The Roman Rural Settlement Project

Preliminary results from the South-East: Settlement and Land-use

Dr Martyn Allen
Project aims and research framework

- A new study of the rural settlement of Roman Britain
- Focus is almost exclusively on the excavated evidence
- Examine temporal and regional variation in settlement evidence from across England and Wales
- Chronological remit covers the later 1st C BC to the early 5th C AD

Roman Rural Settlement Themes

I. Settlement and land-use

II. The agricultural economy

III. Rural industries

IV. Material culture and identity

V. Ritual and religious practice

VI. Death and burial
The **South-East region** is defined here as the modern counties of Kent, Greater London, Surrey, East Sussex, West Sussex, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.
The impact of developer-funded archaeology: quantity and distribution of reported Roman rural sites in the South-East
Changing perspectives of late Iron Age and Roman rural settlement in the South-East

- Land at North Bersted, West Sussex (Thames Valley Archaeological Services - Taylor and Weale 2009)
- Total excavations covering around 20ha, sited less than 750m NW from Wren Crescent
- Late Iron Age to early Roman occupation
- Substantial evidence for poly-focal settlement occupation, trackways, enclosures, burial, and elite activity
- Potentially revolutionises understanding of settlement on the coastal plain
The dataset
## Composition of dataset by fieldwork type

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<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Excavation</th>
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**Bar Chart Description:**
- **Excavation/SMS**: Light blue bars showing the percentage of site records for each county.
- **Evaluation/Watching brief**: Red bars indicating the percentage of site records for each county.
- **Non-invasive investigation**: Green bars representing the percentage of site records for each county.
Area of land excavated, and density of sites per hectare

Greater London 20%
Oxfordshire 10%
Buckinghamshire 5%
Surrey 5%
West & East Sussex 8%
Hampshire & IoW 12%
Berkshire 6%
Kent 34%

1000.6 hectares of land excavated with evidence for Roman rural settlement in the South-East

Number of sites recorded per hectare of excavation by county

Oxfordshire
Buckinghamshire
West & East Sussex
Hampshire & IoW
Berkshire
Greater London
• Distribution of project sites against the National Monuments Record index of all investigations
• General correlation between Roman rural sites and the local frequency of excavation
• Some gaps in settlement evidence are present, though different factors impact upon regional distribution

*NMR data courtesy of Tim Evans, ADS, University of York
Sub-regional variation in Roman rural settlement data

- Frequency of known Roman rural settlements appear varied across the South-East
- Results heavily impacted by the considerable level of intervention in advance of modern development – e.g. the ‘London factor’
- Does not allow for firm conclusions regarding Roman settlement density, though the region is not homogenous

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sub-region</th>
<th>Percentage of Roman records against NMR dataset</th>
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<td>Hampshire/South Downs (n=108)</td>
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<td>South Coast and IoW (n=97)</td>
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### Quantity of site type by county

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<th>IoW</th>
<th>W. Sussex</th>
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*Consolidated nucleated settlement records

- **Remarkable variation in the range of settlement types and features present**

- **Site categories still mask further variation in the settlement record, e.g. ‘farm’ constitutes a range of settlements with differing forms, functions, and socio-economic status**

- **Each site record may consist of one or more site type, e.g. farms which develop into villa establishments or nucleated settlements which include cemeteries and/or shrines**

- **However, nucleated settlements may consist of a number of site records, in order to observe spatial and temporal variation within each***

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</table>
Settlement chronology, morphology and transformation
Late Iron Age settlement and the evidence for continuity/change in during the conquest period

- 280 farming settlements (53%) occupied during the late Iron Age, spread widely across the region (green dots)
- 8% of LIA settlements abandoned and 7% fundamentally changed in site type/form by c.AD50
New farming occupation sites in the conquest period, and beyond

- 131 farm/villa sites (24.8%) originate c.AD40-75
- Relatively wide distribution
- Clusters found close to major settlements and/or arterial routes – possible factors in stimulating new settlement?

Most farming sites established in the 1st C AD, predominantly in the second half of the century

Comparatively few new settlements established from the later 2nd C AD
Frequency of farm/villa occupation by period of use

• Increasing number of sites settled from the mid-late Iron Age, and reduction after 2nd C AD

• Questions remain over the stimulus for increasing and decreasing settlement, i.e. increasing population, trade and exchange, etc.

• Pattern masks regional variation
Settlement forms:

Unenclosed/Open settlement

- Evidence for occupation not obviously contained within a system of enclosure
- Enclosures may still be present on site, but do not bound primary areas of domestic activity (e.g. Moor Hall Farm & Imperial Sports College)
- Large area of excavation generally needed to demonstrate open settlement
Settlement forms:

Enclosed settlement

- All or majority of domestic activity contained within 1 or 2 enclosures
- Internal space not sub-divided to a significant degree
Settlement forms:

**Linear/Developed settlement**

- A complex of conjoined enclosures
- Internal area often extensively sub-divided
- Multiple areas used for domestic activity
- Trackways and field-systems tend to be incorporated within settlement system
Reconstruction of a linear/developed Romano-British farm showing divisions of internal space
Frequency of farmstead sites in south-east by settlement form

- Unclassified: 54%
- Enclosed: 28%
- Linear/developed: 14%
- Unenclosed/open: 4%

No. farm sites classified by settlement form = 450

NB. Some sites may include more than one settlement form due to transformation.
Long term trends in the frequency of settlement forms show an increase in linear farms and a decrease in enclosed farms from the late Iron Age to the late Roman period.

- Open settlements are largely invisible after the late Iron Age, whilst the frequency of enclosed settlements reduces c.10% across the same period.

