation from Box and Draper that ‘all models are wrong: the practical question is how wrong do they have to be not to be useful?’
Soil types of the area around Wroxeter indicate the potential of such investigations as a means of understanding how the *macellum* there may have been supplied. The area was part of the wide rolling plain... (which) extends into mid Staffordshire and Cheshire and forms one of the principal lowland interruptions of highland Britain. The Shropshire portion of the plain, like the Staffordshire and Cheshire portions, is interrupted here and there by sandstone hills which do not, however, alter the essentially gentle landscape characteristics which link it with the English Midlands... They are sandy loams, usually greyish brown in colour and well drained. The north-eastern area was fitted for arable in the early modern period as sheep and cattle fattening developed, and the extensive remaining heaths of the north-east and north-west were enclosed at the end of the 18th century when wartime cereal prices brought them into cultivation. The north-east, long retaining its identity as an area of improved heathland... there, in the 1920s and 1930s, dairying spread from the northern part of the plain.  

**Conclusion**

It is possible that meat production was re-organised and intensified as a result of the needs created by the proximity of the Roman army at Chester, though this would hardly have necessitated a *macellum*. Rather, the existence of the building in the town, and the location of the town in the landscape, suggests that intensive animal-rearing — and especially beef (approaching a level which we might regard as ranching?) was developed. Beef formed the backbone, if the reader will excuse the pun, of agriculture in this area, and may well have been predominant in largely meat-rich diet for the inhabitants of Wroxeter. Claire Ingrem speaks of an ‘intensification of cattle husbandry’ and a predominance of slaughter at older ages than was the case before the coming of Rome which can be identified not only from Silchester, but also at Winchester and at continental sites such as Augst and Zwammerdam. The *macellum* itself is an illustration of a major social and economic change in the region: ‘the growth of the flourishing urban culture that was a hallmark of Roman rule would not have been possible without considerable expansion of agriculture and the transfer of wealth from the countryside to cities.” What is certainly true is that a generalised, ‘one size fits all’ view of production and consumption of foods in the Roman province of Britain have to be replaced by a much more flexible and responsible approach which treats each region on its own merits. Even more important is that older views about the limited spread of villas in Roman-Britain are now being challenged as rural archaeology is carried out more vigorously than in previous times.
Notes

6 John Wacher, *The Towns of Roman Britain* (second ed. fully revised, Batsford, London, 1995) pp. 362-3; he identifies these units as an auxiliary cohort of Thracians, then Legio XIV, and finally Legio XX.
11 Text from *OCT*, ed. Lindsay.
13 The area of Rome by the Tiber where markets were situated. See Figure 10.
15 Martial, 10. 96. 9.
19 Ellis, *The Roman Baths and Macellum at Wroxeter*, pp. 87-90, fig. 3, 4.
20 Ellis, *The Roman Baths and Macellum at Wroxeter*, pp. 56-7, figs. 2.52 and 2.53.
24 Ingrem, ‘Animals in the economy and culture of Roman Britain,’ pp.190-2, 204.
27 Holbrook, ‘Corinium Dubonnorum’, p. 75.
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29 ibid.
32 Ingrem, ‘Animals in the economy and culture of Roman Britain,’ pp. 196.