

CHAPTER 8

THE CENTRAL WEST

By Tom Brindle

The area defined by the project as the Central West extends over 18,364 km² and incorporates elements of several modern administrative counties. The region includes the greater parts of Herefordshire, Shropshire, Cheshire, Merseyside, Derbyshire, West Yorkshire and approximately half of South Yorkshire, although the only counties to be included in their entirety are the metropolitan counties of Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. In the west the region extends into Wales to include small parts of Flintshire, Wrexham, Powys and Monmouthshire, and in the north very small sections of Lancashire and North Yorkshire. The northern extents of Worcestershire and Warwickshire fall within the south of the region, and in the east the region includes a very small section of Nottinghamshire (FIG. 8.1).

THE NATURE OF THE LANDSCAPE

The region contains considerable variation in terms of topography, geology and land use. Topographically, there are low-lying areas, principally in the north-west, in parts of Shropshire, Cheshire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside; plateaus, particularly in the south-west, and upland terrain, primarily in the north-east. However, the superficial division of the region into lowland, plateau and upland does injustice to the immense variation within each of these landscapes, even between areas that appear similar topographically, as shown by the large number of distinctive landscape zones within the region (FIG. 8.2). While much of the region's land use is rural and agricultural, there are some extensively



FIG. 8.1. The Central West region in relation to modern county boundaries

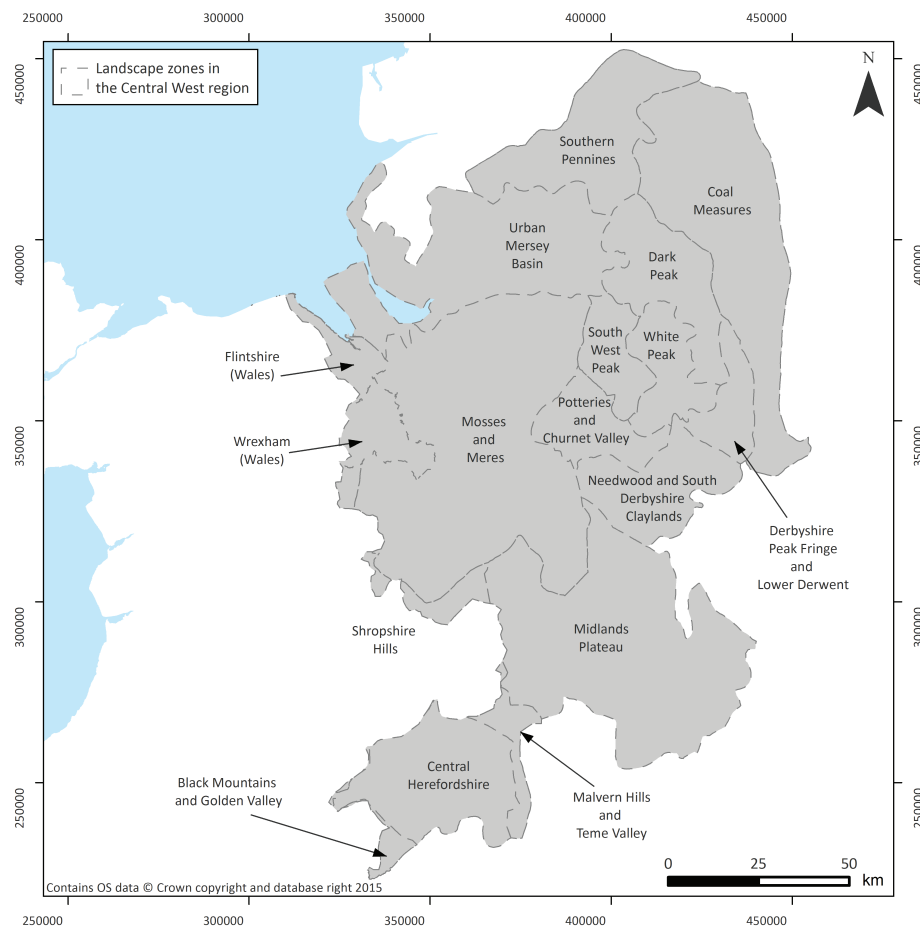


FIG. 8.2. Constituent landscape zones of the Central West region

developed areas, and the region includes some of the largest cities and urban conurbations in England and Wales outside London, including the West Midlands conurbation, Greater Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Bradford, Coventry and Stoke-on-Trent. Soils within the region are primarily acidic, resulting in poor survival of environmental remains, particularly bone.

THE CENTRAL WEST DATASET

The project database contains 200 records of excavations relating to 183 individual sites in the Central West region (the disparity reflecting a small number of sites that are represented by multiple records). These sites are mapped in FIG. 8.3 (top), yet it is crucially important to be aware of the limitations of the excavated data, particularly with regard to their geographical distribution. There appears to be a strong tendency for sites to focus on the low-lying terrain of the region, while the upland areas of Herefordshire and the Pennines are starkly under-represented. This undoubtedly in large part reflects a lowland focus for excavations rather than the genuine ancient settlement pattern,

as indicated by the distribution of excavations of all periods recorded by the National Monuments Record (FIG. 8.3). Indeed, Taylor (2007, 14) has mapped a large number of (mainly unexcavated and undated) earthworks from the southern Pennines, and a large number of earthwork sites from the Peak District have been subject to survey and surface artefact collection, with many being assigned Iron Age to Roman dates (cf. Makepeace 1998). The apparent focus on the lowland terrain may therefore to a certain extent be illusory.

While settlements are widespread across the lowlands, there are some notable clusters within these areas: for instance, a number of sites are situated in the vicinity of the *civitas* capital at Wroxeter, Shropshire (*Viroconium*), and also in close proximity to the walled 'small town' at Wall, Staffordshire. While clusters in these areas may reflect increased settlement density in the hinterlands of these centres, they are perhaps more likely to represent areas in which development has focused. A number of the sites near Wroxeter reflect development-led work associated with the A5/A49 Shrewsbury bypass (Ellis *et al.* 1994) as well as the research-focused work of the Wroxeter

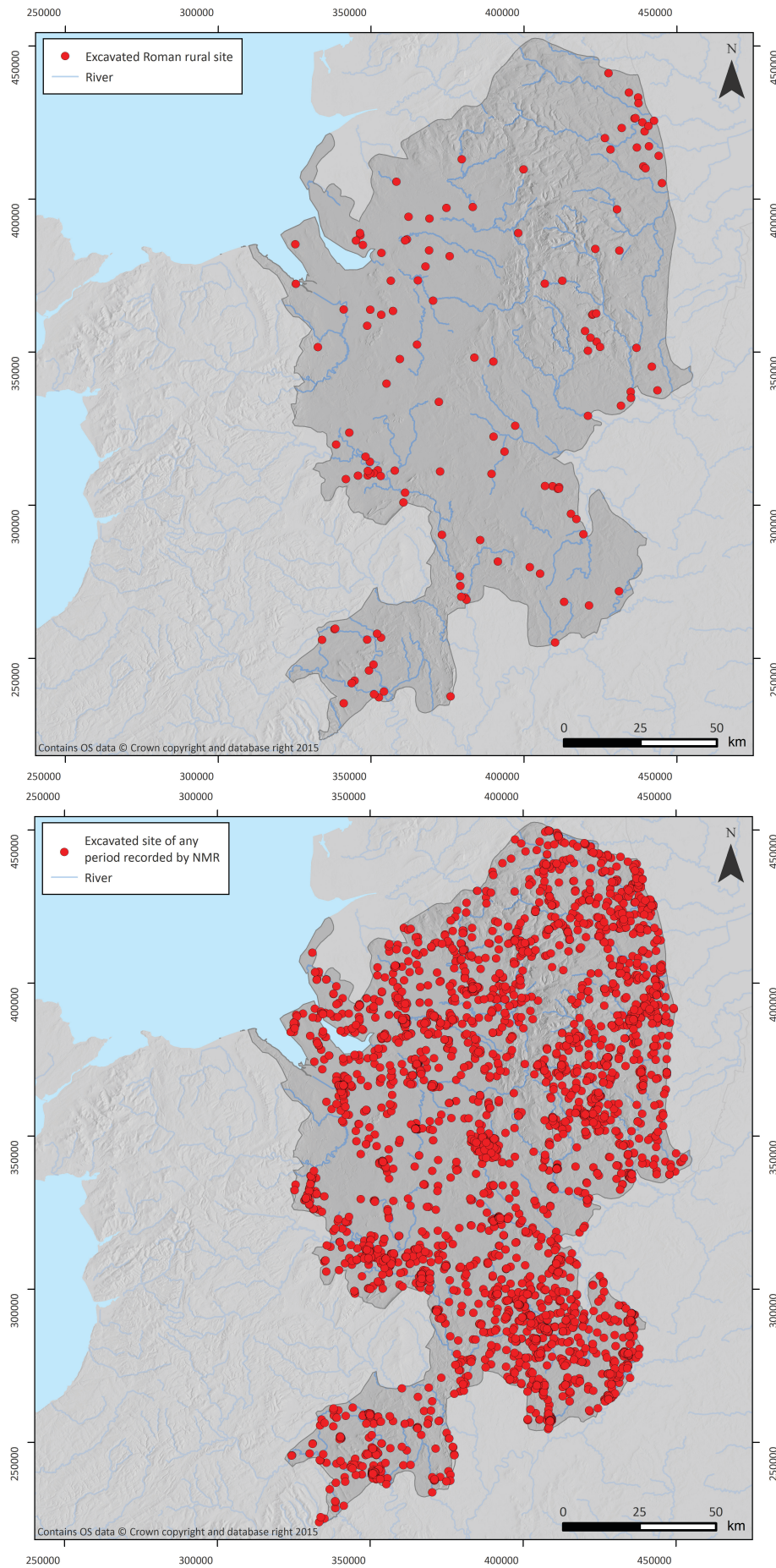


FIG. 8.3. Distribution of excavated Roman rural sites (n=183) and all excavation records (1910–2010) from National Monument Records (NMR) Index (n=4507) in the Central West region

Hinterland Project (Gaffney *et al.* 2007). Several of the sites near Wall were excavated as a result of road development, notably during the construction of the M6 Toll (Powell *et al.* 2008b), and in Merseyside there is a cluster of sites, several of which were also excavated ahead of road improvement (Cowell and Philpott 2000). What is notable, however, is that although the region encompasses some of the largest cities in the country outside London, the vast amounts of development associated with these urban centres have contributed very few new Romano-British rural sites (FIG. 8.4). This clearly does not reflect a lack of excavation in these areas, as the distribution of excavations recorded by the NMR illustrates (FIG. 8.3). It is somewhat unclear whether the almost total absence of rural sites from the built-up areas of the region reflects genuinely low-level settlement density, or whether such sites, which are rarely represented by large numbers of finds and which may already have been destroyed or damaged during earlier episodes of development, often go unrecognised during small-scale excavations in built-up areas. Nevertheless, it is perhaps instructive that large infrastructure

projects, such as the construction of the M6 Toll, have also produced relatively few Romano-British sites compared with what might be expected in some other regions (Powell *et al.* 2008b; British Archaeology 2002, 5). In particular, a watching brief associated with a continuous 68 km long gas pipeline in the region, running north-west to south-east through parts of Cheshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire, resulted in the addition of just two sites to the project database (one a single cremation, the other a small group of pits; Taylor 1999). With topsoil stripping of an easement approximately 30 m wide, this represents an area of over 200 ha, and the dearth of late Iron Age and Roman-period sites recognised during this work is noteworthy, suggesting that at least parts of the landscape saw comparatively low levels of occupation during the Roman period.

