The Roman Rural Settlement Project

Preliminary results from the South-West:
Settlement forms & architecture
Dr Alex Smith

The South-West region is defined here as the modern counties of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall

Encompasses 26 Natural England regions

Geographic context of the South-West region
‘...so little is known of the lesser status [Romano-British] rural settlements, villages, farmsteads, hamlets and other forms of settlement in which the majority of the population of the region must have lived.’

C J Webster (ed.) 2008, 152-3
Origins and type of data

Sources of the records

Organisations

Type of investigation (% of records; n=681)

- Excavation: 75%
- Evaluation: 19%
- Watching brief: 5%
- Field Survey: 0%
- Geophysics: 1%

Wessex Archaeology
Cotswold Archaeology
Oxford Archaeology
Exeter Archaeology
AC Archaeology
Birmingham Archaeology
Bristol and Region Archaeological Services
Foundations Archaeology
Thames Valley Archaeological Services
Bath Archaeological Trust
County Archaeological Units
Other units/consultants
Local societies/groups
Universities
English Heritage/Government organisation
Museums
Individuals/no organisation stated

Number of records
Roman records vs. NMR records of all excavation
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**Farming settlements: morphology, distribution and chronology**

![Farming settlements map](image-url)
**Farmstead morphology**

- Site Plans for c 70% of settlements in South-West database
- c 40% of sites categorised as farms contain site plans

**Enclosed Farms**

- All or majority of domestic activity contained within 1 or 2 enclosures
- Internal space not sub-divided to a significant degree
- A total of 77 Farmsteads categorised as ‘enclosed farms’ in the South-West region, though with marked intra-regional variety
**Complex Farms**

- A complex of conjoined enclosures with internal area often extensively subdivided
- Multiple areas used for domestic and agricultural activity
- Trackways and field-systems tend to be incorporated within settlement system
- A total of 78 Farmsteads categorised as ‘complex farms’ in the South-West region

**Farmsteads: Intra-regional morphologies**

- Very distinctive and well-documented zone of enclosed farmsteads in Cornwall:
- Zone of greater density and variety of farmsteads, with a significant higher proportion of complex type farms and circular houses.
- Particularly prevalent in river valleys (especially Upper Thames and Severn): c 60% vs 22% of enclosed farms
Villa farmsteads

- 122 Romano-British villas
- Well known concentrations in parts of Glos, Wilts & Somerset
- At least 30% had demonstrable ‘pre-villa’ phases, many of these going back into the Iron Age, almost certainly an under-representation

Villa farmstead morphology

- Where examined most villas appear to have been part of wider complex networks of enclosures & trackways
- Less direct association with the main river valleys than complex type farms
- Most ‘enclosed’ villas are fairly modest
Wider perspectives

- Central zone of increased settlement density and diversity
- Particularly associated with emergence of complex type farmsteads

Chronological patterns

- 32% of farming settlements (n=166) occupied in the late Iron Age
- Most continued in use but 17% (n=28) were ‘abandoned’ during the mid to late 1st century AD
- At the same time 61 ‘new’ settlements established, with a notable uneven distribution
- Height of activity in most areas is 2nd-3rd century AD
- Height of villa occupation in later 3rd-4th century AD
Chronological trends in settlement morphology

- General trends of decline in enclosed farms, early Roman increase in complex farms and mid-late Roman increase in villa type farms
- The ‘whole regional’ pattern masks fundamental intra-regional differences

Late Iron Age farming settlements
Later 1st century AD farming settlements

Early 2nd century AD farming settlements
Later 2nd century AD farming settlements

Early 3rd century AD farming settlements
Later 3rd century AD farming settlements

Early 4th century AD farming settlements
Later 4th century AD farming settlements

Nucleated settlements (late Iron Age – 5th century + AD)

- 24 roadside
- 21 rural (‘villages’)
- 3 ports
- 3 industrial
- 28 hillforts
- 3 ‘oppida’
Forms of rural ‘village’ settlements

- Vary in size from 1-3ha to 26ha (most less than 10 ha)
- 62% had origins in late Iron Age (compared with 47% of farms)

A: Chysauster, Cornwall
B: Chisenbury Warren, Wilts

Nucleated roadside settlement at Somerdale, Keynsham, Bath & NE Somerset (Traiectus?)

[Map of Somerdale, Keynsham, Bath & NE Somerset]
Rural settlement architecture

- 306 settlements (farms, villas & nucleated settlements; 56% of total) contained specific evidence for c. 1200 domestic or possible domestic structures

Regional trends in domestic architecture

- 37 settlements in Cornwall and Scilly with dated evidence for settlement architecture
- Dominated by circular architectural forms throughout, though still huge variety, with 'courtyard houses', oval houses etc.
Regional trends in domestic architecture

- 220 settlements in Glos, Wilts & Somerset with dated evidence for settlement architecture
- Sharp transition from circular to rectangular architectural forms
- Significant later 1st century AD rise in rectangular building form due to roadside settlements & villas/farms that become villas.
- Most other farms (n=91) undergo main architectural transformation during 2nd century AD

Character of domestic architecture

- 714 ‘domestic’ masonry buildings on 223 settlements
- 166 timber structures explicitly noted – a massive under-representation
- Masonry buildings well spread across region, though marked differences in context and distribution of mortared masonry structures

Proportion of drystone to mortared masonry domestic structures by site type (%)
Villa architecture

Types of villa in the south-west

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<th>Number of Villas</th>
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Regional distribution of villa architecture
Conclusions to date...

- Rural settlement patterns (density, form, chronology etc) are incredibly diverse throughout the region.
- Height of settlement activity during later 2nd to mid 4th century AD, within minimal ‘tail-off’ compared to further east.
- The north-east zone is not only particularly densely settled, but also has the greatest variety in settlement form, architecture and even treatment of the dead – indications of greater social and economic stratification/mobility?
- This is also the region which experiences the most marked degree of ‘change’ throughout the Roman period, particularly evidenced through the growth of complex farms, villas and roadside settlements.