

NEW VISIONS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE OF ROMAN BRITAIN

VOLUME 3:

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE COUNTRYSIDE
OF ROMAN BRITAIN

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LIFE AND DEATH IN THE
COUNTRYSIDE OF ROMAN BRITAIN

BY

Alexander Smith, Martyn Allen, Tom Brindle, Michael Fulford,
Lisa Lodwick and Anna Rohnbogner

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PREFACE

Life and Death in the Countryside of Roman Britain is the third and final volume of *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain*. It draws on data from the same excavated settlements that provided the resources for Volumes 1 and 2. These include farmsteads, villas, villages, roadside settlements, industrial and religious sites and a selected sample

of defended small towns. These data – over a million fields – are available through *The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain: an online resource* (revised 2016): <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/romangl/>

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SUMMARY

The research presented here builds on the previous two volumes of *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain*. Volume 1 set out a framework for analysis with its eight regions and range of different rural settlement types, while Volume 2 focused on the economic life of the countryside, making full use of the mass of recent archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological data to discuss the principal activity, agriculture. In this, the final volume, we have placed the people firmly at the heart of the analysis – how they looked, lived, interacted with the material and spiritual worlds surrounding them, and also how they died, and what their physical remains can tell us.

Many previous syntheses of life and death in Roman Britain have drawn mostly upon data from urban or military settings, with rural life being limited to the elite residing in villas. Thanks largely to the increase in new information resulting from developer-funded excavations over the past thirty years, this situation has now changed, so that we can place the spotlight firmly on the mass of the rural population living in farmsteads and nucleated settlements across the Roman province. This is a world that has rarely been explored before, and never in as much depth as has been possible here, resulting in a picture of the countryside of Roman Britain that is – for the most part – far removed from the bucolic scenes of villa-life.

The six main chapters in this volume each tackle a different theme relating to life and death in the countryside of Roman Britain, all combining to facilitate construction of a broad social archaeology of the province. Personal appearance is discussed in Chapter 2, using various categories of object associated with dress and personal display – particularly brooches – to highlight the diversity and social inequalities of peoples across the Roman province. A wider range of themes concerned with lifestyle and the domestic environment is addressed

in Chapter 3, focusing upon variations in domestic homes, alongside evidence for eating and drinking, recreation and literacy. Chapter 4 explores the social connections between people and animals, domesticated and wild, suggesting distinct behaviours differentiating those living in villas, towns and farmsteads, as well as wider changes in attitudes between the Iron Age and Roman period. Religion permeated most aspects of Iron Age and Roman society and is explored in Chapter 5, focusing upon analyses of sacred space, along with the material culture, plant and animal remains that displayed religious associations. The diversity and dynamism of religious expression is readily apparent, and is matched by the rituals relating to burial practice, which are analysed and discussed in Chapter 6. Over 15,000 rural burials form the basis for this analysis, providing an unparalleled resource to assess regional and chronological variations in burial rites, and how these may relate to broader social changes in the province. Osteological data from a selected sample of these burials are used in Chapter 7 to examine the people of the countryside in later Roman Britain, providing important observations on the rural living environment, including aspects of diet and the range of daily stressors that impacted on their wellbeing. It is clear from this analysis that the inhabitants of the countryside, at least in certain parts of Roman Britain, were, for the most part, living very tough lives.

Overall, the analyses presented in this volume indicate a geographically and socially diverse society, influenced by pre-existing cultural traditions and degrees of social connectivity between settlements. There is no doubt that incorporation into the Roman Empire brought with it a great deal of social change, though it would appear that this change was largely to the detriment of many of those living in the countryside.

RÉSUMÉ

La recherche présentée ici s'appuie sur les deux tomes précédents des *Nouvelles Visions de la population rurale de la Bretagne romaine*. Le tome 1 expose un cadre pour l'analyse des huit régions qui la compose et une série de types d'habitats ruraux différents, tandis que le tome 2 se concentre sur la vie économique de la population rurale faisant plein usage de la masse de données archéobotaniques et archéozoologiques récentes pour discuter de l'activité principale, l'agriculture. Dans ce volume final, nous avons placé le peuplement résolument au cœur de l'analyse – à quoi ressemblaient-ils, comment vivaient-ils et comment communiquaient-ils avec les mondes matériel et spirituel qui les entouraient, mais aussi de quelle manière mouraient-ils, et que peuvent nous apprendre les restes matériels recueillis ?