- Linear farms overtake enclosed as the dominant settlement form by the 4thC AD.
Settlement transformation patterns

- Villas highly visible archaeologically – most (though not all) have pre-villa settlement phases
- Suggests significant changes in wider land-use and local socio-economic networks
- Other forms of settlement transformation likely to be under-represented compared to villa developments
- Pattern suggests that settlement transformations may have been more widely occurring
Settlement enclosure

- Moor Hall Farm, Greater London
- Late Iron Age open settlement develops over 1st C AD into an enclosed farm
Linear settlement development

- At least 13 sites demonstrate clear development from other settlement forms to linear farms
- Other linear farms either have unclear origins or were ‘virgin’ settlements
- Transformations to linear settlements happen throughout the Roman period, but mostly commonly occur during the late 1st C AD (64%)
Variation in linear settlement forms

Rowbury Farm, Hampshire: agglomeration of multiple enclosures

Wavendon Gate, Buckinghamshire: major internal divisions of space
Distribution of linear farms

- Clear predominance in the north and east of the region
- No clear association with major urban settlements
Thames Valley hinterland distribution of linear farms

- Mostly found on the superficial geology, the sand and gravel river terraces
- Due to large-scale quarrying excavations revealing larger settlements?
- Following the main river alignments, the Thames, the Kennet, and the Colne
- Also found along the route of Akeman Street

Thames Valley Region
Geographic spread of villa construction

- 1st C AD villa construction focussed on north Kent and the Sussex coastal area
- Villa construction spread far more widely by the 3rd C AD, particularly across the North Downs into Hampshire and through Goring Gap
- Clear switch from localised development (l.1st C AD) to wider spread development (3rd-e.4th C AD)
- Few concentrations close to major urban settlement, perhaps apart from Chichester
Villa chronologies

- 64.7% villas with known date of earliest construction (out of 119 villas in total)

- Large proportion built during the late 1st C AD with most new sites appearing in the 2nd C AD

- After the early 2nd C AD villas normally develop from pre-existing farms

- Highest proportion of villas occupied during third and fourth centuries AD
Settlement development:
Beddington, Surrey

Late Iron Age settlement (enclosed?)

Early Roman co-axial field-system

Mid-Roman villa

Late Roman villa
Patterns of wider land-use
Distribution of field-systems

- More widespread distribution than linear farms
- Apparent clustering of ‘field-system areas’: Thanet; south Kent; coastal plain; Thames estuary; Middle Thames; Upper Thames Valley
Field-system forms

Co-axial fields
- consistent alignment of fields
- number of fields follow the same land boundary
- evidence for planned development
- little attention paid to local topography

Aggregated fields
- piecemeal/organic development
- not necessarily on alignment
- tend to pay attention to local topography

no. sites with evidence of field-system = 161

Fullerton, Hampshire
Highstead, Chislet, Kent
Field-system chronologies:  
when were field-systems in use and how long for?

- Many lack accuracy in dating with regards to construction and abandonment (c.16% cannot be dated beyond ‘Roman’)
- Periods of use are more clearly identifiable, particularly on sites with changing layout and developments

- Field-systems normally in use for relatively long periods
- Most appear to be in use between 100 and 200 years, forming distinct chronologies
Field-systems and associated settlement forms

- Most sites with field-systems either associated with farms or have no directly associated settlement recorded.

- Nucleated settlements most frequently associated with field-systems.

- Reinforces the rural character of villages and small towns via associated pastoral and/or agricultural activity.

*nucleated settlement sites amalgamated*
Field-systems and nucleated settlement

- Trackway linking roadside settlement at Brentford, along the London-Silchester Road, to Thames palaeochannel.

- Co-axial field-system developed alongside the trackway, supporting the settlement.
Identifying activity in the fields: livestock

- Waterholes dug for livestock water-supply
- Common association of waterholes with farms with related field-systems
- Waterholes more common on sites of linear settlement form (more than twice the frequency of enclosed farms)

Excavation of a waterhole at Runfold Farm, Farnham.
Surrey Archaeological Unit
### Identifying activity in the fields: hay meadows

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<td>15018</td>
<td>Dunkirt Barn, Abbots Ann</td>
<td>Hampshire</td>
<td>villa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15015</td>
<td>Fullerton</td>
<td>Hampshire</td>
<td>villa/field system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16037</td>
<td>Denchworth Road and Mill Street, Wantage</td>
<td>Oxfordshire</td>
<td>villa/field-system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16067</td>
<td>Appleford</td>
<td>Oxfordshire</td>
<td>village/field-system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9019</td>
<td>Westhawk Farm, Ashford</td>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>village/field-system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sites with evidence for hay meadows**

- Range of site types with evidence for hay meadows
- Villas appear well represented
- Yellow rattle remains found in some environmental assemblages
- Hemi-parasitic species commonly associated with hay meadows
- Seeds effectively spread by traditional hay-making practices

Yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*
Identifying activity in the fields: cereal cultivation

- Chronological frequency of field-system sites with archaeobotanical evidence is similar to overall pattern of field-system use.

- However, difficulties found in generating good environmental assemblages from field-system contexts.

- Impact on plant taxa present due to selection and processing practices.
Concluding points

• Developer-funded archaeology has had a clear and profound impact on our understanding and perspective of Roman rural settlement in the South-East region

• Rural settlement pattern does not appear uniform across the region

• Settlement forms are clearly varied, whilst generally distinctive

• Concentrated development of different settlement type appears to occur in different places, i.e. villas on south coast and north Kent; developed farms in Thames Valley

• Evidence for further land-use and field-systems are wide-spread though clustering of the latter occurs

• Future work may be directed towards further identification of the form and layout of field-systems, and on identifying and securely dating the activities carried out within them