

THE TOM HASSALL LECTURE FOR 1997

Roman Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

This paper is a revised version of the text of the Tom Hassall Lecture delivered to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society on 4 March 1997. It attempts to define the principal characteristics of the Roman period in the Oxford region.

Roman Oxfordshire is an awkward title for a lecture, because the counties of our region do not correspond to any known Roman divisions of Britain. Moreover, on looking at a sketch-map of the principal settlements of central southern Roman Britain it is immediately clear that the large towns or cities of the region lay outside the present county (Fig. 3). Geographically, however, Oxfordshire since 1974 does have a certain unity around the major part of the Upper Thames valley, fringed as it is with the Cotswolds to the north and west, the Downs to the south, and the Chilterns to the south-east (Fig. 1). This variety of landscape is matched to a very significant extent by variety in Roman settlement that largely corresponds to blocks of topography.

It has long been realized that distribution maps of archaeological finds often tell us more about where there have been archaeologists than of ancient peoples. The situation in Oxfordshire was revealed on the excellent maps published in 1986 in *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*.¹ It has, if anything, intensified since. In this county the largest concentrations of Roman finds in recent years have still been on the gravel terraces of the Thames and its tributaries. The reasons are well-known: pioneer air photography; a concentration in the University of Oxford of archaeologists interested in the immediate surroundings in the years before, during, and immediately after the Second World War; the archaeological survey of the Upper Thames gravel terraces that started in 1969 and was published to great effect in 1974;² and – most of all – the spread of the sand and gravel industry. In more recent years the emergence of planning policies directed on the one hand to the 'polluter pays' principle, and on the other to restricting building development in areas of perceived landscape value, has resulted – with a few notable exceptions – in comparatively little modern archaeology in what looks to have become the richest part of the county in Roman times, judging by the extraordinary density of Roman villas in the Cotswolds.

The archaeological evidence for Later Prehistory in the Oxford Region was convincingly outlined by David Miles in the immediately previous Tom Hassall Lecture,³ including an examination of the changing theoretical assumptions on which archaeologists' analyses of the evidence have been based. Miles' survey is essential background to any consideration of the immediately succeeding Roman period and makes it unnecessary to repeat its

¹ G. Briggs, J. Cook, T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986).

² D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (1974).

³ D. Miles, 'Conflict and Complexity: The Later Prehistory of the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lxii (1997), 1-19.



Fig. 1. Oxfordshire Topography: the Main Divisions.

conclusions here. Miles, however, concentrated primarily on the physical evidence for settlement and society in the pre-Roman period, and it is therefore, in the context of the Roman Conquest, necessary to consider briefly the political situation the conquerors may have encountered, though it is a scholarly minefield. Most of what we think about the tribal pattern of Britain immediately before the Roman Conquest is based on analysis of coins, though the distribution of other artefacts has played a part, plus a certain amount of deduction backwards from written evidence for the location of peoples under Roman rule.

Lyn Sellwood considered the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches to the evidence in 1984,⁴ and her observations on methodologies remain broadly valid. Very little is known or can be safely inferred about how the pre-Roman peoples of Britain regarded territories or boundaries. Sellwood points out that the distribution of Dobunnian coins suggests the use of river systems as boundaries. This accords well with recent re-assessments of the behaviour of prehistoric peoples in relation to their perception of landscape, in the light of which we now have to take into account to a much greater extent than heretofore the power of existing natural and man-made features. Fig. 2 is intended to do no more than give an impression of how the tribal spheres of influence of the main peoples may have been located, and how the present borders of Oxfordshire relate to them. It is based principally on the location of the large lowland sites defined by linear earthworks that are conventionally known as *oppida* and the distribution of the main tribal coinages.⁵ The principal change in archaeological knowledge since Sellwood's article has, indeed, come from study of sites as such rather than individual classes of artefact. The very important addition of Abingdon as an *oppidum* since Millett's map has been taken into account in George Lambrick's succinct 1998 synthesis of the Upper Thames that puts the growing understanding of different classes of Late Iron Age site across the region against the artefact evidence.⁶ He is certainly right in emphasizing that there must have been considerable fluctuation in tribal boundaries over time, but the broad picture is certainly strengthened.

It has long been thought that the principal division in the part of the region lying north of the Thames region was between Dobunni to the west of the Cherwell and Catuvellauni to the east. Somewhere south of the Thames lay the Atrebatas, and to the north-west of them (rather less certainly attested) just possibly Durotriges, or, more likely, southern Dobunni or an element in some way under Dobunnian influence ('sub-Dobunni' in Lyn Sellwood's analysis).⁷ The notion that the Cherwell – or the Cherwell Valley – represents some sort of divide in eastern Oxfordshire between Dobunni and the joint realm of the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes that was ruled until shortly before the Claudian invasion by Cunobelinus remains convincing, allowing for some overlap and local fluctuations. The situation to the south is rather different. Although an *oppidum* has been identified at Silchester (in Roman times *Calleva Atrebatum*), there is no very clear coin-area associated; and the pre-Conquest

⁴ L. Sellwood, 'Tribal Boundaries viewed from the Perspective of Numismatic Evidence', in B. Cunliffe and D. Miles, *Aspects of the Iron Age in Central Southern Britain* (Univ. of Oxford: Committee for Archaeology Monograph 2, 1984), 191-204.

⁵ Winchester is shown as uncertain: whether the Iron Age earthworks within the present town were still occupied at the time of the Claudian invasion will be considered in the Winchester volume of the *Historic Towns Atlas* (M. Biddle, pers. comm.).

⁶ G. Lambrick, 'Frontier Territory along the Thames', *Brit. Archaeol.* xxxiii (Apr. 1998), 12-13.

⁷ Sellwood, *op. cit.* note 4, p. 200, and Fig. 13.11.



Fig. 2. Central Southern Britain: Conjectural Tribal Territories.

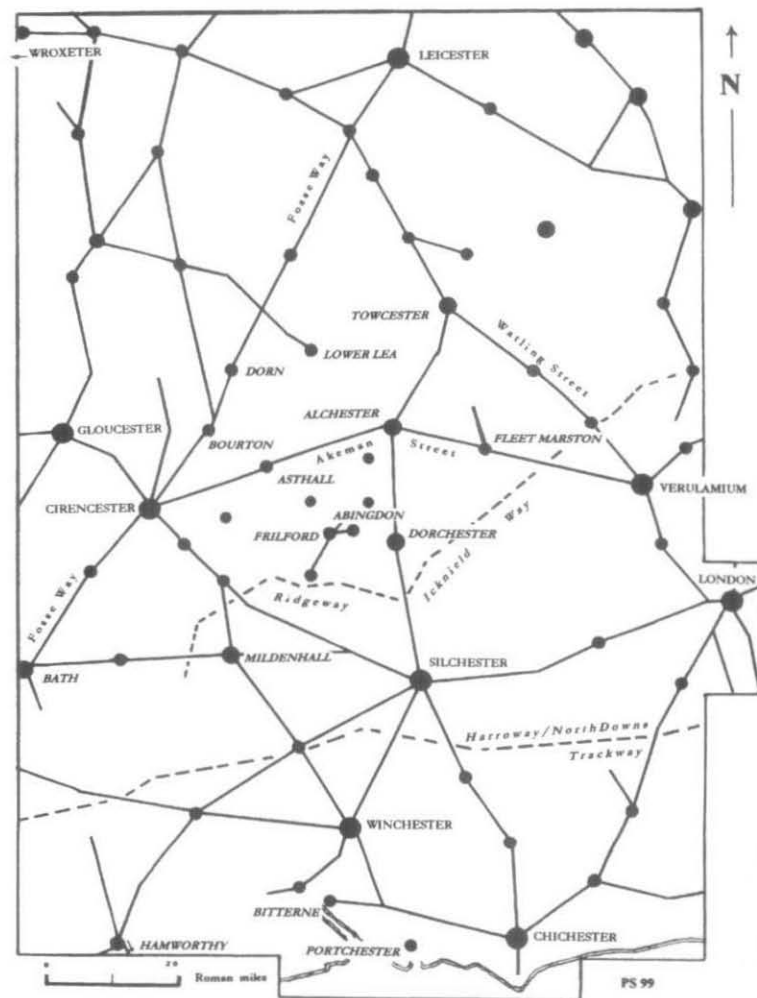


Fig. 3. The Roman Road and Settlement Network.

