The military collapse on the Rhine in the 270s devastated the north-west provinces, and destroyed their industrial and agricultural base. Many villas in north Gaul were abandoned, whilst at the same time British villas (especially on the Jurassic limestones of the south-west and Midlands) begin to appear and flourish on a large scale. This indicates a 'flight of capital' from the stricken areas.

The construction of villa complexes in Britain may have been part of an organised response to the economic challenges of Rome's north-western provinces. By the mid-300s, Rome relied on Britain's grain output and fleet to maintain power in the north-western provinces during the reign of the emperor Julian.

The coins and pottery from the villa complexes suggest that prosperity based on continental trade went on until c340AD. The collapse of the trade was probably initiated by the death of Constantine II and the upheavals caused by the civil wars that followed. This probably heralded the break up of the large privately owned '*latifundia*' with their far-flung trading contacts, into either state-run operations or a series of smaller independent estates, as the local landlord paid the price for supporting the losing imperial faction.

Henceforth local estates were managed to meet more limited local requirements. However, analysis of the finds recovered in the survey shows that some villas remained prosperous well into the late 300s, and that several estates continued into the mid-400s. Continuity of occupation in the area is further illustrated by the excavation of the Post-Roman timber phase of buildings at Whitehall Farm which survived into the mid-500s — although for the estates and farms in the survey area it was most likely subsistence agriculture.

Project conclusions

Local People: Local Past has demonstrated that an integrated systematic approach to field survey produces an effective profile of settlement. A set of diagnostic signposts can be created that not only outlines the general development of a site but describes and explains the character of communities and their associated landscapes.

The evidence from CLASP's geophysical survey clearly establishes the range of features and structural complexes on the settlement sites. The ability to apply either magnetometer or resistivity surveys provides the necessary detail to fully interpret the results obtained.

The range of artefacts retrieved by the fieldwork opens up new opportunities. The findings begin to address aspects of daily life on a communal and personal level, which will inform our ability to assess the impact of Romanisation and what this process meant in any given locality.

Finally, the project has realised the potential of community-based archaeology to complement commercial research — this type of wide-area archaeological research, if not undertaken by experienced volunteer groups such as CLASP, could never be justified as a commercial project — whilst delivering work of the very highest quality. Its importance in informing and directing future research cannot be understated.

You can read more details about the Local People: Local Past project by visiting the CLASP website.

Links with other projects

CLASP is involved in several other long-term projects focused on Iron Age and Roman-period sites in west Northamptonshire.

- At Whitehall Farm, a Roman villa site close to Watling Street (in Nether Heyford parish), CLASP spent 13 years excavating the villa site. The focus is now on preparing for publication what has been learned.
- At Bannaventa, a Roman posting station and small town on Watling Street, CLASP's ongoing fieldwork has recovered tens of thousands of potsherds and thousands of coins and other artefacts, and over 50 hectares of the site and the surrounding area have been mapped in detail by magnetometer.
- A similar survey to 'Local People: Local Past' is under way on the hinterland around Lactodorum (Towcester).
- CLASP is currently providing input, for the whole of Northamptonshire, to the Iron Age Hillforts Atlas project, led by the Institute of Archaeology at Oxford University.

Find out about CLASP

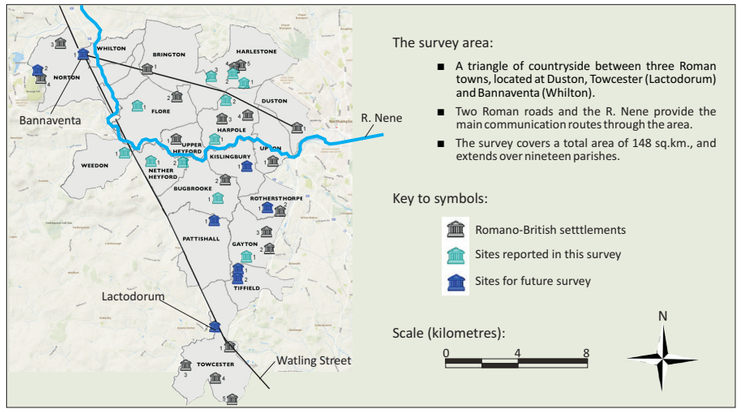
If you found this leaflet interesting, and think you might like to work with a friendly group, and get healthy exercise whilst making a serious contribution to professional archaeology, you should consider joining CLASP!

