

Roman

by Chris Going and Jude Plouviez

I. Introduction

Poised at the beginning of written history, the Roman centuries have been a battleground between classically-trained traditionalists and others. To oversimplify the matter, the former have tended to value Britain for what it might contribute to a rather larger agenda, namely the archaeology of the Roman Empire, within which Britain is of importance primarily for the study of the Roman army, while the latter have been more interested in researching the history of the island in its own right. The survey of thirty years of research in Roman Britain, edited by Malcolm Todd (1990) was poorly received in some quarters for its typological slant and for the absence of the British themselves. A research agenda, therefore, must address equally the concerns of those who feel that the most important thing to do is to excavate a Roman fort and those who regard 'military' projects as anathema.

As is made fairly clear in the *Resource Assessment* (Going 1997), the range of ideas which the Romanist can advance for consideration as potential projects is enormous. Themes perhaps mirror our *gestalt*, which is concerned now with change and decline. The large ideas which are attracting the attention of the relevant specialists are the reverse of the Imperialist coin, concerned with regionalism, identity and change and so deal with the later Iron Age to Romano-British transition (partly covered by Bryant in the previous chapter) and Britain during the period from the middle decades of the 3rd century to the end of the 4th century and after (the 'Lower Empire'). From an archaeological viewpoint studies of the later Roman period are harder to undertake than those of the early Roman period. Development and redevelopment, after all, is much easier to identify archaeologically than stasis and decline.

II. Gaps in knowledge

Although we have a documented conquest and a major revolt in the 1st century we cannot describe the military subjugation of the region after the capture of Colchester and we have little knowledge of garrisons in the Icenian area pre- or post-AD 60.

Most of the later forts of the Saxon shore have had little recent study — real evidence for the foundation of the individual bases and their inter-relationship is very scarce. There is a marked absence of late defences around the small urban communication centres east of the Wash, in contrast to the string of fortified sites west of the Fens (Water Newton, Great Casterton, Godmanchester, Cambridge, Great Chesterford) — how did the shore forts relate to their hinterland?

Work within the major town at Colchester has tended to focus on the early period but evidence has been cited pointing to decay and dereliction after the mid 3rd century (Faulkener 1994) which needs further examination alongside similar questions about the late period in smaller

towns — what industries are evident, are there major changes of use of certain quarters (as at Silchester), what intramural agricultural activity is there?

There has been little attempt to look at inter-relationships between the urban and rural landscapes — no field survey project in the region has taken a Roman urban settlement as a defining feature.

In the rural landscape there is a lack even of classification systems for settlements other than the typical 'villa'. In general the major villas in the region developed in the 1st and 2nd centuries but remarkably few late Roman examples with mosaics *etc.*, have been identified — portable wealth seems more in evidence than high status dwellings. Analysis of the national figures for excavation has shown that rural settlements other than villas are very under-represented, despite being the commonest category of site in Lowland Britain.

The limited evidence for rural settlement layout and economy rarely extends beyond the building plan in the case of villas and the settlement enclosure on other sites (often here lacking evidence of the building(s) because of agricultural erosion). While various landscapes of fields and trackways have been suggested to be of Roman or earlier date (*e.g.* Drury and Rodwell 1980; Williamson 1987) this has rarely (if ever?) been tied into detailed settlement evidence. Almost no attempt has been made to identify Roman woodland — and individual examples certainly do exist of Roman settlement sites within medieval woods.

Some aspects — ironworking, pottery production — of the industrial landscape are also probably closely linked to areas of managed woodland. Almost nothing is known of iron ore recovery and smelting in this region. Even the relatively well known regional and local pottery production centres are mostly very poorly analysed and published (with the exception of much of Essex), a critical gap in terms of dating sites and in examining marketing patterns.

A key element of the region is the coast and it is surprising how little is known of almost all aspects of Roman activity here. Even the main road network fades away as it approaches the east coast. The work on reconstructing the coastline at Caister-on-Sea (Murphy in Darling with Gurney 1993) shows up the gaps elsewhere. The lack of evidence for harbours and ports along the coasts and estuaries is more remarkable in the light of increasing evidence for fish consumption and the efficient distribution of oysters. Although the origins and development of the Essex salterns have been studied, their distribution is much sparser to the north; also Sealey (1995) has raised the possibility that in the later Roman period marshlands were increasingly used for pasture and that some saltern mounds were used as refuges in floods.

