5
The Roman Period

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INTRODUCTION

In broad terms, approximately a quarter of the records in the Northamptonshire Sites and Monuments Record relate to the Roman period, reflecting perhaps both the range and archaeological durability of the material record, and the long-standing antiquarian interest in the period. A large proportion of the undated cropmark sites in the SMR are, however, also likely to be Roman and/or Iron Age in date and should be added to this total. In Northamptonshire, the Roman period is characterized by intensively occupied and large scale rural landscapes. These are related to expanded agricultural production, regional scale craft and industrial production of pottery and iron, the construction and use of an extensive network of roads, and the foundation and development of many local market and religious centres. Discrete formal ceremonial sites are found in both small towns and rural sites, and detectable burial rites become far more common on both rural and small town sites with later Roman inhumation cemeteries common at larger settlements.

CHRONOLOGY

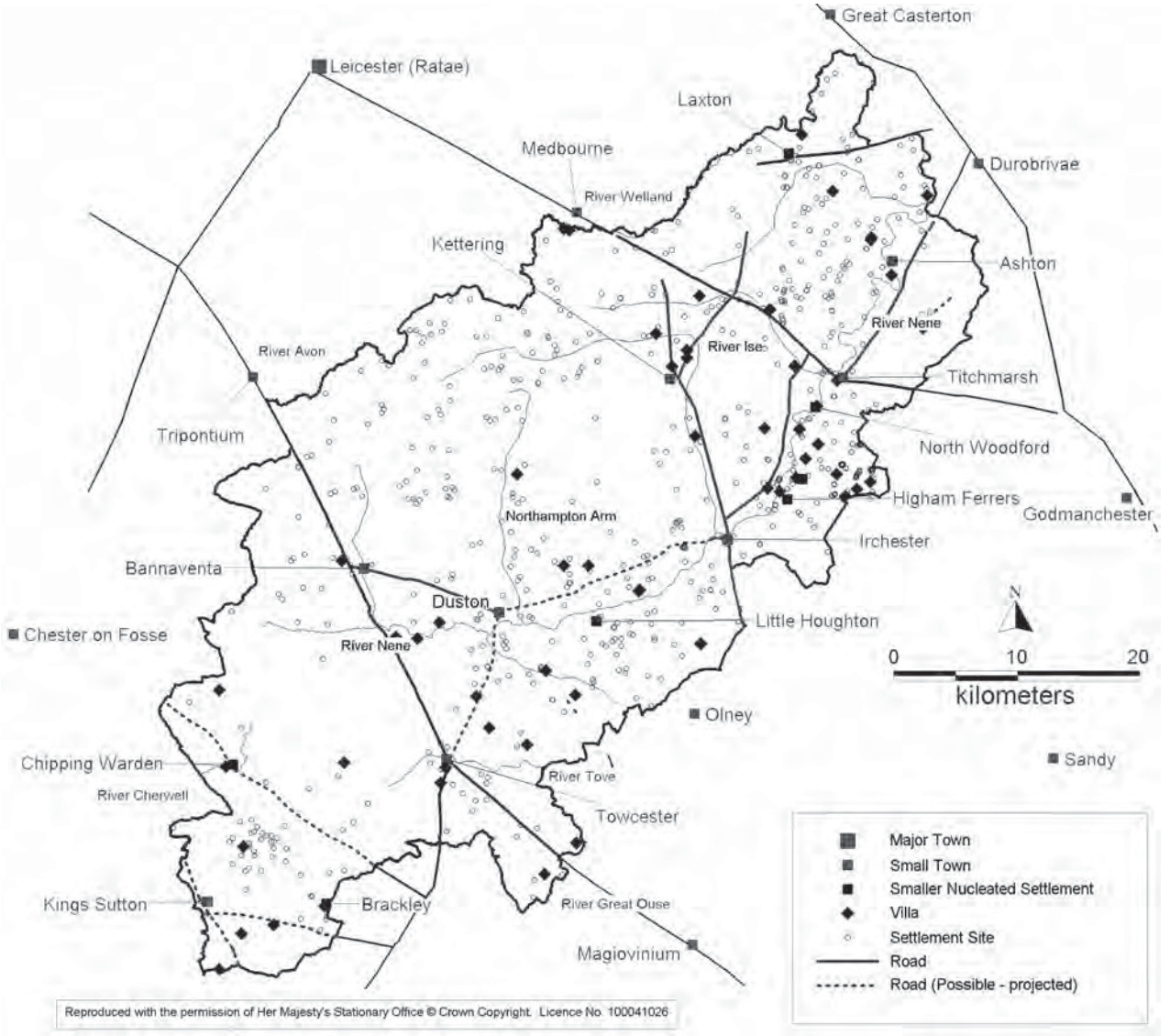
The basic framework for a ceramic chronology of the period is derived by combining information from a number of existing studies of particular wares, such as Howe & Perrin's guide to the pottery of the Nene Valley (1980). To this can be added the synthesis of larger excavated groups such as those from Towcester and immediately outside the county around Milton Keynes (Brown & Alexander 1982; Brown & Woodfield 1983; Marney 1989). An important area of former concern in dating Late Iron Age and first century coarse wares has recently been addressed by Friendship-Taylor (1998) but work of similar quality does not exist for the different fabric and form traditions found more commonly to the north and north west of the county. The recent publication of a number of backlog reports from the Nene and Welland research committee excavations near Peterborough, however, does now provide good basic data for a reappraisal in the former area.

