



The Elliptical Building of Deva Victrix

ABSTRACT

*The legionary fortress of Deva Victrix (modern Chester) contains one of the most enigmatic structures in the corpus of Roman military architecture: the so-called Elliptical Building. Situated in the central division of the fortress, this monumental edifice has no known parallel in any other Roman military or civilian context. First identified in 1939 and subsequently excavated in the late 1960s, the building underwent two distinct phases of construction: an initial, unfinished Flavian phase (c. AD 79) and a completed Severan phase (early third century AD). This study synthesises the archaeological evidence, architectural design, construction materials, and scholarly hypotheses regarding the building's purpose. By examining its unique form, high-quality masonry, and the broader strategic context of Deva, this paper evaluates the prevailing theory that the Elliptical Building was intended as an *imago mundi*—a symbolic representation of the Roman world—and argues that its presence strongly supports the hypothesis that Chester was originally intended to serve as the headquarters for the provincial governor of Britannia.*

An Architectural and Functional Analysis of a Unique Roman Military Structure

The Roman legionary fortress of Deva Victrix, established circa AD 76 by Legio II Adiutrix, occupies a prominent place in the study of Roman Britain. Unlike the standard legionary fortresses at Eboracum (York) and Isca Augusta (Caerleon), which typically enclosed an area of approximately 20 hectares, Deva was exceptionally large, encompassing 24.65 hectares—an increase of roughly 20 percent. This anomalous size has long puzzled archaeologists, but excavations in the central division of the fortress have revealed a suite of unusual buildings that account for this expanded footprint. Chief among these is the Elliptical Building, a structure whose monumental scale, unique geometry, and high-quality construction set it apart from conventional military architecture.

The Elliptical Building occupied the majority of the insula located to the dextral rear (north-west) of the principia (headquarters building). Its discovery and subsequent excavation have provided crucial insights into the ambitions of the Roman military administration during the Flavian period. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the Elliptical Building, drawing heavily on the definitive excavation report compiled by David J. P. Mason (2000), alongside comparative studies of Roman military architecture by Evans (1994) and Fulford (2005).

2. Discovery and Excavation History

The existence of the Elliptical Building was first brought to light in 1939 during excavations directed by R. Newstead (Professor of Entomology at Liverpool University) and J. P. Droop (Department of Classical Archaeology) near the modern market hall in Chester. However, the outbreak of the Second World War abruptly halted these investigations. The site remained largely untouched until the 1960s, when impending urban redevelopment—specifically the construction of a new car park—necessitated rescue excavations. Directed by J. Eames between 1963 and 1969, these excavations exposed the remainder of the structure, as well as a small bathhouse occupying the southern end of the same insula.



The data from these rescue excavations remained unpublished for several decades, a circumstance unfortunately common to much archaeology of that era. It was not until 2000 that a comprehensive monograph, compiled by David J. P. Mason, finally brought the findings to the wider academic community. This publication, *Excavations at Chester: The Elliptical Building: An Image of the Roman World?* (Chester Archaeology Survey & Excavation Report No. 12), provided the first detailed plan of the structure and offered a robust framework for interpreting its complex construction history. The report incorporated computer-graphic reconstructions prepared by Julian Baum, which have proved invaluable for visualising the building's intended appearance. Fulford's review of the report in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* (2005) further contextualised the findings within the broader framework of Roman military architecture.

3. Architectural Form and Construction Materials

3.1 The Flavian Phase (c. AD 79)

The primary phase of the Elliptical Building dates to the Flavian period, specifically the governorship of Gnaeus Julius Agricola. The dating is securely anchored by a lead water-pipe discovered in 1969, which supplied the central fountain-monument of the building. The cast inscription on this pipe (RIB 2434.1) records its manufacture "in the ninth consulship of the emperor Vespasian and the seventh of the emperor Titus, in the governorship of Gnaeus Julius Agricola," placing its creation firmly in the first half of AD 79. This inscription is now housed in the Grosvenor Museum in Chester.

The architectural design of the Flavian building was highly sophisticated and entirely unprecedented in a military context. The structure measured approximately 60 by 30 metres overall. To reconcile its unconventional elliptical shape with the rigid, orthogonal street grid of the legionary fortress, the building was enclosed within a rectangular outer frame. Along both of the shorter sides of this rectangular enclosure, additional ranges of outward-facing chambers were provided, each fronted by a colonnaded portico. Access to the interior of the building was restricted to two long and narrow entrance passages, one set in the middle of each of these short-side ranges.

The core of the building consisted of a central, oval courtyard. Arranged concentrically around this courtyard was a range divided into twelve wedge-shaped rooms. These chambers were fronted by a continuous colonnaded portico. Access to the rooms was not provided by standard doorways; rather, each chamber was entered through a monumental arched opening, measuring 4 metres in width and nearly 6 metres in height, supported by massive stone piers. Within each room, a low wall was constructed a short distance from the entrance, likely intended to support a decorative screen or balustrade. At the very centre of the oval courtyard lay the foundations for a fountain-monument, which was undoubtedly intended to be the focal point of a decorative pool.

