

The Iron Age-Roman Interface

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INTRODUCTION

There are two questions that immediately spring to mind when considering the future direction of regional archaeology in Britain: What do we know, and what would we like to know? The reality of the situation is that at the beginning of the 21st century we have only a murky understanding of the Iron Age and Roman periods in the West Midlands. We know something about certain categories of sites, such as hillforts (where these existed), Roman urban settlements, military installations or Romanised farms, because these are places where fieldwork has tended to be concentrated in the past. However, we do not understand how these settlements interacted, or how the ancient landscape changed and why. We do not know how society at the time was organised, or how that structure that we call the economy actually worked.

Critiques of the traditional interpretations of Britain's later prehistoric and Roman archaeology are indicative of a general dissatisfaction with these versions of the past and the one-sided perspectives that they encourage. The picture of Iron Age settlements (in the western part of the region at least) is dominated by the hillfort, a dispersed category of site whose central function remains poorly understood. Likewise, in the Roman period the concentration of knowledge on certain obviously Romanised categories of settlement has diluted our comprehension and weakened the capacity to speculate. This overwhelming bias towards the most archaeologically visible minority of the population results in the sweeping narrative version of Roman Britain remaining largely unchallenged. Recent work, however, has tended to avoid the grand statement, instead viewing Roman Britain as a historical period experienced at first hand by its inhabitants. It is quite clear that Britain in the later prehistoric and Roman periods was a complex place in which a wide variety of experiences co-existed, and the exploration of this diversity is the beginning of the answer to the second question posed at the start of this paper. A more balanced cultural archaeology requires the reconstruction of complex social networks and settlement landscapes if

we are to progress the study of the past. After all, it is necessary to understand how towns, forts and villas interacted with one another as well as the countryside in-between. Assessing the impact of Roman material culture on different social groups throughout the region would raise the issue of acceptance and resistance among its communities, and the timescale over which such cultural responses took place or changed.

Unfortunately, this type of speculation is beyond the current level of knowledge in much of the West Midlands where very limited fieldwork has been carried out on rural sites of either Iron Age or Roman date, and even investigation of Romanised settlements is patchy. In Herefordshire, for example, little is known about the Roman period at all. Trenching in the 1910s and 1950s at Kenchester has given us only a basic chronology for this enigmatic walled settlement, while the extensive remains at Leintwardine surely deserve more attention. In-between such sites there is a scattering of Romanised farms and not much else. Until the 1990s the countryside was largely unseen and unknown, although excavations elsewhere in the region (and beyond) suggested what small agricultural communities might have looked like. This is a strange state of affairs as Britain was an overwhelmingly agrarian (but probably highly regionalised), place even in the Roman period. Fortunately, it is a relatively simple task to begin providing the data which will allow a different story of prehistoric and Roman Herefordshire and the West Midlands to be told as many rural sites are already known.

A Royal Commission survey of enclosures in Shropshire, Powys and north Herefordshire identified over 1000 small ditched-enclosures in this part of the West Midlands. The problem lies in their dating and the survey acknowledges that, other than in a handful of cases, these sites cannot be dated more closely than the later prehistoric, Roman or early medieval periods. It seems logical to assume that the later Iron Age and Romano-British rural landscape(s) is to be found among this large group of enclosures, always simple in plan but of a variety of forms and often surrounded by more than one ditch. In the recent past developer-led archaeology has begun to show that this is certainly the case and that sites of Roman date may be rather numerous.

LYONSHALL

In 2002 Cardiff University excavated 2 rural enclosures in northwestern Herefordshire near the village of Lyonshall, the interim results of which suggest that a more systematic examination of the countryside at the regional level would go some way towards putting hillforts, towns and villas in a wider context.