For later periods, the Upper Nene valley grey-wares saw much early work through the excavation of kiln sites such as those at Ecton (Johnston 1969). The publication of excavations of shell tempered kilns at Harrold in Bedfordshire provides useful backgrounds for understanding these important regional coarse wares, but would benefit from synthetic study in the light of recent excavations (Brown 1972). Final publication of a number of outstanding major settlement excavations in Northamptonshire and at Odell in Bedfordshire should help improve the picture of common local coarse ware chronology. The Welland valley still remains something of a gap, which may only be improved with the publication of rural settlement excavations on the Leicestershire side of the valley (e.g. Empingham, Drayton and Ketton).

As with many areas there are special problems of constructing late 4th-5th century chronology in the absence of reliable late dated artefacts, and the possibilities for C-14 dating in this context, especially in relation to environmental data and continuing traditions of inhumation, need to be considered. Coinage also provides a good chronological source especially for urban and larger rural sites but low levels of coin loss (especially up to the 3rd century) on many rural sites and all first-second century settlements mean it is frequently of less value in this respect.

SETTLEMENT FORM

Evidence for the morphology and layout of settlements and the changing architectural traditions used within them are an important resource for studies of changing rural social organisation and status. This includes current evidence for settlement size and nucleation, especially in relation to the development and nature of non-villa rural



5.1 Roman Roads and sites in Northamptonshire

settlements and urban/roadside settlements during the mid-late Roman period.

The previous focusing of excavation on the architecture of villas and the conceptual separation of Iron Age from Roman has tended to fragment and bias our understanding of settlement architecture and morphology for the early part of the period. In particular, we have until recently, had a surprisingly poor understanding of the layout and morphology of entire early Roman farmsteads. It is clear, however, that small, enclosed settlements such as those found at Wootton Hill, Blackthorn, Wollaston, Earls Barton and Irchester, were transformed or abandoned during the Late Iron Age - early Roman transition (Jackson 1990, Williams & McCarthy 1974, Meadows 1996, Windell 1982, Atkins 2001,

Hall & Nickerson 1967). Where excavation has been sufficiently extensive, it is apparent that settlement was restructured around agglomerated groups of ditched enclosures and trackways predominantly of rectilinear form. These appear to be the norm for rural settlements in the early Roman period but excavated evidence suggests that these boundaries were ignored or altered to less archaeologically visible form (e.g. hedges) in the later Roman period. Some high status rural sites, such as Piddington, Stanwick and Cosgrove were enclosed in the later period, usually with walls that often followed earlier boundary divisions but now focused occupation around the main building range (Friendship-Taylor 1999, Neal 1989, Quinnell 1992).

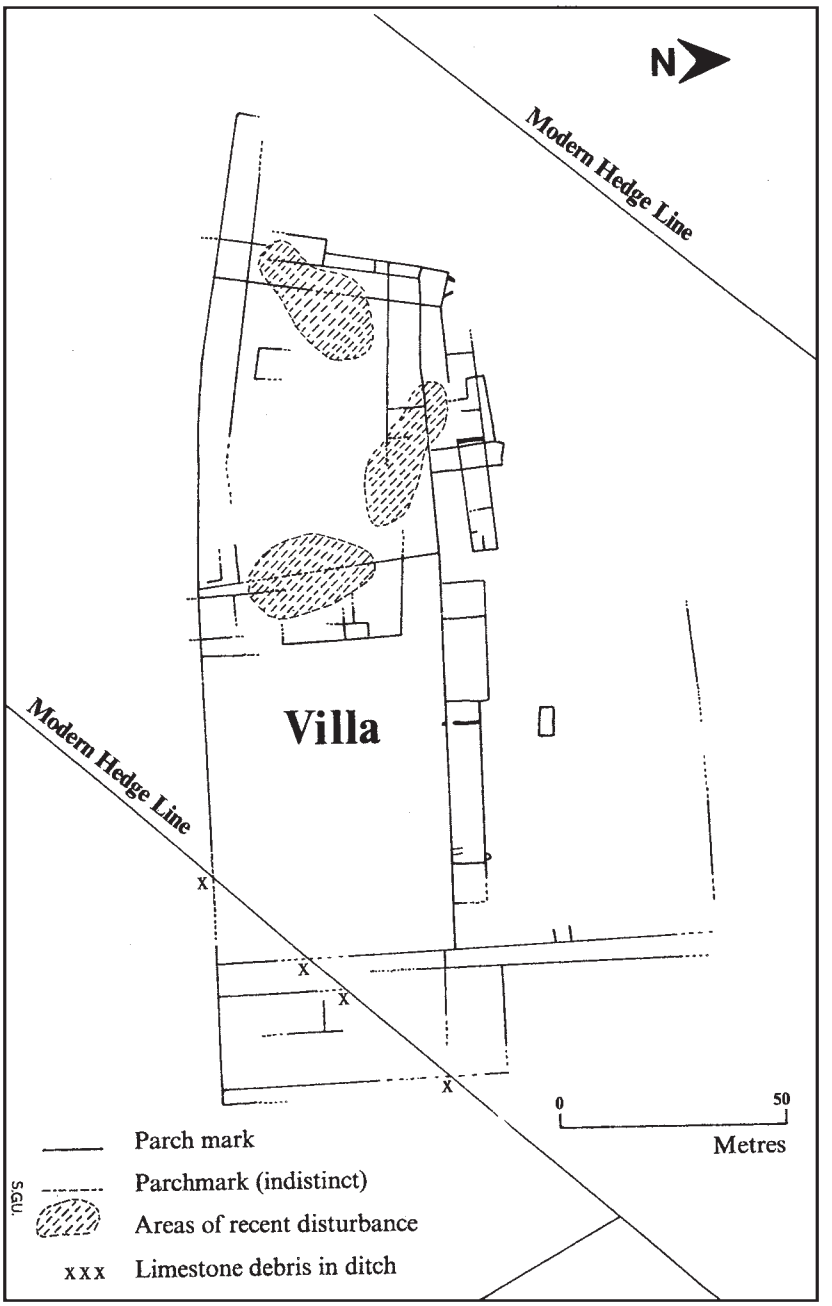
Looking at domestic architecture on rural settlements, there appear to be distinctions between the traditions for central southern Northamptonshire and the northeast part of the county (as mentioned above, there is currently insufficient information to permit detailed comment on the northwest part of the county). In the central southern Northamptonshire, round houses are common and continue their gradual transformation from timber into stone. This development is paralleled by the foundation and gradual development, largely from the Flavian period, of row type villas such as Quinton, Piddington, Thorplands, Overstone, Brixworth and Redlands Farm (Friendship-Taylor & Friendship-Taylor 1997, Hunter & Mynard 1977, Williams 1976, Woods 1970, Keevill 1992).

