

Chapter 12

The Roman Period: Research Agenda

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12.1 Introduction

The Solent-Thames region extends north-south from around the centre of England to the south coast and the Isle of Wight. It is unevenly bisected by a major river, the Thames, and its geology is dominated by the chalk, the gravels of the Thames valley and the heaths and claylands of south Hampshire including the Hampshire Basin. *The Research Agenda*, sketched out below, focus on aspects and attributes of the region which are distinctive to it, and which could contribute to a larger, national research agenda. In other words, these agenda indicate Solent-Thames' particular potential contribution to our knowledge and understanding of Roman Britain. The definition of 'Roman' extends from the late Iron Age, the later first century BC to the fifth/sixth century AD.

12.2 Inheritance

There are no clear boundaries between Iron Age and Roman in this region although it is clear that during the 1st century BC to early 2nd century AD there was a period of major change in the countryside. To assist in understanding this,

- 12.2.1 Sites with well-preserved deposits of both late Iron Age and Roman date should be given careful attention in order to investigate continuity of local tradition at these sites. Sampling strategies should ensure that as wide a range of contexts are sampled as possible. Excavations of deep, well-sealed features are required (as opposed to buildings).
- 12.2.2 Radiocarbon dating should be used more widely and systematically to help understand change between the late Iron Age and early Roman period.

12.3 Environmental evidence

Detailed examination of the fields (lynchets, sediment analysis of colluvium, proxy palaeo-environmental evidence for the use of the field), may start to help define how field and field systems operated (cf. Allen 2008a). It is important to define the composition of the farmed resources (i.e. cereal types and proportions of

livestock) between the main groups of farms to define how they are feeding themselves and/or supporting the wider Roman economy.

Changing farming methods (i.e. from ard to mouldboard plough) increases soil disturbances and consequently may be represented in increased ploughwash and the nature of build-up in lynchets or valley bottoms, and ultimately in alluviation of floodplains. The use of a mouldboard plough, not an ard may be detectable in the nature or erosion products and presence of B horizon or B/C horizon material in lynchets and ploughwash deposits. Soil micromorphology may be able to address this in combination with geoarchaeological field records and other analyses (eg soil magnetic susceptibility). The following recommendations are suggested:

- 12.3.1 Environmental evidence should be collected and analysed to help identify how field systems operated and developed.
- 12.3.2 Variation in resources and agricultural regimes from different scales of farm needs to be investigated.
- 12.3.3 Attempts should be made to identify any changes in farming methods from field, farm and valley environments.
- 12.3.4 Evidence for a Roman cultivation signature in the alluvial sequences of, for instance, the Thames Valley should be sought.

12.4 Landscape and land use

There have been extensive programmes investigating exploitation of the chalk downland and river valleys, but less of the claylands for example. This imbalance needs to be addressed so that an overall pattern across the region can be developed for the existence and spread of fields, stock raising and woodland. The importance of the full range of palaeo-environmental evidence in this respect must be emphasised. The following areas of research have been highlighted:

- 12.4.1 'The time is ripe for an extended programme of sampling across as wide a range of urban and rural site as possible' (Burnham *et al.* 2001, 70). Studies of different types of site

within a local area should be given high priority, in order to build up a picture of supply and demand eg urban sites and those in their hinterland.

- 12.4.2 Corn dryers should be studied, both in terms of their archaeobotany and possible multiple functions, and their archaeological context. Since the majority appear to be of late Roman date, particular attention should be given to early Roman corn dryers wherever they are identified.
- 12.4.3 Spelt wheat was using for brewing throughout the Roman period, though there is some evidence that barely or a mixture of wheat and barley may have been used towards the end of this period. Samples that contain sprouted barley grain, believed to represent grain prepared as malt, should be radio-carbon dated. The material itself should be used for this purpose and a minimum of two dates from a given assemblage should be obtained.
- 12.4.4 The retrieval of information regarding the development of synanthropic fauna, pests and disease, especially in rural settlements.
- 12.4.5 The development of horticulture and the access of the rural population to 'exotic' foods.
- 12.4.6 Detection of evidence for viticulture to compare with that found in the Midlands.
- 12.4.7 Investigation of Roman urban deposits for insects.
- 12.4.8 Diet, including evidence from mineralised deposits from latrines and other sources of cess.
- 12.4.9 The location of woodland, and if and how it was managed.
- 12.4.10 The exploitation of woodland for construction and use as fuel needs to be investigated throughout the settlement hierarchy, and in domestic, religious and industrial contexts.
- 12.4.11 The exploitation of fish and shellfish on Roman sites, including the identification of further evidence for (freshwater) fish farming. This research has the potential to help us understand the connections between coastal and inland settlements.
- 12.4.12 Breed improvement for cattle and sheep, and variation in the proportions of the principal domestic animals in relation to the socio-economic status of the producer.

