
A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales
Southwest Wales – Roman
22/12/2003

INTRODUCTION

The study of Roman Britain is often perceived as a staid topic structured around the certainties of invasion, military uniformity, technical superiority, urban development, material enrichment and, finally, retreat. Dismissed as dull and predictable it has been likened to 'a nice sand pit in which toddlers can safely be left to play' (Reece 1982). Recently more challenging concepts have emerged many generated by the work of theoretical archaeologists. Unfortunately these stimulating ideas have yet to be communicated to a wider audience, an omission that may have serious consequences when it comes to access to limited resources. (James and Millet 2001).

Romano-British South West Wales has until now been expressed in terms of the physical remains synonymous with Roman occupation. Whilst this approach has undoubtedly much to contribute we should also be analysing what might be achieved were we to revisit these traditional narratives. Fresh initiatives would encourage a reassessment of long-held beliefs and challenge traditional interpretations. These could build upon the expertise of professionals and amateurs alike to present a revitalised picture of Romano-British South- West Wales with the potential to enhance our understanding of the wider Roman Empire.

This paper concentrates on three themes, invasion and occupation, Romanisation and regionalisation, and concludes by summarising the issues raised by means of a SWOT analysis. It is based on the comments of the working group (Jeff Davies, Barry Burnham, Helen Burnham, Heather James, Gavin Evans) and incorporates some of the issues raised in *Britons and Romans: advancing an archaeological agenda* (James and Millet 2001). It was first presented at the South-West Wales archaeological research seminar held in Carmarthen on 5th October 2002 and has been updated to take account of recent discoveries.

INVASION AND OCCUPATION

Forts

The invasion of South West Wales can be established with confidence. The forts are all Flavian though there are hints of an earlier occupation at Llandovery (Jarrett 1962, 1963, 1970) and two superimposed forts have been recently discovered at Llandeilo (Hughes 2003). Physical remains as interpreted through excavation, geophysical survey and aerial photography are consistent with expected patterns. Any variation is not considered to be of sufficient importance to alter accepted interpretations. Evidence of rebuilding in stone, changes in layout and reduction in size has been identified in several forts. Questions remain as to the rapidity and the reasons for these modifications, the significance of which may also have relevance in an external context. Some forts exhibit a bewildering rate of change.

The extension of the Roman road beyond Carmarthen increases the potential for new sites in West Wales and encourages speculation that this may have been

directed towards a coastal destination. So far only one marching camp (Arosfa Garreg) has been identified though as Heather James implies we should not ignore the nearby examples at Y Pigwn. These lie within the political boundaries of South-East Wales but directly relate to the invasion of this part of the country (James 1982).

It has been suggested that the military was proportionally more important to Britain than any other province (James 2001). Outmoded concepts as to the role and function of the army should be abandoned and the influence of the short-lived military occupation of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion debated. It may be worth establishing in detail the nature of the assemblages from our forts with a view to reading the 'military signature'. Institutional identity is manifested in the layout of the forts but 'soldierly' identity emerges from the material culture (James 2001)

Vici

The confidence in our understanding of the invasion does not appear to extend to the role of the vici. The accepted interpretation is that they were populated by camp followers; functioned as islands of 'Romanisation'; had limited communication with the indigenous population and were abandoned at the same time as the forts.

Given that many of the forts were occupied for a relatively short time this picture is plausible but easily challenged. Questions might include the nature of the interface between the inhabitants of forts and vici; the existence of two communities or two parts of one community; the potential to read the nature of this relationship from material remains and artefact assemblages and the nature of the interaction with local inhabitants. It is difficult to imagine that new technology introduced by the Romans was ignored entirely no matter how quiet and peaceable the Demetae may have been. These are universal questions but it is possible that the inter-relationships differed to those found in the rest of the province. Similar patterns may be found in other border areas.

Evidence of continuity after the departure of the Romans is scarce. Is it possible to relate the founding of Moridinum to the original vicus or can we read any significance into the Early Christian foundations at Llandewi Brefi or Llandeilo? The documented early estate at Caio (Pumsaint) could have its foundation within the Roman landscape (Jones, 1994).