In the north east of the county, the initial continuity of round houses was replaced from the 2nd century by aisled buildings and villas (e.g. Apethorpe: RCHME 1975; Great Oakley: Meadows 1993a; Wakerley: Jackson & Ambrose 1978). This seems to be part of a tradition extending through South Lincolnshire, North Cambridgeshire and Rutland of which Orton Longueville, Lynch Farm, Barnack, Empingham, Whitwell and West Deeping are part. Unfortunately, modern excavations of villas in the Lower Nene Valley are rare and so little can be said of this area with confidence.

Architecturally and decoratively, villas within the county range in scale from large sophisticated complexes of buildings which must have required substantial resources, to much simpler structures comprising little more than a single row of rooms. At the upper end of this scale the complexes at Cotterstock and Piddington may be cited as particularly lavish, long-lived examples.

The Cotterstock villa was first recorded in the mid eighteenth century but was only re-located by aerial photography in 1976. It has seen little modern excavation, but a recent synthesis of geophysical survey, fieldwalking, limited trenching and information from aerial photography presents a complex of unparalleled size within Northamptonshire (Upex 2001). The villa site includes four courtyards surrounded by ranges of buildings which cover an area approximately 70 metres across and up to 270 metres in length. It is by far the largest known structure of its kind in the lower Nene valley and thus comparable with courtyard villas such as Bignor (Sussex) and Chedworth (Glos).

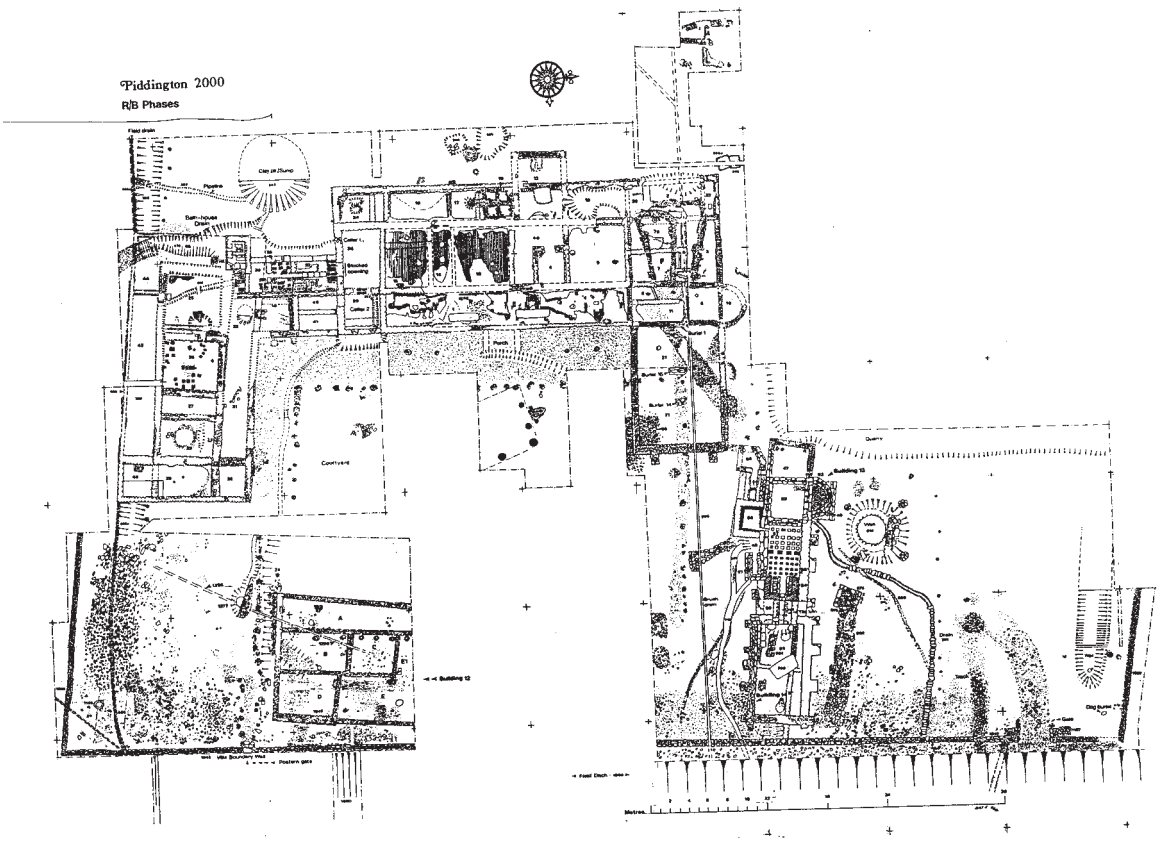
The Piddington villa has been the subject of long-term excavation since 1979 by the Upper Nene Archaeological Society. Apart from a large collection of worked flints ranging in date from the Neolithic to the Bronze Ages, the main evidence for settlement at the site occurs in the late Iron Age with three post-built 'D-shaped' structures. Pottery from the post-holes of these structures suggest a date from c. 50BC. These structures were followed by at least three more round-houses of more conventional form of between 8 and 13 meters in diameter and were dated by pottery and metal-work from c. I AD - c. 40+ AD. This phase was followed by a Conquest period (43/44AD) military presence for a duration of between 10 to 15 years. From c. 70AD a timber proto-villa of at least 6 rooms emerged, to be followed some 30 years later on an adjacent site by a stone-built 'cottage type' villa (see Fig 1.7). A similar, but smaller detached building was added at an obtuse angle. Both of these buildings suggest occupation dating from approximately 90/100 to 120 AD. Both of these buildings were extended until they were linked in a single-winged ('L'-shaped) corridor building by a small bathhouse (colour plate 7). This building was extensively damaged by fire in the late Antonine period (c. 160's AD). Reconstruction followed with the addition of further rooms and a new detached bathhouse. By 280/290AD a further major refurbishment programme was in progress. However, this came to an abrupt end midway through the work, leaving unfinished structures, unpainted walls and quantities of building materials, including large piles of unused tesserae sited around the building. Only minimal activity is attested during this period with an unbroken but small sequence of coins from various locations throughout the