Roman burials are remarkably uncommon in the eastern region; there is growing evidence for very different practices around urban areas and in the countryside (*e.g.* recent work on Hampshire by John Pearce, unpubl.) where formal cemeteries are the exception rather than the norm.



Plate IV The 'Saxon shore' fort at Burgh Castle on the Norfolk coast. (Photo: D.A.Edwards, 16 July 1984, AXK6 copyright Norfolk Museums Service)

It appears that religion is one of the easier functions to identify from surface collections (metal detecting) alone, but few of these groups have been quantified, compared or further investigated in any way.

III. Potential of resource

While there has been a clear division between the Highland and the Lowland zones (military and civilian respectively) in Romanist circles, regionalism has begun to be seen as a topic comparatively recently and any efforts which are directed towards discovering the regional flavour of the area ought to be encouraged. The five counties include the whole of the *civitates* of the Iceni and the Trinovantes and a large part of the Catuvellauni, probably reflecting political/tribal divisions in the Late Iron Age — whether these political units relate in any way to, for example, ceramic use regions has also been noted as an area for research by others (Willis 1997, 37).

The arable landscape of eastern England enables rapid identification of Roman sites because of the prolific artefacts — some small compensation for the damage done to the deposits in the process. Fieldwalking projects have shown that settlement and manuring distributions can be established (*e.g.* Williamson 1984); very little follow-up has been done on differentiating chronologically and typologically between the sites and

applying other survey methods (metal detecting, geophysical) which have also been shown to produce useful results.

Although plough damage to some sites is very severe there are also instances where a relatively slight slope has resulted in exceptionally good preservation under colluvial deposits. One of the earliest collapsed structural walls to be recognised was uncovered at Great Chesterford in 1948 and is very unlikely to be unique in the region.

The quantities of metal detected information already collected in Norfolk and Suffolk and now beginning to accumulate in the other three counties is a barely touched research asset — preliminary work on coinage patterns for example identify low levels of both hoard deposition and general coin loss in the coastal zone in the second half of the 4th century (Plouviez 1995; Davies and Gregory 1991).

This is a particularly significant region for study of the Roman to Saxon transition period as it includes a primary Germanic contact area (with the potential for studying earlier patterns of Continental contact — as at Caister shore fort — Darling with Gurney 1993) and a major town (Colchester). Adjacent parts of the five counties have longer Romano-British survivals in urban contexts (Verulamium) and potentially similar sequences in rural areas such as Herts and west Essex.

IV. Research topics

Early Roman military

- Can we fit the identified forts into an overall scheme, and how does the quantity and distribution of finds of military metalwork relate to this?

Late Roman military

- The chronology of foundation dates and any hiatuses (e.g. in 4th century at Burgh Castle) need to be established for the individual shore forts.
- Are there associated naval facilities?
- Can either the finds assemblages or the cemeteries (if these can be located) provide information about Continental contacts?
- Is a military impact visible in the distribution of late settlements or in the artefact assemblages of the coastal region?

Towns (large and small)

- The 'small towns' of the 1st and 2nd centuries appear to have developed along uncontroversial lines, but do not seem to have expanded much after a later Antonine apogee, after which several of them received earthwork defences. How closely linked are these defensive schemes?
- Several sites in Essex at least have produced fire-damaged samian dating to the later Antonine period. This has given rise to the idea that some Trinovantian small towns, and some rural sites, may have been burned at about this time. What is the current evidence for the so-called 'Antonine fires'?

Reece has been castigated for some of his ideas about the decline of towns (Reece 1980; 1987) and in particular for suggesting that this process began in the later Roman period, but many of his ideas seem very relevant to East Anglia and the questions raised might be studied via some quite small projects:

- Can the distribution patterns of later Roman pottery, even mapped at a gross level, indicate shifting patterns of active settlement inside towns?
- What is happening in the latest stratigraphic levels which are regarded as Roman? Is the pottery in these levels 'collected' material, and therefore likely to post-date the collapse of the major ceramics industries? Quantification should throw light on this phenomenon.
- What later Roman industries are evident in the towns?
- Is there evidence of more crop growing or storage inside the towns in the later period?