De nombreuses synthèses antérieures sur la vie et la mort en Bretagne romaine ont puisé principalement dans les données issues de contextes urbains et militaires, la vie rurale étant limitée à l'élite qui seule réside dans les *villas*. Essentiellement grâce à l'augmentation de nouvelles informations générées par les fouilles préventives de ces 30 dernières années, cette situation a maintenant changé, nous permettant ainsi de mettre en pleine lumière la masse de la population rurale qui vit dans les fermes et les habitats nucléés à travers l'ensemble de la province romaine. Il s'agit d'un 'monde' rarement exploré auparavant, et jamais de façon aussi exhaustive qu'il a été possible de le faire ici. Cela nous a permis de produire une « image » de la population rurale de la Bretagne romaine qui est – en majeure partie – fort éloignée des scènes bucoliques de la vie en villa.

Chacun des six principaux chapitres de ce volume aborde un thème différent et relate la vie et la mort dans la campagne de la Bretagne romaine. Ensemble, ils facilitent l'élaboration d'une archéologie sociale générale de la province. La discussion sur l'apparence personnelle est l'objet du chapitre 2 grâce à des objets de catégories diverses relatifs à l'habit et à l'apparence personnelle – particulièrement les broches – pour souligner la diversité et les inégalités sociales des peuples à travers la province romaine. Une gamme plus étendue de sujets s'intéressant au mode de vie et à l'environnement domestique est abordée au chapitre 3 et se penche sur les variations des habitations

domestiques et les restes alimentaires et de boissons, ainsi que les témoignages sur le jeu et l'alphabétisation. Quant au chapitre 4, il explore les liens sociaux existant entre les peuplements et les animaux, domestiqués et sauvages, qui suggèrent des comportements distincts différenciant les habitants des villas, des villes et des fermes, ainsi que des changements de comportements plus notables entre l'âge du Fer et la période romaine. La religion qui imprégnait la plupart des aspects de l'Age du Fer et de la société romaine est appréhendé dans le chapitre 5, axé sur les analyses de l'espace sacré, la culture matérielle, les restes archéobotaniques et les ossements animaux qui affichent des associations religieuses. La diversité et le dynamisme de l'expression religieuse sont vite apparents, comme c'est le cas pour les rituels relatifs aux pratiques funéraires, qui font l'objet d'une analyse et d'une discussion au chapitre 6. Plus de 15000 sépultures rurales forment la base de cette analyse et fournissent des ressources sans parallèle pour évaluer les écarts régionaux et chronologiques des rites funéraires, et la manière dont ces derniers pourraient être liés aux changements sociaux plus vastes au sein de la province. Les données ostéologiques d'un échantillon choisi à partir de ces sépultures sont utilisées dans le chapitre 7 pour étudier le peuplement des campagnes à la période romaine tardive. Ces données apportent d'importantes observations sur l'environnement de la vie en milieu rural, dont des aspects sur le régime alimentaire et la série de facteurs de stress quotidiens qui impactaient leur bien-être. A partir de cette analyse, il est clair que les habitants de la campagne, au moins dans certaines parties de la Bretagne romaine, avaient, pour la majeure partie, une vie très rude.

Globalement, les analyses présentées dans ce volume indiquent une société géographiquement et socialement diverse, influencée par des traditions culturelles préexistantes et des degrés de lien sociale entre les habitats. Il ne fait aucun doute que l'incorporation à l'empire romain ait engendré de nombreux changements sociaux, bien qu'apparemment ces derniers aient eu lieu largement au détriment de beaucoup d'habitants vivant à la campagne.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die hier vorgestellten Forschungsergebnisse basieren auf den zwei vorangegangenen Bänden von *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain*. Im ersten Band wurde der Rahmen der Untersuchungen gesetzt, acht Regionen mit ihren unterschiedlichen ländlichen Siedlungstypen. Während Band 2 das ökonomische Leben der Landschaft in den Fokus nahm und sich dabei der breiten Masse der neueren archäobotanischen und archäozoologischen Daten zunutze machte, um die Haupttätigkeit, die Landwirtschaft, zu diskutieren. In diesem, dem letzten Band, wurden die Menschen in den Mittelpunkt der Forschung gestellt – wie sie aussahen, lebten, interagierten mit der materiellen und spirituellen Welt die sie umgab, wie sie starben und was ihre sterblichen Überreste uns mitteilen können.

