The Danebury Environs Roman Programme – A Wessex landscape during the Roman Era

Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe

Prof Cunliffe has been excavating in the environs of Danebury, the Iron Age Hill site, for 20 seasons, with 18 seasons of interpretation. His purpose was to study the continuity of landscape use from the Bronze Age to the end of the Roman period and to establish how subsequent occupiers had made use of and adapted earlier features. The area had been chosen because of the discovery of extensive clusters of Roman Villas around Andover. The 19th century had been a great period of villa discovery and some limited excavation and this programme had been established to learn more about the development of these villas and their context in the landscape.

Prior to this a typical example of a Romano British villa could be found at Stroud, near Petersfield, Hampshire. It followed a courtyard plan. The main house comprised a Great Aisled Hall, which had been subsequently modified by division into smaller rooms, the building of a bath suite, barns and possibly a temple. Nothing else is known about its relationship to the local landscape or economy.

The Danebury programme was set up to study in detail villa sites at Thruxton, Dunkirt Barn, Grately, Fullerton and Houghton Down, in a rough triangle between Andover and Stockbridge. The landscape of this area was old – it had been formed and settled since 4000 BC and there was intensive land use by the time the Romans arrived. It comprised rolling downland with dry valleys with barrows dating from 1700 – 2000 BC and fields and Bronze Age settlements, with roadways in between, which were laid out c 1500 BC. Subsequent Iron Age settlements fitted into the field system, using existing boundaries. For exaple Flint Farm showed evidence of Bronze Age houses being enlarged in 500 BC, before being abandoned in 400 BC. Rowbury Farm, established c 600 – 500 BC, was in continuous use and showed evidence of Roman paddocks. Once the pattern of settlement had been established, future generations continued with it. The Roman villas grew slowly within an already ancient landscape.

DUNKIRT BARN

Prof. Cunliffe showed 3 surveys of this site – each showing different details. Magnetometry scans did not show the Roman villa but resistivity showed some of it. Ground penetrating radar (GPR) gave the greatest amount of detail showing even the enclosure fence posts. The surveys enabled the team to ask specific research questions to establish the relationship between the earlier and later buildings, without having to excavate the whole site.

GPR had indicated that the footings of the main house were of different depths, which indicated that it could have been a 3-storey building, with possibly a loggia on the first floor. Such evidence leads to a re-evaluation of the construction of later villas – possibly the main rooms were located on the first floor. The aisled hall was a substantial construction, with fine rooms at one end. This would have been a massive structure in the centre of the villa estate, comparable to a mediaeval hall, which integrated social activities on the estate e.g. marriages, feast days.

The development of this Roman villa site started with an early aisled hall, with later additions of small, private rooms for the owner's family. As wealth accumulated, the family would construct a separate, small villa for their private use. In the early 4th century the villa was rebuilt on a much grander scale and the aisled hall extended.

GRATELEY SOUTH

The pattern of excavation was established from an aerial photograph.
It comprised a villa house and an uncluttered aisled hall, which showed evidence of massive timbers and pre-made trusses dropped into pits – an example of complex timber management practises. The most interesting buildings on the site were ancillary buildings, which proved to be for crop processing, containing crop drying ovens, complete with flues. Subsequent analysis showed that of the two crop drying ovens found, one was used for drying wheat and barley at a high heat, while the other was used for warming wheat and barley which had started to germinate and was therefore for use in preparing grain for malting for making beer. This enabled, for the first time, a drawing of a grain drying chamber to be produced, which in due course could lead to a model being made. The role of the building in the economy of the villa site had been established.

FULLERTON VILLA

This site, adjacent to the river Anton, a tributary of the Test, provided a completely different challenge. It lies at the bottom of a slope. The establishment of adjacent fields had destroyed an Iron Age settlement, but the site was discovered when the building of a railway uncovered a Roman channel crossing the site. This led to speculation that it might be a watermill. Excavation revealed a modest early 3rd century house with painted wall plaster. The excavations of the mill site were much more interesting and revealed the use of some impressive engineering techniques. At some point the mill had been doubled in size and there was capacity for two millstones to be in operation at the same time. At this time, a larger house had been built, with mosaics in every room and a bath suite. Significantly, the villa had been re-sited to optimise the views over the river, a purely aesthetic move. It had obviously been a wealthy establishment; - a fine 4th century mosaic had

been lifted in 1890 and transferred to a local manor house. About 7 years ago, it was sold to the Andover Museum.

THRUXTON

This villa was found in the early 19th century and contained a very rare mosaic. This became the exhibit in the first purpose-built Roman museum, when a local farmer erected a roof over it and charged for viewing. It was eventually moved to the British Museum in a much dilapidated state, but the original drawing of it at the time of discovery remains.

It was a puzzle that such a fine mosaic was found in such a modest building, but subsequent finds established that in the 4th century it had been placed in a room of an old aisled hall, overlooking a much earlier grave, which had obviously been revered for generations. The grave, very few traces of which remained due to plough damage, contained a brooch dated to the 1st century, which could indicate it belonged to the founder of the site, and that the mosaic had been placed in a shrine to the early ancestor.

Finally, Prof Cunliffe showed a North African mosaic of a Roman villa with towers and a loggia, illustrating that this type of construction was not confined to Roman Britain.

Fishbourne Roman Palace itself illustrated a dramatic change to the evolution of Roman building from the vernacular architecture of the 1st and 2nd centuries, but Prof Cunliffe remained convinced that the construction could be considered to be based on 3 great halls: the east end of the North Wing, the entrance hall in the East Wing, and the Audience Chamber of the West Wing.