In order to explore intra-regional diversity within the settlement pattern, throughout the course of this chapter the region's sites have been divided into six spatial groups. Compared with some regions, the number of excavated sites in the Central West is relatively low, and it has not been possible to group them meaningfully by individual

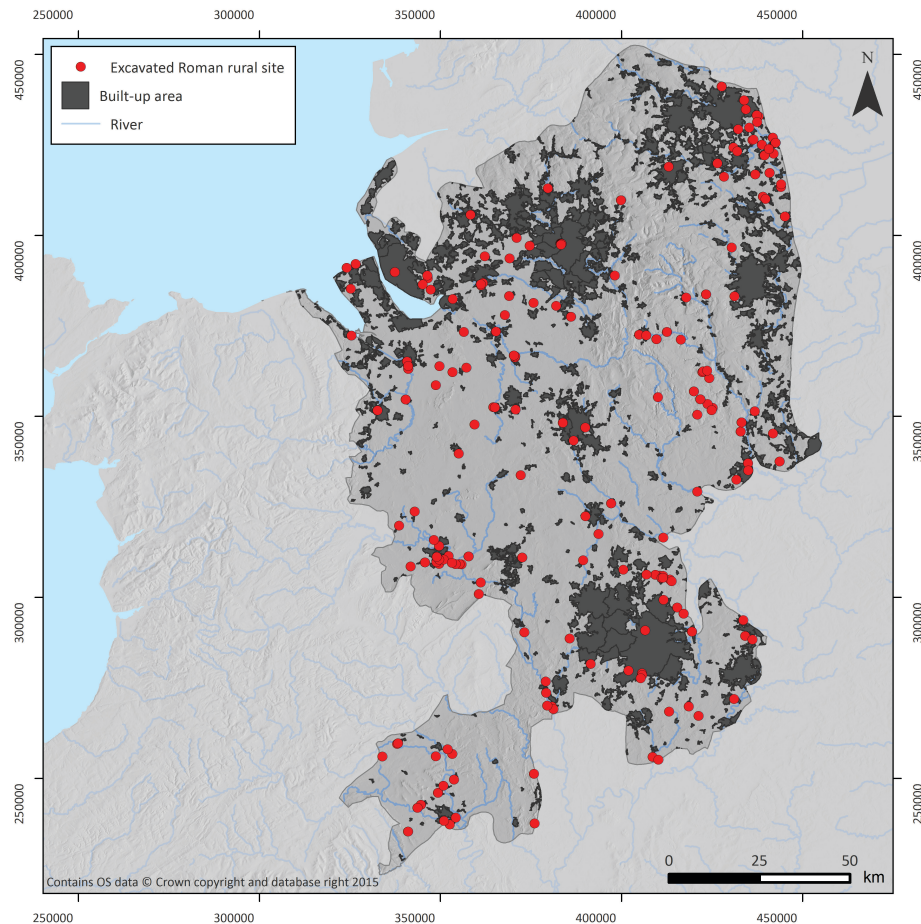


FIG. 8.4. Distribution of excavated Roman rural sites in relation to built-up areas

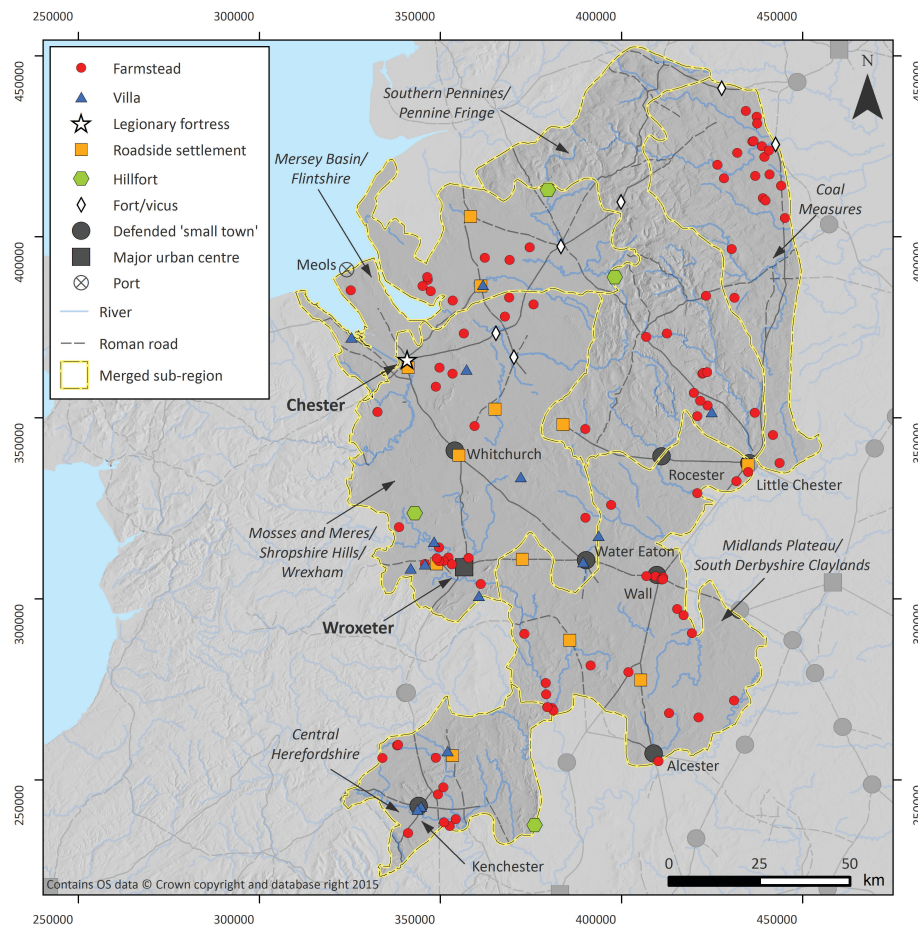


FIG. 8.5. Distribution of sites in the Central West by six sub-regions

TABLE 8.1: NUMBER AND DENSITY OF SITES IN THE CENTRAL WEST ARRANGED BY SUB-REGIONS

Landscape zone	Area (km ²)	No. of sites	Density of sites per km ²
Coal Measures	2283	32	0.014
Midlands Plateau/South Derbyshire Claylands	3852	44	0.011
Central Herefordshire	1512	17	0.011
Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham	4452	44	0.010
Mersey Basin/Flintshire	2327	20	0.009
Southern Pennines/Pennine Fringe	3927	26	0.007
Total	18351	183	0.010

Natural England landscape zones. Such an approach is made more problematic by the extension of the region into parts of Wales, where there is no equivalent to the Natural England areas (see Ch. 1). For these reasons six new zones have been established, based in the main upon the existing Natural England zones, but adding adjacent parts of Wales where applicable, and merging Natural England areas where there would be too few sites to consider individually (FIG. 8.5; TABLE 8.1). The dividing lines between these six zones do not always represent firm, clearly distinguishable physical boundaries, and the

borders are to a certain extent arbitrary, yet they provide a pragmatic means of assessing the variability in the settlement pattern within the Central West region.

ROMAN RURAL SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

There are two major Roman-period centres in the Central West region, Wroxeter (*Viroconium Cornoviorum*) and Chester (*Deva*). Both sites had Roman military origins, established as legionary

TABLE 8.2: MAJOR SITE TYPES IN THE CENTRAL WEST REGION DISPLAYED BY SUB-REGIONS

<i>Landscape zone</i>	<i>Farmstead</i>	<i>Villa</i>	<i>Roadside settlement</i>	<i>Vicus</i>	<i>Hillfort</i>	<i>Other site</i>
Midlands Plateau/South Derbyshire Claylands	24	1	4	0	0	10
Coal Measures	21	0	0	2	0	9
Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham	20	7	4	2	1	15
Southern Pennines/Pennine Fringe	12	1	1	1	1	10
Central Herefordshire	10	3	1	0	1	2
Mersey Basin/Flintshire	9	2	2	1	1	5
Total	96	14	12	6	4	51

fortresses, the former during the A.D. 50s, and the latter during the 70s. However, whereas Chester was to remain a permanent legionary base with an accompanying and extensive *canabae*, occupied until at least the late fourth century A.D., the legionary fortress at Wroxeter was abandoned in around A.D. 90, after which it was redeveloped and became the *civitas* capital of the Cornovii. Away from these major centres, there were, in addition, a number of nucleated sites of the type usually defined as ‘small towns’, situated along major Roman roads. These include the ‘walled towns’ of Kenchester (*Magnis*), Alcester (*Alavna*), Wall (*Letocetum*), Water Eaton (*Pennocrucium*), Whitchurch (*Mediolanum*), Little Chester (*Derventio*) and Rocester. These ‘walled towns’ fall outside the remit of this study, although it is worth noting that they have a southern focus and do not seem to have been a feature of the northern half of the Central West. Besides the walled towns, however, there were also a number of large undefended roadside settlements, which have a wider distribution, and several of these are represented by records on the project database.

As well as the long-lived fortress at Chester, several auxiliary forts and marching camps are known, and the Roman army maintained a strong presence, predominantly in the north of the region, particularly during the later first and second centuries A.D. Most forts had associated civilian settlements, *vici*, and in the north these seem to have taken the place of the walled ‘small towns’ of the south. Excavated examples on the database include those associated with the auxiliary forts at Middlewich, Northwich, Manchester, Castleshaw, Castleford and perhaps also Adel. The example at Castleford is best seen as a *vicus* associated with a north–south network of forts extending outside the border of the region, into the North-East, including Newton Kyme and Doncaster, perhaps all established at around the same time towards the end of the first century A.D.

(see Ch. 7). In addition to the excavated examples on the database, limited interventions have also been undertaken in *vici* associated with forts at Ilkley, Slack, Templeborough, Chesterfield and Brough-on-Noe, although these are not well understood (Roberts pers. comm.). Unlike Chester, most forts were abandoned during the second century A.D., although a small number maintained garrisons into the late Roman period, and Manchester, for instance, witnessed activity into the fourth century (Bidwell and Hodgson 2009, 97; Jones 1974).

Of the 183 sites broadly classified as being of ‘rural’ character and recorded on the project database, 132 have been identified as domestic settlements of some description, the remainder comprising industrial sites, field systems or areas of funerary activity. TABLE 8.2 presents broad classifications of the settlements by the six sub-regions, and it is clear that farmsteads are overwhelmingly the most common type of domestic site across the region as a whole, accounting for 73 per cent of domestic sites. Nucleated sites on the database are confined to undefended roadside settlements (9 per cent of settlements) and military *vici* (5 per cent), with villages absent, although as noted above ‘walled towns’ are a common feature of the archaeology of the south of the region. Villas occur, although they are few in number (fourteen excavated examples – 11 per cent of settlements), and these are unevenly distributed, being clearly focused on the Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham sub-region, with an emphasis on the south which is, broadly speaking, similar to the distribution of walled ‘small towns’. Of the few sites broadly defined as villas in the north of the region, those at Loushers Lane, Warrington, Cheshire (Rogers and Garner 2007; Hinchliffe *et al.* 1992), and Pentre Farm, Flint, Flintshire, are very atypical, probably functioning as official buildings associated with local administration rather than rural villas. Indeed, Pentre Farm has

long been recognised as being in some way involved with the control of lead production (O’Leary 1989), and recent excavations (completed after data collection was finished) have indicated the presence of an extensive roadside industrial settlement immediately to the south-east of the ‘villa’ (Chris Martin pers. comm.), suggesting that the building was part of or closely associated with this nucleated site. The remaining element of the settlement pattern consists of a small number of hillforts with Iron Age origins that continued to be occupied in some way during the late Iron Age/Roman period within the region.

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

As farmsteads account for the large majority of settlements recorded from the Central West it is inevitable that any attempt to display rural settlement chronology in graphical form will be biased towards these sites, and for this reason the chronological pattern shown by each of the main settlement types are discussed here independently. However, as for the most part villas are likely to have been involved in some way with agricultural production (though perhaps not the site at Pentre Farm, Flint), and as in some cases villa buildings represented late developments at sites that would otherwise be considered farmsteads, the region’s fourteen villas have been included as ‘farming settlements’ here.

As in some other regions, the dating of Iron Age and Roman period rural sites in the Central West is often hindered by the low dating resolution afforded by pottery (cf. Ch. 1). Much of the region appears to have been largely aceramic during the late Iron Age (Philpott and Adams 2010, 179–80; Gaffney *et al.* 2007, 223, 280), and in areas where pottery was in use ceramic traditions often continued unchanged into the early Roman

period, making it difficult to distinguish between sites occupied during the late Iron Age and those established during the Roman period (Roberts pers. comm.). The chronological patterns presented below must therefore be regarded with a certain degree of caution.

FIGURE 8.6 presents the chronology of farming settlements, showing the number of settlements in use over time, suggesting a rise in the number of sites occupied during the late Iron Age, with this increase continuing until the second half of the second century A.D. This is followed by a slight decline in the number of settlements occupied at around the turn of the third century, although the numbers then remain relatively stable until the end of the third/early fourth century, when there is a decline that continues until the end of the Roman period.

This broad regional pattern masks important intra-regional trends, however, and there are distinct differences between some of the sub-regions. To illustrate this, FIG. 8.7 presents the chronological data from two sub-regions with very different chronological profiles, the Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham area, and, on the opposite side of the Pennines, the Coal Measures. Both regions are represented by a very small number of farmsteads of mid- to late Iron Age date, yet whereas the number of farmsteads in use during the late Iron Age and first century A.D. increased in both areas, the Coal Measures appears to have witnessed much more considerable settlement expansion at this time. In both areas the number of settlements continued to rise until the mid- to late second century, when broadly similar numbers of settlements were occupied in both sub-regions. The early third century saw a decline in the number of settlements in both areas, yet this reduction appears to have been more acute

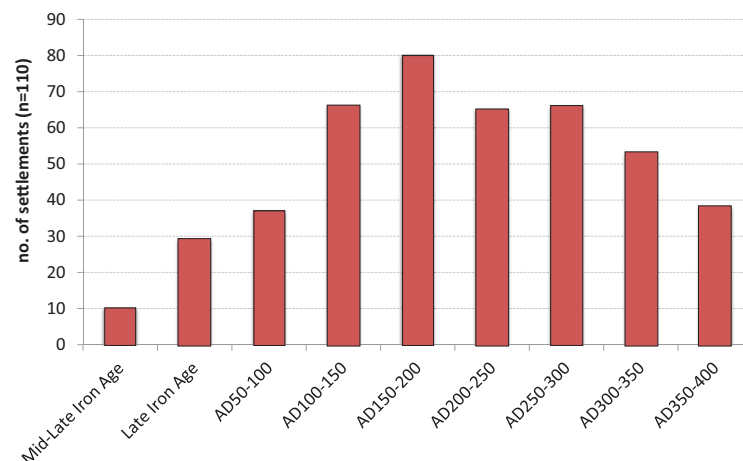


FIG. 8.6. Number of farming settlements in use over time in the Central West region

in the Coal Measures, heralding a period of marked settlement abandonment that continued unchecked until the end of the Roman period (a phenomenon previously noted by Hodgson 2012, 53). In contrast, the number of settlements in use in the Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham area fluctuated slightly during the course of the third century, but there does not appear to have been a major episode of settlement decline until the mid-fourth century.