Atrebates look to be centred on the coast in Hampshire and West Sussex, extending north-westward towards Winchester and rather further north-eastwards to the Middle Thames.⁸ There now seem to be much larger areas of uncertainty between recognisable tribal areas, and this may have been reflected in reality with tracts of country where none of the major tribal powers exercised control. Indeed, smaller groups of population may here in some instances have effectively prevented much direct contact between their larger neighbours. Lambrick has pointed to a very interesting situation when we look at the distribution of major Iron Age sites on the stretch of the Thames between Oxford and Wallingford, where Dobunni, Atrebates and Catuvellauni may have met, if only sporadically. At the centre of this section we now have the Iron Age *oppidum* at Abingdon. If one were trying to attribute it to one of the major tribes, one might guess it to have been Dobunnian or just possibly Atrebatian, or even occupied as a Catuvellaunian bridgehead. An intriguing possibility, however, is that it was none of these, its prosperity deriving from its situation between them: perhaps – to use the jargon – as an inland ‘port of trade’, or as the centre of power of a small tribal unit controlling a limited but well-placed territory between big neighbours. Such a promising but perhaps precarious position could well account for the very substantial defences at Abingdon.

Similar factors may also have applied on the stretches of the Upper Thames immediately to the east and to the west of this central sector. The Dyke Hills at Dorchester, at the confluence with the Thame, could equally have been Catuvellaunian, a Dobunnian or Atrebatian bridgehead, or independent, and something of the same sort may have developed west of Oxford at Cassington Mill, where an earthwork known as Cassington Big Ring is situated where the Evenlode meets the Thames. Here the boundary was perhaps between groups within the Dobunni and Catuvellauni, though the rather scanty occupation evidence may reflect rather different conditions or usage.

It is particularly difficult to conjecture where boundaries may have lain in the western part of the present Vale of White Horse – the Thames, the Ock, the Ridgeway, or beyond the Vale on the Kennet. On the southern rim of the Thames Valley, the hillforts on the Downs along the Ridgeway have long been assumed to be Iron Age monuments of relatively uniform date and purpose. Debate has largely centred on what that purpose was and (in political terms) whether they represent domination of the Downland ridge by the Late Iron Age peoples of the Thames Valley or those to the south. Recent excavation and survey on a number of the hillforts, however, has not only pushed the date at which some at least were founded back into the Bronze Age but also demonstrated that different hillforts had different histories and apparently very different purposes.⁹ Segsbury, for example, was intensively settled, while Uffington has revealed little permanent occupation but indications of a very long existence as a site for ritual observance and burial – of which the White Horse’s history from the Late Bronze Age or soon thereafter to the recent past is a part – and perhaps of inter-tribal gatherings. Given the propensity of ritual sites at all periods to attract trade, it seems reasonable to suggest that Uffington in the Late Iron Age also performed the sort of border market function that has been suggested for the Dyke Hills and similar lowland sites.

⁸ The two Alton hoards totalling 256 gold staters that end with issues of Verica, accompanied by Roman jewellery, may perhaps reflect some incident around the period of the Claudian invasion itself: S. Esmonde Cleary, *Britannia*, xxviii (1997), 446; C. Cheesman, ‘Tincomarus Commi filius’, *Britannia*, xxix (1998), 309–15.

⁹ The Hillforts of the Ridgeway research project has followed on from excavation in 1995 at Uffington Castle: see G. Lock and C. Gosden, ‘Hillforts of the Ridgeway Project’, *S. Midlands Archaeol.* xxvii (1997), 64–77.

North of the Thames, the very unusual series of discontinuous linear earthworks known as the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch lies between Woodstock and Charlbury, straddling the Evenlode. The system demarcates no less than 80 square kilometres of countryside, apparently having developed from a first stage that enclosed 13 square kilometres. It has been argued from the type of Iron Age settlement within it and from its subsequent unusual concentration of Roman villas that it represents an area of high-status activity.¹⁰ As it lies west of the Cherwell it ought to lie in Dobunnic territory, but it, too, might have had some independence in a border zone and derived special prosperity through being the location of – and perhaps controlling – contacts between powerful groups.

Inter-tribal boundaries east of the Cherwell at this time are also difficult to conjecture, in particular who might have bordered the Catuvellauni to the north. It may reflect an area where the situation was fluid and particularly susceptible to exploitation. At the northernmost end of modern Oxfordshire the general absence of Iron Age coinage perhaps suggests relatively little contact with the Corieltaui (the people who were previously thought to have been called Coritani), at least of the sort that seems to have prevailed between the Dobunni and the Catuvellauni. In this period there seems to have been a fairly large gap on the ground between those two tribes and this northern neighbour. However, recent air photography and local archaeological activity has revealed that there is potentially a great deal to learn about the condition of Iron Age North Oxfordshire, with an abundance of small enclosed settlements, a situation apparently reflected in an unexpected density of subsequent Roman occupation.

Turning now to what the Romans did with what they found in our region, it is necessary to understand the general pattern of Roman approaches to creating a province out of newly-acquired territory. Roman provincial government depended critically on being able to shift the burden on to local administrations, particularly under the Early Empire when the central organs of the state were relatively small. The devices adopted almost universally were to win over the influential upper classes in the conquered territories or to replace them with locals more favourable to Rome; to encourage education and the adoption of cultural patterns that were not necessarily metropolitan Roman in detail but crucially were not inimical to the everyday life of the Empire; and to leave the local gentry to run their own communities on lines that meshed with the responsibilities of the agencies of central Roman government. The constitutions of the local authorities broadly replicated those of the city-states of the Mediterranean – including Rome itself – which had been welded together by Roman military might into an empire. In the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire the pre-Conquest communities had been centred much more on the tribe than the city, but the overall constitutional system of local authorities (*civitates*) proved remarkably adaptable, even though derived from a Mediterranean pattern. To a considerable extent this must have been due to the fact that the constitutional model was not democratic. Membership of the local councils was limited by property qualifications set at a relatively high level, and the system depended essentially on a convention of public service by the wealthiest members of the community, competing with one another to enhance personal reputation and family honour. Responsibility therefore fell on a relatively small number of identifiable people, ultimately accountable to their peers at the same social level in communities small enough for them on the one hand to be well-acquainted with one another and on the other hand to be known to the provincial governor and other senior Roman officers, appointed personally by the emperor and posted in on relatively short tours of duty. Where there were

¹⁰ T. Copeland, 'The North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch', *Oxoniensia*, lxxx (1988), 277-92; P. Salway, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Roman Britain* (1993), 379.

pre-existing tribal units that fitted Roman requirements – particularly where the native aristocracies were sympathetic to Rome – they seem often to have been absorbed smoothly into the provincial system, but the Romans did not hesitate to amalgamate, divide or invent from scratch when it seemed appropriate.

