



The Impact of Rome on the British Countryside

A conference organized by the
Royal Archaeological Institute,
Chester, 11–13 October 2013

Edited by David J. Breeze

THE ROYAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: Aerial photograph showing a section of a
'ladder' settlement' in the Vale of Pickering

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PREFACE

DAVID HINTON

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

The Royal Archaeological Institute has recently instituted an annual conference at which topics are addressed that demonstrate the best of recent research to an audience of members and others who may not themselves be leaders in the field but who have an informed interest in the archaeology of Britain, Ireland and beyond. In 2013 we were the guests of the University of Chester, where the facilities were excellent and the staff very helpful. The Institute is particularly grateful to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Timothy Wheeler, who welcomed us at the opening lecture and provided a reception — and who took the trouble to revisit us the following day, when he was able to see how the University's efforts were contributing to an enjoyable as well as a thought-provoking occasion. The Institute was honoured by the presence at the reception and opening lecture of the Lord Mayor of Chester, Councillor Jill Houlbrook. We are also grateful to Professor Howard Williams of the History and Archaeology Department, who is the Institute's Honorary Editor, and who played a large part in the arrangements for the conference.

Conference papers are sometimes published subsequently as monographs, and the Institute considered a publication of that sort. Some contributors already had work in press or were committed to publication in other outlets, however, while others were at an earlier stage of research and were not yet ready to write a definitive report. The Institute felt nevertheless that a permanent record of a stimulating conference would still be useful, and therefore invited the speakers to expand the abstracts that they produced for the programme. We are grateful to them for agreeing to this. Publication in this format is a new venture, and one that we hope will be well received, not least because of its punctuality. Bibliographies direct attention to further information. It has been edited by our immediate past President, Professor David Breeze, who also initiated the conference, invited the speakers, and contributed to the event. The Institute is much in his debt.

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INTRODUCTION

DAVID J. BREEZE

Several research projects in recent years across the whole of Roman Britain have focused on the impact of Rome on the British countryside. The purpose of the conference was to bring together a series of lectures on many of these projects, to understand the results and to tease out not only comparisons but also lessons learnt. As Britain was part of the Roman Empire, it seemed useful to look beyond the English Channel to work in the Netherlands and also in Romania, and these two lectures 'book-ended' the conference.

The lecturers and the audience seemed to agree that the conference had been successful in its aims. A challenge, however, was rightly given by Sue Stallibrass during the final discussion, who pointed out that the papers had been concerned with the impact on the

landscape rather than the countryside because lecturers had omitted discussion of changes in farming practice during the Roman period. In this she was supported by Sian Rees who stated that the introduction of a heavier plough in the third or fourth century would have had an impact on the nature and extent of arable farming (Rees 1979). Evidence for this might be visible at some sites in Essex (Murphy et al. 2000) and elsewhere. It might also be argued that we ignored the evidence provided by crops and the implications in particular of new or improved strains for the landscape. In the military zone, analysis of sedges and other plant remains from Vindolanda indicates the scale and variety of habitats used to provide grazing, fodder and grain feed for the soldiers' horses (Huntley 2013). Clearly these are aspects requiring further discussion (I am grateful to Sue Stallibrass for the last two references).

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RE-ASSESSING THE TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL SOCIETY IN THE ROMAN RHINELAND

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In the years 2006–13 we have worked in Amsterdam on a project entitled 'Roman villa landscapes in the north: economy, culture, life-styles', funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and aimed at the study of the transformation of rural societies in the northern provinces of the Roman Empire, with an emphasis on the Germanic provinces and the adjacent hinterland of Belgic Gaul. The project has resulted in the PhD theses of Diederick Habermehl (2012), Karen Jeneson (2012), Laura Crowley (in press), and a synthesizing volume edited by Roymans and Derks (2011). Our aim was threefold: a) to develop a synthesis of the origin and development of Roman villa landscapes in the northern provinces; b) to formulate a cohesive body of theoretical concepts and ideas about the social, economic and cultural role of villas within the broader context of the Roman empire; and c) to contribute to comparative research into Roman rural landscapes.