Archaeology Today
Fishbourne: Unfinished Business

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Excavation of a major site is often a long-term task, and few excavations can claim to have been completed within a ten-year period. The Minoan site at Knossos, discovered in 1900, is still being excavated in 1980; the Bronze Age town at Akrotiri on Thera, under excavation since 1967, is still only partially exposed. There are, of course, many different reasons for the slowness with which excavation proceeds, but one is simply financial: few archaeologists or schools of archaeology have on hand the resources necessary for a complete excavation and must rely instead on a gradual accumulation of funds from both governments and private individuals.

A case in point is the so-called Palace of Fishbourne. In 1960, the digging of a water-main trench near the town of Fishbourne on the southern coast of England accidentally revealled extensive traces of a large structure apparently dating to the period of Roman occupation. The years 1961-1968 saw excavation undertaken to clarify the nature of this structure, and it is now agreed that an unusually large and elaborate palace once stood on the site. But many questions about this palace remain unanswered today, and further excavation has been blocked by the fact that a highway and a group of modern houses now sit atop much of the site. Thus, only a small part of the structure has been brought to light, and the financially modest Sussex Archaeological Society, which controls the excavation, endures the frustration of knowing that important remains still rest beneath the earth and are likely to stay there unless more funds become available.

Even in its partially excavated state, however, the palace at Fishbourne tells an impressive tale. In antiquity Fishbourne possessed a sheltered harbour that attracted the Roman invaders, who were much in need of a supply base in that area. Luckily for them, the district was under the control of the friendly tribe of the Atrebates, and a Roman base, including at least two large granaries, came into existence at Fishbourne around 43 A.D. By 47 A.D., however, the Roman advance into Britain had lessened the value of the depot at Fishbourne, and the site was converted to civil use as small buildings of wattle and daub replaced the granaries. The years from 65 to 75 A.D. saw continuous development on the site; stone began to replace wattle and daub, with exotic marbles even being imported from the distant Mediterranean. One building, now called the Protopalace, was especially sumptuous, possessing a complex bath suite and a colonnaded garden. Unhappily, this part of the site is now covered by houses and only limited excavation has been possible.

About 75 A.D. the site was partially levelled to make way for the construction of the most elaborate palace yet to appear on provincial soil. The core of the structure was a large formal garden, surrounded on all four sides by wings containing dozens of rooms. The East Wing held the official entrance hall, as well as an aisled hall (perhaps used as a place of general assembly) and a bath complex; a path through the formal garden led the visitor directly to the West Wing, where an imposing

audience chamber was located. The South Wing is today completely overlain by road and houses, but trial trenches have confirmed another complex series of rooms with a large southern garden beyond. It is the North Wing which has been thoroughly excavated and which visitors to the site see today under a protective roof: it features an assortment of large and small rooms (all of which were originally covered with mosaic pavements), and two colonnaded courtyards. Of the formal garden, only the northern part has been excavated, but it has been painstakingly restored to look as much like the original as possible.

It has been estimated that this palace at its peak covered more than five acres. In comparison, it is approximately as large as the Palace of Minos at Knossos, and even larger than Nero's Golden House at Rome. Clearly a building of such size and opulence must have belonged to a very important person, and one of the still unanswered questions about Fishbourne is just who the owner was. The most popular theory at present is that the palace belonged to Tiberius Claudius Cogidubnus, King of the Atrebates and, at the same time, an imperial legate (legatus Augusti in Britannia, according to a famous inscription). Was Fishbourne his official capital? Or was it a country retreat? Again, certainty eludes us.

After the time of Cogidubnus, the palace underwent significant alterations, including the addition of a new bath suite and the rebuilding of the aisled assembly hall into an exercise room for bathers. Even more drastic alterations were made in the mid second century, when many of the older walls were simply pulled down. Such "interior redecoration" in fact continued into the third century, at which time a devastating fire seems to have swept the palace, reducing it to ruin. So complete was this devastation that the palace was never rebuilt. In the words of Professor Barry Cunliffe, "the shell of the old building was thenceforth regarded as a quarry from which all visible building stone was carted off, leaving by the early years of the fourth century nothing but undulating heaps of rubble."

It is to the credit of the Sussex Archaeological Society that at least part of this heap of rubble has been recovered. Most impressive on the site today are the well-preserved mosaics which are to be found in every room, some of them true masterpieces. But what treasures remain buried under the road and houses? Like the Sussex Archaeological Society, we must learn to be patient, hoping that some day further excavations can be undertaken.