When considering boundaries in the ancient world, important cautions have to be borne in mind. Unlike the situation faced in trying to map Pre-Roman Britain there is a substantial amount of written evidence relating to the political geography, but in almost all respects it is not enough to be certain of detail.¹¹ There is, too, the complication that in the Roman world different borders applied for different purposes. Nor is it safe to assume that legal borders are represented by what look like clear lines actually created by the Romans themselves – fortified linear works like Hadrian's Wall, for example. The existence of an inscription in Germany referring to an imperial estate outside the military line emphasizes just how misleading this can be.¹² This is not to say that administrative boundaries did not exist under the Romans. On the contrary, the idea of boundaries was very important in Roman life, and legal concepts were powerfully bound up with religious ones. The well-known bronze group of a plough-team in action from Piercebridge, County Durham, has plausibly been interpreted as showing the ritual demarcation of territory – for example for a new town.¹³ Such a boundary, among other things, often marked the limits beyond which a public official's authority ceased. In the case of provincial governors, their appointments automatically terminated the moment they entered the city limits of Rome. The crossing of the Rubicon by Julius Caesar has left us with a cliché to describe an act from which there is no turning back. But the technical reason why it was decisive was that the exercise of the powers of a provincial governor, the command of a general, was limited to the area defined in his terms of appointment. Crossing the Rubicon from his legitimate province meant that his authority ceased to be valid. Since he was at the head of an army this was an automatic declaration of war on the Roman State, both a secular and a religious crime. The line followed by an actual boundary on the ground was sometimes a purely artificial one (for example the delineating plough-furrow just mentioned), and sometimes a natural feature (the Rubicon). We know that the boundaries between legal entities were precisely determined, even in distant provinces of the Roman Empire. On the edge of the mountains of north-western Spain, for example, inscribed boundary stones mark the line between the civil district of Iuliobriga and the territory of a neighbouring legion. In the absence of such markers, the fragmentary nature of the evidence in Britain means that attempts to draw maps with boundaries such as those accompanying this article can only be highly speculative, as a glance at different publications on Roman Britain will immediately reveal.¹⁴

What, then, can we reasonably conjecture that the Romans did with the tribal pattern they encountered following the invasion? We know from the literary sources that politically our region was in a state of turmoil. One of Cunobelinus' sons (Adminius) had already been exiled and was at Rome, and on Cunobelinus' death two other sons – Caratacus and Togodumnus – had taken control of his kingdom and were in expansionist mood. Verica,

¹¹ There are summaries in B. Jones and D. Mattingly, *An Atlas of Roman Britain* (1990), 16-42, 141-51; and for further discussion see A. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (1979), *passim*.

¹² The *saltus Sumelocennensis* in Germania Superior. For a major study of Roman boundaries and frontiers see H. Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (1996).

¹³ M. Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain* (1984), 29; M. Millett, *English Heritage Book of Roman Britain* (1995), 47, Fig. 31.

¹⁴ E.g. Millett, *op. cit.* note 13, Fig. 38, and *The Romanization of Britain* (1990), 67, Fig. 16, with explanatory note; Jones and Mattingly, *op. cit.* note 11, p. 154, map 5:11; S. Frere, *Britannia: a History of Roman Britain* (1987), p. xvi.

king of the Atrebates, had been expelled, and his arrival at Rome had been part of the Claudian pretext for invasion. In the campaign that followed, the defeat and death of Togodumnus and the capture of Colchester left Caratacus without a kingdom. Part of the Dobunni are recorded as surrendering early on, though it is possible that Caratacus himself regrouped his forces somewhere in their territory, perhaps at Minchinhampton. The little-explored or dated earthworks there may just possibly represent an existing *oppidum*, a second centre for the western Dobunni – who certainly occupied the *oppidum* at Bagendon, forerunner of Roman Cirencester – but were perhaps more akin to what has been suggested above for Uffington Castle. All three of the principal native groupings whose presence in or near Oxfordshire has been conjectured were thus in an unstable condition, and the slowness with which permanent arrangements emerged in the early years of the province would not be surprising even if the rest of the century had been entirely peaceful.

During and immediately following the initial conquest the principal factors will have been military. In terms of visible monuments that means roads, temporary camps, and – soon after – permanent forts in order to garrison areas conquered and secure the lines of communication. In our region the army seems to have moved on relatively quickly, but the road pattern once established provided the basic skeleton on which civil life grew. That road pattern was largely new. Fig. 4 shows that the principal elements are a north-south line and an east-west line, crossing at Alchester. The former represents most of the northern half of

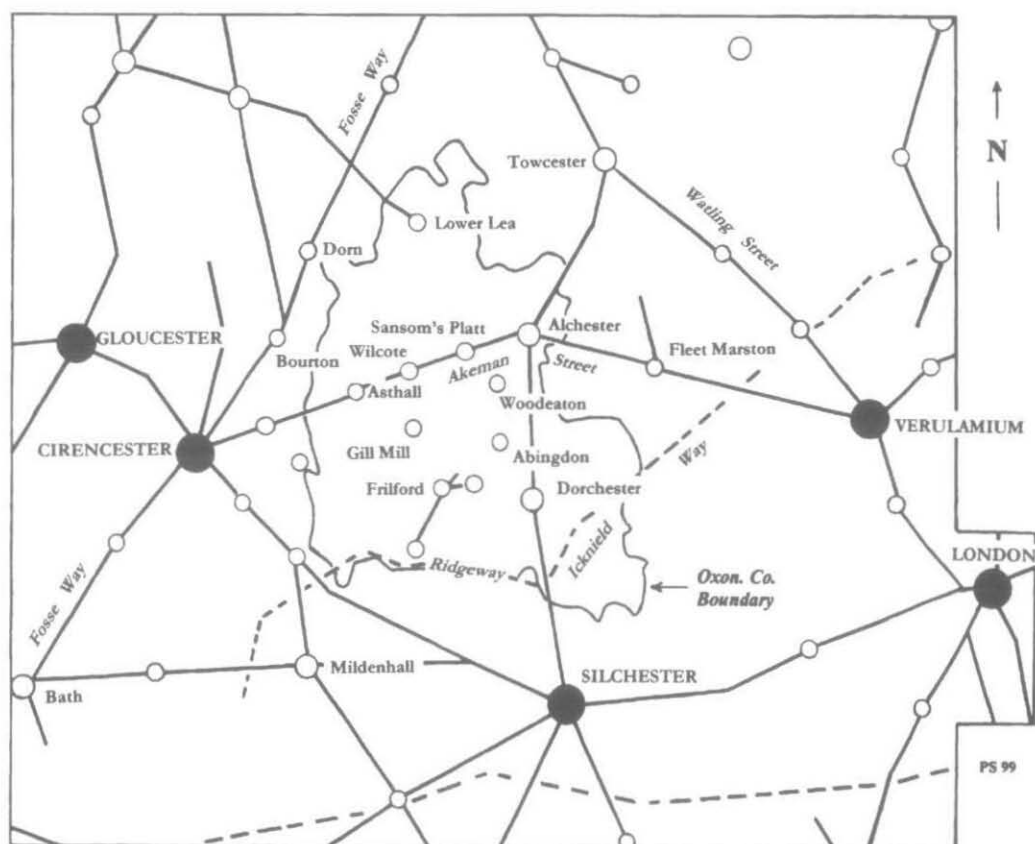


Fig. 4. Roman Oxfordshire in context (solid circles: major cities).

a route from the coast at Chichester to Towcester in Northamptonshire, where it meets what is now called Watling Street. It is a reasonable guess that this preserves the line of a thrust by one division of the invasion army, as it now seems reasonably arguable that the Chichester area and its access to the sea was used early in the Claudian Conquest as a springboard and supply-base for advance into Britain, supplementing the bridgehead at Richborough. It is more than possible that the initial invasion of AD 43 itself was in the form of two landings – at Richborough and Fishbourne/Chichester¹⁵ – but even if that was not so, the very early date for the north-south line seems to be supported by Christopher Cheetham's work in the Otmoor area, where the well-known Roman causeway across the Moor looks secondary to an earlier route around the edge.¹⁶ In places that seems to be more of a trackway than a made-up road, consistent with initial clearance by an advancing army. This interpretation of the north-south line has recently been much strengthened by the discovery by the Royal Commission and by Eberhard Sauer and the Oxford University Archaeological Society of a temporary camp south of Alchester, convincingly military and apparently relating to the putative early road-line rather than the later.¹⁷ Some of the rectilinear cropmarks south of the walled town known for some time turn out to be almost certainly ditches of a camp big enough to house a major force. Other rectangular cropmarks suggest that this was succeeded by a much smaller enclosure. The latter is of playing-card proportions, though without the rounded corners that would have made identification easy and is more likely to be a military parade-ground for a nearby fort than the fort itself, an interpretation that excavation by OUAS supported. The fact that neither of these enclosures is in alignment with the causeway sector of the Roman road from Dorchester strongly suggests that the larger one pre-dates the construction of the causeway, and strengthens the notion that it may be of very early construction.¹⁸ The same argument cannot be applied to the parade ground, as its constructors clearly took advantage of the existing earthworks of the presumably disused camp.