Food: consumption and production

by Peter Murphy

- Sufficient work has been done to characterise some 'typical' crop assemblages, which will permit more informed assessment, focusing attention on atypical or unusually informative ones for analysis. A point of special interest is the introduction or importation of Mediterranean crops, which have implications in terms of the status of site occupants.
- Further work is needed on rural sites, characterising activities associated with crop cleaning, malting and storage. The scale and type of these activities provides a direct indication of the type of production (on a subsistence or market economy level).

- The remains of *in situ* stored crops from the Boudiccan deposits at Colchester, provide unusually detailed information on urban consumption and storage (Murphy 1992), and should continue to take a high priority for analysis.
- Excavations at Colchester have provided several large bone assemblages (Luff 1993), but there is little material from other towns. Our knowledge of faunal remains from military and rural sites is poor, and much more information is needed about the use of the countryside in Roman times.
- Results from Great Holts Farm, Boreham, which produced bones matching Spanish mackerel (thought to represent fish imported in preserved form), very large cattle bones (possibly from animals imported from the Continent) and bones of sparrowhawk and thrush (evidence for early hawking?) illustrate the complex economic links of some rural sites which need to be explored further (Albarella, Locker and Murphy, in prep.).
- Sites spanning the Iron Age-Roman transition should have a particularly high priority so far as faunal remains studies are concerned, to assess the extent to which the conquest affected patterns of production.

Agricultural production

- East Anglia lies opposite to the Rhine mouth which was a major supply artery to Roman Britain in the early Roman period. In the later Roman period the process may have been reversed (Ammianus Marcellinus refers to massive grain exports from Britain). Did a disproportionate share of the export burden fall on the unfortunate East Anglian civitates?
- The region has produced some of the most sophisticated agricultural implements found within the Roman Empire (in hoards of ironwork such as those at Great Chesterford, Essex and Worlington, Suffolk). A survey of ironwork and the implications of these agricultural innovations might throw useful light on the agricultural regimes in existence in eastern England during the later Roman period.

Landscapes

- Are the massive relict landscape systems of fields of Roman or earlier date, as has been claimed? How can this be challenged, or confirmed?
- How well wooded was the landscape and has the detailed distribution of woodland changed? Some earthworks survive in existing woodland but are rarely dated securely but these could be uncommonly well preserved elements of the Roman landscape.
- What happened in the countryside at the end of the period? Did substantial tracts of former arable regenerate as woodland, as Williamson avers happened in north-west Essex, or was there an increase of pasture at the expense of arable as the Pakenham pollen sequence suggests? More well-dated pollen sequences are needed to establish late and post-Roman landscape history more securely.
- More research on the Roman road network is needed, particularly in the later Roman period and beyond. Why did the course of some strategic Roman roads survive, and not others? The identification of bridges or other crossing places might be extremely informative.

Rural settlements

- It is now clear that geophysics, particularly magnetometer survey, can produce quite detailed large area plans. These can be used to characterise sites which may never produce detailed cropmark plans, and also to embed the results of small scale excavations in a wider context.
- Roman water mills have been identified at a few sites in our region. There were clearly more mills in existence in the Roman period (Spain 1984), but we know very little about possible sites.
- The ironwork industries of at least the Chilterns need to be assessed in some detail.
- Later settlements can often be dated quite closely from surface assemblages of coins and pottery where these have been collected and recorded. The latest datable sites will potentially include post-Roman levels which may be identified by stratigraphic sequence or by the 'curated sherd' assemblages of an aceramic population.

Coastal

- Almost all the available information on Roman fisheries in eastern England comes from one site — Culver Street, Colchester (Locker 1992) — though collections of marine mollusc shell are available from several sites. More sieving for retrieval of small bones is needed, on a scale comparable to that already undertaken at medieval urban sites.
- A programme which seeks to shed light on the harbours and ports of eastern Britain and links them with the road network is a clearly needed.
- In the later period the possible changes in use of saltern areas need further research.
- In our region some scores, at least, of shipwrecks dating to the Roman era must remain to be found. A project geared to exploring the coastline near Burgh Castle, Bradwell fort, the river estuaries and the Fens might be productive. The Thames is clearly an area of considerable potential (Fulford *et al.* 1997), and its waters have produced evidence for two wrecks in the last 20 years.

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