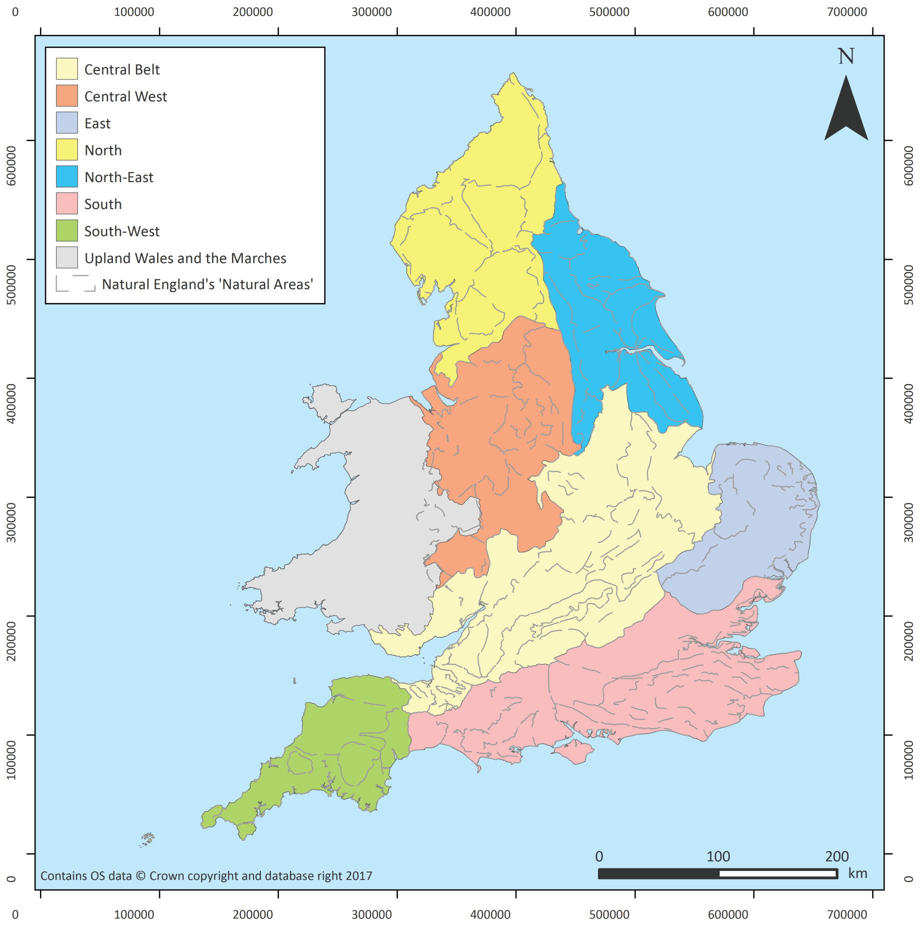
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

By Michael Fulford

The combination of the increase in new information from the corresponding recent expansion in the number of archaeological investigations in England and Wales, especially since the implementation of PPG16 in England in 1990, and the enrichment of the knowledge derived from each one through the application of new approaches to environmental and material culture, now allows us to say much more about life and death in the countryside of Roman Britain. This research builds on the previous two volumes of *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain*, the first of which, *The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain* (Smith *et al.* 2016), established a typology of rural settlement and a regional framework where material culture and environmental evidence played key, complementary, roles in its formulation (FIG. 1.1). The regional framework continued to help articulate the evidence for the rural economy of Roman Britain that was set out in Volume 2 of *New Visions* (Allen *et al.* 2017). Here, the mass of recent archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological data informed a new understanding of agriculture in the province alongside a re-appraisal of other rural industries, while coins, ceramics and other categories of material culture allowed a more nuanced insight into the movement of resources and the development of markets.

In contextualising our third study, essentially trying to offer a richer characterisation of life (and death) in the countryside, we can look back at late twentieth-century syntheses of Roman Britain where the countryside was conceived very much in terms of the built environment of the elite, the villa


Central Belt
Central West
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North
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South
South-West
Upland Wales and the Marches
Natural England's 'Natural Areas'
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FIG. 1.1. Map showing Natural England's 'Natural Areas' within the Roman Rural Settlement Project regions

and its attributes, such as the bathhouse, hypocausts and the interior décor of mosaic pavements and painted plaster (e.g. Frere 1967; Salway 1981; Todd 1981). When Anthony Birley wrote his *The People of Roman Britain*, the chapter dedicated to the subject of 'country dwellers' drew exclusively on the epigraphic record from the countryside of Roman Britain to assess the (limited) evidence that names provided for identifying immigrants, estate owners, citizens and peregrines (1979, 137–44), with a further chapter considering the evidence, though much of it drawn from military and urban contexts, for slaves and freedmen (*ibid.*, 145–50).