Although the second century A.D. may be regarded as the period of peak activity across the region, the differences between the two sub-regions discussed above are further emphasised if we consider the evidence for the dates at which settlements apparently *emerged*, rather than just noting the broad number of settlements in use over time (FIG. 8.8). Considerably more settlements in the Coal Measures produced evidence for an Iron Age (or earlier) origin, and there appears to have been a particular episode of settlement

expansion during the late Iron Age in this zone. Many of these sites continued to be occupied throughout the early Roman period, and as the number of settlements continued gradually to increase, this resulted in a landscape that was at its most densely populated (in terms of the number of settlements) during the second century. Although some farmsteads in the Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham area were established during the Iron Age, the period in which most farmsteads emerged seems to have been considerably later than in the Coal Measures, and the second century appears to have been the period of major settlement expansion in this area. The reasons for the striking chronological differences between sites in these two parts of the Central West are uncertain, and it is at present unclear whether the variance reflects genuine differences in the settlement patterns of the two areas or an artificial phenomenon caused by the aforementioned sub-regional variation in the use

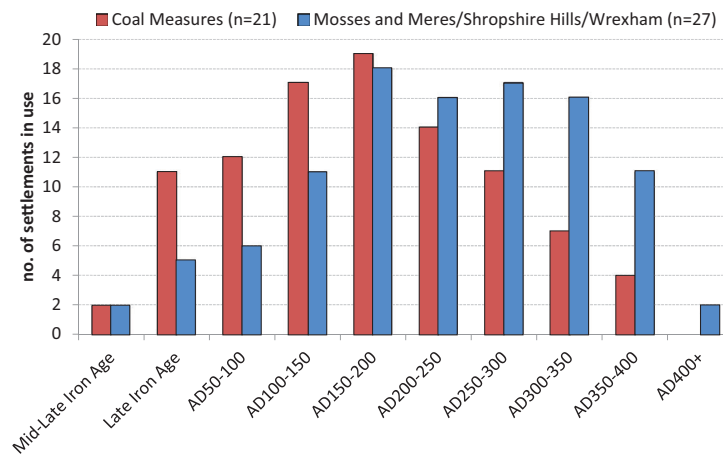


FIG. 8.7. Number of farming settlements in use over time in selected sub-regions of the Central West

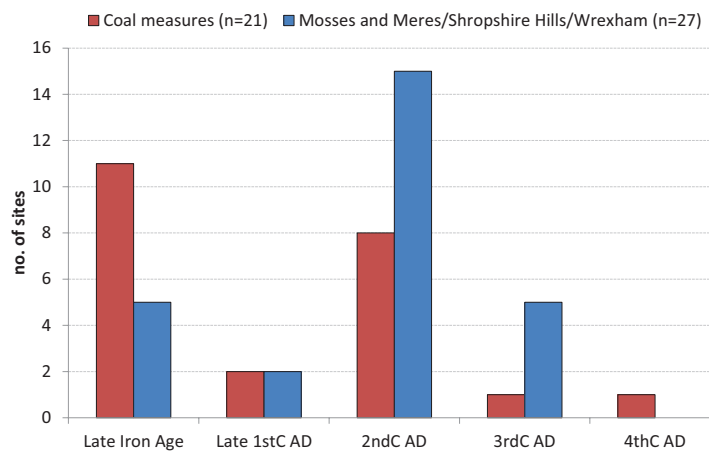


FIG. 8.8. Establishment dates for farming settlements in the Coal Measures and the Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham area

of ceramics, and the subsequent effect this has had on the dating of sites. Taking the evidence at face value, however, it would appear that there were distinct geographical differences in settlement chronology, even within these two sub-regions.

There is considerable chronological variation between the other major classes of settlement within the region – the military *vici*, roadside settlements and hillforts. As *vici* are civilian settlements associated with military sites, they typically emerged shortly after the foundation of the forts to which they were attached, usually from around the final quarter of the first century A.D. Some *vici* apparently went out of use at broadly the same time as activity at the forts ceased, as at Northwich (Jones 1972) and Castleshaw (Redhead 1999), although in some cases the civilian settlement appears to have extended beyond the period of military occupation, as, for example, at Middlewich (Garner and Reid 2012; Williams and Reid 2008). At Castleford the fort and *vicus* were redeveloped during the second half of the third century A.D., becoming a defended civilian settlement that continued until the end of the fourth century A.D. (Rush *et al.* 2000; Abramson *et al.* 1999; Cool and Philo 1998).

The sites defined as roadside settlements form an amorphous group, comprising sites of varying character. Some, like military *vici*, developed adjacent to or in close proximity to forts, but these are differentiated from *vici* as the civilian settlements emerged after the forts were abandoned, as at Greensforge (A. Jones 1999; Webster 1981). In some cases, however, the relationship between the civilian settlements and the military activity is uncertain, for example at Children's Hospital, North Street, Derby (Higgins 1999). In other instances civilian roadside settlements developed out of other military sites, such as those interpreted as possible supply depots at Holditch (Rogers and Garner 2007; Charlton 1962), Wilderspool (Rogers and Garner 2007; Hinchliffe *et al.* 1992) and Redhill, Telford (Mann 2011; Browne and Boon 2004). Occasionally early military phases or military associations are indicated but ill understood, as at Wigan, where the recent discovery of a bathhouse (Miller and Aldridge 2011) has confirmed the presence of early Roman military activity, as also suggested by earlier interventions (Jones and Price 1985).

Other nucleated settlements take the form of 'ribbon' developments along roads, sometimes not far from other large settlements, for example at Heath Road (Hannaford and Mason 1991), 2 km south of the walled town at Whitchurch. Despite their varying character and mixed origins, the available dating evidence suggests that the region's roadside settlements emerged during broadly the

same period. None has produced evidence for Iron Age origins, and all appear to have been established during the later first or early second centuries A.D. In most cases the settlements appear to have been relatively long lived, although several appear not to have continued beyond the end of the third century A.D. Others, including Meole Brace (Ellis *et al.* 1994; Hannaford and Philpotts 1994), Redhill, Telford (Mann 2011; Browne and Boon 2004), Heronbridge (Mason 2004) and Greensforge (A. Jones 1999; Webster 1981), have produced evidence for fourth-century occupation, although the precise nature of the activity is not always clear. None of the region's roadside settlements have produced evidence for continuity beyond the Roman period. The site at Meols (Griffiths *et al.* 2007), on the north coast of the Wirral peninsula, represents something of an anomaly as it is so very poorly understood. The site is known principally through chance finds, but it was evidently an important centre throughout the late Iron Age and Roman periods. The rich range of artefacts recovered, which include objects such as third-century B.C. Carthaginian coins and other exotic artefacts, suggest that the site was an important and long-lived harbour serving an Atlantic trade route that linked western Britain to the Mediterranean via Brittany (Philpott and Adams 2010, 177).

The final class of rural settlement within the region are hillforts, of which there are four examples on the database. In all cases the late Iron Age/Romano-British activity recorded represents continuity of (or renewed) occupation at sites that originated as hillforts during the mid-Iron Age, although the character of occupation is usually uncertain, and the length of duration of the continuity into the late Iron Age and Roman period varies. At Midsummer Hill, Herefordshire (Stanford 1981), and the Berth, Shropshire (Morris and Gelling 1991), for example, activity appears to have ceased during the first century A.D. At Castle Steads, Bury (Fletcher 2005), some sort of activity apparently continued into the second century A.D., whereas at Old Vicarage, Mellor, Stockport, occupation, possibly of high status, may have continued until the fourth century (Noble *et al.* 2008). Further examples saw excavation in the early or mid-twentieth century, and as a consequence the available information is sometimes limited. The multivallate site at Nescliffe, Shropshire (Hume and Jones 1960) represents a further Iron Age hillfort with poorly understood evidence for Roman-period occupation, and a large hoard of early fourth-century coins was also recently recovered from the vicinity of the site (Wigley pers. comm.). At Bury Walls, Shropshire, excavations in the 1930s resulted in the discovery

of a masonry building of suspected Roman date within the interior of the hillfort (Morris 1932), and this has been suggested as a possible late Roman temple (Murdie *et al.* 2003). Almondbury Hillfort, near Huddersfield, has been regarded by some as a likely stronghold of Cartimandua and as the *Camulodunum* recorded in the Ravenna Cosmography (Faull 1981, 116; Varley 1976; Challis and Harding 1975, 120), although evidence of occupation in the later Iron Age has not been confirmed by excavation (Varley 1976).

RURAL SETTLEMENT FORM

The form of rural settlements in the Central West has previously been characterised by Taylor (in his sections on the West Midlands and the North-West), with enclosed farmsteads being recognised as the dominant settlement type, principally identified through aerial photography (Taylor 2007, 43, 47–8). Of the 110 excavated farmsteads and villas recorded on the project database for the region, 40 sites (36 per cent) had plans that were

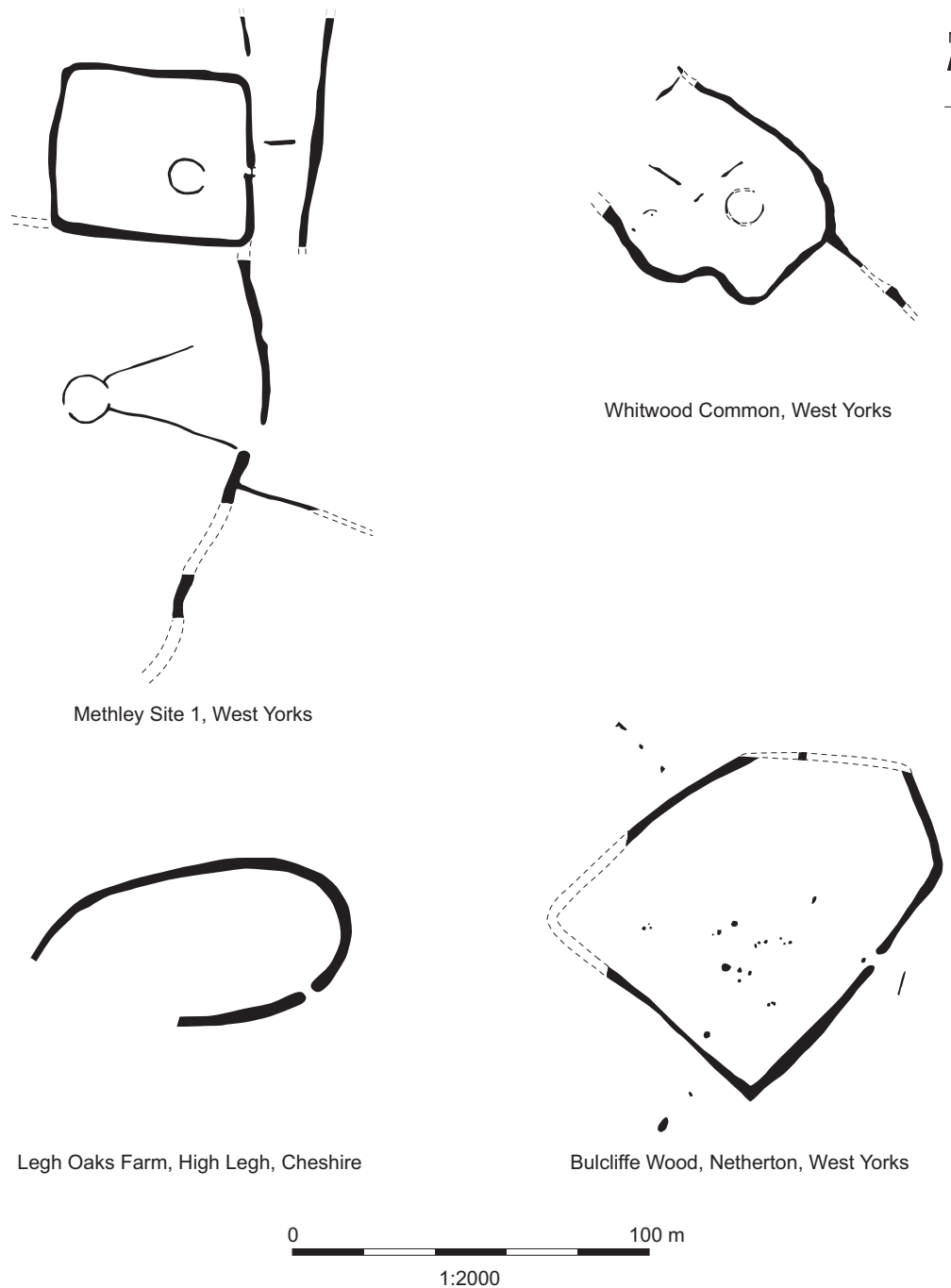


FIG. 8.9. Plans of enclosed farmsteads of rectilinear (Methley Site 1; Roberts and Richardson 2002), irregular (Whitwood Common; Burgess and Roberts 2004), D-shaped (Bulcliffe Wood, Netherton; Grassam and Roberts 2008) and curvilinear (Legh Oaks Farm, High Legh; Nevell 2002) form

sufficiently detailed and extensive to allow confident classification by form, and, of these, the large majority (85 per cent) were small, dispersed, settlements of enclosed form. There were, in addition, a further twelve potential enclosed farmsteads which had insufficiently clear or complete plans for such a classification to be made with confidence.