- 12.4.13 Information about 'exotic' species, such as the north Buckinghamshire chestnuts should be sought within pollen sequences.

12.5 Social organisation

To go beyond the familiar catechism of settlement hierarchies for Roman Britain: of large town, small town, other nucleated settlement, villa, other rural settlement, etc., in order to gain a better knowledge and understanding of social organisation requires focused and extensive work on each category of nucleated settlement as well as the careful sampling of rural landscapes and their constituent settlements across the sub-region through survey and excavation. The careful excavation of burials and cemeteries in association with their parent towns and settlements can also shed important light on social organisation. Possible approaches are identified in the sections which follow.

12.6 Settlement

Characterisation of settlement and economy

Our knowledge of settlement types and distributions is heavily biased towards the chalk and the river gravels of the upper Ouse, and the middle and upper Thames, even if we still know little of non-villa settlement, settlement hierarchies and site economies in these areas. Barton Court Farm villa (Abingdon, Oxfordshire) and Bancroft villa (Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire) remain exceptional for the contribution that they have made to our understanding of modest villas on the gravels and the workings of their associated, assumed estates. While the Thames Valley gravels have seen a very considerable amount of modern archaeology in advance of gravel extraction, there has not been a comparable focus on the settlement of the chalk, where we are still very largely reliant on the results of antiquarian or pre-modern fieldwork, the exceptions being the Danebury Environs (north Hampshire) and the Maddle Farm (Berkshire) projects. An ambition would be to reach the point, on the basis of comparable data from different environments, of being able to offer characterisations of the settlement and agricultural economies of these sub-regions. For the Chalk,

- 12.6.1 a comparative, landscape approach to 'blocks' of chalkland, such as the Berkshire Downs, the Chiltern Hills, the central or eastern Hampshire chalk and the Isle of Wight might address questions relating to:

- A – Non-villa settlement and burial practice
- B – Nucleated settlement and burial practice
- C – Settlement economies
- D – Temples and religious sites

E – The relationship of the above to the mid and late Iron Age background.

- 12.6.2 Equally important is the need to gain an understanding of settlement, its density and variability as well as economy in other environments, such as claylands and heathlands. This is crucial not only to our understanding of population density and its fluctuation over time, but also to determining the extent of woodland in the region and its change through time. For the claylands and heathlands, we particularly need a much better characterisation of settlement patterns in:

- A – East Berkshire
- B – The Vale of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire
- C – The Hampshire Basin
- D – The New Forest
- E – The claylands of the Isle of Wight
- F – North-east Oxfordshire claylands
- G – The Vale of the White Horse.

- 12.6.3 The PAS records show concentrations of reported finds on a landscape scale which do not map onto existing HER records. These require further investigation through geophysical survey and systematic surface collection.

Patterns of development and abandonment

The (differential) development of ‘villas’, representing a concentration of resources in the countryside, suggests an associated re-organisation of settlement and the wider, associated (managed) landscape. Preliminary survey of the evidence on the Chalk and on the river gravels suggests that the first centuries BC and AD were a period of increased rural settlement, but that this was followed by settlement desertion in the first/second century AD. At the end of the Roman period the lack of dated material culture has led to the assumption of widespread settlement desertion after the early fifth century AD. To address this,

- 12.6.4 the evidence for major change in settlement occupation across the diverse landscapes of the region between the late Iron Age and the early medieval period needs to be collated.
- 12.6.5 the relationship of such change to the development and decline of ‘villas’ and associated reorganisation of the rural landscape should be investigated.

12.7 Civitas capitals and other towns

Our region includes two *civitas* capitals, and several ‘small towns’, both defended and undefended. While

much has been learnt recently of the origins and early history of *Calleva*, the context for the particular choice of locations at Silchester and Winchester and the subsequent development of both towns is poorly understood. Whereas later it is unexceptional for the ‘small’ towns of Roman Britain, including those of Solent-Thames, not to develop in the post-Roman period, the abandonment of a major town in southern Britain, such as *Calleva Atrebatum* (Silchester), is exceptional. While exploring the context and the reasons for abandonment may be a priority for the early medievalists, the fact is that it has resulted not only in a well preserved late Iron Age and Roman town, but also, coincidentally, in a relatively well preserved immediate hinterland, devoid of intensive modern development. A particularly unusual feature of *Calleva* is the scale of nucleation in the late Iron Age.

Despite some major research programmes, such as the Wroxeter Hinterland project, we still know very little of the impact of towns on their immediate hinterlands and of relationships between town and country. The former can be addressed by non-intrusive survey; the latter by comparative analysis of assemblages of material culture and biological remains.

