

# SOLENT THAMES RESEARCH FRAMEWORK RESEARCH AGENDA THE ROMAN PERIOD

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## 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.

## 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.

- 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).

## 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 presence of mouldboard plough vs 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 basic analyses (e.g. soil magnetic susceptibility).

- Environmental evidence should be collected and analysed to help identify how field systems operated.
- Evidence for variation in resources from different scales of farm needs to be investigated.
- Attempts should be made to find evidence for changes in farming methods from field, farm to valley.
- Evidence for a Roman cultivation signature in the alluvial sequences in for instance the Thames Valley should be sought.

## **Landscape and land use**

There have been extensive programmes investigating exploitation of the chalk downland and river valleys, but less in 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 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 e.g. urban sites and those in their hinterland.
- Corn dryers dated to before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century should be studied, both in terms of their archaeobotany and possible multifunctionalism and in terms of their associated archaeology.
- Spelt wheat was used 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 radiocarbon dated. The material itself should be used for this purpose and a minimum of two dates from a given assemblage should be obtained.
- Projects should seek to retrieve information regarding the development of synantropic fauna, pests and disease, especially in rural settlements.
- The development of horticulture and the access of the rural population to ‘exotic’ foods require further consideration.
- Detection of evidence for viticulture akin to that found in the midlands.
- Investigation of Roman urban deposits for insects, where preserved remains a priority.
- Diet generally needs further study, including evidence from latrines and other sources of cess.
- Palaeo-environmental evidence for managed woodland needs to be identified.
- The exploitation of fish and shellfish on Roman sites requires further investigation, including evidence for fish farming. This has the potential to help us understand the connections between coastal and inland settlements of different types.
- Further evidence for breed improvement for cattle and sheep should be sought. Changes in the proportions of cattle and pig in relation to socio-economic status require further investigation.

- The location and management of woodland requires further investigation.
- Information about ‘exotic’ species, such as the north Buckinghamshire chestnuts should be sought within pollen sequences.

### **Social organisation**

Work in Winchester has shown that cemeteries can provide insights into the general population, including the presence of migrants. Better evidences of population sizes are still needed. The role of small towns needs to be explored further and roadside settlements may help establish the nature of highways. In addition a comparison of the two civitas, Silchester and Winchester, with their different fates would be of interest.

- The disposal of rubbish in towns requires further attention. There is some evidence that towns were kept clean, especially in the early Roman period. This suggests that rubbish was exported from urban areas.
- Identification of social capitals might be made.
- The contribution made by marine resources from the south coast – fish and shellfish – to diet across the region needs assessment.

### **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 villa (Abingdon, Oxon) and Bancroft villa (Milton Keynes, Bucks) 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.

- Chalk: 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:
  - Non-villa settlement and burial practice
  - Nucleated settlement and burial practice
  - Settlement economies
  - Temples and religious sites
  - And the relationship of the above to the mid and late Iron Age background.

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.

- Claylands and heathlands: we particularly need a much better characterisation of settlement patterns in:
  - East Berkshire
  - The Vale of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire
  - The Hampshire Basin
  - The New Forest
  - The claylands of the Isle of Wight
  - North-east Oxfordshire claylands; and the Vale of the White Horse.

*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 chalk and gravel 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.

- 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.
- The relationship of such change to the development and decline of ‘villas’ and associated reorganisation of the rural landscape should be investigated.

## **Urban**

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 ill 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.

Little is known about what urban settlements were really like e.g. the state of the streets. Attempting to address this issue is a challenge, but palaeo-environmental science is best placed to do. 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 the 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.

- The context for the late Iron Age/early Roman development of Winchester (Venta Belgarum) requires exploration.
- The evidence for the hinterland settlement and mortuary landscape of a major late Iron Age and Roman town (Calleva Atrebatum) needs to be studied.
- The evidence for the larger rural hinterlands of the major towns should be investigated.
- The evidence for a hinterland around smaller nucleated settlements would also merit further study.
- The evidence for nucleation away from the road network needs further work.
- The presence of nucleated settlement on the Isle of Wight should be investigated.
- The quality of urban environments remains to be investigated.
- Differences in economies of urban and rural settlements need to be identified.

### **Ceremony, ritual and religion**

Although several temples and shrines have been identified, the relationship between ritual and settlement is not well understood. Evidence shows that the range of ritual activity was wide, possibly including deposition in rivers and rural shrines. Inhumation cemeteries need much more study to identify variations in gender, age profile, pathology etc.