The second major element in the skeleton is the east-west Roman road we call Akeman Street. The dating of this road is still problematic – both at the beginning and the end of the Roman period – but some reasonable conjectures can be made. It was clearly an important thoroughfare, as it represents the central section of the northern of the two routes from London to Cirencester, Gloucester and South Wales. It almost certainly does not date from the Invasion period. At Alchester it seems secondary to the north-south road, apparently meeting it in dog-leg fashion (though further work may alter that appreciation). At the eastern end its approach to Verulamium is uncertain, but both it and the road into Verulamium from Colchester seem secondary to the main lines radiating out from London. At its western end the question of Akeman Street is only one part of the problem of interpreting the road pattern around Cirencester.¹⁹ It does, however, look on the map to be secondary to the Fosse Way, as it changes direction at its junction with the Fosse before its last stretch into Cirencester (Kingshill Lane). If the Fosse Way was constructed in the period AD 47-9 as far as Cirencester, then Akeman Street (or at least the western half, from Alchester to Cirencester) almost certainly dates not earlier than the phase of consolidation

¹⁵ Current debate has tended to polarise around Richborough or Fishbourne/Chichester, but there seems no good reason why both may not have been used by the Claudian invasion force.

¹⁶ C. Cheetham, 'Some Roman and Pre-Roman Settlements and Roads by the Confluence of the Cherwell and the Ray near Otmoor', *Oxoniensia*, lx (1995), 419-26.

¹⁷ E. Sauer, in A. Esmonde Cleary, *Britannia*, xxix (1998), 400.

¹⁸ The temporary camp seems more likely to be associated with the earlier road line.

¹⁹ T. Darvill and C. Gerrard, *Cirencester: Town and Landscape* (1994), 51-3, with references to earlier discussions.

that included the moving of the Twentieth Legion from Colchester to Gloucester, the foundation of the *colonia* at the former, and – it would now seem – the foundation of London.²⁰ A date in the 50s AD is possible. However, it might be even later. The dating of the Fosse Way itself is perhaps beginning to look a little uncertain, and re-examination of the evidence for the fort at Cirencester that suggested its foundation not earlier than 50/55 has also suggested a change of garrison in the mid-60s.²¹ The transfer of the legionary base at Gloucester from Kingsholm to the site of the subsequent *colonia* seems currently to be in the mid to late 60s, and the two could be part of a single policy. It is perhaps worth pointing to the tree-ring date of 63-4 and the associated military finds from the rebuilding of the wharf on the Regis House site in Roman London.²² This was on a massive scale – quite unlike its 50s predecessor – and contained timbers with what appears to be an official stamp. The possibility that Akeman Street was part of strategic military re-organization in the years after the defeat of Boudicca cannot be dismissed. Nero's initial inclination to abandon Britain was replaced – as is so often the case with major changes of policy – by large-scale military expenditure. Unfortunately conclusive stratigraphic evidence from the road itself still eludes us. At Wilcote excavation revealed that the entire structure of the road itself had disappeared, though there was some Claudian pottery associated with the earliest phase of pits that probably supplied road material.²³ At Asthall there was no direct evidence for the first road surface, and it is not possible to be more certain than mid 1st century AD as a commencement date for road and settlement.²⁴ Excavation in 1997 immediately east of Cirencester revealed a very deep succession of road surfaces, indicating heavy wear, long life, and a sustained recognition by those locally responsible that it needed to be kept in repair.²⁵ However, that site was on the stretch *between* the Fosse Way and Cirencester itself already mentioned, which may represent a spur from the Fosse to the city or the fort that preceded it. It may then have no direct bearing on the origin of Akeman Street at large, other than perhaps to suggest that the junction of this section of road with the Fosse Way may already have existed *before* Akeman Street was brought up from the east and have determined the latter's line.

If one takes rough measurements of distance in Roman miles from Alchester, some interesting figures emerge. It is just about 40 Roman miles to Verulamium, and 39 to Cirencester. To Silchester it is about 40, and to Mildenhall in Wiltshire (*Cunetio*) 41. There are also shorter but not all that much less regular measurements to the smaller places, such as Wilcote and Asthall, mentioned earlier. Taking all the intervals between the settlements actually on Akeman Street between Verulamium and Cirencester produces a rough average of around 8 Roman miles. Travelling times in the ancient world are extremely difficult to estimate, as the examples from classical literature were mostly noted by the authors because they were exceptional. However, the distances are perhaps not unreasonable for slow wagons on relatively good roads. The variations in travelling distance between the smaller

²⁰ B. Watson (ed.), *Roman London: Recent Archaeological Work* (JRA Supplementary Series 24, 1998), passim.

²¹ Darvill and Gerrard, op. cit. note 19, p. 53.

²² *Current Archaeology*, 158 (July 1998), 43-7.

²³ A. Hands, *The Romano-British Roadside Settlement at Wilcote, Oxfordshire*, I (BAR Brit. Ser. 232, 1993), 10-13, where Akeman Street is assumed to have been constructed c. 47. (NB. Hands, *Wilcote*, II (BAR 265, 1998) came to hand too late to take fully into account: as well as further excavation material and discussion it includes an important review chapter and bibliography by Paul Booth.)

²⁴ P. Booth, *Asthall, Oxfordshire: Excavations in a Roman 'Small Town'* (Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph 9, 1997), 7-11.

²⁵ Excavation by the Oxford Archaeological Unit as part of the Swindon-Gloucester Trunk Road DBFO project, publication forthcoming.

sites are substantially more than between the larger settlements (ranging from 4 to 12 Roman miles), and it may be that the location of the small sites related more closely to local conditions on the road than did those of the larger sites, with the latter perhaps more likely to reflect planning on textbook principles and their sites decided first. It is certainly probable that the very similar small site discovered at Birdlip on the Cirencester to Gloucester Roman road relied for its prosperity in being at exactly the right place to sell a desperately-needed drink to the carter whose vehicle had just crawled up Birdlip Hill.²⁶ Anthony Hands has pointed to the possibility that the small Akeman Street settlements originated as stopping points on a military supply line between early forts.²⁷ The occasional piece of military equipment suggests the presence of soldiers, either in transit or stationed in ones and twos to assist the putative military traffic and perhaps to serve in a gendarmerie role.

It is a possibility that no permanent forts were required in the territory of the client-king Cogidubnus, either in the earliest years of the province or after the Boudiccan revolt. A permanent fort at Dorchester – possibly the first strategic point northwards beyond his lands – would make sense. Was there one at Alchester, maybe on the boundary between Dobunni and Catuvellauni and certainly the point where the north-south route crossed the east-west line? The answer is now in the affirmative, as further air photography has revealed the long-surmised fort at Alchester, partially but not completely concealed under the later town. Its dating – when excavated – may not directly bear on the dating of Akeman Street running to the north of it, but may help in testing the theory that a permanent military presence was first established in the aftermath of the Boudiccan rebellion.

In the fully-developed province of the early 2nd century (Fig. 6), the Dobunni probably still occupied much the same territory as before the Claudian Conquest (part of the tribe had submitted to Rome at the very beginning of the Invasion). The city of Cirencester was founded in the last quarter of the 1st century – and was to become the second only to London in size – but it was a new creation that did not emerge till the army had moved on. For the Dobunni, the establishment of Cirencester must have helped to counter-balance what may have been some loss of territory when a new veteran colony was established at the very end of the 1st century at Gloucester, though the legionary base that the colony replaced probably had a *territorium* that had been carved out of tribal lands decades earlier. In the east the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes had long been split from one another, which almost certainly reflects different Conquest and post-Conquest relations with Rome. Colchester, originally Trinovantian, had been the headquarters of the principal Invasion-period enemies of Rome, and had been the scene of the Emperor Claudius' personal entry as victor, an event of huge symbolic and political importance. Final obliteration came with the establishment in AD 49 of the first legionary veteran colony in Britain. There is good reason to think that Verulamium, representing the second centre of Cunobelinus' former realm, followed a very different pattern, with benefits to the Catuvellauni being reflected in the early development there of a city on Roman lines, marked by conferment of Roman municipal status on an existing community.²⁸ This served them ill when Verulamium was destroyed by Boudicca and its people massacred. The disaster included, one assumes, its Catuvellaunian inhabitants as well as incomers, thus maintaining the long-standing differences from Colchester, where Britons living in the city joined forces with the rebels.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Hands, *op. cit.* note 23, pp. 1-5.