Beyond a limited understanding of their morphologies and plans, little is known about what urban settlements were really like. Attempting to address this issue is a challenge, but palaeo-environmental science is best placed to do so. It requires the combination and integration of variety of disciplines such as pollen, soil micromorphology, soil chemistry, plant and faunal remains, and perhaps too land snails. Similarly palaeo-environmental evidence can be used to explore the differences between urban and rural settlement in terms of food processing for example, and its development over time. Key to these issues are the following:

- 12.7.1 Our knowledge of towns and their histories of origin, development and change at all levels of the urban hierarchy is very limited. Opportunities to improve our knowledge, particularly through large-scale area-excavation, should be seized whenever possible.
- 12.7.2 The hinterland settlement and mortuary landscape of both ‘large’ and ‘small’ towns requires further research. Examples with hinterlands relatively untouched by modern development offer major opportunities for research.
- 12.7.3 Researching the hinterlands and mortuary landscapes of smaller nucleated settlements.
- 12.7.4 Researching settlement nucleation away from the road network to understand its context, character and later history.
- 12.7.5 Researching the settlement hierarchy and possible existence of nucleated settlement on the Isle of Wight.

- 12.7.6 The character of urban environments and their change over time.
- 12.7.7 Characterisation of economic activity through the various levels of the urban hierarchy.

12.8 Ceremony, ritual and religion

Although several temples and shrines have been identified, there has been little modern research in the sub-region. Evidence shows that the range of ritual activity was wide, both within settlements and in rivers and other watery places. Cemeteries need much more study to identify variations in burial practice, gender, age profile, pathology etc., as well as in the diet and possible origins of their populations. The following are priorities:

- 12.8.1 Sampling for biological remains from deposits associated with temples and shrines, and from cremation cemeteries, in order to widen our understanding of the use of plants and animals in religion and ritual.
- 12.8.2 Stable isotope analysis of cemetery populations.
- 12.8.3 Radiocarbon dating of burials potentially post-dating AD 400.
- 12.8.4 Researching the contexts of metal-detected major finds, including hoards
- 12.8.5 Patterns in the location and distribution of temples need to be explored.

12.9 Warfare, defences and military installations

Recent work at Alchester has shown that the military impact of the conquest is not as well understood as previously thought. We need to be alert to the possibility of further discoveries that will shed light on the progress of the conquest of the region. The construction of town and coastal forts in the later Roman period raises questions about the permanency or periodicity of garrisons and militias. PAS records show military equipment in the landscape at all periods. Research directions include the following:

- 12.9.1 Research on the context of Roman military equipment of all phases, with particular reference to PAS material, in the sub-region.

12.10 Material culture

Material culture has considerable potential for addressing questions of acculturation and social identity.

Distribution of objects and styles, including coinage, can provide information about development of markets and settlement hierarchies. Well-dated assemblages are however rare. In particular, the sub-region needs

- 12.10.1 The publication of well-dated assemblages of material culture of all types.
- 12.10.2 The development of regional pottery fabric series to complement the national series, in conjunction with the publication of as yet unpublished pottery assemblages from kilns.
- 12.10.2 The resources of the PAS to be exploited to understand more clearly variations in the characteristics of the material culture of the sub-region.

12.11 Crafts, trades and industries

Pottery

Solent-Thames is distinctive in having two major Roman pottery industries, the New Forest and Oxfordshire industries, while a third, the Alice Holt industry, straddles the border with Surrey. The New Forest and Oxfordshire kilns spread across extensive territories and we lack knowledge of the landscape and settlement context in which these industries developed and operated and their impact on woodland and its management. Research should aim to:

- 12.11.1 Increase knowledge of the Roman landscape and settlement context of the Alice Holt, New Forest and Oxfordshire industries.
- 12.11.2 Explore the relationship between kilns, workshops and settlements.
- 12.11.3 Increase knowledge of the exploitation and management of associated woodlands through the study of pollen sequences and wood charcoal assemblages from the pottery production sites.
- 12.11.4 Develop a methodology for distinguishing between the 'grey ware' products of the Alice Holt and New Forest industries in hand specimen and apply it to dated pottery assemblages to determine the respective markets of the two industries in these wares.
- 12.11.5 Collect the evidence of localised pottery manufacture and publish the pottery associated with the kilns with appropriate description/characterisation of fabrics.

Iron-making

Solent-Thames lies between the major centres/regions of iron production: the Forest of Dean, the Weald and Northamptonshire. Sites across the region (eg Isle of Wight, Buckinghamshire) attest small-scale iron-making, including the continuation of prehistoric traditions alongside shaft furnaces, as well as iron-working. Recommendations for research include:

- 12.11.6 Characterisation, including chemical analysis, and quantification of iron slag assemblages to ensure correct identification of both iron-making and iron-working residues.
- 12.11.7 In the absence of good material culture evidence, dating slag assemblages may require radiocarbon dating to establish a chronology of local traditions.
- 12.11.8 Characterisation and quantification of the wood charcoal used in this industry.