The construction materials employed during this initial phase were of exceptionally high quality. The building was constructed using finely dressed masonry set upon foundations of high-grade concrete. The primary building stone utilised in Deva was the local red Triassic sandstone, which was readily available from quarries opened on both sides of the River Dee. The use of *opus quadratum*—large, squared, and dressed blocks of stone—for the fortress walls and key internal structures during the Flavian period is notable, as most contemporary fortresses in Britain were still heavily reliant on timber-framed, wattle-and-daub construction. The fact that the Elliptical Building was being constructed in stone from its inception underscores its intended permanence and high status. The harder-wearing, pale Helsby Sandstone from Manley quarries was also employed for structural elements requiring



greater durability, in contrast to the more commonly used iron-rich red local Chester sandstone.

However, this grand Flavian vision was never realised. Work on the building ceased abruptly, likely coinciding with Agricola's withdrawal of Legio II Adiutrix from Chester to support his military campaigns in northern Britain and Scotland. The unfinished structure was abandoned, and for the next 150 years, the site lay largely derelict, gradually becoming obscured beneath accumulated rubbish. As Mason observes, the building was abandoned well before completion, and its modern name derives solely from its plan form rather than any ancient designation.

3.2 The Severan Reconstruction (Early Third Century AD)

The Elliptical Building remained a ruin until the early third century, when a comprehensive reconstruction programme was initiated across the Chester fortress under the Severan dynasty. During this period, the Elliptical Building project was remarkably revived and finally brought to completion. The dating evidence for this "Severan reconstruction" is described in the excavation report as "early to mid-third century," consistent with the broader pattern of building activity at Deva during this period.

The Severan architects constructed the new building directly on top of the Flavian remains. Interestingly, they did not attempt to trace or reuse the earlier foundations, as all visible traces of the original structure had long since disappeared. Instead, the building was completed with considerable modifications to the original design. The new structure utilised different diameters of arc, resulting in a proportionally wider or "fatter" elliptical shape compared to its Flavian predecessor. During the late third or early fourth centuries, the structure was altered again, with slate becoming the main roofing material.

The ability of the Severan builders to recreate the complex geometry of the Elliptical Building, despite the lack of visible remains, strongly implies that the original architectural plans (*formae*) had been preserved in the fortress archives for a century and a half. This continuity of design highlights the enduring administrative capacity of the Roman military and the persistent significance attached to this specific location within the fortress. Evans (1994) has demonstrated that the principles of design upon which Roman military building plans were based were highly standardised, and the preservation and reuse of such plans was consistent with Roman military practice.

4. Function and Purpose: Scholarly Interpretations

The unique plan of the Elliptical Building, coupled with its unfinished state during its primary phase, has made determining its exact function a subject of intense scholarly debate. As Mason notes, no precise parallels exist in either military or civil Roman architecture, rendering the building truly *sui generis*. The lack, until 2000, of a detailed published plan had significantly hindered scholarly speculation, and several competing hypotheses have been advanced.

4.1 Rejected Hypotheses

Prior to the publication of the detailed plan, several hypotheses were advanced regarding the building's purpose. These included suggestions that it served as a palace (*praetorium*), a weapons-training school, a *schola* (a guild hall or meeting place for military associations), or a *macellum* (market). However, detailed architectural analysis renders these interpretations unconvincing. The monumental, arched entrances to the wedge-shaped rooms are entirely unsuited for the practical requirements of a market or a training facility. Furthermore, the building lacks the domestic amenities expected of a palace, and its highly specific geometry is unnecessary for a standard *schola*. The form of the principal chambers, with their restricted access, low internal screens, and colonnaded frontage, endows the



building with a monumental and commemorative, even quasi-religious character that is inconsistent with these mundane interpretations.

4.2 The Imago Mundi Hypothesis

The prevailing and most compelling interpretation, advanced by David Mason, posits that the Elliptical Building possessed a monumental, commemorative, and quasi-religious character. This interpretation is supported by a particularly significant piece of archaeological evidence: the foundation of the central courtyard fountain sealed a rock-cut trench, which likely served as the focus for a ritual foundation ceremony (*inauguratio*) associated with the building's inception. This practice of ritual foundation deposits is well-attested in Roman religious and civic architecture.

Mason suggests that the building may have functioned as a specialised temple, perhaps dedicated to the official deities of the Roman State or to the imperial cult (*Roma et Divi Augusti*). While temples were typically located outside the fortress defences (*extra muros*), shrines dedicated to official state cults were permitted within the walls.