Although enclosed settlements dominate the settlement pattern of the region, there is considerable variation among them, with a range of forms represented. Enclosures of rectilinear form are most common, accounting for 56 per cent of those assigned a form, while enclosures of irregular (28 per cent), D-shaped (11 per cent) and curvilinear (6 per cent) shape also occur (FIG. 8.9). Most enclosures appear to have been of single-ditched construction, although substantial double-ditched enclosures, as for example, at Sharpstones Hill Site E, Shropshire (FIG. 8.10; Bain and Evans 2011; Barker *et al.* 1991), occur in small numbers (eight in total), with an apparent emphasis on the west of the region.

The relatively small number of well-understood sites prevents a confident understanding of the intra-regional and chronological patterns for the form of enclosures, and the pattern within the region was complex. Philpott (2000a, 183–4), focusing on the Cheshire/Merseyside area, suggested that double-ditched curvilinear enclosures may be Iron Age and those of single-ditched, rectilinear form of Roman date, highlighting a contrast with the pattern in Shropshire, where rectilinear enclosures sometimes originated in the late Iron Age. The limited sample of excavated sites makes the identification of firm patterns difficult, and there are insufficient numbers for statistics to be of value, although, at least in the west of the region, the excavated evidence broadly supports Philpott's suggestion. The rectilinear enclosure at Ochre Brook, in Merseyside (Cowell 2009; Philpott 2000b), for example, appears to have been a second-century establishment, whereas in Shropshire the rectilinear settlements at Hay Farm, Eardington (Hunn 2000) and Sharpstones Hill Site E (Bain and Evans 2011; Barker *et al.* 1991) had origins in the late Iron Age, continuing on into the Roman period. East of the Pennines, in the Coal Measures, many of the rectilinear enclosures seem to have had Iron Age origins, and some did not continue long into the Roman period, yet others, such as Bullerthorpe Lane (Roberts *et al.* 2001) may only have been established in the second century A.D. Many irregularly shaped enclosures (seemingly more common in the east) also appear to have been of a range of dates; some seem to have had Iron Age origins, as at Whitwood Common

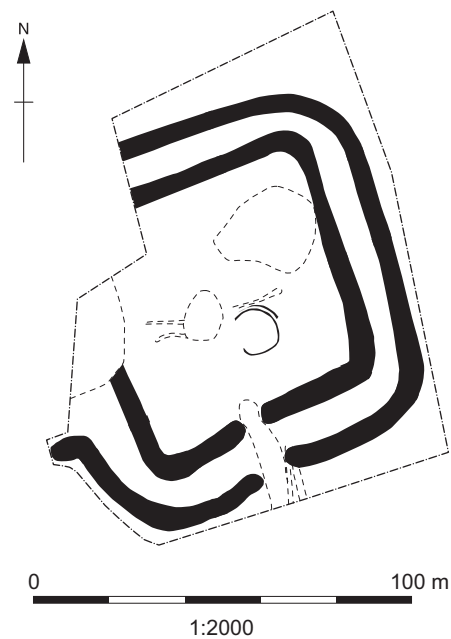


FIG. 8.10. Plan of farmstead at Sharpstones Hill Site E, Shropshire (Bain and Evans 2011)

(Burgess and Roberts 2004), while others were of Roman date, as at Killingbeck Hospital, Leeds (Timms 2012).

Although Philpott (2000a, 183) has observed a late prehistoric date for double-ditched curvilinear enclosures in Cheshire and Merseyside, most of the region's sites with double-ditched enclosures were of rectilinear form and appear predominantly to have been of Roman date. The number of ditches alone is therefore a poor guide to settlement chronology. Indeed, in the Coal Measures it has been suggested that double-ditched enclosures may typically have been products of two phases: an initial large-ditched enclosure (often of late Iron Age date), subsequently redefined when it was integrated into a later field system complex (Roberts *pers. comm.*). In this part of the region few double-ditched enclosures are thought to have been created with both circuits as primary features, although a second/third century example from Low Common, Whitwood, is one such example (Burgess and Roberts 2004). The variable and complex range of enclosures across the region makes assigning a date to sites based upon their morphology alone extremely problematic, and it would certainly be dangerous to extrapolate from one part of the region to another.

Rural settlements of complex form make up a very minor component of the settlement pattern within the region, with only four (10 per cent) of the classified sites assigned to this morphological group with any degree of confidence, although an additional nine unclassified sites have been regarded as potential examples. There are too few

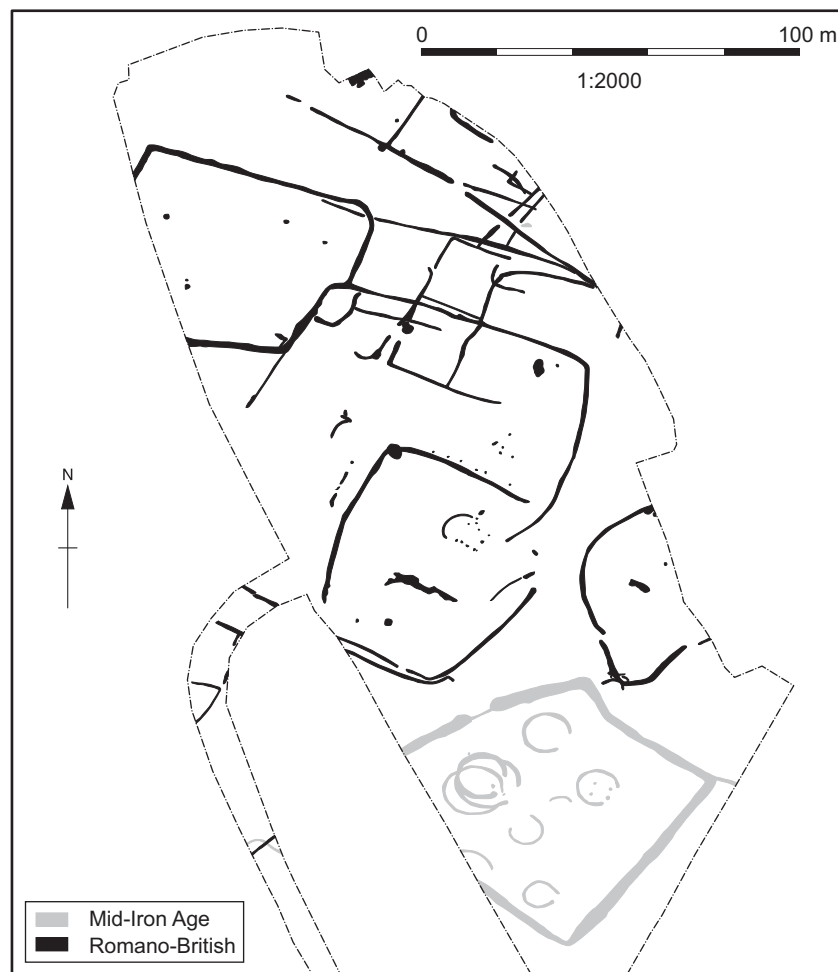


FIG. 8.11. Site plan of a mid-second to mid-third century A.D. complex farmstead, developing from a mid-Iron Age open and subsequently enclosed settlement, north of Langley Mill, West Midlands (Powell and Ritchie 2008)

certain examples to identify any meaningful patterns within their geographical distribution. While complex farmsteads never approached enclosed sites in terms of their frequency within the region, their number appears to have increased from the second century A.D. Again, these sites do not represent a homogeneous group; there are considerable differences between them in terms of their precise form and chronology, and they all underwent considerable change and development over time.

Some had Iron Age origins; the site north of Langley Mill (FIG. 8.11), appears to have experienced a complex sequence of development, emerging first as an open, then subsequently enclosed settlement in the mid-Iron Age, followed by contraction during the late Iron Age and early Roman periods, and then by extensive reorganisation and reoccupation between the mid-second and mid-third centuries, when a series of enclosures, some with structures, were linked to a wider system of fields and other boundaries (Powell and Ritchie 2008).

At Loushers Lane (Rogers and Garner 2007; Hinchliffe *et al.* 1992), a late Iron Age enclosed farmstead was remodelled in the late first century A.D. when a series of enclosures were established containing a range of building types, all associated with a lane leading to the newly constructed villa, and the site continued to see further reorganisation over time. Other complex sites produced little evidence for Iron Age activity, and that at East of Birmingham Road Nurseries, Shenstone (Simmonds 2008) appears to have been established in the mid-second century A.D., although it also produced evidence for a phase of major reorganisation, this time in the mid-third century, with ditches recut and the establishment of new enclosures.

Only two open settlements have been recorded from the region, although this low number must certainly result from the lack of major features such as enclosure ditches, which means that such sites are very difficult to identify. The two known examples are quite different. Court Farm, Halewood, Knowsley (Adams 1997), in

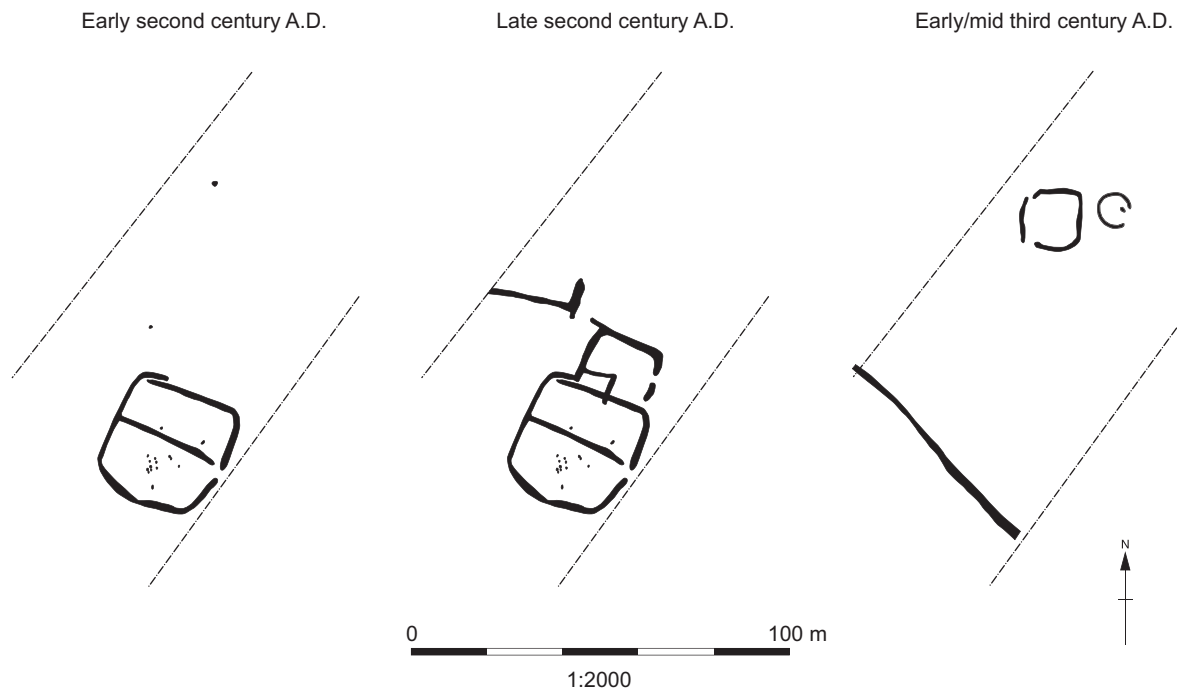


FIG. 8.12. Sequence of development at Bullerthorpe Lane, Swillington, where a third-century building and stock enclosure replaced an earlier enclosed settlement (Roberts *et al.* 2001)

Merseyside, was represented by a large group of sub-rectangular buildings of mid- to late Roman date, and there is no evidence that it was ever enclosed. In contrast, Bullerthorpe Lane, Swillington, West Yorkshire (Roberts *et al.* 2001), had an unenclosed third-century phase, when it was represented by a single building and a stock enclosure, which may have replaced an earlier farmstead of enclosed form (FIG. 8.12).

BUILDINGS

The evidence for buildings in the Central West region amounts to 302 individual structures recorded from 72 sites (TABLE 8.3). Taylor (2007, 31) has previously noted the presence of rectilinear buildings at rural sites in the region, and these stand out as being by far the most common type of building within the region with 202 examples excavated (*c.* 80 per cent of those recorded). However, rectangular buildings are very unevenly distributed across the different classes of site, the majority (61 per cent) being recovered from roadside settlements and military *vici*. This largely reflects the large size of these nucleated sites, and a correspondingly high number of buildings from each individual settlement. Excavations at the roadside settlement at Wilderspool, Warrington, for example, recorded a series of 36 rectangular buildings, although not all of these were contemporary (FIG. 8.13; Rogers and Garner 2007). Circular buildings are very uncommon at

nucleated settlements, comprising just 3 per cent of all buildings associated with these types of site; the only roadside settlement with buildings of circular form is Longdales Road, King's Norton, Birmingham, and the only *vici* is Middlewich, where possible pre-Roman roundhouses and an oval building of Antonine date were identified.