²⁸ See Rivet and Smith, *op. cit.* note 11, p. 499, with references, for the probability that Verulamium was a *municipium* in the technical sense. If so, it raises interesting questions about its relationship to the *civitas Catuvellaunorum* on which there is at present insufficient evidence to provide answers.



Fig. 5. Conjectural Political Geography: Early Roman.



Fig. 6. Conjectural Political Geography: 2nd-century.

However, the eventual reconstruction of Verulamium provided one of the principal urban centres of the province and a prosperous hinterland that included the eastern part of Oxfordshire.

Looking south, in Fig. 6 the territory of the Atrebatas is conjectured now to meet those of the Catuvellauni (probably on the Thames) and of the Dobunni (where the boundary is less clear). This conceals an interesting transition in the course of the 1st century. It has reasonably been argued that the old Atrebatas south-coast tribal territory had been joined immediately after the Conquest with the lands based on Silchester and Winchester to form the '*civitates*' given to Cogidubnus according to Tacitus (Fig. 5).²⁹ It was this that could justify the high-flown title of *Rex Magnus* ('Great King' or 'King of Kings') on the Chichester inscription.³⁰ Such arrangements – 'client-kingdoms' – were a common feature of Roman policy, particularly in the first half of the 1st century AD. They provided a cheap way of maintaining order and supplying administration – the local king bearing the burdens and ensuring Roman revenue in exchange for military and political guarantees. They tended, however, to break down: Boudicca is a dramatic example, but only one among many. Many had to be replaced in the end by 'normal' local government. Fig. 6 shows the putative area of the former kingdom subdivided, with its rump represented by a coastal *civitas* of 'Regni' (or 'Regini'), the Winchester-centred part by 'Belgae' (both perhaps invented names for newly-formed Roman local authorities),³¹ and the Atrebatas now centred on Silchester as *Calleva Atrebatum* rather than the coast. In the northern part of Oxfordshire it is very unlikely that there were still gaps in definitive territorial allocation between the Dobunni and Catuvellauni and their northern neighbours. It can be presumed that both now met the Corieltauvi, perhaps within North Oxfordshire. However, by the early 2nd century the authority of that *civitas* had certainly been reduced by the recent establishment of a Roman citizen colony at Lincoln, probably too by incorporation of large tracts of land into an imperial estate in the Fens, and just possibly by an upgrade to *municipium* of the city of Leicester itself.³²

An outstanding characteristic of Oxfordshire in Roman times is, therefore, as a border area between jurisdictions and communities, already emerging before the Claudian Conquest and fully stabilised in the developed province of the early 2nd century. Its Roman sites reflect this, in more ways than one. The linking of secular and religious in boundary situations has long been connected with *conciliabula*, an intriguing category of sites in the western provinces of the Roman empire.³³ It is known that in pre-Roman Gaul it was customary for the leaders of neighbouring tribes to meet from time to time; and in Roman Gaul there is an important category of sites that combine religious and secular elements – temples, theatres or amphitheatres, baths, and (most significantly) so-called forums – and are in many cases of very early date. Though these complexes often look very much like conventional Roman town centres, they have relatively little in the way of urban development around them and produce no evidence of having been the seats of ordinary civil local authorities. The religious focus suggests that assemblies at these sites were primarily religious in nature, but the close association of religion and public life in general in the ancient world makes it fairly certain that these meetings also had an important secular

²⁹ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 14.1.

³⁰ J. Bogaers, 'King Cogidubnus in Chichester: Another Reading of RIB 91', *Britannia*, x (1979), 243-54.

³¹ See Rivet and Smith, *op. cit.* note 11, pp. 446-7 (Regni/Regini), 267 (Belgae).

³² *Ibid.* 443-4, and note 28 above.

³³ A. King, *Roman Gaul and Germany* (1990), 91-2, 113.

function. One only has to look at the operation of Roman provincial councils to realise that while the prime and ostensible purpose was to affirm loyalty by the leading members of provincial communities to the State through the rituals of the imperial cult, much of a secular and political nature was also accomplished. It may also be asserted with confidence that such institutionalized gatherings attracted trade. Like medieval pilgrimage centres, these sites are likely in themselves to have generated much business in the way of providing services to visitors, not forgetting the sale of religious souvenirs. One recalls the silversmiths of Ephesus, whose huge trade in figurines of Diana was threatened by the preaching of Paul which provoked the famous demonstration in the theatre, a location that played an important part in the festivals of that goddess.³⁴ But we may also guess that where the Gallo-Roman rural sites were at boundaries, a good deal of secular marketing also went on.

In Roman Oxfordshire we have two reasonably certain examples of this type of site, and one or two others for which a case might be made. At Frilford,³⁵ a precinct contained one and probably two temples, accompanied by a small amphitheatre and several other structures, plus Roman and Saxon cemeteries, situated at a river crossing (the Ock) and a possible road junction. It has long been suggested that Frilford was a boundary meeting point between tribes. Such limited archaeology as has been done on the site, however, does not support continuity of occupation from pre-Roman to Roman: if anything, there seems to be a gap, with the principal Roman usage running from the 2nd century till surprisingly late in the 4th or 5th. The gap may support a suggestion that the Atrebates and the Dobunni were not in permanent or formalized contact till the Roman local authorities centred on Cirencester and Silchester were firmly in place (Fig. 5). This in turn could imply deliberate foundation – as seems the case with many of the *conciliabula* in Gaul – and the presence of the amphitheatre may point in the same direction.

The other long-recognised example is at Woodeaton, which probably marks a pre-existing meeting point of Dobunni and Catuvellauni.³⁶ It, too, has a Romano-Celtic temple within a walled enclosure, with the small-finds causing Collingwood and Richmond to describe the site as a 'fair-ground'. Woodeaton has produced an unusually large tally of small bronzes, generally regarded as votive offerings, though it is not clear how many of these had actually been given to the shrine, and how many were stall-holders' stock awaiting purchase by visitors before being dedicated here or taken away as pious souvenirs. The cults were not necessarily purely local, for the dedication of quite expensive figure bronzes seems to be an upper-class practice across the Roman Empire, indicating that we are not dealing with peasant traditions alone.³⁷ Miniature weapons are common from temple sites, sometimes deliberately bent, perhaps to indicate a sacrifice of something treasured to the deity. Magical charms relating to Egyptian deities (including a gold example with a coded inscription) underline the cosmopolitan spread of the influences at work among those who frequented this Oxfordshire shrine.

³⁴ G. Rogers, *The Sacred Identity of Ephesus* (1991), 12, points to an alternative (or additional) element in the reaction to Paul being the potential threat to the traditional toleration of the Jewish community in that city.

³⁵ R. Hingley, *S. Midlands Archaeol.* xii (1982), 16; 'Location, Function and Status: a Romano-British Religious Complex', at the Noah's Ark Inn, Frilford (Oxfordshire)', *Oxford Jnl. of Archaeol.* iv (1985), 201-14. See also J. Bagnall Smith, 'Interim Report on the Votive Material from Romano-Celtic Temple Sites in Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, lx (1995), 198-200, 202-3.

³⁶ Bagnall Smith, *op. cit.* note 35, pp. 178-203, *passim*. Further material from Woodeaton has been published in J. Bagnall Smith, 'More Votive Finds from Woodeaton, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, lxxiii (1998), 147-85.