Roads

Recent AP work has greatly enhanced our understanding of the road layout but the complete network remains to be discovered. In particular the direction and purpose of the road west of Carmarthen deserves attention. Can this be linked to harbours such as Milford Haven or to coastal defence? The forts at Loughor and Neath remain apparently isolated from the forts to the north. Civil engineering has much to offer to the interpretation of known and potential routes. The presence of these heavily imposing structures with their bridges and embankments must have had an influence in at least some parts of Dyfed.

It would appear that the Romans swept across South-West Wales with speed and efficiency. But can the reasons for this be read in the archaeological record? This apparent ease of occupation needs to be examined within the context of large areas without any visible evidence of military intervention such as north of the Preselis. It would also be of interest to review this network in terms of the threat of Irish invasion.

ROMANISATION (landuse, enclosure, settlement housing and storage)

Urban Romanisation

Heather James's recent work has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of the founding and occupation of Moridunum (James, 2003). Several issues remain unresolved largely because the site lies beneath modern Carmarthen. On the basis that often the simplest questions throw light on fundamental concepts we might question why this urban centre developed when there was no need for one before? The role of the military in its foundation requires further consideration, as does the potential association with the nearby hill-fort, Merlin's Hill. Did Moridunum emerge smoothly or was it a disruptive 'foreign' introduction?

Carmarthen can contribute to the principal themes for Roman urban research as identified by the CBA working party. Some of these are not relevant but we might include; chronology; comparison with other provinces; regional and cultural diversity; production, distribution and consumption of goods; economic dimensions; settlement networks; size and identity; shape and density of urban stock; settlement morphology and artifact analysis (Burnham et al 2001) Of particular interest is the apparent lack of evidence of the public space we would expect in a Roman Town.

Carmarthen must have been a focus for the introduction of improved technology and changes in agricultural practice such as cash crops. On the basis of these developments the town operated as a trading centre. Can we read these changes in the archaeological record and if so do we understand their significance? Inter-site as well as intra-site comparisons may reveal what has been missed in the past.

Millet recommends finds, architectural evidence and cemeteries as the keys to understanding Romanisation in an urban context (Millet 2001) We should be able to explore the first two but have scant evidence as to the last though the recent discoveries at Johnston may have some bearing on this issue (not yet published – see research audit).

Rural Romanisation

Analysing the nature and extent of Romanisation in a rural context is problematic. Possession of Roman goods makes the local population visible but we have so far failed to appreciate the extent to which Roman values were absorbed. Changes and trends are difficult to identify when there is little or no apparent material culture. For example Pen y Coed was occupied in the Roman period and its occupants must have been aware of Moridunum yet this is not reflected in the physical evidence (Murphy 1985). Many of the small-defended enclosures, which characterise this area, have produced isolated finds but to what degree do these reflect Romanisation? As a minimum we should be able to assess the extent to which Roman material penetrated native sites.

It is usually assumed that late Iron Age South-West Wales consisted of small-scale societies with limited access to surplus resources. They were, therefore. Less likely to invest in durable expressions of their culture and we are left with little evidence of identifiable Roman influence. A re-analysis of this conclusion may challenge the widely held belief that the indigenous population was largely untouched by the Romans. In this respect we might benefit from a comparison with other areas such as the Wroxeter hinterland or even with such extensively Romanised areas such as South-East England It is possible that in order to fully

explain the influence of the Romans on rural society we need to examine how material culture was manipulated and understood in the Late Iron Age.

This absence of information about material culture also affects our understanding of the role of the native elite. It is possible that the Romans managed this part of Wales through the most powerful people. Prestige sites like Castell Henllys where an assemblage of Roman pottery (2nd and 4th century in date) has been recovered (Heather James *pers com*) could tell us much about the interaction between Roman and native. If the elite absorbed Roman ideas how did this manifest itself in terms of the introduction concepts and material culture? Did it lead to improved technology and changes in agricultural practice such as the introduction of new crops, revised land tenure and alterations in land use? We know that oats were introduced to Anglesey but have no similar data for this part of Wales. We assume that the Roman introduced a market economy if only to facilitate the payment of taxes. However, the production of surpluses is not reflected in large-scale mills, corn dryers or barns though the road network may have had a part to play.