5.2 Plan of the courtyard villa at Cottestock. Reproduced by permission of the Nene Valley Research Committee

site covering the next decade. However, intensive occupation resumed around *c.* 330AD with at least 6 family units living within the area of the old villa. This type of occupation then continued in an unbroken sequence well into the 5th century, followed by a small amount of Saxon occupation and a small cemetery (both groups may of course have been co-existing together).

Apart from being a detailed study of site morphology, the excavations at Piddington have



5.3 Ground plan of the Piddington Villa. Reproduced by permission of Roy Friendship-Taylor

been particularly significant for the information they have produced on the decorative schemes employed, showing that the villa's walls, colonnades, and roofs were all brightly coloured (See Colour Plate 8).

Although arguably of less architectural significance, in terms of sheer scale, the excavation of the villa at Stanwick is of national importance. The sites covered approximately 10 hectares and included not only a villa but also a group of substantial and separate stone buildings. Their excavation represents the first occasion that a villa has been fully excavated along with its estate buildings, including barns, a village and what appears to be a bailiffs residence. This not only reveals the morphology of the site but allows some attempt to be made to reconstruct its tenurial and social relationships

Substantial stone-built, or at least stone-founded, circular buildings are a further element of the building repertoire seen on a number of rural sites. These are found throughout the country, but a review has been made of examples found in the Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire (Keevill and Booth 1997). While it might once have been assumed that they represented stone founded round houses and were as such a short lived fusion of Celtic design with Roman technology, the true picture is far more complex. They appear to have been constructed from the first to the third centuries and some appear to have been in use, well into the fourth. There is considerable variation in their size, the largest being up to 16 metres in diameter. Some, like those at Stanwick seem to be part of a villa estate, while others are found in association with temples and some seem to stand in isolation.

5.4 Carved head from the Stanwick villa. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Environment Team

Many appear to have been domestic habitations and in one example at Ringstead a timber roundhouse was rebuilt with stone footing and a tessellated floor. However, there is also evidence linking these structures with agricultural storage, agricultural processing, industrial, and religious functions. It is also clear that other important timber architectural traditions existed. These are poorly understood due, in the past, to the lack of any specific interest in their study and subsequently, because of their susceptibility to damage by cultivation.

At a larger scale, there are no major towns in the county but a pattern of smaller nucleated settlements linked in to the road network is reasonably well mapped. The archaeology of these settlements has recently been reviewed as part of the English Heritage funded 'Extensive Urban Survey' of Northamptonshire. Significant settlements are known to have existed at Whilton Lodge, Towcester, Duston, Irchester, Titchmarsh, Ashton, Kings Sutton and Kettering. With the exception of Towcester ('*Lactodurum*') and Whilton Lodge ('*Bannaventa*') the original names of the settlements are unknown.

The site named as Bannaventa in the Antonine Itinerary was known from finds recorded in the eighteenth century although its precise location, three kilometres north east of Daventry, was only determined in 1970 by aerial survey (Fig 5.5). This revealed a walled town enclosing an area approximately 220 metres across. Almost as soon as it was rediscovered, the site was threatened by gravel extraction necessitating a rescue excavation on approximately a quarter of the site. This revealed both extra-mural settlement and a round house beneath the tail of the rampart with other earlier features

At Towcester, excavations of the defences showed them to have been constructed around 170 AD and to be composed of a stone wall with a backing bank inside a ditch which was 23metres wide but only 1.5 metres deep (Brown & Alexander 1982). Some 400 metres south of the defences, three rescue excavations were along the line of the Alcester road revealed, not only how the road was constructed and maintained but that a series of ditched plots containing rectangular houses of timber and cob, were laid out on either side of the road. These appeared to be contemporary with the construction

