Brits beat Romans to the baths

Brickwork suggests that Iron Age man enjoyed a good soak, write Norman Hammond and David Sanderson

The Romans brought us straight roads, the Julian calendar and baths. Or did they?

An archaeological excavation at one of the earliest Roman buildings in Britain has unearthed evidence that Britons may have been luxuriating in baths before the invasion of AD43.

The archaeologists behind the dig at Silchester in Hampshire have raised the possibility that Britain’s late Iron Age rulers, who it is known had connections with Gaul for decades before the arrival of the Romans, may already have had facilities for pre-battle saunas.

Michael Fulford, from the University of Reading, said that differences in brickwork from a wall they had excavated with a later bathhouse structure at the site were “suspicious” adding: “Late Iron Age baths are ever a possibility.”

It has always been assumed that “bathhouse socialising” had been introduced to the country by the early Roman invaders.

Once they had overrun the defending British tribes, with the Catuvellauni tribe led by a man called Caratacus thought to have been leading resistance at Silchester, the Romans quickly instituted a civic building programme with public bathhouses often top of their must-haves.

The site between Basingstoke and Reading, which was known as Calleva Atrebatum, is recognised as being one of their first projects with an entire “new build community” set on the site of the Iron Age town.

Professor Fulford said there appeared to have been “an extraordinary demolition and then rebuild of the public baths within a generation” with the upgraded complex being constructed during the reign of the Emperor Nero in AD54-68.

The new excavations, conducted in June and July, have identified bricks “of dimensions and fabrics not previously recognised at Silchester” that are bordered by a well-preserved water channel, raising the possibility that the invading legionaries found a bath waiting for them.

The excavation of a ditch at the site has also led to the discovery of what is thought to be evidence of ritual killings, possibly in advance of the Roman invasion. A human skull “resting on a triangular arrangement of wooden hurdles” was discovered along with the skulls of three dogs.

Professor Fulford said that “the nature of the deposit of human and dog skulls” meant it was “hard to escape a ritual explanation, though we do now know how localised this behaviour was”.

Coins with the name Cara, which have been associated with Caratacus, were also unearthed during the dig.

Arguably the most famous Roman bathing structure in Britain was built at Bath, known as Aquae Sulis, where construction began between AD60-70 and was further developed over the next three centuries.

Typically, Roman bathhouses would contain a caldarium (hot bath), tepidarium ( lukewarm bath) and a frigidarium ( cold bath). These complexes were found across the country up to Hadrian’s Wall.

The sophistication of the complexes, including the aqueducts to supply the water, plus the absence of evidence of any structures having been built before the Roman invasion has led to the widely held assumption that cleanliness through drainage and access to fresh water was a new concept for Britain.

The latest excavations, coupled with the knowledge that Britain’s Iron Age rulers had extensive trading contacts with Gaul and therefore knew of the Roman predilection for luxury, suggest that— just perhaps — Britons could have shown those Europeans a thing or two about cleanliness.
The Roman bathhouse at Silchester was built on the site of an Iron Age town where Caratacus, left, and his people may have once had their own sauna.
The bathhouse

How it may have looked

Caldarium (hot room)
People sat in the steam bath heated by hot air flowing under the floor.

Tepidarium (warm room)
Slaves massaged visitors with scented oil and scraped off dead skin.

Apodyterium (changing rooms)

Frigidarium (cold room)
Used for cooling off, it contained a cold bath.

Hypocaust
Floors set on stacks of tiles and linked to a furnace.

Peristyle (courtyard)

Plan

Area excavated

Coverage is reproduced under license from the NLA, CLA or other copyright owner. No further copying (including the printing of digital cuttings) digital reproductions or forwarding is permitted except under license from the NLA, http://www.nla.co.uk (for newspapers) CLA http://www.cla.co.uk (for books and magazines) or other copyright body.