Outside of the nucleated settlements circular buildings are far more common, accounting for 41 per cent of the buildings at farming settlements and hillforts (although of the region's hillforts only Old Vicarage, Mellor, produced good evidence for structures). However, this pattern is skewed by the inclusion of villas in the farming settlements, and these sites are unsurprisingly far better represented by rectangular architecture than by circular buildings. At farmsteads without villa architecture circular buildings do outnumber those of rectangular form, yet, while they form the greatest proportion of buildings from farmsteads, they do not completely dominate.

In terms of chronology the regional pattern follows the provincial pattern closely, with a reduction in the frequency of sites with circular buildings over time, as rectangular forms become increasingly common. The most striking period of decline in the use of circular architecture appears to be during the late Iron Age to Roman transition, where there is a drop from 43 per cent of sites with circular buildings to 23 per cent (FIG. 8.14). By the first century A.D. sites producing rectangular buildings slightly outnumber those with circular buildings, although the balance is relatively equal.

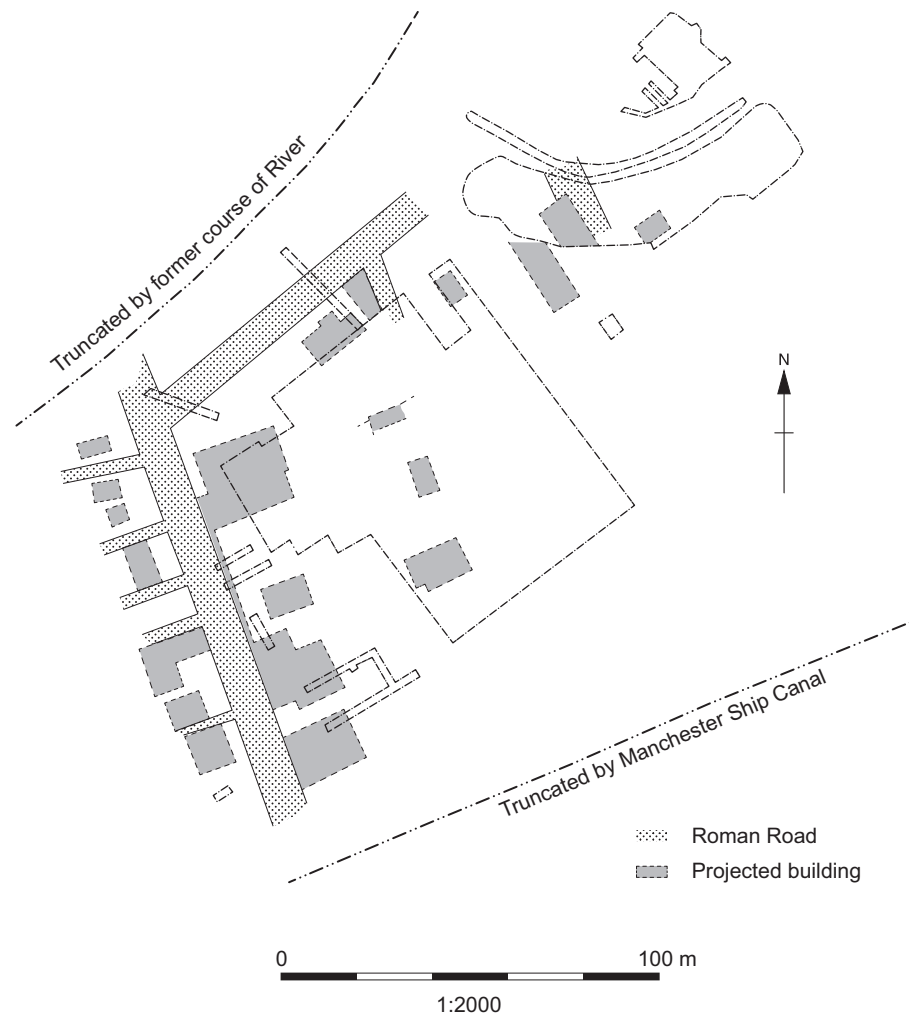


FIG. 8.13. Plan of buildings at Wilderspool, Warrington, during the period c. A.D. 250–270 (Rogers and Garner 2007)

TABLE 8.3: NUMBER OF BUILDINGS FROM DIFFERENT SITE TYPES IN THE CENTRAL WEST REGION

<i>Site type</i>	<i>Total no. buildings</i>	<i>No. circular buildings</i>	<i>No. rectangular buildings</i>
Farmstead	84	46	38
Farmstead/villa	48	10	38
Roadside settlement	99	3	96
Hillfort	5	5	0
<i>Vicus</i>	48	1	47
Other	18	1	17
Total	302	66	236

However, by the second century many more sites with evidence for buildings produce rectangular buildings, with circular buildings remaining relatively uncommon from then onwards. This broad chronological pattern of course masks differences between the different classes of settlement, and to a certain extent reflects an increase over time of those sites that produce rectangular buildings, namely roadside settlements, military *vici* and villas. However, if we look at

farmsteads exclusively, the same temporal trend is clearly evident, the principal difference being that circular architecture remains important longer (until the second century A.D.) than the overall regional pattern suggests (FIG. 8.15).

The materials used in the construction of buildings vary across the different classes of site. At farmsteads, buildings were overwhelmingly of timber (or mass-walled; see Ch. 3) construction, only 14 per cent of structures incorporating stone.

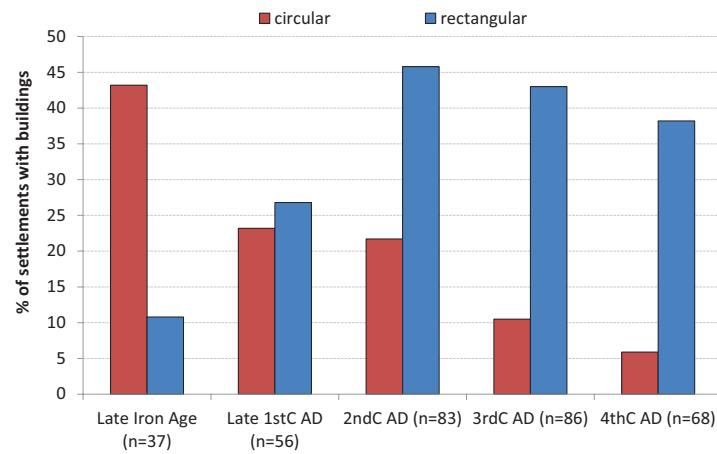


FIG. 8.14. Use of circular and rectangular buildings in the Central West over time

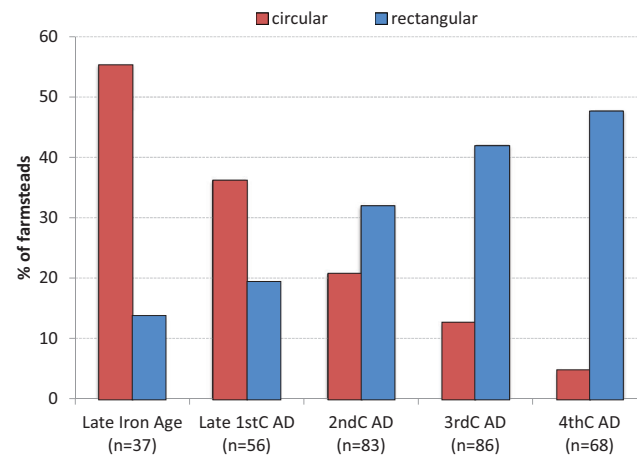


FIG. 8.15. Use of circular and rectangular buildings on farmsteads in the Central West over time

The few farmsteads with stone buildings (ten examples) are widely dispersed across the region, with examples in Clwyd Powys, Shropshire, Herefordshire and Warwickshire, although there is a small cluster in the Derbyshire/South Yorkshire area. Where masonry structures do occur at farmsteads they are usually rectangular and of mortared construction, sometimes with evidence for tiled roofs and occasionally for wall plaster, as at Ripley, Derbyshire (Palfreyman and Ebbins 2012). At Wattscliffe, Harthill Moor, Derbyshire, the only farmstead in the region to have produced stone-built circular houses, somewhat different construction techniques were used, and the walls of one house were constructed using large gritstone boulders (Makepeace 1998).

Timber was also the most commonly used material for buildings at nucleated settlements, although most of these settlements also included some examples of masonry buildings, these being revealed in large numbers at certain sites (e.g. Holditch and Heronbridge). In contrast to the buildings from farmsteads, which are usually interpreted as

domestic houses, buildings at nucleated sites have a wide range of functions and are frequently suggested as workshops, shops and taverns.

Villas are the only class of site within the region where masonry-built structures outnumber those of timber, although this is scarcely surprising given that a well-appointed masonry-built structure is a typical characteristic of this settlement type. Yet sites identified as villas do also display a range of buildings, both in terms of form and in the material used. All of the region's villas display complex sequences of development, and the provision of a full villa building often only occurs after several generations of activity during which settlement focuses around other types of building. At Loushers Lane, Warrington, the construction of the villa building in the late first century A.D. was associated with the remodelling of a previously occupied farmstead (Rogers and Garner 2007; Hinchliffe *et al.* 1992). The villa at Acton Trussell, Staffordshire (Penk Valley Archaeological Group 1997; 2004), appears to have gone through various transformations, initially developing from late Iron



FIG. 8.16. Plan of building at Pentre Farm, Flint, during the late second/early third century A.D., probably associated with a recently discovered roadside settlement (O'Leary 1989)

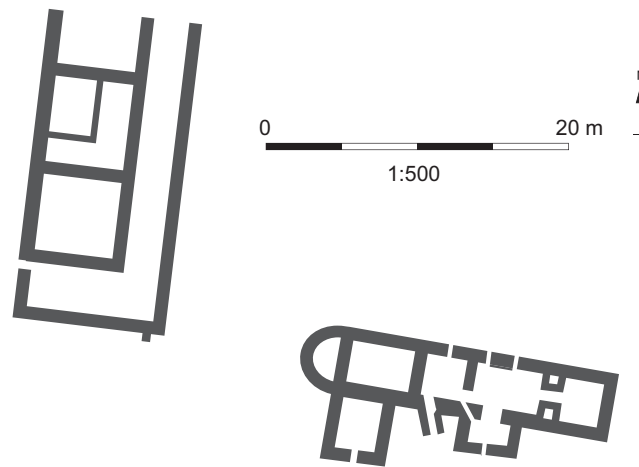


FIG. 8.17. Plan of a corridor villa with a detached bathhouse at Hales, Staffordshire (Goodyear 1974)

Age roundhouses, incorporating timber-built rectangular buildings in the late first century A.D., with stone buildings added in the second century. Further extensions and the addition of a bathhouse occurred during the second to third century, and the villa experienced a complete rebuild during the mid-fourth century.

In terms of our understanding of the development of their form, several of the villas from the region are too poorly understood to provide much information about their plan. Based on the eight examples that could be classified by villa form, almost all appear to have been of relatively modest scale. Three were cottage buildings (e.g. Pentre Farm, Flint: O'Leary 1989; FIG. 8.16), two were corridor (e.g. Hales, Staffordshire: Goodyear 1974; FIG. 8.17) and three were winged-corridor types (e.g. Eaton-by-Tarporley, Cheshire: Mason 1983; FIG. 8.18). Although the evidence is very

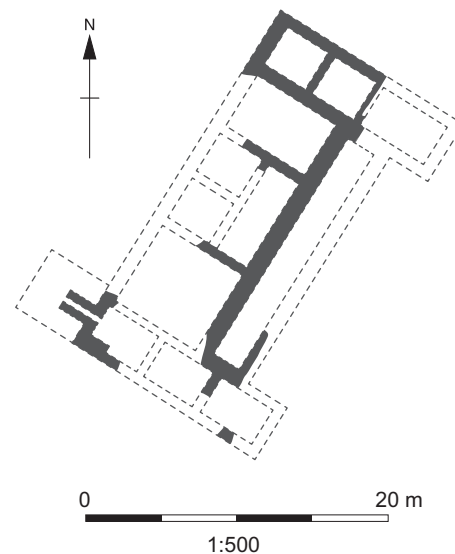


FIG. 8.18. Plan of a winged corridor villa at Eaton-by-Tarporley, Cheshire, during its final phase (Mason 1983)

fragmentary, the villa at Loushers Lane, Wilderspool, is regarded as being of courtyard form in its final phase (Rogers and Garner 2007, 42), which would make it the most elaborate of the villas from the region. The small numbers prevent any meaningful assessment of the distribution of these different classes of villa within the region. Compared with some of the most luxurious courtyard and palatial villas known from elsewhere within the province (particularly in the South and the Central Belt), the Central West villas seem relatively unimpressive, although in the context of the broader settlement pattern of the region these sites must have stood out as rich and impressive examples of architecture.

LANDSCAPE CONTEXT AND INFRASTRUCTURE

TOPOGRAPHY

The bias in the excavated data towards the lower-lying areas of the region has already been noted above, and it would be wrong to assume that areas without excavated sites were entirely uninhabited. Taylor (2007, 14, fig. 3.2), for instance, has mapped large numbers of settlements recorded as earthworks, cropmarks and soil marks from upland parts of the region, particularly in the Marches, although few of these sites have been dated through excavation. It is therefore likely that the lowland focus in the excavated data reflects, at least to a certain extent, greater numbers of excavations associated with increased development

in these areas. Nevertheless, the modern settlement pattern also exhibits a strong preference towards the plateaus and river valleys, and it seems likely that the emphasis on these areas was a genuine characteristic of the Romano-British settlement pattern.