³⁷ See Henig, *op. cit.* note 13, pp. 145-52 for votive practices.

Earlier it was suggested that an association between religion and trade might have characterized Uffington Castle in the Iron Age. Excavation has demonstrated slighting of the perimeter defences in the Roman period, but if the existing purpose was primarily ritual – perhaps bound up with social and political structures among the British tribes – then the Roman action may have been largely symbolic. Certainly the finds from the site indicate continued use during the Roman period, but, as in the Iron Age, nothing yet to suggest extensive occupation.³⁸ The likelihood that Uffington continued to have a comparable religious and economic function is strong. It is not unreasonable to speculate that a shrine of Roman date may eventually be found, as for example at Maiden Castle, though there is the possibility that the focus was entirely on periodic ritual at the White Horse itself, perhaps with the processions that are a very common feature of ancient religious observance starting elsewhere, without any permanent structures at or near the hillfort.

Returning now to the broad divide of the county between the uplands and the river terraces. On the former there are the Cotswold villas, ranging from the compact Ditchley to the mansion at North Leigh (almost exactly the same size as Chedworth and a similar product of development and enlargement over a long period). It is not always appreciated just how many villa sites are known. It raises the possibly unanswerable question of the relationships of villas one to another. Were some small villas dependent upon larger ones? Were they the dwellings of tenants within villa estates, or the houses of managers running direct-labour enterprises? Can it be demonstrated archaeologically that there was a move in the late Roman period towards larger estates? We cannot even begin on those questions till we know a lot more about the dating of individual villas, particularly which were contemporary with one another. There is, for example, the intriguing group within the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch which may indicate an Iron Age unit of countryside surviving to become a Roman estate.³⁹

The larger question of what lay *between* the upland villas remains for the present intriguing but wholly unanswerable in the absence of modern landscape survey. It has been suggested in general for Oxfordshire that early isolated farmsteads tended to develop into villas, with a land-use pattern derived from patches of field agriculture around farmsteads or small settlements, and grazing on open unenclosed land between. This has been derived to a considerable extent from David Miles' work at Barton Court Farm.⁴⁰ Here one can see the modest villa growing out of an early farmstead, and a putative division of land between neighbouring establishments. This site is, however, not upland and not Cotswold, and is adjacent to a long-established urban settlement at Abingdon. We do not yet know whether the pattern can be replicated in the upland parts of the county.

On the gravels, the large number of apparently humble farming settlements provides an apparently sharp contrast with the Cotswold villas. At present the best known is that at Farmoor, where a great deal of environmental evidence was recovered.⁴¹ This indicated, for example, on the one hand large-scale management of hay meadows, and on the other the existence of cottage gardens. Both indicate a settled way of life, but their co-existence is consistent with small farmers or labourers operating within a broader framework, perhaps an estate, perhaps in a village-based system not unlike the annual distribution of meadow

³⁸ S. Palmer, in S. Esmonde Cleary, *Britannia*, xxiii (1987), 287; Lock and Gosden, *op. cit.* note 9, pp. 64–70.

³⁹ See note 10.

⁴⁰ D. Miles (ed.), *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxon.* (CBA Research Report 50, 1986).

⁴¹ G. Lambrick and M. Robinson, *Iron Age and Roman Riverside Settlements at Farmoor, Oxfordshire* (CBA Research Report 32, 1979).

that survived locally till the very recent past, or a combination of the two. Roman landholding practice was very well acquainted with short-leases and periodic re-letting, and administrative models would have been readily available to support such practices.

At Gravelly Guy, Stanton Harcourt, excavation has revealed a well-ordered settlement of Roman date.⁴² Such settlements seem to contain perhaps half-a-dozen households – hamlets rather than villages – and sometimes lie not more than a kilometre or kilometre and a half apart. A possible hint of changing practice in Late Roman Oxfordshire is given by the discovery at Farmoor of one of the very large scythes that seem to have been introduced under the Late Empire,⁴³ along with other innovations thought to have been in response to an increasing shortage of agricultural labour in the Roman world and the development of larger estates. It is a conjecture – but a likely one – that those who lived in and worked the farms on the gravels were dependent on those who occupied and perhaps in most cases owned the villas on the higher ground. Such dependence could have occurred whether the villa-dwellers simply provided a market for the small farmers, or were in fact their landlords (if they were free) or their owners (if slave). The location of the Oxfordshire villas is indeed likely to have been influenced powerfully by the life-style of the Roman upper classes. Nearness to good hunting country – forest and open space rather than intensive agriculture and small fields – may well have attracted the well-off (particularly in the Late Roman period). On a mosaic at Piazza Armerina in Sicily well-dressed 4th-century huntsmen carry a trussed boar through a landscape remarkable for the garden pavilions and colonnades that indicate an aesthetic as well as practical or sporting interest in the countryside.⁴⁴ Though this is in fact a scene of animal collecting for the arena, many other mosaics testify to the love of hunting as a sport in itself. We should not dismiss simple preference among our Oxfordshire Roman landowners for the Cotswold landscape as against the river gravels. Archaeologists tend to become obsessed with explanations of human behaviour based on economics and social politics or on ritual, forgetting that aesthetics and sentiment played a very important part in Roman culture and are extensively represented in Latin literature. Pliny the Younger, for example (in 2nd-century metropolitan Italy), or Sidonius Apollinaris (in 5th-century Gaul), enthuse over the views from the dining-rooms of their villas.⁴⁵ These were great villa-owners, in the shaping of whose ways of thinking the literary culture of the Greco-Roman world played a central part, and who were themselves contributing to and reinforcing it in their published writings.

The density of villas in the Cotswolds must certainly have much to do with the eventual existence of Akeman Street as the highway between two of the principal towns of Roman Britain. In the western part of the county the villas are clearly part of the remarkable spread that fans out from Cirencester. It is probable that this effect began soon after the city was established in the later 1st century AD, and expanded rapidly in the 2nd. The villas' very high level of prosperity in the 4th century is likely to reflect at least in part the probable location of a provincial capital at Cirencester as part of the governmental reorganisation of the period. For the early period it is not difficult to follow Martin Millett's view that the villas were mostly the country houses of the Romanized native élites that ran the *civitates* centred in cities such as Cirencester.⁴⁶ This is unlikely to hold good for the 4th century. By then, the town councillor class (*curiales*) had become impoverished by being used as the milch cow of

⁴² Oxford Archaeological Unit publication forthcoming.

⁴³ S. Rees, in Lambrick and Robinson, *op. cit.* note 41, pp. 61-5.

⁴⁴ R. Wilson, *Piazza Armerina* (1983), Fig. 12 (Great Hunt mosaic, at top, left of centre).

⁴⁵ Pliny, *Letters*, 5.6.19 (Tuscany); Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letters*, 2.2.11 (Auvergne).

⁴⁶ Millett, *Romanization of Britain*, 118 (2nd century), 196 (4th century).

imperial taxation, and rather than striving for local office now had to be forced to retain it. The prosperous were those who managed to escape liability, especially by acquired status through service in one of the arms of the rapidly expanding imperial – not local – government or by taking holy orders in the Church.

In the light of this, accurate dating of the phases of more of the villas might make possible a new line of research. The cities of Verulamium and Cirencester have quite different histories. Verulamium starts very early – as we noted earlier – with a Conquest-period pro-Roman élite, but has as yet no known Late Roman central government activity. Cirencester starts quite a lot later but does seem to have a very important 4th-century function. The villas within reach of Verulamium ought therefore to start early, but not be particularly rich in the late period. Those around Cirencester should start later, but have their grandest development in the 4th century. But there is no chance of testing this model without close comparative dating of the two groups of villas.