Can we describe how Rome influenced the organisation of space within the domestic framework? As noted by Ken Murphy in his paper in this collection neither the chronology nor the function of the numerous small, rectilinear enclosures thought to date to either the Iron Age or the Romano British period are understood. Certainly many were inhabited during the Roman occupation. They were also abandoned during this period but as yet we lack the information to explain what triggered this shift. It may be linked to changes in tenure or agricultural practice. We do not even know if the inhabitants moved away entirely or continued to occupy the same holding in a different form. So far we have only hints of what must have been a significant alteration in the status and function of these sites. Wider settlement patterns have yet to be explored.

The role of the villa in this part of Wales is poorly understood particularly as so few examples have been discovered. If this reflects the nature if not the full extent of this type of settlement the implications for the Romanisation of the rural economy requires further consideration. Of those that have been recorded Trelissy and Cwmbwrwyn are in poor condition and there is no chronology for Llys Brychan (Thomas and Walker, 1959; Ward 1907; Jarret, 1961).

We do not have sufficient data to study the dynamics of change in the rural environment throughout this period. When Jeremy Taylor wrote about the 'extraordinary quantity and diversity of information we have available' he clearly had not been studying South-West Wales (Taylor 2001). As it stands the limited information available implies minimal Roman influence. Until we can establish whether this is genuine or due to a failure to interpret and question the record correctly the extent of rural Romanisation must remain a huge gap in our understanding.

Technology and Trade (use and exploitation of natural resources)

Technological innovations and changes in scales of production must have been one of the most visible manifestations of Roman occupation. Extractive industries and manufacturing and their connections with the surrounding landscape require further reappraisal.

Evidence of iron working at Carmarthen implies nearby iron ore extraction. Gold mining at Dolaucothi is well-documented and subject to ongoing investigation. Lead and silver extraction is debateable. Roman mining has been suggested for

several sites throughout the area (for instance Rhandirmyn (Timberlake 1994) but none of these have the ancillary buildings and infrastructure usually associated with such enterprises. Excavation of the North Ceredigion forts may tell a different story.

Surviving walls indicate quarrying close to the forts and Moridinum. The source of this stone has yet to be identified though querns were mined from country rock. Phyllite from the Preselis was discovered at Cwmbryn (Ward 1907) and exported to other parts of Wales. Decorative stone was apparently not quarried. We have so far failed to identify a source of clay for tiles and brick at any fort or near to Carmarthen.

The Romans mastered water based technology but beyond the leats and tanks at Dolaucothi there is scant evidence of this expertise in South-West Wales. Well-based technology may have been introduced at this time.

More could be learned from pottery and metalwork finds. A reanalysis might elucidate technological introductions.

The scale and focus of trade is poorly understood. Carmarthen functioned as a point of export and import but did it have a role as a distributional node? Did imported goods come directly from other parts of the empire, including Britain, or were they shipped on from Caerleon? The total number of finds along the coast is thought to be small but further investigation, perhaps in antiquarian sources, might show this to be an underestimate. If what we have is a true distribution does this reflect a lack of coastal trade or a society impervious to the significance of material goods? A more likely explanation is that it was too under-resourced to afford such items.

REGIONALISATION

It is widely accepted that the interpretation of the Roman sphere of influence as a society dominated by military might and subject to blanket uniformity is outdated. Concepts of regionalisation and variability in social conditions have yet to be explored in Wales. The apparent ease with which the Demetae were conquered (in contrast to the Silures) suggests that from the beginning South-West Wales could be distinguished as a region. Forts were abandoned within 50 to 60 years implying that Roman control remained unchallenged even if it did operate at a distance. Traditional displays of Roman power were not required in this part of the province.

In searching for evidence of regionalisation should we conclude that this was a distinct region before the Romans arrived? Based on the apparent lack of interaction with local populations can we further suggest that it remained as such throughout the period of occupation? Alternatively there may evidence of a new dynamic that is neither Roman nor native that has so far escaped the attention of researchers. The emergence of Moridunum may be relevant to this question. A re-analysis of the Romano-British material culture may be of benefit, as might comparison to other similar regions in other provinces.