Now it is possible to reach far beyond just names: the first decades of the twenty-first century have seen a sea change in approaches to the people of Roman Britain, with David Mattingly exploiting the first fruits of the new, contextualised and scientific approaches to material culture and environmental evidence to characterise a society separated into communities – military, civil and rural – and to introduce the concept of the rural non-elite in his *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire* (2006). This represents an altogether very different approach to the syntheses of the second half of the twentieth century cited above, which had privileged the military and political history of the province and only latterly the archaeology (Millett 1990). Also, in 2006 Hilary Cool published her *Eating and Drinking in Roman Britain*, bringing together the strands of new knowledge derived from archaeobotany, zooarchaeology, osteology and material culture studies to construct a rich, socially nuanced picture of eating and drinking (2006). Previously Charlotte Roberts and Margaret Cox had synthesised the evidence for health and disease in Britain, including for the Roman period, though their data drew almost exclusively from urban cemeteries (2003). Fresh approaches to material culture using quantitative techniques and taking account of context have enriched our ideas of identity and diversity far beyond what the evidence of names alone could offer in the late twentieth century (e.g. Cool 2016; Eckardt and Crummy 2008; Eckardt 2014). This has been taken significantly further through the application of isotope analysis to allow us to distinguish between locals and foreigners in the province and so deepen our understanding of mobility (e.g. Eckardt 2010b; Eckardt and Müldner 2016). The distance that the study of Roman Britain has travelled in the almost fifty years since the publication of the second edition of what may be thought of as the first handbook of Roman Britain, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (Collingwood and Richmond 1969), or of Liversidge's *Britain in the Roman Empire* (1968), can be measured by the contents of *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain* (Millett *et al.* 2016), itself building on Malcolm Todd's *A Companion to Roman Britain* (2004). The contents of *The Archaeology…* and *The Oxford Handbook…* are almost mutually exclusive: the first, amply illustrated, is very much concerned with the built environment – military, urban and rural, inscriptions and key artefact types of the province; the latter, with proportionally many fewer visual references, is strongly orientated towards constructing the components for a social archaeology of Roman Britain.

Indeed, social archaeology is the linking theme of the contents of this, the third volume of *New Visions*. With the data collected from some 3600 records derived from 2500 rural settlements across Roman Britain, we can now apply some of the approaches, mostly developed in the late twentieth century, specifically to the people who lived in the countryside of Roman Britain, and who constituted the vast majority of the population of the province. Moreover we are able to develop further our appreciation of the diversity of that people through the perspectives of the regional framework and its categories of settlement type: from the small towns, military *vici* and roadside settlements, through to the villas and other types of farmstead, expounded in the first volume of *New Visions* (Smith *et al.* 2016).

The data (Allen *et al.* 2016) that underpin this volume are available online at:

http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/romangl/

We begin our social archaeology with a study of what people across Roman Britain wore through the media of objects associated with dress and personal display, with particular emphasis on the evidence provided by brooches (Chapter 2). Other than copper-alloy coins or structural items like iron nails, the brooch is one of the most commonly found metal objects and there is a well-developed typology that has allowed Brindle to assess the frequency of the different types across the eight regions, contextualising the finds according to settlement type. He reaches important conclusions both about identity and the diversity of appearance across the province, but also stressing the inequalities in the social distribution of dress accessories. This study takes us to the early to mid-third century when the tradition of brooch-making and wearing almost dies out, such that, for the fourth century, it is principally through the differing burial traditions explored in Chapter 6 that we gain a further perspective on diversity and identity.

A wider range of themes concerned with lifestyle and the domestic environment is addressed in

Chapter 3. While subsistence was of over-riding importance, there is comparatively little that can be said about what people actually ate and drank, but the skeletal evidence explored in Chapter 7 reveals widespread malnutrition among the rural population. As the principal source of the majority of the food and drink consumed in Roman Britain, the countryside had the potential to support a well-nourished rural population. However, differential access is very much in evidence, with the elite benefiting at the expense of poorer households, whose diet was largely limited to the staple crops with some access to meat. Landowners appear to have exercised strict control over what was grown or reared, as well as over wild resources, on their estates in order to maximise the return from supplying the market and the needs of the state, particularly the army.