5.5 The walled town of Bannaventa, visible to the north of the A5. Reproduced by permission of Mr J Pickering

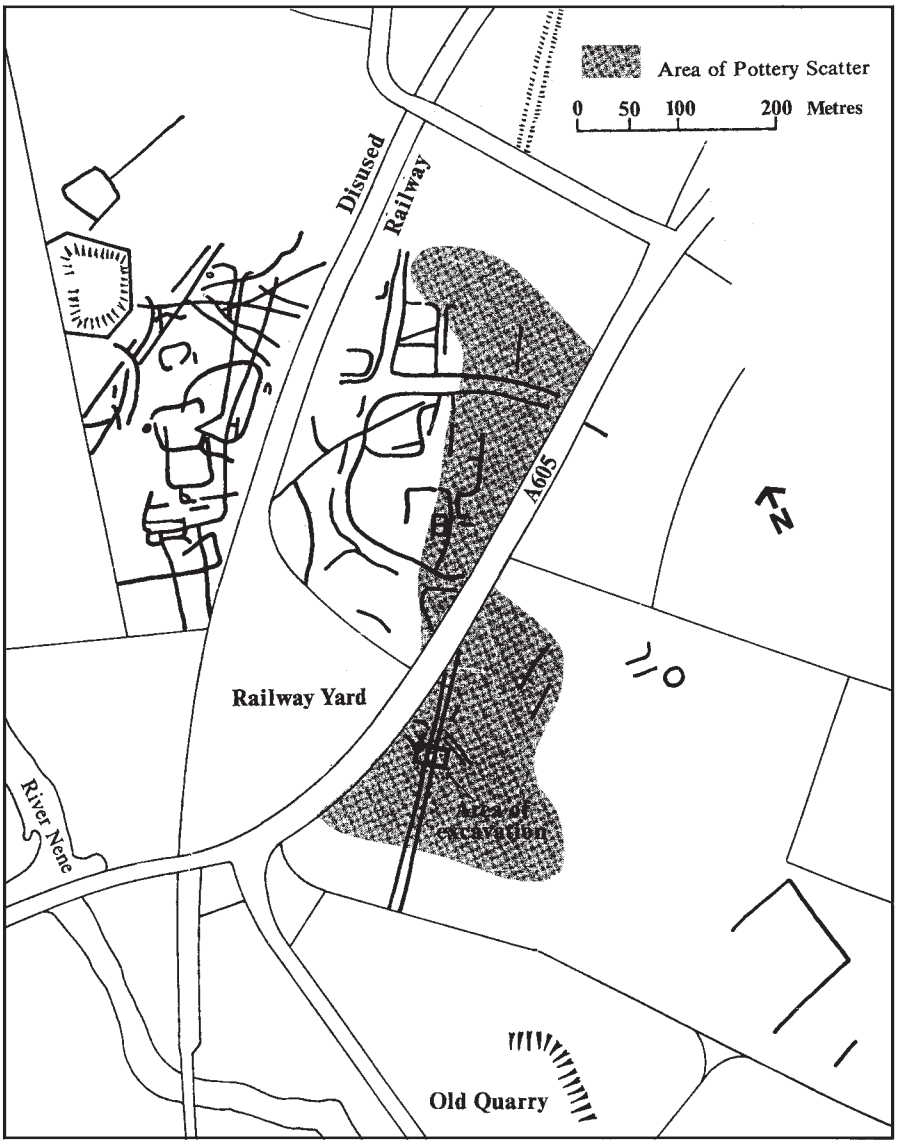
of the defences and to have been part of a planned development of the area (Brown & Woodfield 1983).

Other large nucleated settlements have also been identified across the county at Stanwick, Higham Ferrers, Brackley and Laxton. These settlements, while larger than individual farmsteads do not appear to have the same roles or attributes as the 'small towns' above and may be more akin to medieval villages.

Where archaeological evidence is sufficiently detailed and comprehensive, many of these small towns seem to have had Late Iron Age predecessors such as Duston, Towcester, Irchester and possibly Ashton (RCHME 1985; Walker 1992; Hall & Nickerson 1967) Some, such as Titchmarsh and Brackley/Evenly were significant religious as well as economic foci.

The evidence currently available almost always suggests that growth was organic alongside major roads and dendritic patterns of track ways that linked the core of each settlement to their surrounding agricultural landscapes (e.g. Ashton, Titchmarsh, Irchester and Bannaventa). Enclosure within a defensive wall, when it happened, was a secondary event that cut across the existing grain of a town's layout and that only protected its core. Only three of the towns are believed to have ever developed such features: Bannaventa, Towcester and Irchester. The significance of this set is uncertain although two of the three settlements lie on Watling Street and other similarly sized settlements on this route, outside Northamptonshire (eg Water Eaton, Staffs), are similarly protected, this does not explain the enclosure of Irchester.

Little is known about the function, development



5.6 The Roman town at Ashton.
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and emerging roles of these nucleated settlements during the Roman period. Few of the towns have had significant modern excavations in their core but those at Ashton constitute an extremely important dataset that requires publication. Excavation on the fringes or extramural areas of Towcester, Irchester and Bannaventa and rescue excavations at Titchmarsh help to fill out the picture, particularly with regard to artefactual and paleobiological evidence (Brown & Woodfield 1983; Windell 1984; Dix et. al 1991; 1994; Dix & Masters 1992; Masters 1997; Meadows 1997; Dix and Taylor 1988; NAU unpublished).

5.7 The Roman town at Irchester Reproduced by permission of the Historic Environment Team

COMMUNICATION NETWORKS ACROSS THE COUNTY

A composite picture of the major roads in the county has been available since the Royal Commission Survey volumes published between the late 1970s and mid 1980s and their mapping by Ivan Margary (1973). Map (5.1) shows the principal major roads in the county, i.e. those forming part of a regional or national communication network linking geographical locations, rather than the more local networks linking settlements to the surrounding agricultural landscape.