More profoundly, the architectural form of the building is interpreted as a symbolic representation of the Roman world—an *imago mundi* or *imago orbis terrarum*. In this reading, the oval shape of the building reflects the contemporary Roman perception of the inhabited world (*oikumene*). The central pool and fountain would represent the Mediterranean Sea (*Mare Nostrum*), the conceptual and geographical centre of the empire. The twelve wedge-shaped chambers surrounding the courtyard would represent the various provinces or regions of the empire, grouped around the Mediterranean core. Had the building been completed in the Flavian period, it is highly probable that these chambers would have been adorned with statues, sculptures, and pictorial representations personifying the different provinces and conquered peoples, a practice well-documented in the iconographic programmes of major public buildings in Rome itself.

4.3 Strategic Context: The Capital of Britannia?

The presence of such an exotic, metropolitan, and highly symbolic structure within a frontier legionary fortress demands explanation. The Elliptical Building cannot be viewed in isolation; it must be understood within the broader context of *Deva Victrix* during the Flavian period. As noted, the Chester fortress was 20 percent larger than its contemporaries, a discrepancy explained by the need to accommodate a suite of unusual, high-status buildings in its central division. Furthermore, the fortress was being constructed in high-quality stone at a time when timber was the standard military building material in Britain.

These factors, combined with the explicit epigraphic connection to the governor Gnaeus Julius Agricola via the lead water-pipes (RIB 2434.1-3), strongly suggest that *Deva* was originally intended to serve a purpose far greater than a standard legionary base. Mason and others argue that Chester's geographical and strategic position in the AD 70s made it the ideal location for the headquarters of the provincial governor. The expanded fortress would have been necessary to house the governor, his extensive retinue of administrative officials, and his personal bodyguard (*singulares*). A fragmentary slate-cut inscription found near the Elliptical Building in the late 1960s (*Britannia II* (1971), 290 No. 7), the only example of its class from Britain, may also be connected with the postulated unusual status of *Deva*.

In this context, the Elliptical Building makes perfect sense. As the intended capital of Britannia, *Deva* required architecture that reflected the power, majesty, and universal dominion of Rome. The Elliptical



Building, as an *imago mundi*, would have served as a powerful ideological statement of Roman imperialism—a physical manifestation of the empire's extent, designed to overawe both the provincial subjects and the military garrison itself. The abandonment of the project correlates with a shift in strategic priorities, as Agricola pushed further north into Caledonia and Londinium eventually solidified its position as the undisputed provincial capital.

5. Comparative Architectural Context

The Elliptical Building at Chester has no direct parallel in the Roman world, but comparative analysis with other legionary fortresses illuminates its exceptional character. The closest architectural parallel for the overall design of the Chester fortress, including its unusually large size and ambitious stone construction programme, is the legionary fortress at Inchtuthil in Scotland, which was also left incomplete. Fulford (2005) has suggested that both fortresses may have been the work of the same military architect, noting the shared characteristics of their planning and construction.

The legionary fortresses at Caerleon and York, the two other permanent legionary bases in Roman Britain, provide a useful baseline for comparison. Both enclosed approximately 20 hectares and followed the standard layout of a Roman legionary fortress, with the *principia*, *praetorium*, and *horrea* occupying the central division. The absence of any building comparable to the Elliptical Building at either site reinforces the conclusion that Chester occupied a unique and elevated status within the military hierarchy of Roman Britain.

Evans (1994) has demonstrated that Roman military architects operated within a standardised system of design principles, using modular units of measurement to generate building plans. The Elliptical Building, with its complex geometry, represents a significant departure from these norms. Its design required sophisticated mathematical knowledge to reconcile the elliptical form with the orthogonal grid of the fortress, suggesting the involvement of an architect of considerable skill and experience, likely drawing on traditions from the metropolitan centres of the empire rather than the provincial frontier.

6. Summary of Key Architectural Data

Conclusion

The Elliptical Building at Chester remains a singular masterpiece of Roman military architecture. Its sophisticated geometry, high-quality sandstone construction, and complex two-phase history provide a fascinating window into the ambitions of the Roman administration in first-century Britain. While its precise function may never be definitively proven, the hypothesis that it was designed as an *imago mundi*—a symbolic microcosm of the Roman Empire—offers the most coherent explanation for its unique form. The architectural evidence, the epigraphic record, and the broader strategic context of *Deva Victrix* collectively support the theory that Chester was originally conceived not merely as a legionary fortress, but as the administrative capital of the province of Britannia under the governorship of Gnaeus Julius Agricola.

The building's two-phase construction history—a grand Flavian vision abandoned before completion and then revived and realised under the Severan dynasty—reflects the broader rhythms of Roman Britain's military and administrative history. The Severan completion of the building, using plans preserved in the fortress archives for 150 years, demonstrates the enduring institutional memory of the



Roman military and the persistent significance of Deva as a major centre of Roman power in the north-west of the province.

Future research, particularly further excavation in the central division of the fortress and detailed petrographic analysis of the surviving masonry, would greatly enhance our understanding of this remarkable structure. The Elliptical Building stands as a testament to the ambition, sophistication, and symbolic power of Roman military architecture at its most extraordinary.