Collectively, the sites from the region appear to be evenly distributed across a range of heights, ranging from 9 m above sea level up to a height of 313 m. However, there are some striking differences between some of the classes of site in terms of their situation within the landscape. It is notable, for example, that of the region's six military *vici*, four occupy positions below 50 m, and two are located above 100 m. These sites do not occupy 'mid-level' terrain. Of course this reflects the fact that these nucleated settlements are directly associated with forts, which always occupy strategic locations, and all of the low-lying forts appear to have controlled the area around major river confluences, whereas those occupying prominent positions commanded routes through the terrain.

A further striking aspect of the topographic distribution between different classes of sites is a clear preference for villas to occupy elevated positions, usually on slopes overlooking valleys (FIG. 8.19). Of the fourteen villas, ten (71 per cent) occupy positions at 75 m above sea level or higher. Eight of these (57 per cent) are located at elevations between 75–100 m, compared, for example, with just 14 per cent of farmsteads, the majority of which lie below 75 m. It is striking that the two villas which do occupy lower terrain

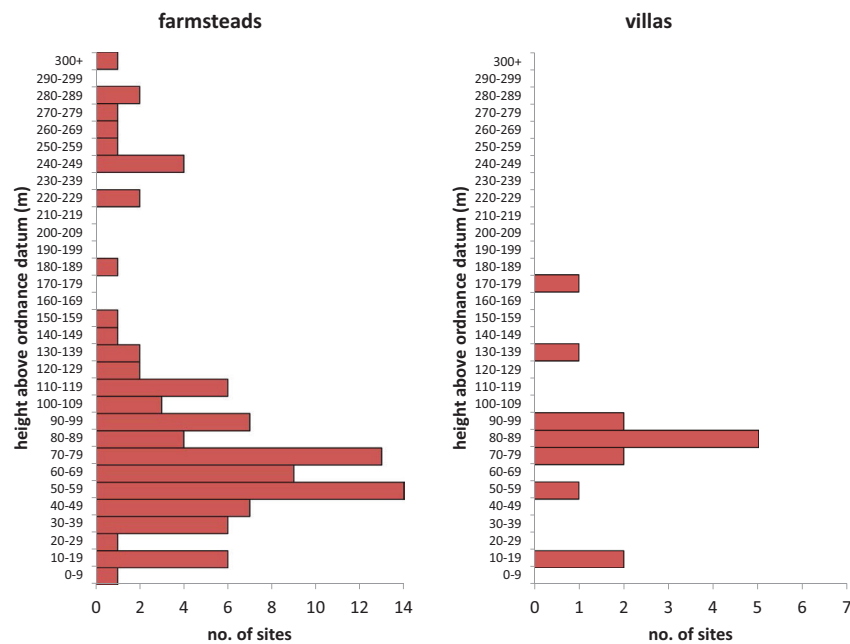


FIG. 8.19. Spot height analysis of farmsteads and villas in the Central West region

appear to be of a somewhat different character to many of the other villas. The villa at Loushers Lane is early (established *c.* A.D. 75), situated adjacent to the roadside settlement at Warrington, and it is thought to be closely associated with the nucleated site (Rogers and Garner 2007, 43–4). Pentre Farm, Flint, is believed to have been directly linked to the control of lead mining (O’Leary 1989, 50–1), and its likely association with a recently discovered roadside (probably industrial) settlement has been noted above. Both of these buildings were therefore potentially official residences occupied by people responsible for the administration of places or resources, and their position is governed by the location of the activity they are associated with. The reasons more typical villas tend to be situated where they are within the landscape are unclear. It may at least partly be aesthetic, with locations chosen because of the views they afforded, although perhaps the selection of elevated locations was another component in the armature of villa construction, possibly for reasons of architectural tradition, and perhaps as a further indicator of social status, associated with the desire for the building to be seen from particular positions within the landscape. If, perhaps, villa owners were supported by rent from other farmsteads, then there would also be less need for them to be situated near the fertile valley bottoms (Higham 1993, 52). It is difficult to assess how important Mediterranean traditions would have been for the wealthy occupants of Britain, but the focus for high-status dwellings on hill slopes may have been a fashionable symbolic expression of power.

TRANSPORTATION: RIVERS, ROADS AND TRACKWAYS

The Roman infrastructure evidently had a significant impact on the development of the settlement pattern within the region. As well as the establishment of legionary bases and auxiliary forts, the military consolidation of the area involved the construction of roads, resulting in the transformation of the landscape, the new roads becoming the focus for the region’s nucleated sites. All such settlements within the region occupy road junctions or sit alongside Roman roads. Most other sites within the region are also within relatively close proximity to a road, almost all lying within 10 km and the large majority within 5 km. In terms of the farming settlements, villas appear to have a closer association with roads than farmsteads; half of all villas are located within 1 km of a road, compared to 26 per cent of farmsteads.

Beyond the major Roman roads, a fairly large proportion (nearly 30 per cent) of farmsteads and

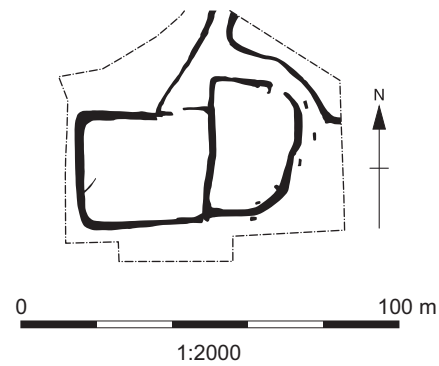


FIG. 8.20 Plan of a trackway leading to a mid- to late Roman farmstead at Billingley Drive, Thurnscoe, South Yorkshire (Neal and Fraser 2004)

villas produced evidence for transport links in the form of trackways, these being features of both the late Iron Age and Roman period landscapes. A number of these features are represented by earthworks or cropmarks recognised during aerial photography, although at several sites traces of trackways/roads were excavated, typically leading to the entrances of settlements. At Billingley Drive, Thurnscoe, South Yorkshire (Neal and Fraser 2004), a ditched trackway led to the entrances of two mid- to late Roman enclosures (FIG. 8.20); at St Donat’s, Burghill/Upper House Farm, Moreton on Lugg, Herefordshire, a metalled trackway or minor road, flanked by ditches, linked the site to Watling Street, a major Roman road (Wainwright and Rogers 2007); at Preston Farm, Shropshire a metalled trackway led to the gated entrance of the settlement enclosure (Ellis *et al.* 1994).

As well as roads and trackways, rivers formed another potential means of transport and communication, although there is little direct evidence for their use from the region and navigable waterways appear not to have been especially important in terms of the location of most farmsteads, villas or roadside settlements. The exception is for forts and associated *vici*, which, as discussed above, are more likely to occupy lower-lying river valleys, allowing the control of waterborne traffic and bridging points, as well as facilitating supply by boat.

FIELD SYSTEMS

Field systems were a further element of the landscape surrounding many settlements, and features identified as being parts of field boundaries, usually represented by linear ditches, were present at 31 sites (22 per cent), almost all of them farmsteads. In addition, a further nineteen sites had excavated features that were interpreted as elements of field systems but where no associated domestic focus has been found. The excavated

field systems are fairly widely distributed across the region, although there are few examples from the northern part of the Mosses and Meres/Shropshire Hills/Wrexham area, and only one from the Mersey Basin zone. It is possible, however, that this geographical imbalance may reflect the reduced availability of cropmark evidence from this region rather than a genuine difference in their distribution (Philpott 2000a, 192).

**SETTLEMENT HIERARCHIES:
THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BASIS OF
SETTLEMENTS. A CASE STUDY FROM
THE CHESTER AND WROXETER
HINTERLANDS**

The above sections have presented a summary of the broad settlement pattern for the Central West, yet it is important to recognise that within the region there are some demonstrable differences that are bound up with localised historical developments; the Roman conquest and the

establishment of military bases, industrial sites and urban centres appear to have affected the countryside in different ways. There is insufficient space here to consider this in detail for the entire region, but a case study focusing on Chester and Wroxeter, with a particular focus on the social and economic basis of settlements within these areas, exemplifies some important nuances within the region. This comparative case study focuses on excavated sites within a 30 km radius of each of these major centres respectively (FIG. 8.21). The areas around Chester and Wroxeter are two of the best represented areas in the region for excavated sites, but the evidence is still sparse compared to many other regions, and the fairly limited evidence for rural settlement has already been given considerable attention, notably by Gaffney *et al.* (2007) for the Wroxeter area and by Carrington (2012) and Philpott (2000a; Philpott and Adams 2010) for the area around Chester. Readers requiring more detail than the brief overview presented here are therefore directed towards these detailed surveys.

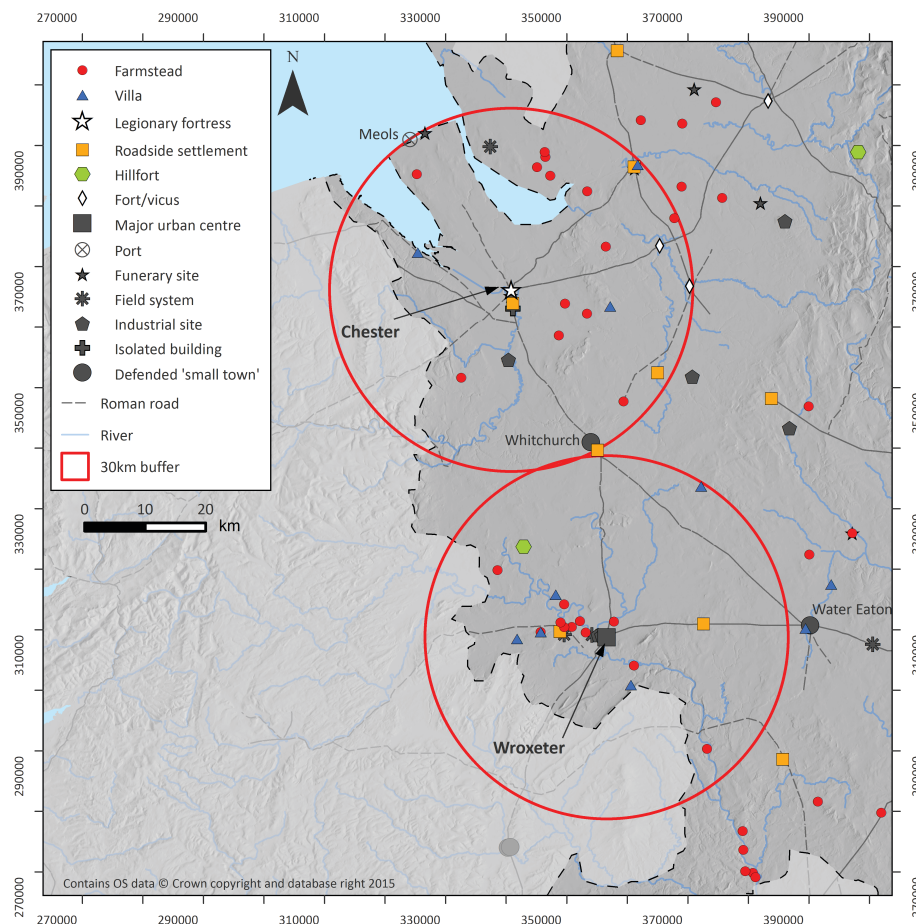


FIG. 8.21. The Chester and Wroxeter case study area

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Wroxeter, *Viroconium Cornoviorum*, was the *civitas* capital of the Cornovii during the Roman period, probably replacing an earlier tribal centre, possibly the hillfort known as the Wrekin (White and Barker 1998, 39; Philpott and Adams 2010, 170). Chester, *Deva*, may have lain within the same *civitas*, being referred to as a *polis* of the Cornovii by Ptolemy (Petch 1987, 115), although the true extent of the Cornovian territory is not known (see Ch. 12 for discussion of ‘tribes and *civitates*’).

While at a broad level the rural Romano-British settlement pattern around Chester and Wroxeter can be described as very similar, characterised by dispersed, small, enclosed farmsteads with broadly similar architectural traditions, there are a number of subtle differences within the hinterlands of the two centres that potentially reflect important differences in the way the countryside was organised and exploited. Of critical importance to this are the fundamental differences between Chester and Wroxeter, the former a long-lived legionary fortress, the latter a *civitas* capital. Chester was occupied by a permanent military force (whose numbers fluctuated according to military campaigns and troop movements), at least until the mid-third century, after which military occupation of the fortress appears to have continued at a reduced level (Bidwell and Hodgson 2009, 72). The fortress had a large and mixed extra-mural settlement, the *canabae*, populated by soldiers’ dependents and those involved with providing services and goods to the army. Legionary fortresses are assumed to have been surrounded by a large area named the *prata legionis*, territory held by the legion used for grazing cavalry mounts, herds and flocks, and the provision of natural resources and raw materials

(Philpott and Adams 2010, 207; Carrington 2012, 344–5; Mason 1988, 164–5). While the precise extent of the *prata* surrounding Chester is uncertain, where the area of other *prata* have been calculated they could amount to more than 500 km² (Carrington 2012, 344), and it has been suggested that Chester’s *prata* may have been situated to the north and east of the fortress, perhaps including all of the Wirral (Mason 1988, 180). Chester’s hinterland might therefore have included a substantial area that was under the direct control of the military, as opposed to the territory around Wroxeter, which, once the site had transformed from a legionary base into a *civitas* capital, was probably all under the control of the *civitas Cornoviorum*, governed by local elites. To what extent can the differences between these major sites be recognised in the countryside?