- Sampling for biological remains from deposits associated with temples and shrines, and cremation cemeteries should be given higher priority in order to widen our understanding of the use of plants and animals in religion and ritual.
- Dating of late antiquity inhumation burials needs to be carried out.
- Infant burials require further study.
- Patterns in distribution of temples need to be explored.
- PAS material could assist in identifying rural shrines.
- Bustum burials, rare within the region, should be investigated.

### **Warfare, defences and military installations**

Recent work at Alchester has shown that the military impact is not as well understood as previously thought. More work therefore needs to be done to identify the progress of the conquest of the region. Similarly refortification and construction of Portchester towards the end of the Roman period raise questions about the relationships between civilian and military at that time.

- The impact of excavations at Alchester on previous assumptions needs review.
- PAS material could be used to identify presence of military.

## **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. Tribal affiliations may also manifest themselves through objects.

- Development of regionally fabric series for pottery requires further work.
- Collections should be revisited to review assumptions.
- PAS material could contribute to typological and distribution studies.

## **Crafts, trade 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.

- Pictures of the Roman landscape of the New Forest and Oxfordshire industries need to be developed.
- The relationship between kilns, workshops and settlements should be explored.
- The evidence for the exploitation and management of associated woodlands needs to be collated.
- Attempts should be made to map the distributions of the cooking and kitchen wares, especially those of the Alice Holt and New Forest industries, whose products are notoriously difficult to distinguish in hand specimen.

*Iron-making:* Solent Thames lies between the major centres/regions of iron production: the Forest of Dean, the Weald and Northamptonshire. Reports from sites across the region (e.g. Bucks, Isle of Wight) attest iron-making, as well as iron-working.

- The evidence for iron-making (as opposed to iron-working) across the region needs to be investigated.
- The evidence for change through time should be identified.

*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 manufacture into 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).

- Differentiation in hand specimen between Solent Thames and extra-regional stone sources.
- The distribution of Stonesfield (Oxon) slate, vis à vis other sources of roofing slate.
- The sources and distributions of Solent Thames-produced querns (and millstones).
- Types of fuel used in different industries and the environmental impact in this region, including evidence for pollution.

*Food production:* the region was heavily involved in production of grain, but the extent of large-scale production aimed at supplying markets has yet to be explored. The existence of 'state farms' or 'Imperial Estates' should also be considered.

- The evidence for structures relating to malting and corn drying needs to be collected.
- The relationship between large-scale food production sites and possible markets should be explored.

## **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 (post Hengistbury *floruit*) through the Roman to the Early Anglo-Saxon period. Central to our coast-line is Southampton Water and the Rivers Itchen and Test which flow into it. Indeed little is known of the structures relating to water transport.

- The evidence for the use of the Solent and its harbours in trade and communication during the Roman period needs investigation.
- The rarity of waterlogged structures of Roman date on the coast requires further investigation and water-logged remains of harbours, jetties, boats etc. should be sought.
- The impact of this traffic on the hinterland should be assessed.
- Distinction of south-coast generated traffic from that connected with London and the Thames Estuary need to be determined.
- The evidence for the development of ports and harbours (Clausentum and its context in particular) should be a priority for research.
- In relation to the above, evidence for change over time should be identified.

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, as well as related questions.

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.

- The evidence for the use of this river for the movement of goods and people requires investigation.
- Evidence for river crossing points should be sought.
- The evidence for Roman-period deposition in the river needs more study.
- The influence of the Thames on the development of riverine settlements should be explored.
- In relation to the above, the evidence for change over time should be identified.

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:

- The importance of this east-west road communication in comparison with the river(s), particularly the Thames and its major tributaries, such as the Kennet and the Thame, requires further work.
- The importance of the east-west road route compared with the Corinium – Alchester – Verulamium road, which runs across the north of the region should also be studied.
- The influence of the major roads on the development of roadside settlement should be investigated.
- The evidence for changes in the relative importance of the east-west and other major roads through the region over time need to be explored.
- The relationship between transport routes and the London hinterland should be better understood.

### **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:

- Differences (or similarities) of the island to the mainland in terms of settlements, patterns of settlement, exploitation of resources, etc. need to be explored.
- The relations between the Island and mainland (and the Island and overseas) through the Roman period need more investigation.