Stone

The region exploits flint extensively, but is heavily dependent on extra-regional sources for freestone. Within the region, however, there is exploitation, notably of greensands and limestones, particularly for the manufacture of querns and roofing slates, but the Solent-Thames region also receives material of similar, geological character from other regions, notably the Isle of Purbeck (slates) and Lodsworth, West Sussex (querns). Specific issues that merit attention include:

- 12.11.9 The development of methodologies based on petrographic analysis to differentiate in hand specimen between Solent-Thames and extra-regional stone sources.
- 12.11.10 The characterisation, including by petrographic methods, and quantification of non-local building materials, including unworked material from settlement excavations.
- 12.11.11 The distribution of Stonesfield (Oxon) slate, vis à vis other sources of roofing slate.
- 12.11.12 The sources and distributions of Solent-Thames-produced querns (and millstones).
- 12.11.13 The identification of quarries.

Ceramic building material

There has been little systematic research of ceramic building materials in the region. Priorities for research include:

- 12.11.14 Characterisation and quantification of settlement assemblages by type of material.
- 12.11.15 The extent of trade in these materials through research of type and fabric

Marine resources

The exploitation and consumption of marine resources in the sub-region is ill-understood. Research needs to:

- 12.11.16 Sample coastal sites appropriately for the recovery of evidence of fishing, shellfish harvesting and salt-making.
- 12.11.17 Sample appropriately inland settlements, both urban and rural, to recover and quantify fish remains if they are present.
- 12.11.18 Research shellfish assemblages to recover evidence of origin and to quantify relative abundance across the sub-region.

12.12 Communications and trade

The inclusion of a substantial tract of the south coast of England from the Avon to the major natural harbours of the eastern Solent reminds us how little we know of Atlantic and Channel trade and communication from the late Iron Age after the *floruit* of Hengistbury Head. The same is true throughout the Roman period and into the early Anglo-Saxon period. At the same time we also know very little of the coastal infrastructure of seaborne trade. The following are some of the priorities for research:

- 12.12.1 The use of the Solent and its harbours for trade and communication during the Roman period.
- 12.12.2 The remains of harbours, jetties (including waterlogged structures), boats etc.
- 12.12.3 The extent of trade and traffic along the south coast of Britain.
- 12.12.4 Distinguishing between south-coast generated overseas trade and traffic from that connected with London and the Thames Estuary.
- 12.12.5 The development of *Claesentum* and potential associated port facilities.

Consideration of the relationship between Solent-Thames and the south coast of England, to west and east of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight coasts, and the larger Roman world of Gaul and beyond, in turn raises further issues connected with trade, traffic and communications in general.

The Thames, for example, is a major river of England and of the region, apparently with little evidence of its use for communication/transport after the Late Iron Age. However, the river itself has only recently been the subject of focused research. To improve our understanding,

- 12.12.6 The use of the Thames and its tributaries for the movement of goods and people requires investigation.
- 12.12.7 The location of river crossing-points needs to be sought.
- 12.12.8 The location and extent of Roman-period deposition in the river needs further research.
- 12.12.9 The influence of the Thames on the development of riverine settlements needs to be explored.

Our region is also bisected by the principal Roman road leading west from London, and all traffic and communications between it, central southern England and the south-west (as well as south Wales) would have passed along it. Research priorities include the following:

- 12.12.10 Assessment of the importance of communication and trade using this east-west road communication in comparison with use of the river(s), particularly the Thames and its major tributaries, such as the Kennet and the Thame.

- 12.12.11 Assessment of the importance of the east-west road route originating from London compared with the Corinium – Alchester – Verulamium road, which runs across the north of the region.
- 12.12.12 Assessment of the relative importance of north-south routes in the sub-region.
- 12.12.13 The influence of the major roads on the development of roadside settlement should be investigated.
- 12.12.14 Assessment of changes in the relative importance of the major roads that cross the region over time.

12.13 The Isle of Wight

The Isle of Wight is, arguably, the most distinctive topographic entity of our region. It is unique in England (Britain) in the sense that it is both a sizeable island and it has produced extensive evidence of Romanisation, comparable to that of the adjacent mainland. The Island invites the following questions:

- 12.13.1 What are the differences (or similarities) of the island to the mainland in terms of settlements, patterns of settlement, exploitation of resources, etc.?
- 12.13.2 How can we define the relations between the Island and mainland (and the Island and overseas) through the Roman period more closely?