One of the most notable differences relates to the chronology of settlement, and the apparently low population density of Cheshire during the late Iron Age, compared with Shropshire, has previously been noted (Philpott 2000a, 192; Philpott and Adams 2010, 175) (FIG. 8.22). While this difference may partly reflect variance in the intensity of aerial reconnaissance and crop regimes in the two areas, as well as greater susceptibility for soils in the Severn Valley to produce cropmarks, based on the excavated evidence alone there are notably more sites from the Wroxeter area than from the Chester area with evidence for occupation in the late Iron Age, even though the two areas are represented by broadly similar numbers of excavated sites. While the Chester sites have an overwhelming tendency to be established between the late first to early second century A.D., there seems to be greater evidence for continuity between the late Iron Age and Roman periods around Wroxeter. The seemingly rapid increase in the number of

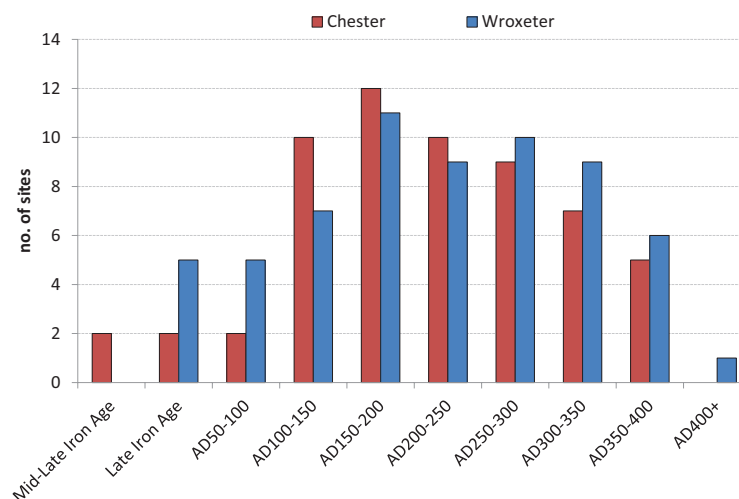


FIG. 8.22. Chronology of farming settlements in the Chester and Wroxeter hinterlands

farmsteads near Chester, from around the time the legionary fortress was established, is probably linked to the need for increased local production to meet the needs of the military occupation, and a form of colonisation, perhaps officially encouraged, has been suggested (Carrington 2012, 388; Philpott and Adams 2010, 207).

One site near Chester appears to have strong associations with the fortress. The roadside settlement at Heronbridge, just 2 km south of Chester, established during the late first century, produced material culture of similar character to that of the *canabae*, and the discovery of tombstones and evidence for a substantial and impressive funerary monument, similar to examples recorded from Chester, indicate that at least some of the inhabitants were prosperous (Philpott 2006, 71). Given the proximity of the roadside settlement to Chester it is possible that it formed part of the *prata legionis*, although there is no direct evidence to support the suggestion. A further site with clear military links is Holt, situated adjacent to the River Dee around 12 km south of Chester. The site produced pottery and tiles, and is thought to have been established during the late first century as a manufacturing and supply depot for the legionary fortress. A site at Ochre Brook, approximately 7 km north of the River Mersey, and 23 km north-east of Chester, also revealed evidence for a relatively short-lived phase of tile production during the 160s and stamps indicated that the tiles were also being manufactured for the XX Legion at Chester. In contrast to the site at Holt, however, there is little evidence that the site was military in origin, and morphologically the site has all of the characteristics of a 'normal' enclosed farmstead. The identity of the owner of the site is of course uncertain, but Philpott has speculated that it may have been a retired veteran who leased land for the purpose (Philpott 2000a, 197).

A further feature of Chester's hinterland is the presence of a number of nucleated sites, many of which appear to have had an industrial focus. A range of industries are represented at these settlements, including pottery, iron and other metal production, although the extraction of salt was of major regional importance and is likely to have been the principal focus at Northwich (Jones 1972), Middlewich (Williams and Reid 2008) and Nantwich (Arrowsmith and Power 2012). The latter two sites in particular have produced a wealth of evidence for salt extraction, including brine tanks, lead salt pans and large quantities of briquetage. Several of these sites have strong military associations, most notably the *vici* at Middlewich and Northwich, whereas Warrington and Nantwich may also have been under official control (Carrington 2012, 387–8). The widespread

distribution of Iron Age Cheshire briquetage (Morris 1985) indicates that at least one of these sites was involved in salt production in the pre-Roman period, and it is likely that the Roman military took control of and intensified production in some cases. The establishment of new nucleated industrial sites in the late first century, at the same time as the area sees a rapid increase in the number of farmsteads, is viewed as a direct response to the need to supply the Roman military machine, not just at Chester, but also the forts to the north (Carrington 2012, 387). The two roadside settlements in the vicinity of Wroxeter (Meole Brace, approximately 6 km to the west and Redhill, Telford, 16 km to the east) are of a somewhat different character. Meole Brace produced limited evidence for pottery production, but it has more characteristics of a roadside market than the industrial centres to the north (Ellis *et al.* 1994). Redhill, Telford, on the other hand, emerged out of a military supply depot and had evidence for metalworking, although there are no indications that it was a major production site (Mann 2011).

MATERIAL CULTURE

There is a clear hierarchy in both the Wroxeter and Chester hinterlands in terms of access to material culture. In both areas nucleated settlements produced evidence for access to a range of artefacts, including large quantities of imported pottery and a wide array of objects including coins, brooches and various other dress accessories (FIG. 8.23). Although not as well represented by artefacts as roadside settlements, the finds assemblages from villas in the Chester and Wroxeter areas have produced a range of objects, with artefacts such as coins, brooches, other dress accessories and household equipment occurring frequently. While poorly represented by objects compared to the nucleated settlements, the villas in the two areas stand out as being considerably better represented by most artefact types than farmsteads; however, all classes of object are relatively rare at these types of site.

However, whereas the nucleated settlements and villas in the Chester and Wroxeter hinterlands appear to behave in a broadly similar way in terms of the range of artefacts they produce, farmsteads from the two areas differ. One such difference can be recognised in pottery assemblages within the two areas, with perhaps the most obvious difference being the distinctive types of coarse wares present at farmsteads in the two areas; sites around Chester tend to be dominated by Cheshire Plain wares, with those near Wroxeter chiefly represented by Severn Valley wares. This difference evidently reflects the marketing distribution of pots in these different fabrics; Cheshire Plain wares were

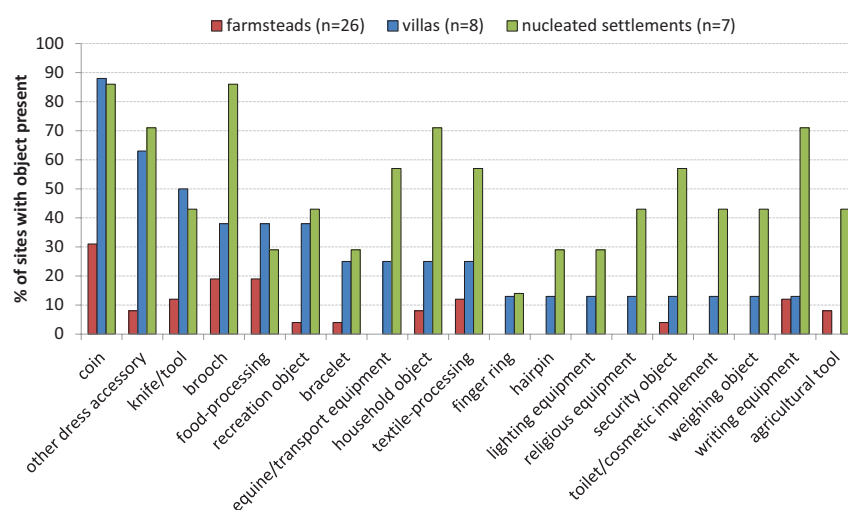


FIG. 8.23. Frequency of major artefact categories on different types of settlement in the Chester and Wroxeter hinterlands

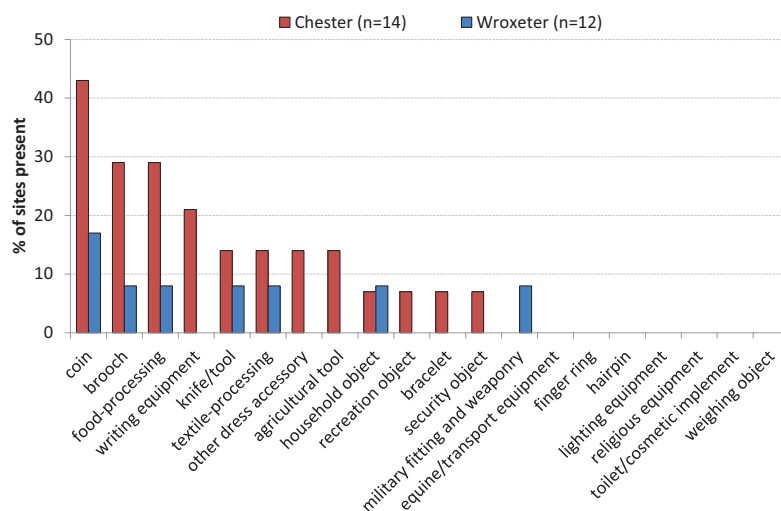


FIG. 8.24. Frequency of major artefact categories on farmsteads in the Chester and Wroxeter hinterlands

produced at Wilderspool, among other places, whereas Severn Valley ware production is known from Meole Brace, west of Wroxeter. There are further differences, however. Fieldwalking and excavation by the Wroxeter Hinterland Project, as well as elsewhere, revealed generally low numbers of ceramics in the area around the town, and the authors noted that the quantity of this material declines rapidly with distance from the city (White and Gaffney 2003, 223). This appears to represent continuity of an Iron Age cultural trend for favouring organic over ceramic vessel types (Gaffney *et al.* 2007, 280). Although pottery was used in the Severn Valley area during the Iron Age, its scarcity suggests that it may traditionally have been used only for certain activities or in certain socially prescribed contexts that continued into the Roman period (Wigley pers. comm.). Inconsistencies in the recording of pottery from excavated sites make detailed comparison difficult,

but impressionistically the situation is somewhat different for the area around Chester. More farmsteads in the Chester hinterland consistently produce greater quantities of Roman pottery, pottery is more widely distributed, and sites appear to be better represented by imported pottery than farmsteads near Wroxeter, suggesting that pottery vessels performed a wider role in social practices in this area during the Roman period. This is despite a similar background of only very limited pottery-use during the Iron Age (Philpott and Adams 2010, 179–80).

This pattern is also visible through other artefacts recovered from farmsteads. While it is true that in both areas finds are scarce compared to roadside settlements and villas, objects are undoubtedly more frequently recovered from the Chester hinterland (FIG. 8.24); more sites in this area produce objects such as coins and brooches, and they tend to produce more of them.

Notably, writing equipment is absent from all excavated farmsteads surrounding Wroxeter, yet three rural sites in the Chester area have produced styli (Irby, Wirral: Philpott and Adams 2010; Ochre Brook: Philpott 2000b; Plas Coch, Wrexham: N.W. Jones 2011), implying literacy in at least some parts of the countryside in this area. Philpott suggests the stylus from Ochre Brook may relate to accounts kept by civilian contractors supplying the military with tiles (Philpott 2000a, 197).

Although the excavated sites in the Chester hinterland apparently produce more objects than those around Wroxeter, the relative scarcity of artefacts at excavated sites in both areas makes this difficult to demonstrate emphatically. However, the pattern is supported and emphasised by finds recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS). Firstly, there are substantially more artefacts recorded on the PAS database from the Chester area than Wroxeter (excluding objects and coins from hoards, 1423 artefacts from Chester, against 869 objects from Wroxeter – an almost 40 per cent difference). While it is difficult to establish the extent to which this reflects variance in levels of metal detecting and reporting of metal-detector finds, there are also clear differences in the proportions of the types of objects recovered by metal detectorists from the two areas; coins make up 59 per cent of finds on the PAS database from the Chester hinterland, and just 38 per cent of finds from the area around Wroxeter (FIG. 8.25). Brooches, however, form roughly similar proportions of artefacts from both areas.