Inequality of access was not only limited to food and drink, but can be seen in household security and lighting, where the scarcity of locks and keys and lighting equipment is very clear outside the Central Belt and South regions, as well as among farmsteads more generally across the province. For the heating of houses, too, reliance on a simple, central hearth is most commonly evidenced with examples of rooms with hypocausts confined to the higher status villas. It was the rural elite, too, who mainly benefited from the provision of bathhouses, with a very small proportion, on the basis of the evidence available to date, enjoying the further pleasure of a formal garden. Recreational objects, mostly in the form of gaming counters, have been recorded from only about 12 per cent of all sites, the majority of these being nucleated settlements, but with villas also having significantly greater representation compared with other farmsteads. Finally, literacy: although there has been much recent research on the extent and character of literacy in Roman Britain, the evidence from the database of the incidence of graffiti on ceramics, of inscriptions on stone, of writing equipment, such as styli, wax spatulae, seal boxes and inkwells, provides a more nuanced picture of social distribution where, except for the incidence of inscriptions at military *vici*, the defended small towns clearly stand out above all other categories of settlement, with almost two-thirds producing some form of evidence of literacy. Except for inscriptions, roadside settlements otherwise follow defended small towns rather than military *vici* in the percentage of them with evidence of literacy. At the other end of the scale there is little to distinguish between the various types of non-villa farmstead; only in the single category of styli do complex farmsteads stand out a little, showing representation at between five and ten per cent of sites in this category. Together, this emphasises the importance of the road network and underlines a difference in the role played by the defended small towns (other than that of defence) in the infrastructure and bureaucratic management of the province.

Fresh insights into the ways that the Roman occupation of Britain changed the lives of people and of their relationship to animals, both domesticated and wild, are the subject of Chapter 4. There are indications of changing attitudes towards cattle, sheep and pig (the commodification of meat) as animals increased in number and generally lived longer before slaughter during the Roman period. Here a direct link can be drawn with patterns of occupation, where animals suitable for traction, particularly cattle but also horses, were required to meet the growing demands of arable cultivation and to move resources along roads and trackways to the towns and military consumers, with consequent impacts on their health as reflected in their pathology. Attitudes towards dogs, probably deliberately bred for a variety of roles, including as pets, and cats also changed over the Roman period. In the case of the wild, the importance of hunting as an elite activity among landowners and the military accounts for some of the change in the exploitation of wild animals, particularly of deer, but also of hare and some wild birds compared with the Iron Age. Mediterranean influences may also explain the increased role of fish, both freshwater and marine species, in the diet, also with a strong association with the elite. Virtually absent in the Iron Age, fish is particularly noticeable by the late Roman period. So, too, are shellfish, particularly the oyster, a notable feature of elite dining in the Roman world.

Animals also played an important role in the religious life of the rural population, which is the subject of Chapter 5. This brings together a mass of new evidence to enrich our concept of what constituted 'sacred' in late Iron Age and Roman Britain. Between the formal, Classical architecture of the temple to Sulis Minerva at Bath and the sanctity of space indicated by the repeated deposition of certain types of artefact or selected parts of animal skeletons within, for example, enclosures, or around prehistoric monuments, or in caves, shafts, wells or watery places more generally, there is great variety, much of it found within the Central Belt and South regions. In this context the Romano-Celtic temple, so familiar from earlier treatments of religion in Roman Britain, with its tendency for concentric arrangements of cella and ambulatory, becomes the exception not the norm. However, what may be considered to be sacred space often hinges on the interpretation of associated artefacts and/or animal bone and perceptions of difference from a domestic 'rubbish' assemblage. No certainties can be offered in this regard and one does not preclude the other; the sacred and the domestic were not necessarily mutually exclusive (cf. Eckardt 2006). This is nowhere more evident than in the treatment of certain, otherwise 'everyday' items like coins or brooches, where their recovery from some sites in their hundreds or thousands suggests a religious motivation. The chapter concludes with a major review of structured deposition – of deposits of artefacts, human and animal remains, the latter often articulated – which links back to the discussions of the identification of sacred space earlier in the chapter, but also relates to types of deposition associated with a wider range of domestic and agricultural buildings, such as corndryers, with no obvious sacred significance, but perhaps marking major events like their initial construction or their final abandonment. The wide-ranging scope of this chapter highlights the all-pervasive concern in all regions of Roman Britain with the appeasement of deities and the management of superstition.

The last two chapters are complementary; the one about the different ways people were treated after death over time as well as across regions and the settlement hierarchy (Chapter 6), the other about the characteristics of the population as revealed by study of their skeletal remains (Chapter 7). Over 15,000 burials recorded from excavated sites in England and Wales form the basis for these analyses, a resource that offers the prospect of further comparative research, such as of burial practice, or health and disease in towns in Britain, or across the north-western provinces of the Empire more generally. However, with the comparative lack of excavations conducted with modern methodologies of the higher status villa sites, as noted in Volume 1 (Allen and Smith 2016, 33–7), we should also be aware of the limitations of the data.