CLASP is always keen to welcome new volunteers. New projects are regularly planned and executed, knowledge is shared, and training in fieldwork and archaeological computing skills is given in a friendly environment.

For more details, contact CLASP at http://www.claspweb.org.uk.

Local People: Local Past:

Analysis of the 'Romanisation' of settlements in west Northamptonshire



Despite fieldwork at various Roman sites in west Northamptonshire, there has never been any previous multi-disciplinary attempt to provide an overview of the finds and sites identified, or any explanation of the general development, the nature of settlement or the character of Romanisation of the area.

CLASP therefore set out to remedy this, in the 'Local People: Local Past' project.

Provincial culture in Roman Britain was influenced by imperial fashion and taste. However, local society often interpreted the 'benefits of civilisation' in their own way. The opportunity to systematically examine settlement over a wide area provided excellent prospects for archaeologically profiling the character of communities.

The area chosen was a triangle of landscape east of Watling Street — one of Roman Britain's main arterial roads, connecting London with the north-west via a busy and commercial highway.

The settlements surveyed lie between the Roman posting stations at Bannaventa (Whilton) and Lactodorum (Towcester) on Watling Street, and the survey area extends eastward towards a third Roman 'small town' near Duston (Northampton).

The area covers 148sq.km. of central Northamptonshire, including the watershed of the River Nene — a transitional zone of rising ground between the low lying floodplain of the lower Nene valley in the east and the Northampton Heights in the west.

Project methodology

Creation of a 'context framework' as a basis for analysis was the first challenge. This called for a range of complementary archaeological techniques, aiming to establish the nature of focal areas of settlement:

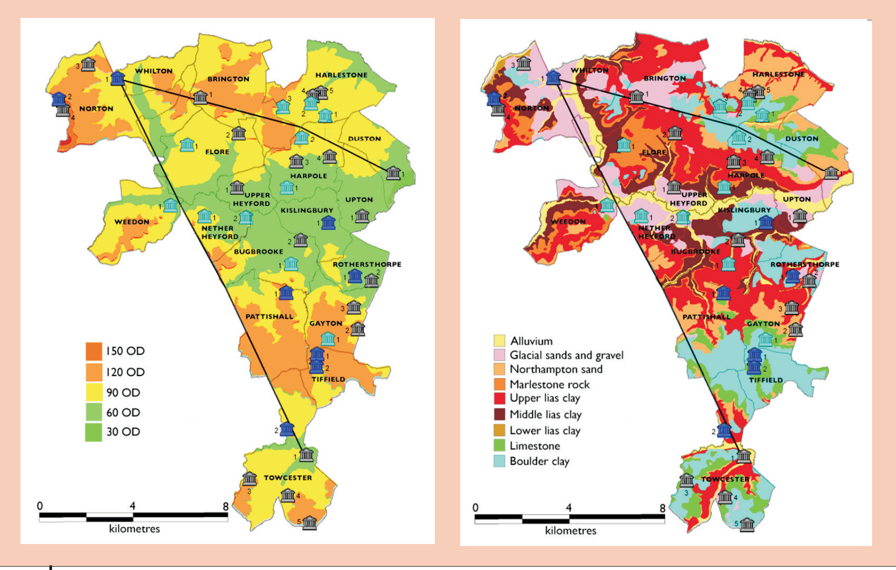
- Potsherds provide a basic timeline for each site, and for studying the distribution of goods across the area.
- Coin lists provide an alternative resource to supplement and cross-check the dating provided by the pottery. Systematic metal detection surveys increased the number of metal finds recovered.
- Taken together, the evidence not only indicates the types of settlement but also outlines the nature of the economy within which they existed.
- Geophysics surveys allow the archaeology below ground to be integrated with the evidence from field surveys, providing a backdrop against which to interpret any surface scatter.
- Magnetometry can identify wider landscape features such as field systems, trackways, enclosures, stock pens, pit alignments and boundary ditches
- Resistivity surveys can provide clear outlines of the layout of stone buildings.