As well as the villas on the northern uplands there is also another, less well-known concentration of Roman high-ground occupation which also possesses a character different from the valley-floor farming settlements. This lies along the Corallian ridge that runs parallel to and between the Downs and the Thames, with its NE end at Wytham Hill (Fig. 1). Environmental evidence from excavations indicates that this ridge – unlike the deforested valleys – was principally woodland, which could provide timber, game, and pasturage for pigs, plus oak and hazel fuel for pottery production and stone and grit for use in industry and construction. The significance of the location of the Frilford temple complex at a possible boundary between the Dobunni and the Atrebates and not far from Catuvellaunian territory has already been mentioned. Its location by water and at the entrance to woodland may also be significant, in view of the high importance of grove and water cults in Celtic religion. But the existence of a landscape of wood and water should not lead us to assume that this was some sort of impenetrable primeval forest. Survey and excavation at Bowling-Green Farm in the parish of Stanford-in-the-Vale revealed a whole occupied landscape that probably represents a Roman estate.⁴⁷ On the top of the ridge was a village street, bordered with rectangular houses, running for more than 400 metres. Down in the valley-bottom there is evidence for a large villa, and the static picture of a compact estate is rounded off with Roman fields and isolated Roman buildings. But it is also clear that it developed over time, since a rectangular enclosure was discovered under the Roman village whose ditch was packed with painted wall-plaster, strongly suggesting that an earlier villa was demolished when the big house was built on a new site. The sequence would certainly fit with that general pattern in our region by which medium-sized villas seem to have been swallowed up by the owners of large or very large villas in the Late Roman period, reflecting the trend in the later Empire for the middling people to be squeezed and the rich to become richer. The presence of over 1,000 coins from topsoil at Bowling-Green Farm which were not obviously from a hoard suggests a flourishing money economy, with free rather than slave labour, even if in the 4th century the agricultural workers were legally obliged not to leave the land.

A survey of evidence for villas in Britain by Eleanor Scott listed 66 certain or possible Roman villa sites in Oxfordshire.⁴⁸ There are difficulties in using her gazetteer, as she includes *all* rural sites with signs of substantial Roman structures that have not been proved to be some other sort of Roman occupation. One has to be equally uncomfortable with Anthony Hands' assertion that the North Oxfordshire Cotswolds – other than the roadside

⁴⁷ S. Frere, *Britannia*, xxi (1990), 334 (with references).

⁴⁸ E. Scott, *A Gazetteer of Roman Villas in Britain* (Leicester Archaeol. Monographs 1, 1993).

villages – were ‘entirely and solely’ occupied by villas.⁴⁹ Apart from anything else, one cannot possibly rule out religious sites. Nevertheless, with few urban settlements and very little purely military occupation, it is likely that a good proportion will have been villas or associated buildings. Allowing for the fact that not all will have been occupied at the same time, nevertheless, with the Corallian Ridge villas added to those of the Cotswolds, the importance of landed wealth in Roman Oxfordshire is clear.

In this context we need also to look at another category of site and potential source of wealth that mirrors the pattern of lowland farm and upland villa. It is the Oxfordshire pottery industry. Ever since the pioneering work by Christopher Young in the 1960s at the Churchill Hospital site, it has been clear that there was a major centre of Roman pottery production in East Oxford. These potters were in production in the 2nd century, and their 4th-century successors were among the major producers for the Romano-British market at large. The development is very much in line with the change visible in many Roman provinces, by which – as local industries developed – provincial products were able to compete more and more successfully with imports which suffered from much higher transport costs. It is now clear that there was an industrial zone stretching in an arc around the east and south sides of the present city of Oxford, from Foxcombe on Boar’s Hill to the Alchester-to-Dorchester Roman road.⁵⁰ The potters were clearly exploiting the proximity of the Oxford Clay and other minerals to the woodland that could provide the prodigious quantity of fuel that they must have required. Large-scale industry in the ancient world tended to be rural, or in some cases suburban, not urban. We may also guess that Oxfordshire’s road and water links were of prime importance in allowing the industry to reach beyond a local market, just as the development of canals stimulated the eighteenth-century Staffordshire potteries, when the cost of transport dropped dramatically.

Despite realizing the density of this industry, it has been difficult to visualize what it looked like on the ground till very recently. There is the negative evidence: that there seem to be no villas between the Alchester-Dorchester road and the Thames (indeed, nothing of that sort till one gets as far north as Islip). Certainly the location of a pre-Saxon Oxford has been a baffling problem for a very long time. There is a scatter of Roman material plotted in North Oxford, but little else in the present city, other than the East Oxford kilns. The 1995 and 1996 *Tempus Reparatum* and Oxford Unit excavations in Blackbird Leys, however, emphasized the large scale and long life of the Oxford Roman pottery industry, implying the presence of a fairly large workforce over a long period. Where that workforce lived, however, has yet to be identified for certain: the Blackbird Leys excavations produced domestic assemblages of the Middle and Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, but not Roman.⁵¹ For the moment one has to assume that the Roman workers lived on the job, pending discovery of habitation sites clearly distinguishable from industrial. It is easy to imagine workmen dossing-down alongside the kilns, but how, one wonders, were they fed? Were factory-owners or peasants transporting food from the farms on the river gravels? And where were the potters’ families living – or, for that matter, where might we find the habitations of the charcoal-burners and other direct suppliers of essential materials to the industry? The infrastructure remains extremely obscure. Evidence of how the pottery production sites themselves were laid out has come in a rather dramatic way from

⁴⁹ Hands, *op. cit.* note 23, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Pottery industry: C. Young, *The Roman Pottery Industry of the Oxford Region* (BAR British Series 43, 1977); recent work: see notes 51 and 52 below.

⁵¹ *S. Midlands Archaeol.* xxvi (1996), 58; P. Booth and I. Scott, in A. Esmonde Cleary, *Britannia*, xxviii (1997), 429.

investigation ahead of a pipeline at Nuneham Courtenay.⁵² This is an admirable example of a site where remote sensing and excavation complemented one another perfectly. The excavation hit spectacular dumps of wasters, kiln debris, and boundary ditches. The magnetometer plot showed for the first time a pattern of rectangular enclosures into which this activity fitted. This is the beginning of a new understanding of the industry. Detailed study of the excavation evidence is already suggesting changes in operational practices within the industry's working life, and it may be that subsequent investigation on this or other sites will tell us whether the enclosures represent separate potters, or different processes or products within a single pottery.

Oxfordshire, though not focused on a single Roman city, does have a number of the smaller urban or semi-urban sites that are an important feature of Roman Britain and form a continuum with the villages. We have already noted religious sites of the Frilford and Woodeaton type: there may well be more to be recognized, including Gill Mill, in the parish of Ducklington, and Fringford Lodge. But even among the settlements without any arguably religious origin or focus there is no single type. Abingdon – as a Roman urban settlement growing out of an Iron Age *oppidum* and on the same site – is a new phenomenon for our region.⁵³ Another is the Oxford Unit's site at Claydon Pike, on the gravels just over the Gloucestershire border to the west.⁵⁴ Its nature is much easier to understand now that we have the report on the British Museum's excavation of Stonea, in the Cambridgeshire Fenlands.⁵⁵ Claydon Pike does not have Stonea's extraordinary stone tower but it does have other very similar features, including a substantial scatter of evidence for a small military presence: as suggested above for the Akeman Street sites, one imagines a centurion and one or two men carrying out administrative duties of the sort that soldiers were often detached from their units to carry out.

Another semi-urban category can be introduced with Wantage, which has recently been recognized as Roman, and whose nature is the subject of current discussion.⁵⁶ It may well fall within the category of large village spread out along a Roman road. We have unfortunately no convenient word in English to describe this category of site: 'roadside settlement' has overtones of something rather insubstantial and low-grade, which by no means all of these necessarily were. The German phrase *Strassendorf* perhaps expresses it better. But even within that category there are differences. At Wantage, Neil Holbrook suggests that burials lying back from the presumed line of the road and on a line parallel with it may indicate individual family burial plots at the back of strip-shaped properties with narrow street frontages. Plots of this shape are very common in Roman towns and villages. But at Asthall on Akeman Street the Oxford Unit's excavation showed a different layout.⁵⁷ Here there seemed to be zones of differing activity stretched along the main road. The main occupation was at the presumed centre of the village, then industry, then a cemetery. The

⁵² P. Booth, A. Boyle, G. Keevill, 'A Romano-British Kiln Site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, and Other Sites on the Didcot to Oxford and Wootton to Abingdon Water Mains, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, lvi (1993), 87-217; G. Keevill, *S. Midlands Archaeol.* xxvi (1996), 57-8; G. Keevill and M. Cole, *S. Midlands Archaeol.* xxvii (1997), 59.