Perhaps the most significant Roman road (at least in terms of the wider national road network) is the part of the route known as 'Watling Street' running north-west across the country from London. Within Northamptonshire its course is generally followed by the modern A5 between Old Stratford and Lilbourne. The only other road line in the county of similar strategic importance is the 'Gartree Road', running from Leicester to link with Ermine Street at Godmanchester, which crosses from the Corby area to Clopton.

Other roads can be partially traced from stretches visible as cropmarks on aerial photographs or as earthworks, and lengths preserved in later boundaries. This would include a road running along the Nene valley between Titchmarsh and Water Newton. More speculatively, the existence of a route along the middle stretches of the Nene valley, linking the small towns at Duston and Irchester can be postulated although there is currently little physical evidence for its alignment.

Roads such as Watling Street can be viewed as being significant boundaries in the initial Roman conquest and consolidation of lowland Britain. This suggests a mid-late first century origin, and that it continued as a maintained route of strategic importance throughout the period. A similar

5.8 Part of the Roman timber bridge at Aldwincle. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Environment Team

argument can be made for the Gartree road. Other roads can only be interpreted and understood by reference to the network of larger nucleated settlements, although here a causal relationship between settlement centre and communication route (or vice versa) is difficult to prove. The towns are discussed separately elsewhere, but the identification of pre-Roman settlement at several of these sites (Duston, Towcester, Irchester) raises the strong possibility that parts of the Roman road network is based on earlier prehistoric communication lines.

The chronology of road creation and development of the network within the county is far from completely understood. Watling Street and the Gartree road can best be viewed within the context of the initial Roman conquest and consolidation of lowland Britain and to have continued as a maintained route of strategic importance throughout the period.

It is only in the Roman period that the creation of a permanent way necessitated major engineering operations. These include the causeway across part of the Nene floodplain north of the nucleated settlement at Irchester, recorded and partially excavated by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in Ditchford Quarry (Keevill & Williams 1995), or the extensive gravel metalled roads excavated south-west of Towcester (Brown and Woodfield 1983). Archaeological evidence for bridges across the river Nene has been recovered at Aldwinckle where gravel quarrying in 1968 revealed a timber bridge connected to a metaled roadway. The bridge had been re-built on at least three occasions and although no final date for its destruction could be determined, it was certainly in use between the 1st and the 3rd centuries (Jackson & Ambrose 1976). Other riverside constructions include a causeway at Irchester, and probable mills at Redlands Farm (Keevill 1992) and Towcester, Wood Burcote (Turland 1977). River-road intersections, such as the routes crossing the Nene north and west of Irchester, and Watling Street crossing the Tove immediately north of Towcester, would also have required bridges or fords, as was suggested for the road north of Irchester.

Perhaps surprisingly given the amount of development work on the gravels and alluvial deposits along the Nene there has been little research pulling together information on riverside installations and communications in the county. The potential for future discoveries may still be present at a number of locations along the lower reaches of the valley (Jackson & Ambrose 1976).

SETTLEMENT LOCATION AND LANDSCAPE ORGANISATION.

Summaries of the evidence for rural settlement patterns, stability and shift in the location of settlement, and the basic layout of intervening land boundaries as a guide to changing patterns of social organization, are key to understanding Roman rural society in the county. Critical to this is some understanding of networks of settlement locally and regionally, rather than just individual sites. How far this is achievable is currently highly varied, but is already possible in some parts of the county.

Good information is currently available from the Raunds Area Project, a large scale survey and excavation work in the Nene Valley around Raunds and from work in advance of gravel extraction at Wollaston (Parry, forthcoming; Meadows, forthcoming). Away from the river Nene, a smaller survey around Brigstock examined an area that had been preserved from medieval plough damage within a deer park, while more recently there has been an extensive excavation and survey at Courteenhall (Foster, 1988; Buteaux, 2001). Generally, information from the north and west of the county and much of the clay lands is lacking. Both Raunds and Wollaston suggest some localized settlement shift during the late Iron Age or shortly after the conquest within long established bounded landscapes. Excavation on nucleated and dispersed settlements suggests a greater degree of continuity on the former, dating from at least the Late Iron Age. Such settlements are known at Duston and Stanwick though publication of the excavations at both is awaited.

Where excavation has been on a significant scale or carried out to more rigorous modern standards, results indicate that most villas within the county appear to have had late Iron Age predecessors (e.g. Ashley: Taylor & Dix 1985; Brixworth: Woods 1970; Piddington: Friendship-Taylor 1999; Stanwick: Neal 1989; Weekley: Jackson & Dix 1988). Until recently our understanding of non-villa rural settlements has been very poor. However, landscape orientated excavation and observation strategies as part of large scale developer funded projects, such as those at Wollaston, Crick and Courteenhall is now improving the situation (Meadows 1996 &

pers comm; Chapman 1995; Ovendon-Wilson 1997; Thomas 1998; Buteux pers comm). Although at an early stage, this work suggests that many of these settlements were relocated from nearby predecessors or were new foundations during the first and second centuries AD as rural settlement was reorganized within an existing bounded landscape.

Thanks to the quality and recent systematic mapping of aerial photography, information is available to assess the morphology of agricultural landscapes in a number of parts of the county. This is continually augmented by large-scale prospection ahead of modern development (e.g. Bramptons/ Dallington: Cadman 1995; Ecton: Meadows 1993b; Upton: Buteux & Jones 2000) but the real need is to extend paleoenvironmental studies and link them to other material correlates of changing agricultural practice during this period. In order to develop a balanced and extensive understanding of how landscapes in the region developed, it will be critical to integrate analyses of boundary form and pattern, with environmental, artefactual and geochemical data that informs our understanding of land use. One approach to this issue is currently the subject of work at Crick, Wollaston and Courteenhall.