OUTPUTS

Strengths

- The military history and construction of the forts can be described with confidence. Llandovery (Albamum), Llanio (Bremia), Carmarthen (Moridunum) and Pumsaint have all been partially excavated.

- Our understanding of the significance of both the fort and the town of Moridunum has been enlarged and enhanced by the work of Heather James and others.
- Without the survey and excavations carried out by Barry Burnham and Barry Jones the gold mines at Dolaucothi would have remained an enigma and the fort at Pumsaint would not have been located.
- The forts at Llandeilo and Pumsaint, and the gold mines at Dolaucothi are owned by The National Trust.
- Aerial photography has transformed our understanding of the military infrastructure and the contemporary native occupation.
- The recent geophysical survey of the Llandeilo forts is exceptional in its detail and clarity.
- Information of Iron Age hillforts in South-West Wales rivals that from any area in Britain

Weaknesses

- There is a lack of understanding as to the nature and extent of Roman influence within the rural context. It is not clear whether this is because of insufficient data or a failure to explore the potential of what is available.
- The role of the native elite as advocates of Romanisation is unclear. Social organisation within the local population has yet to be clarified.
- The degree to which Roman material culture penetrated this remote part of the province has not been established. The poverty of the region may not have been taken into account.
- The chronology of occupation remains unresolved.
- Traditional narratives predominate. The benefits of asking new and challenging questions have not been appreciated.
- Outside Carmarthen excavation has largely focused on evidence of military occupation. With the exception of the recent work near Wolfs Castle civilian and native sites have not been investigated. Establishing the chronology, function and significance of the numerous small rectilinear enclosures is essential to our understanding of this period. Vici represent the interface between the military and the civilian population and possibly with local inhabitants beyond. They have the potential to resolve issues of Romanisation and regionalisation.
- Moridunum lies beneath medieval and modern Carmarthen. Access to the Roman town is restricted to small windows made available by urban development
- Find sites are inadequately recorded
- Comparative studies within the province or with other similar parts of the empire have not been undertaken.
- Despite recent new discoveries the road network remains incomplete.
- Acid soils preclude the survival of human and animal bones.

Opportunities

- Geophysical survey and aerial photography have the potential to address many of the issues raised in the above discussion. The clarity of the results achieved at Llandeilo demonstrates the benefits of geophysical survey. A well-funded, systematic program of aerial investigation particularly in a dry summer would be rewarding.
- Our understanding of Iron Age hill-forts and defended enclosures should serve as the basis for research into the settlement patterns of this period. Social and economic models may also apply even if only to the early phases of Roman occupation

- The chronology and function of the distinctive, small, rectilinear enclosures should be resolved by means of a co-ordinated program of aerial photography, geophysical survey, *sondage* and full excavation.
- The discovery of two superimposed forts at Llandeilo has the potential to enhance our understanding of the phasing of the conquest
- New hypotheses could be used to reassess the evidence of Roman material culture. This must come follow on from a review of the location of all finds and a revised catalogue.
- Opportunities for environmental sampling should not be squandered.
- This research audit is an opportunity to challenge accepted concepts and to move away from traditional narratives.
- The Roman invasion of Wales is a story easily explained to the non-specialist. Visible remains are attractive and easily understood. This period in our history has the potential to stimulate an interest in the historic environment.

Threats

- Excavation is generally restricted to small trial pits. There have been no large-scale investigations with full post-excavation analysis in the recent past.
- Aerial photography and geophysical survey are not adequately funded.
- The value of our collections is poorly understood. A failure to integrate and co-ordinate threatens our ability to address significant issues.
- Planning controls are inadequate. Many potential opportunities have been squandered particularly in Carmarthen.
- A failure to identify sources of funding beyond development projects is restricting work on all aspects of this period.
- As a result of the recent coastal survey we understand the archaeology of the 'hard coast'. Unfortunately the all-important estuaries were omitted and it is here that the Romans must have based the greater part of their coastal communication and trade.
- As in the rest of Great Britain Roman archaeology is perceived as a 'quiet backwater'

Paper prepared by Emma Plunkett Dillon