The survey area

The area may be broadly divided into four main geologies:

- upland heavy clay zones, often at the highest elevations;
- permeable soils on the slopes between plateau and floodplain;
- glacial gravels and sands on the lower slopes;
- alluvial deposits in the floodplain.

The type of farming influences the number and type of farm structures and the potential density of settlement — animal husbandry needs fewer buildings and manpower, but may cover larger areas than arable farms.



Relief map (L) and geological map (R) of the survey area

Heavy clay soils

One fifth of the survey area is heavy Boulder Clay soil. The technology of that period could not provide the drainage needed for such heavy soil, though the land would still have made good pasture.

We might therefore expect either relatively small farms with limited structures, or large specialist estates ('*latifundia*') able to meet the needs of intensive sheep rearing and wool production.

Two of the surveyed settlements are located on these heavy clays, and cover the largest areas of any in the survey, each over 5 ha. One of these was a large estate centre, implying specialist exploitation of the countryside rather than small-scale pastoral or subsistence farming. Both sites lie on a gentle south-east facing slope, with the focus at the west of the geological area.

Permeable soils

The permeable intermediate slopes cover half of the survey area, typically at lower elevations. The soils are lighter sand, limestone or Lias clays.

These areas present better conditions for Roman farmers, with locations able to support the more intensive infrastructure needed for mixed agriculture.

The Lias clay is more easily worked with primitive ploughs such as the *'ard'* than the heavy boulder clay, as drainage is less of a problem.

These lighter clay sites vary between 2-4 ha in size. By comparison, on the Northampton Sand and Limestone geologies the settlements are between 1-2ha.

These permeable soils offer the greatest number of locations for settlement, and attracted a wider clientele and a wider variation in farm and estate management regimes. In general these sites are on flat plateaux, with the focus at the centre of the survey area.

Gravels and sands

Most sands and gravels lie parallel to the Nene valley in the north of the area (14% of the total survey area), and their excellent drainage would have encouraged arable farming.

This is an intense regime requiring a wide range of structures to process and store the crops.

These settlements show a denser distribution pattern — twice as many settlements are based on the gravel and sands as on any other geological area.

These settlements are uniform in size, at about 4ha. Again the evidence confirms intensive exploitation, mainly for cereal crops. The residential focus is mainly at the northern edge of the geological area.

Floodplain alluvium

Agriculture on the floodplain would have been specialised — meadow for fodder production, as part of the resources of a larger integrated farm or estate. The floodplain was probably not much settled, just an additional resource for livestock farmers on nearby sites.

survey basic statistics

11 rural settlements on 28 sites
27,000 potsherds (294kg)
72,500 tile fragments (212kg)
1,000 flue tiles (44.5kg)
14,600 tesserae
450 coins
28.8 hectares of geophysics (19.5%)
23.7 hectares of field-walking (16%)

Find scatter patterns from field-walking and metal detection establish the focal centre of each settlement; geophysics gives complementary data on field-patterns, trackways, enclosures and buildings; trial trenching and excavation provide confirmation of settlement details and degree of archaeological survival.

site geology	sites	area (sq.km.)	area per site (sq.km.)
heavy clay	6	28	4.5
gravels (estuaries/glacial)	8	21	2.5
intermediate soils	14	88	6.25
alluvium (floodplain)	0	11	0
	28	**148**	**av. 5.25**

Settlement density on heavy clay soils is greater than on intermediate soils — suggesting that at least 3 further sites still await discovery on the intermediate soils. The results indicate that all geologies and elevations were utilised.

site elevation	sites	area (sq.km.)	area per site (sq.km.)
at or above 120m OD	9	44	6.3
90m to 120m OD	12	69	5.7
60m to 90m OD	7	35	5.3
	28	**148**	**av. 5.25**

The survey statistics, when analysed, reveal a surprising amount of detail about the individual settlements.