AGRICULTURE

The quality of our existing evidence for agricultural practice (as reflected in the structural evidence for periods of innovation, change or stability, alongside the palaeoenvironmental record, and patterns of land division and use) is also currently highly variable. Whilst excavations from the county have provided many dated examples of key changes in the organisation of agriculture, we still have very little detailed work on palaeobotanical and faunal remains of this period, especially away from the major river valleys or small towns/roadside settlements.

Synthesis of the published and unpublished environmental information is currently much needed as part of a regional overview, but it is already clear that few of the existing published excavations from the county contain any such information. Valuable results of preliminary work at Wollaston have demonstrated the presence of a significant area of probable viticulture in the middle Nene valley. During the examination of a 35 hectare gravel extraction site, a series of shallow, flat based ditches were uncovered running in parallel lines for over 6 kilometres and spaced 5 metres apart. Excavations revealed post holes within the trenches which were interpreted as plant supports and analysis of the ditch fills produced vine pollen.

This work together with the extensive programmes of work at Stanwick villa, Redlands Farm and Courteenhall will eventually produce a much clearer picture of patterns of environmental change and agricultural regimes for the county. These key projects need then to be augmented by the additional datasets collected as part of smaller briefs and published accounts from other parts of the county (such as that from Croughton, Irchester, Aldwincle and Crick). Critically, however, there is still very little comparable environmental data from areas away from the Nene valley and gathering such information remains a high priority.

Sufficient information is currently available to study the structural development of Roman rural landscapes over significant parts of the Nene valley. Alone, such information tends to produce somewhat descriptive maps, which still often tell us little about the dynamics of agricultural land use in the Roman period. It is imperative if we are to understand the development of Roman agricultural life to develop approaches that integrate structural, environmental and artefactual data into models of land use, agricultural practice and exchange. With this in mind it is important to shift our thinking from an emphasis on solely structural and artefactual evidence to incorporate approaches that assist in the delineation of ‘use areas’. In particular, this requires us to think of preliminary survey strategies (field walking, aerial photography, geophysics, geochemistry) and periods of active intervention (microtopography of stripped surfaces, environmental sampling and excavation) as providing highly significant landscape datasets for the study of the agricultural environment. Only when extant projects of this kind are completed and future opportunities for such work taken, will we be better placed to answer key questions about agricultural specialisation, centralization, the separate or similar development of upland, clayland or even potentially formerly wooded areas, and changing patterns of land use through time.

CRAFT PRODUCTION AND INDUSTRY

The nature and distribution of evidence for pottery and tile production, and the iron working industry are currently areas of real potential in Northamptonshire. A long tradition of work on

the major regional Roman pottery industries gives reasonable data sets on the location of production sites, their date and technology, but is still poor on the context of production and the analysis of patterns of supply. Critically, earlier site based work on the upper Nene valley pottery kilns (e.g. Johnston 1969) needs synthesizing in order to fill a significant gap in our understanding of coarseware production, supply and use in the region (cf. Fulford & Huddleston 1991, 35 & 39). The study of tile production is, if anything, similar but worse and little recent consideration has been given to assessing the link between the two. This is particularly important in relation to the major excavated groups currently awaiting publication from Stanwick and Ashton, which have the potential to provide major synthetic studies for the Lower and Middle Nene valleys.

Iron production has been the subject of recent synthetic summaries and although information on the development and extent of the industry is still very fragmented, it appears that the importance Roman Iron production in the east Midlands has in the past been underestimated (Condron 1997, Schrufer-Kolb 1999, Bellamy et al, 2001). Earlier field walking surveys have provided good basic datasets on the patterns and extent of iron production sites across the county but much additional information is required if they are to be better understood. Primarily, these surround the need to better date the industry and begin differentiating between the locations of various stages in the process and the scale upon which they occurred. If much, or even a significant proportion of the sites currently known can be demonstrated to date to the Iron Age and, or Roman period this region, which includes neighbouring areas of Rutland and Lincolnshire, is likely to have been one of the most important centres for the industry nationally.

5.9 Excavation of an iron working site at Laxton. Reproduced by permission of the Roy Friendship-Taylor

Little is known about the economic and social context of the iron industry despite evidence being available from a number of earlier excavations. Dispersed patterns of iron smelting within the agricultural landscapes of the south of the county, around Silverstone (Mudd 2002), and in the Welland valley from Harringworth (Jackson 1981) and Wakerley (Jackson and Ambrose 1978). Evidence for more concentrated and potentially large scale iron smelting comes from nearby Laxton (Jackson & Tylecote 1988), but the wider layout and function of the settlement is still very poorly understood. Likewise, the unpublished excavations at Ashton strongly suggest that iron smithing was a significant element in the town's development and economy. Unfortunately, however, these have tended to be considered in isolation and a wider research framework that considers patterns of extraction, roasting, smelting, smithing and exchange is much needed if the role of this industry is to be understood.

Currently ample scope exists for assessing other potential industries as little or no work has been done. In particular, possible craft specialization linked to agricultural products such as textiles, horn, leather and bone is in need of examination, especially in relation to the still small number of important excavated groups from the small towns and larger villas.

