Hamwih

In 1972, the Southampton Archaeological Research Committee was set up to carry out excavations in this crucial Saxon and Medieval town, and Lawrence Keene was appointed director. In 1975 he was succeeded by Philip Holdsworth but in 1980 the DoE withdrew so much support from Southampton that as a result Philip Holdsworth resigned as Director and most of the Unit's work has come to a halt. It thus seems appropriate at this stage to write an obituary of the Southampton Archaeological Research Committee.

In the middle Saxon period a number of trading towns began to be established around the coasts of the North Sea. The dawn was in some ways a false one for many of these towns were destroyed or retarded by the Vikings. In England the names of most of these settlements tended to end in the wordwich, which has nothing to do with the Cheshire salt towns but is derived from the Latin vicus. The best known of these are Ipswich, Dunwich, Sandwich and Hamwich—Saxon Southampton. On the Continent ports included the yet unlocated site of Quentovic in North France between Boulogne and Dieppe and Domburg and Dorestad in Holland. The rising Viking towns of Haithabu, Ribe and Birka were also part of the same phenomenon. Of these the most extensively excavated are those at Dorestad at the mouth of the River Rhine where Professor van Es has been excavating for the Dutch Archaeological Service, and Hamwih where Philip Holdsworth carried out extensive excavations between 1972 and 1980 for the Southampton Archaeological Research Committee.

The name of Saxon Southampton is ambiguous. It is recorded in the documents variously as Hamwih, Hamwich (or rather Hamwic) or Hamtun, and a recent study of the place name evidence by Alexander Rumble (in the "Melbourne Street" report) showed that all three were apparently used to refer to the same place. In fact the two most common are Hamwich and Hamtun for Hamwih is used only once. It occurs, probably as a scribal error, in the Life of Saint Willibald written in 778 by a pious nun living in Middle Franconia. The Life relates how St. Willibald set sail in 721 for the continent from a place near to 'that market which is called Hamwih.' Some archaeologists, notably Peter Addyman (who excavated at Southampton before he went to York), have tried to call it Hamwich, largely I suspect because they liked the idea of the Hamwich/Sandwich complex. However, most archaeologists have stuck with the name Hamwih as this is the earliest reference. The change to South (hamtun) does not appear until the late Saxon period after the making of the midland Hamtun into a shire town in the 10th Century.

Hamwih is particularly important to the archaeologist because it lies not under but adjacent to the medieval and modern Southampton. Southampton lies on a peninsula between the Rivers Test and Itchen. The medieval town and the centre of the modern town are situated on the banks of the River Test to the west. Southampton, however, was situated 1 km. away on the banks of the River Itchen to the east. (See plan on page 246). Thus, following its abandonment, the Saxon town was largely open ground until the 1840s when it was once again reoccupied and the archaeology began to be rediscovered. However the area is now once again ripe for redevelopment, and over the past 30 years excavations have been carried out ever more intensively in both the Saxon and the medieval town. In 1972 the Southampton Archaeological Research Committee (S.A.R.C.) was founded under the direction of Lawrence Keene, who