There are several potential reasons for the apparent differences in the circulation of at least some aspects of material culture in the two landscapes. One is that the legionary fortress was a source of more wealth than Wroxeter, and that farmsteads in its hinterland benefited from the flow of consumable goods entering Chester through military trade networks. There are, however, also implications for our understanding of potentially different cultural attitudes in the two areas. This subject has been given recent attention by Jeremy Taylor (2013), who has suggested that for members of a traditional agricultural society in the Wroxeter hinterland, 'Roman' material culture may have been an irrelevance, and rural identity and status may have been tied into traditional communal activities and the ownership and display of cattle (Taylor 2013, 185; Gaffney *et al.* 2007, 280). If, as suggested by Carrington (2012, 388) and Philpott and Adams (2010, 207), the landscape around Chester was subject to colonisation by migrants (whether veterans, migrants from elsewhere in Britain or elsewhere in the empire),

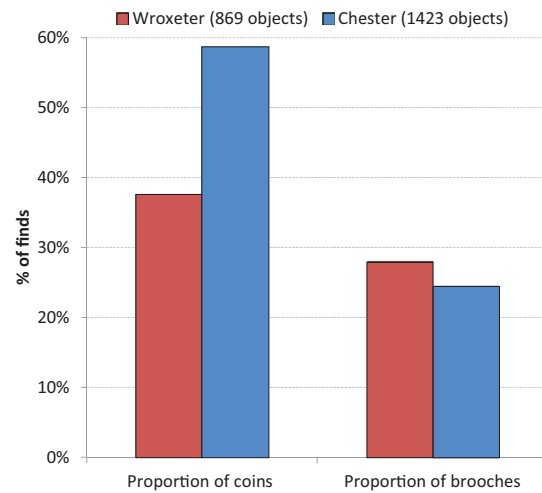


FIG. 8.25. Proportion of coins and brooches among all finds recorded by PAS (excluding objects from hoards) in the Chester and Wroxeter hinterlands

then the greater numbers of coins and other artefacts circulating within this landscape may represent a more mixed population than that in the hinterland of Wroxeter. Such a scenario might also explain the limited distribution of ceramics in the Wroxeter area, where such mixed populations were perhaps confined to the city, smaller towns and roadside settlements. The scarcity or absence of artefacts from some sites in the Chester hinterland perhaps suggests that the demographic here was complex, and a local society seems likely to have continued to exist alongside a migrant population, as suggested by the presence of roundhouses at Birch Heath, Tarporley (Fairburn 2003).

Given the pattern in the material culture, it seems paradoxical that villas within the region cluster around Wroxeter rather than Chester. As we have seen, two of the three excavated villa buildings near Chester (Pentre Farm, Flint and Lousher's Lane, Warrington) are atypical in that they appear likely to have had official functions associated with the administration of resources and/or places. The only other example from near Chester, Eaton-by-Tarporley (Mason 1983), may be regarded as a more typical rural villa. All three of the Chester villas appear to have had relatively early origins, initially constructed between the late first and late second centuries A.D. Wroxeter, in contrast, is surrounded by five excavated villas, and a further seven have been recognised through other techniques (White and Gaffney 2003, 223). The dating evidence for these villas is of variable quality, but on current evidence the initial villa buildings appear to have been constructed similarly early, between the late first and the early third century A.D. The reason for the difference in the distribution of villas is unclear. It is possible that

there are more in the Chester area awaiting discovery, and the poor susceptibility of the soils for the formation of cropmarks compared with the area around Wroxeter may help account for the pattern. However, it is also possible that the situation reflects social and economic differences in the landscapes surrounding the legionary fortress and the *civitas* capital. If a substantial part of the Chester hinterland was requisitioned for military supply much of the area may have been populated by migrant tenants or a servile workforce, and this may have restricted the opportunities for the display of private wealth through the construction of villa buildings. The greater number of villas near Wroxeter perhaps represents ownership of land by the Cornovian elite, who may have capitalised on the economic opportunities created by the requirements of the army at Chester and elsewhere in the north. There may also have been a degree of differentiation in the way in which the two areas were perceived in terms of social status, with it perhaps being more prestigious to construct villas in the environs of the *civitas* capital than the legionary fortress (Wigley pers. comm.). It is noteworthy in this regard that the villa at Whitley Grange, to the west of the Wroxeter, may have functioned as a hunting lodge, rather than a permanently occupied site (Gaffney *et al.* 2007, 141).

While some differences between Chester and Wroxeter may be recognised in the archaeology of their respective hinterlands, other differences are manifested less clearly in the archaeology of the surrounding countryside. There is, for instance, little evidence for any distinction between the two areas in the late Roman period, when the two centres appear again to have experienced different circumstances. Wroxeter apparently flourished as an urban centre until at least the end of the fourth century, with occupation of some sort continuing into the fifth century and beyond (White and Barker 1998, though see now Lane 2014 for an alternative interpretation). Chester, however, seems to have witnessed more mixed fortunes, and although activity continued in some form into the fourth century, the level of occupation was considerably reduced (Bidwell and Hodgson 2009, 72). There is at present, however, little evidence to suggest that sites in the hinterlands of the two centres were affected differently by these late Roman developments. Rural sites in both areas diminish in numbers between the end of the second and the late fourth century, and while marginally more of the Wroxeter hinterland sites continue for longer than those in the Chester area the numbers are so small and the dating evidence so variable that this may perhaps be of little significance.

RURAL SETTLEMENT ECONOMIES

The evidence for the economic basis of settlements around Wroxeter and Chester is in both areas hampered by soil conditions, which are very unfavourable for the preservation of bone, and only six sites in the Chester hinterland and two in the Wroxeter area produced faunal remains. Even at these sites, animal bones were typically recovered in very small numbers, and only Pentre Farm and the roadside settlement at Nantwich (both in the Chester area) produced assemblages with more than 100 specimens. At Pentre Farm a mid-Roman assemblage suggested an emphasis on cattle, followed by sheep/goat and then pig, with horse and hare also identified. At Nantwich there was a similar emphasis on cattle, again followed by sheep/goat and pig, while other species included horse, dog, red and roe deer, and domestic fowl. There is insufficient faunal evidence from farmsteads in the hinterland of either centre to allow comment on the types of animals favoured for consumption at low-status rural sites, although across the region as a whole the limited data (just three farmsteads with more than 100 specimens) suggest an emphasis on cattle, followed by sheep/goat and then pig.

While there is little direct evidence from faunal remains, work in the Wroxeter area has indicated a general focus on pastoralism, suggested by the geographical relationship between settlement enclosures and soils more suited to grazing than arable production, with perhaps the exception of those fields immediately adjacent to the city walls that seem to have been used for market gardening (White and Gaffney 2003, 223; Gaffney *et al.* 2007, 254–7). At Duncote Farm, for instance, approximately 2 km north-east of Wroxeter, there was evidence for the reorganisation of the existing landscape during the second century A.D., when coaxial fields were established (Ellis *et al.* 1994), and these have been suggested as possible horticultural plots (White *et al.* 2013, 177). However, very few (just four) sites in the Wroxeter area have yielded botanical remains, and in most cases these were recovered in very small quantities. At Ellesmere Road, Shrewsbury (Booth 1996), significant quantities of spelt chaff and rye were recovered, as well as some barley and oats, although even here it was suggested that the initial stages of crop processing may have been carried out elsewhere. There is very little evidence of intensive arable production in the area as a rule. The impression of a pastoral focus for the Wroxeter hinterland sites is complemented by the presence at Wroxeter of an area of presumed industrial pitting recognised through geophysics, thought likely to represent processing of secondary animal products through tanning, fulling or dyeing,

although hard evidence is currently lacking. These features, combined with the presence of a large enclosure interpreted as a large cattle market in the town, suggest that the city and its hinterland may have been focused on the intensive rearing of livestock, perhaps also supplying the northern military sites with cattle and other animal products (Gaffney *et al.* 2007, 254–6, 283; Carrington 2012, 380).

A slightly greater number of sites from the area around Chester have produced botanical evidence, although the numbers are still small, and in most cases the evidence is relatively minor, with most evidence coming from nucleated sites such as Middlewich (Garner and Reid 2012; Williams and Reid 2008) and Nantwich (Arrowsmith and Power 2012). Spelt wheat appears to have been the dominant crop, but the presence of a wide range of cereals, including emmer, bread wheat, barley and rye, has been suggested as evidence for a lack of specialisation in the region (Stallibrass 2011, 117). While the presence of corndryers at Heronbridge (Mason 2004), Plas Coch (N.W. Jones 2011) and possibly the Eaton-by-Tarporley villa (Mason 1983) indicate large-scale processing of grain in the area, Carrington has suggested that the principal products of the Chester hinterland, perhaps provided as a tax in kind, were animals and animal products (Carrington 2012, 395). Of note in this regard is evidence from Kingsley Fields, Nantwich, where hook-damaged cattle scapulae, often recovered from military and urban sites in the north of England (Dobney 2001, 40–1), suggest hung beef shoulders, which were perhaps brined and dried in Nantwich (Arrowsmith and Power 2012). Skulls of cattle, sheep and red deer were also present and may represent skinned carcasses. The importance of the nucleated sites with evidence for salt production, Northwich, Nantwich and Middlewich, may therefore be about more than the production and distribution of salt as a commodity in its own right, being also associated with the use of salt for processing carcasses and preserving joints of meat in order to supply the military. While a range of cereals was recovered from the farmstead at Birch Heath, Tarporley (Fairburn 2003), a broader economic basis is suggested by the presence of a number of sherds from ceramic cheese presses, suggesting cheese production dependent on cattle or sheep rearing (Carrington 2012, 385).

CASE STUDY SUMMARY

The above discussion has sought to present some of the intra-regional diversity within the rural settlement pattern of the Central West. There are notable differences between the landscapes surrounding Wroxeter and Chester, which reflect

the particular historical circumstances that led these two sites, originally both legionary fortresses, to develop very differently. While the earlier sections of the chapter provided a descriptive overview of the character of the Romano-British settlement pattern in the region, this case study has highlighted some important nuances, indicating that the hinterlands of Wroxeter and Chester, despite their geographical proximity, must have felt like very different places.

REGION SUMMARY

The Central West region includes a wide variety of different landscape zones, with some evidence for corresponding variability in the density of late Iron Age and Roman settlement. In particular, low numbers of excavated sites within the extensively developed urban areas, or from major infrastructure projects such as the M6 Toll and major pipeline routes, suggest that the landscape in parts of the region may have been relatively empty of permanent occupation, perhaps only utilised occasionally, such as for seasonal grazing.

The late Iron Age and Roman rural settlement pattern of the Central West can be broadly characterised as being chiefly represented by dispersed, enclosed, farmsteads. Villas were certainly found within the region, but they were uncommon and typically of comparatively modest form. Aside from the major Roman urban and military centres of the region, Wroxeter and Chester, nucleated settlements were distributed along the region's major Roman roads; in the south, many were walled 'small towns' or undefended civilian settlements, yet in the north most were *vici* associated with Roman forts, or seem otherwise in some way to have had military connections. Several of these northern nucleated sites appear to have performed important industrial functions (including salt production), likely to be associated with supplying the legionary fortress at Chester, as well, perhaps, as forts on the northern frontier. This highlights one of the principal characteristics of this region, as lying on the junction between the agricultural heartland of Roman Britain (Central Belt; Ch. 5), with its mass of villas, roadside settlements and complex farms, and more upland zones (the North and Upland Wales and Marches; Chs 9 and 11) with – in general – smaller, dispersed, enclosed farmsteads, and a much greater and longer lasting Roman military presence.

Our understanding of the chronological development of rural settlements in the Central West is hindered by the often limited dating evidence, a consequence of the regional scarcity of material culture, especially during the late Iron

Age, which makes it difficult to identify and confidently date sites. In general terms, however, there appears to have been an increase in the number of sites occupied between the late Iron Age and the end of the second century A.D., when the numbers of settlements in use peaked, before a decline during the late third and fourth centuries.

There are, however, some distinctive sub-regional differences, regarding both chronology and other aspects of the evidence, reflecting the range of physical landscapes within the region as well as local historical developments. For example, sites to the east and west of the Pennines appear often, on the basis of the existing dating evidence, to have developed quite differently. Late Iron Age/first century A.D. sites have been identified from across the region, yet, in the Coal Measures to the east, there seems to have been considerably greater settlement expansion during this period than is apparent further west. Many late Iron Age sites from all landscapes continued into the Roman period, yet from the third century onwards there appears to have been a period of more marked settlement abandonment in the Coal Measures, as opposed to the gradual pattern of settlement disuse observed in the west. This is part of a pattern previously noted in South Yorkshire, which suggests the collapse during the late Roman period of long-lived communities with traditions dating back to the Iron Age (Hodgson 2012, 53).

Although the evidence suggests that the west of the region may have been less densely occupied than the east during the late Iron Age, there is, in

some areas, strong evidence that pre-existing Iron Age cultural traditions persisted into the Roman period. Roman rural sites in the Severn Valley, near the *civitas* capital at Wroxeter, typically produce very small quantities of Roman ceramics, apparently reflecting continuity of a cultural preference towards the use of organic vessels, with rural sites in this area betraying little evidence for engagement with the Roman city (Gaffney *et al.* 2007, 280). This is in contrast to the situation in the landscape surrounding the legionary fortress at Chester, where rural sites often produce a greater range of material culture, suggesting that the population of this area included at least some groups of people with different cultural values to many of those inhabiting the Wroxeter hinterland. The chronology of sites near Chester, many of which appear to have been established shortly after the foundation of the legionary fortress, suggests that this part of the region saw early Roman settlement expansion, possibly involving migrant populations, associated with the requirements of supplying the legionary base, and possibly Roman forts further afield.

While at first glance the character of the Roman settlement pattern of the region outside of the towns and military sites might seem uniform and relatively unvaried, dominated as it is by enclosed farmsteads, with few villas, even fewer complex farmsteads and an absence of villages, this masks a complex situation with locally distinctive chronologies and social and economic differences that were influenced by a range of circumstances.