RITUAL AND RELIGION, BURIALS & CULTURAL IDENTITY

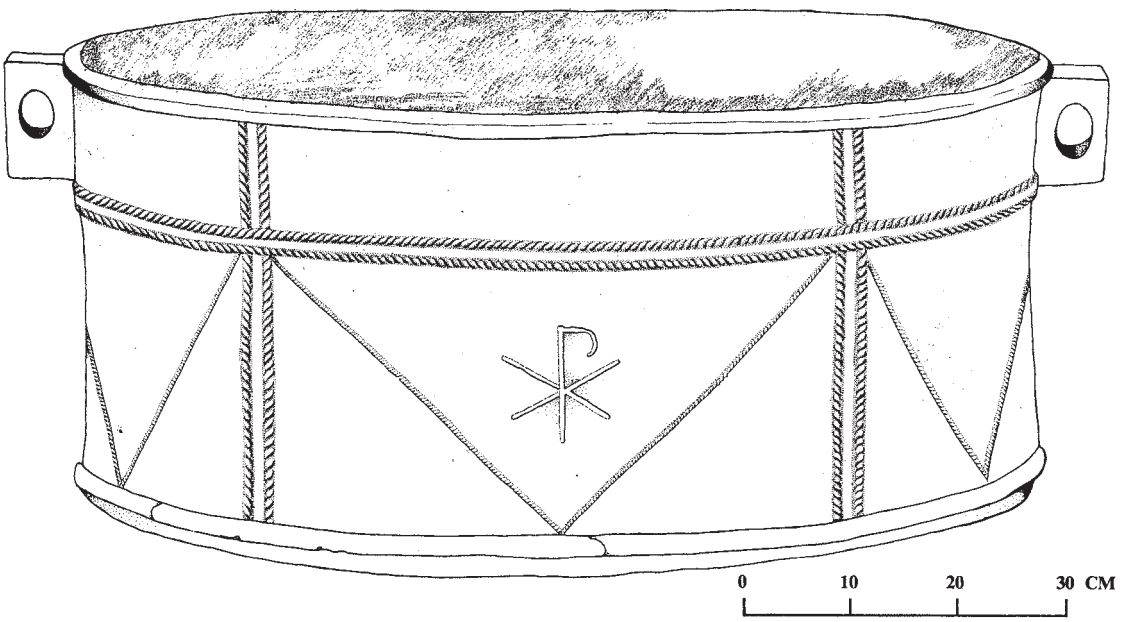
Much recent work on Iron and Roman Britain has pointed to the evidence for the construction and maintenance of distinct regional identities, often at varying scales. In this respect, new projects would benefit from considering settlement architecture for example, as possible expressions of identity and status through time and space (e.g. a possible contrast between communities in the north east of county and those in the central south). Buildings clearly have practical functions but distinctive regional and chronological patterns are often caused by important social differences, an insight long recognized in architectural studies of later periods.

Portable material culture and identity has received much recent attention for the Late Iron Age, however this emphasis on possibly significant local differences has not been similarly pursued within Romano-British studies (e.g. Curteis 1996; Jackson & Dix 1988). Such considerations are also valuable in considering the marked difference between nucleated/rural settlement assemblages as evidence for variation in social status. Likewise, the role of long term ritual traditions and religion in particular is important in this context, and consideration of the possibility of structured deposition and animal burial, the ritual associations of architecture, and human rural and boundary burial may all prove very fruitful.

Individual excavations have provided useful information on the more obvious material remains of Romano-British religious sites. At Brigstock, a circular and a polygonal shrine, both approximately 9 metres in diameter were located within 2 kilometres of the Gartree road. Most of the 278 coins and minature bronze objects (including a horse and rider, a table and an axe) were concentrated within the circular building. Within 8 kilometres of this site, a group of two polygonal, one rectangular structure and as many as three round buildings were located at Collyweston, (Greenfield 1963; Knocker 1965).

Substantial numbers of burials were encountered during excavations at Ashton and Laxton but these await publication. The possible religious function of some smaller Roman towns/roadside settlements is already suggested from survey evidence but little is known from excavation. At the heart of this is the continuing need to better examine religious foci within both rural and larger nucleated/small town sites such as Cosgrove, Titchmarsh, Irchester and Towcester. Many probable rural religious sites have come to light through metal detecting, and in the absence of any immediate likelihood of excavation, the analysis of such surface finds groups, preferably under controlled conditions, will remain the best option for their study. Evidence for such sites spanning the later Iron Age and Roman periods is now common, largely through the efforts of Mark Curteis (pers. comm.), but the establishment of a portable antiquities officer post provides further opportunities for the better recording and synthesis of this growing body of information.

Much excavated evidence is already available for other forms of settlement but a strong tendency to overlook evidence for ritual practice in such contexts, in contrast with Iron Age archaeology, has led to a potentially important gap in research. That such structured deposits did occur in domestic contexts is ably demonstrated by the articulated animal deposits discovered at Quinton, and needs



5.10 Lead tank from Ashton, displaying a chi-rho monogramme.
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to be considered in all future excavation projects on such sites (Friendship-Taylor 1974; 1979).

Evidence for specific religious traditions is somewhat limited by the lack of modern excavation on such sites. However, the discovery at Ashton and Rushton of lead tanks bearing the *chi-rho* motif, as well as the hoard of early christian church plate from Durobrivae, may well suggest the presence of significant late Roman Christian communities in the county.

Rural burials are sparse in number on any one site but commonly present and recent reviews of this phenomenon suggest some significant patterns in burial location and tradition (Pearce 1999; Taylor in prep). The excellent data from Ashton, where both substantial cemetery and boundary burial groups are recorded, alongside limited work at Laxton, provide a key opportunity to better understand later Roman urban traditions and compare and contrast urban-rural relationships with the traditions noted above.