

Computerization meets the Roman Empire

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Ancient Rome met 21st century e-science this summer in a Hampshire County field in Britain.

For the first time, archaeologists excavating at the Silchester Roman site used e-science techniques to record their finds. The techniques are being demonstrated at the e-science All Hands meeting in Nottingham, England, this week.

The archaeologists are participating in a project to build a Virtual Research Environment, to enable geographically-dispersed researchers to collaborate through online links.

Silchester is one of the most important Roman sites in Britain. The town layout remains just as it was when the Romans abandoned it in the fifth century.

Traditionally, archaeologists dig at the site during eight weeks each summer, recording their finds using paper and pencil. These records are then digitized the following winter for entry into a computer database.

"The project is streamlining the flow of data from excavation right through to publication, which traditionally is a very long process," said Mike Rains, a member of the project team from the York Archaeological Trust.

This year the archaeologists abandoned the use of paper and pencils, instead utilizing PDAs -- hand-held computers.

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