Although both inhumation and cremation burials are in evidence from the late Iron Age, the latter is the dominant mode until the late Roman period. From a fairly tight focus in the south-east of England in the late Iron Age, showing close parallels with practice across the Channel in northern Gaul, there is evidence of cremation right across the province by the second century A.D. Whereas there is a strong argument for linking the former with pre-conquest migration, in the case of the latter there is a clear correlation with the Roman conquest and the traditions introduced by the military and their associated camp followers. Explaining the shift towards a greater, but by no means exclusive, preference for inhumation by the late Roman period is necessarily more complex. There is manifestly an indigenous context evident from the late Iron Age but, like cremation earlier, the trend in Britain is paralleled across the empire more widely. Within Britain itself, there is a much more apparent regional concentration of burial evidence in the late Roman period, with the great majority of examples found in the Central Belt and the west of the South regions. While we should always be aware of the influence of the varying intensities of developer-funded work, some of the patterning in the late Roman period correlates with changes in overall settlement density, such as the comparative lack of evidence for inhumation burial in the North Kent Plain.

One of the benefits of an assessment of the entirety of the rural burial record is that minority practices can be seen in context. For obvious reasons, the rite of decapitation and the debate over possible explanations for the detachment of the head from the rest of the body has attracted attention, but with this study we can see it as one of several minority practices in the late Roman period, which include prone and flexed inhumations as well as cremation, and which is represented across the associated settlement hierarchy. Study of the skeletal remains in Chapter 7 shows that these rites were not confined to particular sexes or age groups; for example, there are cases of decapitation among both young and old adults. These differing traditions are to be found alongside each other and in urban as well as rural contexts, particularly across the Central Belt and parts of the South region, but also in the East. If we can now see these practices as normative in late Roman Britain, they still imply differences among the living who chose these particular rites for their dead. What we do not know is whether the groups that chose to express their identities in this particular way were present in the early Roman period when cremation was the dominant rite and where their various identities might have been expressed in other ways, not necessarily evident in burial practice. The presence of these distinct traditions reminds us that we know very little about the movement of peoples, as opposed to individuals, between Britain and the Continent, or within Britain in the late Roman period. We can only speculate whether movements, like that of the Durotriges and Dumnonii to Hadrian's Wall, presumably enforced, in the second century, also took place in the late Roman period. Also, were the people who migrated into towns, as the isotopic evidence suggests (Eckardt 2010a, 112–20; Eckardt and Müldner 2016, 207–13), from the local or regional countryside replaced to ensure continued productivity on the land and, if so, how? Collectively the evidence of the various rites associated with late Roman inhumations shows a strong cross-regional clustering in the south of Britain, one which also transcends any boundaries that might be conceived of in terms of tribes or *civitates*. An important question for future research is the extent to which comparable expressions of burial identity, individually and/or collectively can be found across the Channel in Gallia Belgica or Germania, or yet further afield.

The complementary evidence from the analysis of the skeletal remains gives vivid insight into daily life in the countryside (Chapter 7). Compared with the Iron Age population we see elevated levels of pathology in the rural population of late Roman Britain, with spinal degeneration the most prominent. The incidence is also higher than in the contemporary urban sample (Lankhills, Winchester), with lesions reflecting the kind of labour associated with farming and present in both men and, to a lesser extent, in women. Degenerative joint disease is also widely observed in young adults, accounting for between 10 and 20 per cent of this population in the southern regions. When it comes to food, the rural population appears to have had a less adequate diet than its urban counterparts, or in the Iron Age, with a relatively high incidence of metabolic disease, including among children, who were also affected by rickets and scurvy, particularly in the Central Belt region. However, even though the incidence of tooth decay was higher in the countryside in the Roman period compared with the Iron Age, it was significantly less than in the urban sample. Overall, the Roman period in the countryside saw a considerable decline in health from the Iron Age, a situation that was worse than in the urban sample. Given the nature of the evidence, with cremation the dominant rite in the early Roman period, we cannot yet determine whether the situation in late Roman Britain was better or worse than in the second century when, in other respects, *Britannia* appears to have been at its height (Smith *et al.* 2016).

To conclude this introduction, the contributions to *Life and Death in the Countryside of Roman Britain* show clearly that whatever might be perceived as the benefits of the Roman occupation of Britain, they touched only the rural elite, to the detriment of the rural population at large.