The site at Moorcourt Farm was a single-ditched enclosure at the bottom of a shallow valley, approximately 70m long and 30m wide with a causeway in the centre of the eastern short side and an internal north-south ditch, also with a central causeway, dividing the enclosure into two unequal halves. The site was first identified from aerial photographs and geophysical survey confirmed the internal arrangement prior to excavation. Sections across the ditches at various points around the site produced a pottery assemblage indicating that occupation began in the later Iron Age and ended some time around AD200. No trace of any internal structures was found, although the ditches survived to a depth of *c.* 1.20m. The existence of these ditches combined with the absence of any evidence for pits indicates that the site was probably never occupied by permanent structures (rather than the evidence having been ploughed out). The limited range of small finds indicates a low status settlement, perhaps only seasonally occupied. Moorcourt Farm shows continuity from Iron Age to Roman pottery traditions, yet was abandoned earlier than might be expected.

Excavation was also undertaken at the nearby site at Cold Furrow, only 600m to the north of Moorcourt Farm and some 20m higher up the south-facing side of the valley. This site had also been identified from aerial photographs and has received a number of different interpretations. A trial trench across the two ditches that enclosed an area similar to Moorcourt Farm showed that this site also can be dated to the Roman period, while the abundance of pottery (including samian) and metal finds from such a small-scale excavation suggests a site of significantly higher status than Moorcourt Farm. Yet, although the statuses of the two neighbouring settlements are different, their chronologies appear more similar. In fact, both sites were occupied for the same period of time, beginning in the later Iron Age and ending *c.* AD200 (the Cold Furrow chronology needs to be confirmed by further investigation).

The excavations at Lyonshall highlight two interesting methodological issues for archaeologists in the West Midlands. At Moorcourt Farm a reliable finds assemblage

was only obtained by excavating a representative sample of the site. A total of 6 excavation trenches was opened, five of which included lengths of the external and internal ditches. Sections across these produced different pottery assemblages from each area, and it is only by combining this material that a more accurate (but not necessarily definitive) chronology of the site was obtained. For example, the terminals of the ditch to either side of the main causeway produced only small quantities of Iron Age pottery, while a significantly larger sample of mainly 2nd century Roman material was recovered from the fills of the internal causeway's ditches. The second issue concerns the vertical deposition of archaeological material and problems with fieldwalking such sites. The sequences of fills in the ditches at Moorcourt Farm and Cold Furrow show that these sites were abandoned while the ditches were still open features, although not as deep as when first cut. The lower fills contained sufficient material to begin the study of chronology as well as form and function, yet when these fields were surveyed for surface finds the little material that was recovered was of mixed Roman and medieval date. Unfortunately, fieldwalking is not a reliable method of obtaining material for some (most?) rural sites in this part of the West Midlands. Excavation can provide a more accurate picture of a site's date of occupation, its function and regional links, although this needs to be on a scale large enough to be representative of the archaeological remains.

CONCLUSIONS

The Lyonshall project raises a number of questions that are pertinent to the study of the Iron Age and Roman periods in Herefordshire as well as the West Midlands. It is interesting that the 2 enclosures we examined were in use for the same period of time, although it is difficult to provide precise dates from the pottery alone. Both sites were first occupied towards the end of the Iron Age when (so far as we can tell) the major hillforts in the area had already been deserted for some time. Similarly, both Moorcourt Farm and Cold Furrow were abandoned at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, or before typically 3rd century pottery forms had been introduced. Were these 2 sites connected in some way, or do they indicate major structural changes in the landscape at the local or regional levels? If so, what factors might have caused these changes and where is the later Roman settlement pattern?

Fortunately, these questions and many others can be explored directly through systematic fieldwork. Perhaps the key is to ask the right questions of the data:

- What impact did the introduction of Roman customs and practices have on different people in the region?
- Did communities actively accept or resist Roman material culture?
- Was the change from Iron Age to Roman gradual or sudden?
- Were these archaeologically visible changes economically or socially driven?
- How localised were responses to the Roman occupation?

What follows are some suggestions for future research priorities:

- Complement past and future work on ‘major’ settlement sites (hillforts, towns etc) with an awareness that the rural landscape has an important role to play in identifying social and economic change;
- Identify more rural sites and disentangle the local settlement pattern (expand NMP, more fieldwalking and geophysical surveys, excavation);
- Improve absolute dating, particularly for periods of transition such from Iron Age to Roman (when did Iron Age traditions of pottery production disappear?);
- Excavate enough of a site to be representative – a single trench across a ditch may well provide misleading results.