Before the Romans

The evidence shows that the area was already densely occupied by the late Iron Age. This is an advance in our understanding, showing that the Roman conquest caused no instantaneous change, but steady absorption of the local population.

The findings indicate a close spread of small enclosed farmsteads occupied by an extended family or kinship group, sometimes with field systems, probably representing subsistence mixed farming.

Pre-Roman occupation was typically located on exposed hilltops, probably chosen for their sight lines — most of the survey sites have sight lines to the Iron Age hillforts at Borough Hill and Hunsbury Hill.

The earliest landscape features are lines of 'pit alignments', probably marking land boundaries. Previous fieldwork suggests that the area was extensively occupied further back in time, possibly to the Bronze Age.

The Roman occupation

Analysis of the finds from the survey reveals two important facts about Roman occupation of this area:

- sites were continuously occupied;
- activity at the sites covered a considerable period.

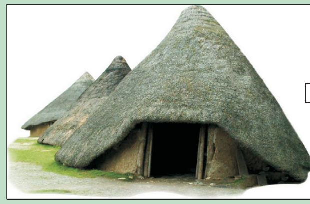
The absence of evidence of military sites across the survey area implies that the local population was not hostile to the Roman occupation. Contact with the Roman army seems to have been minimal and probably of limited duration.

First signs of change

A change appears in the late C1 to early C2. A step increase in finds indicates reorganisation of individual settlements and their farms. There are two architectural innovations: traditional roundhouses are now constructed of stone; and Roman style rectangular buildings appear, accompanied by new field systems — emphasising a continuation of mixed farming.

Second stage changes

The stone roundhouse remained the main building design until the late C3, when a major change occurred, particularly in the north of the survey area. Large ditched and banked compounds covering 2-5ha were imposed over existing field systems. Existing field systems were abandoned, whilst stock enclosures and paddocks were laid out within the new compounds, and villa ranges with separate bath-houses were erected. The main villa was often located between two existing stone roundhouses which initially continued in domestic use, suggesting that the population of estates was maintained through to the new regimes.



Note how the stone roundhouses of the intermediate phase are retained at each end of the villa range, in the final phase of construction below

- Throughout the Iron Age and early Roman period, the standard dwelling was a roundhouse of wattle and daub and timber. At the end of its lifetime (25-40 years) the entire structure had to be rebuilt on a new site nearby.
- With the change to stone-walled roundhouses (about 50 years after the arrival of Roman troops), periodic re-roofing was the only requirement.
- By about 280-300AD, rectangular villa complexes began to appear, with bath-houses and ancillary buildings.

Significant advances are made in vernacular architecture

This development occurred on most settlements in the survey area, probably within 25-50 years. Again the villa complexes appear to be designed for extended family or kinship groups. The appearance of stock yards and paddocks indicates a change in farming regime, from mixed farming to sheep rearing, mainly to produce wool for the textile industries of the empire's north-western provinces.

The prosperity of this period is evident in the luxurious layout of the villas in the survey area. The limited period of construction and similarity in layout suggest the existence of a significant '*latifundia*' in the hinterland of Bannaventa (Whilton) on Watling Street. Both the scale of the edifices and the abrupt changes to the local rural landscape imply a huge influx of resources.

This seems to be linked to the major upheavals in Gaul in the late C3, due to Germanic invasions (in 276AD, when 60-70 of the largest cities in the Gallic and Rhineland provinces, were destroyed).

Evolution of building styles and farming regimes.