



Review

Wroxeter: Ashes under Uricon. A Cultural and Social History of the Roman City. By R. White. Archaeopress, Oxford, 2022. Pp. xii + 239, illus. Price £26 (pbk); £14.99 (PDF eBook). ISBN 9781803272498.

Roger White's *Ashes under Uricon* is a personal journey with very deep foundations. His long association with Wroxeter (*Uriconium* or *Viroconium* to the Romans) began in 1976 and continues to this day. This book fits within the recent shift towards archaeological narratives that are subjective by design. It explores how people have engaged with Wroxeter at different periods in time – through poetry, art, literature and archaeology.

Each chapter reflects on the experiences and interpretations of people with a particular focus, whether archaeologists or antiquarians, painters or poets. In 'Archaeologists and their stories', White provides three tellings from Wroxeter with reflections on the wider societal milieu that gave rise to them, including the persistent myth of the 'Old Man in the Hypocaust'. The next section on 'Poetic Visions' ranges from ninth-century Welsh elegies for lost lands to Romantic visions of the ruined city echoing with its history, by Wilfred Owen, Mary Webb and A.E. Housman, from whose 'A Shropshire Lad' the subtitle of the book is taken.

The following chapter, 'Wroxeter depicted', concentrates on artistic representations of the *civitas* capital. White looks at the fanciful aesthetic of 'Antiquarian style' engravings and watercolours, and the influence of the Grand Tour and Roman antiquities on imposing houses, such as nearby Attingham Hall. He also moves forward in time and considers the accuracy and role of site reconstructions created as archaeology came of age in the twentieth century. There is an interesting walk-through of evolving site illustrations created in consultation with archaeologists and based on regularly changing survey data or excavation results.

The chapter 'Writing and visiting Wroxeter' looks at both fictional and factual accounts of the city, returning to the enduring story of the 'Old Man in the Hypocaust' in works by Rosemary Sutcliff and John Buchan. The archaeological story itself is also skilfully woven through all the chapters: descriptions of various excavators' struggles to find ongoing funding, battles with the tenant farmer and the persistence of large spoilheaps may be all too familiar today!

'Archaeology for All' describes how, in the second half of the twentieth century, part of the site was brought into state ownership, with attendant changes in land management and interpretation. Unfortunately, the extensive defences and the further reaches of the buried city remain on private land without any public access to this day. This chapter covers academic interest in the site by such luminaries as Kathleen Kenyon and Graham Webster, and outlines the history of twentieth-century interventions, including the Wroxeter Hinterland Project in the 1990s. The chapter on 'Wroxeter's People' affords the reader a glimpse of inhabitants of the city during the Roman period and some of the local characters in more recent times – a vivid mixture of folk heroes, treasure-seekers and chancers.

The final chapter '21st century Wroxeter' outlines some remaining mysteries and unanswered research questions: only approximately 5 per cent of the site has been excavated. White ends with a plea to reopen community digs to revitalise interest in the city and bring in visitors, whilst restoring the landscape and its wildlife. This could form part of a regenerative approach to archaeology which prioritises reconnection with the land, its people and its past.

Ashes under Uricon is well-written with a clear voice and numerous illustrations. An accompanying exhibition was held at the Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery to showcase some of the artworks and technical drawings mentioned in the text. One of the key themes which arises is how we engage with today's sites and landscapes. White notes that the unkempt and forgotten nature of the site fired the poetic imagination up until World War II, after which a more pragmatic management strategy – 'ruins in a lawn' – stole some of its

nostalgic presence. One senses White's ambiguity about this shift: greater access to evidence has resulted in a loss of the romantic and imaginative.

Throughout the book I sensed that the author himself harbours a poetic or artistic vision of the site and its landscape and I wondered if and how he was going to express it: this book reads as his love poem to Wroxeter.

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