⁵³ T. Allen, 'Abingdon: West Central Redevelopment Area', *S. Midlands Archaeol.* xxvii (1997), 47-54.

⁵⁴ D. Miles, 'Romano-British Settlement in the Gloucestershire Thames Valley', in A. Savile (ed.), *Archaeology in Gloucestershire* (1984), 197-203; Salway, *op. cit.* note 10, p. 366.

⁵⁵ R. Jackson and T. Potter, *Excavations at Stonea, Cambridgeshire, 1980-8* (1996).

⁵⁶ N. Holbrook and A. Thomas, 'The Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon Settlement at Wantage, Oxfordshire: Excavations at Mill Street, 1993-4', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 109-79.

⁵⁷ Booth, *op. cit.* note 24.

grouping of burials together suggests a more organized community than Wantage, and the location of the cemetery in classic Roman fashion at the edge of a settlement and alongside a road perhaps indicates more pretensions to urbanism.

Another sort of site is that which has defensive walls enclosing all or part of the settlement. Situated just over the county border into the Gloucestershire Cotswolds is Dorn, a small ten-acre walled enclosure on the Fosse Way north of Moreton-in-Marsh.⁵⁸ This may or may not be urban – in the broadly civilian sense. Dorchester is well-known: it has the striking sequence of hillfort (Wittenham Clumps); low-lying defended *oppidum* (Dyke Hills); possible early fort; town (with an imperial official of perhaps 3rd-century date recorded); and important Late- and Sub-Roman associations.⁵⁹ In the case of Dorchester each of the earlier phases of settlement seems to have been on a separate but adjacent location, demonstrating the feature of settlement drift which was shown on humbler sites such as Gravelly Guy, and is spectacularly apparent at Yarnton from Neolithic to medieval. The final example of a walled town in Oxfordshire must, of course, be Alchester. It had substantial walls; possessed a street grid; important suburbs to the north (the Oxford Unit's A421 excavation); and as noted above saw at least two periods of previous military activity. Some sort of continuing official presence after the transition from fort to town is hinted at by a fragment of official-looking inscription from the A421 excavation, perhaps parallel to the *beneficiarius consularis* at Dorchester.⁶⁰ Certainly there seems to have been some substantial realignment of street-pattern – requiring public authority, but perhaps local – at the east gate of the town in the middle years of the Roman period.

In conclusion, what of the Late Roman period? It is easy to imagine Alchester as a base for the hugely proliferating Roman bureaucracy, particularly the tax and police officers to whom some of the unusual buildings visible on the air photographs could relate.⁶¹ Britain had been divided into two provinces at the beginning of the 3rd century (Fig. 7). The border between them almost certainly followed the boundaries between existing local administrative units. The Romans did not conceive of a province as a unitary area circumscribed by a line on a map, but as a *list* of local jurisdictions, bundled together and given to an imperial governor as his sphere of authority. It is therefore highly likely that those given the task of defining the new provinces assembled two lists, allocating existing *civitates* to one or the other but not altering their boundaries. Almost a century later, following Diocletian's reforms, Britain went from two provinces – whose administrations had been largely (but not completely) independent of one another – to four. These were grouped together as a civil 'diocese' under a new superior administration based in London, itself part of a larger grouping responsible to a praetorian prefect normally resident at Trier in Germany (Fig. 8).⁶² The same process of subdividing the lists probably went on as on the previous occasion. It is possible that the line between *Maxima Caesariensis* (with its capital assumed also to be at London) and *Britannia Prima* (whose capital seems likely to have been Cirencester) ran in the neighbourhood of Alchester, with the boundary between *Maxima Caesariensis* and *Britannia Secunda* not far to the north. It is highly likely that by the end of the 3rd century

⁵⁸ B. Burnham and J. Wachter, *The 'Small Towns' of Roman Britain* (1990), 253-5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 117-22.

⁶⁰ Alchester inscription: M. Hassall and R. Tomlin, *Britannia*, xxiii (1992), 312; Dorchester inscription: RIB 235.

⁶¹ Burnham and Wachter, *op. cit.* note 58, pp. 100-1, Fig. 26.

⁶² The diocese consisting of the provinces of Britain (originally four, later five) was headed by a *vicarius* (governor-general), responsible to the *praefectus praetorio Galliae*, whose prefecture included three other dioceses and comprised most of Western Europe (outside Italy) that lay within the Empire and both sides of the Straits of Gibraltar (for map, see Salway, *op. cit.* note 10, p. 292).



Fig. 7. Conjectural Political Geography: 3rd-century.



Fig. 8. Conjectural Political Geography: Late Roman.

the boundary between the civil *civitates* of the Dobunni and Catuvellauni had been undisturbed for 250 years or more. Retaining existing boundaries is even more likely at this period, since a principal duty of the new administrators was the supervision of the tax systems in much greater detail than before. In those systems the pivotal element remained the responsibility of local councillors for collecting and accounting for the sums for which the provincials were assessed, but in a much more closely regulated fashion. The ability to identify specific individuals must therefore have been even more crucial than before, and the advantage of retaining existing local authorities obvious. Alchester, half-way between London and Cirencester, at a crossroads with an important north-south route, and possibly close to the meeting point of three of the four provinces, might have been an ideal point at which to base the field officers of the new civil service.

Considerations that were different in detail will have influenced the military hierarchy, but human and physical geography may have led to similar solutions here, despite the fact that 4th-century military districts were divorced from civil, a radical change in the organization of the empire. The change – which may have been introduced gradually – was particularly acute in Britain, where both old provinces had contained legions, supported by large numbers of auxiliary units. Provincial governors, having now to cope with vastly more administration, no longer commanded substantial bodies of fighting troops, even in frontier regions. New senior military posts were occupied by career soldiers. The heavily fortified bases of the period that occur on some highways in the Continental provinces are notable for the contrast between massive walls and comparatively few detected interior features – not unlike Saxon Shore forts in Britain. It may be suspected that a principal function of the Continental sites was to provide protected temporary accommodation for mobile units of the field army, corresponding to the marching camps of the Early Empire, with the secondary purpose of acting as secure collection points for supplies – including taxation in kind – that the civil administration was expected to provide for the army. It is tempting to speculate that Alchester, with its key position in the communications network, may have taken on some such role under the Late Empire. We do not have to assume that Late Roman Alchester lost its civil purposes if it took on a military one, as the incorporation of fortified towns into the military network was much more common under the Late Empire than the Early.

What, then, can we say in closing to summarize the character of Roman Oxfordshire? First, that the topographical division of Roman occupation closely matches the geological zones of the county; second, that it is at the crossing-point of major lines of communication; and third, that throughout the Roman period it carries on being a region in which boundaries meet: political, economic, and probably cultural. The conjectures in this article may perhaps act as tentative models or hypotheses that future research aimed at greater depth and precision in understanding Roman Oxfordshire can refine, test, adapt, or demolish.

NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

The figures have been drawn specifically to illustrate this Tom Hassall Lecture, to portray the area represented by Oxfordshire since 1974 in its changing ancient settings, and in particular to present visually some of the conjectures on ancient boundaries referred to in the text. The aim has been overall impression, and individual detail should not be relied upon. In addition, much has been omitted in the interest of clarity, especially outside the Oxfordshire county boundary. It is therefore likely to be misleading if the illustrations are taken out of context. (NB. The identification of the Roman names of provinces is as generally accepted, except that the province centred on Lincoln has here been labelled *Britannia Secunda*, following Martin Henig's suggestion that 4th-century *Flavia Caesariensis* must have been centred on York.)