Viele vorangegangene Synthesen des Lebens und Sterbens im römischen Britannien wurden primär aus urbanen oder militärischen Siedlungen gezogen, während die Analyse des ländlichen Lebens auf die in den Villen lebenden Eliten beschränkt war. In den letzten dreißig Jahren hat sich die Situation jedoch, dank der durch Bauträgerfinanzierten Ausgrabungen und der dadurch rapide angestiegenen Datenmengen, stark verändert. Mit Hilfe der neuen Daten ergibt sich nun ein detaillierteres Bild der Masse der auf Bauernhöfen lebenden Landbevölkerung und der Bevölkerung kleiner Siedlungen in der gesamten römischen Provinz. Dies ist eine Welt, die selten zuvor untersucht wurde, und niemals so detailliert, wie es hier möglich war, was zu einem Bild des ländlichen römischen Britanniens führt, das – größten Teils – weit entfernt von den idyllischen Szenen des Villa-Lebens war.

Die sechs Kapitel des vorliegenden Bandes beschäftigen sich jeweils mit einem Thema des Bereiches Leben und Sterben im ländlichen römischen Britannien. Zusammengefasst helfen sie uns ein breit gefächertes Konstrukt der sozialen Archäologie der Provinz herzustellen. Das persönliche Erscheinungsbild wird in Kapitel 2 behandelt. Verschiedene Objektkategorien von Kleidung und der persönlichen Darstellung – insbesondere Fibeln – wurden benutzt, um die Vielfalt und die soziale Ungleichheit der Völker der römischen Provinz hervorzuheben. Eine breitere Themenpalette, welche sich mit dem Lebensstil und dem häuslichen Umfeld beschäftigt, wird in

Kapitel 3 behandelt. Hier wird der Fokus auf die Variationen im Hausbau, sowie dem Essen, dem Trinken, der Erholung und der Bildung gelegt. Kapitel 4 untersucht die sozialen Zusammenhänge zwischen Mensch und Tier, domestiziert und wild, mit der Andeutung, dass ein deutlicher Unterschied zwischen Bewohnern von Villen, Städten und der Landbevölkerung bestand. Es wird weiterhin ausgeführt, dass tiefer reichenden Veränderungen, in der Haltung von Menschen gegenüber Tieren, zwischen der Eisenzeit und der römischen Periode zu erkennen sind. Religion durchdringt fast alle Aspekte der eisenzeitlichen und römischen Gesellschaft und wird in Kapitel 5 sondiert, mit der Analyse heiliger Plätze zusammen mit der materiellen Kultur und pflanzlicher- und tierischer Überreste, die religiöse Zugehörigkeit darstellten. Die Vielfalt und Dynamik mit der Religion ausgedrückt wird ist allgegenwärtig und findet ihren Ausdruck in den Riten der Bestattungspraxis, die in Kapitel 6 diskutiert werden. Über 15.000 ländliche Bestattungen bilden die Grundlage für diese Analyse und bieten eine beispiellose Quelle, um regionale und chronologische Variationen der Bestattungsriten bewerten zu können, auch in Hinblick auf umfassendere gesellschaftliche Veränderungen in der Provinz.

Osteologische Daten, einer ausgewählten Stichprobe dieser Bestattungen, werden in Kapitel 7 untersucht, um die Menschen auf dem Lande im späteren römischen Britannien zu untersuchen und wichtige Beobachtungen über das ländliche Leben, inklusive Aspekte der Ernährung und des Umfangs der täglichen Stressfaktoren, die sich auf das Wohlbefinden auswirken, zu liefern. Aus dieser Analyse geht hervor, dass ein Großteil der Landbevölkerung, zumindest in einigen Teilen des römischen Britanniens, ein sehr hartes Leben führte.

Insgesamt zeigen die in diesem Band vorgestellten Untersuchungen eine geographisch und soziokulturell vielfältige Gesellschaft, die durch bereits bestehende kulturelle Traditionen und Grade der sozialen Verknüpfung zwischen Siedlungen geprägt wird. Es scheint kein Zweifel daran zu bestehen, dass die Eingliederung in das römische Reich große soziale Veränderungen mit sich brachte und es entsteht der Eindruck, dass diese Veränderungen in hohem Maße zum Nachteil der ländlichen Bevölkerung waren.