

An Archaeological Resource Assessment Roman Leicestershire and Rutland

Peter Liddle, Leicestershire Museums

Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

Iron Age Background

As we saw at the last seminar the old assumption that Leicestershire and Rutland was predominantly unpopulated and wooded has been comprehensively blown away by a combination of aerial archaeology, fieldwalking and excavation. It is clear that the advancing Roman army in the 40's AD would have found a settled agricultural landscape with frequent farmsteads and some larger settlements that may have been royal centres, proto-towns or, indeed, both. Some hillforts were also still occupied. At least a generation before the Conquest material from the Roman world was already in use at Leicester but has yet to be identified elsewhere including that this may have been reserved for elite use.

Roman military phase and Roman roads

Evidence of early military establishments has been found at Great Casterton (Todd 1968), Leicester (Clay and Mellor 1985), Wigston Parva (Blank 1971), Mancetter (Scott 1981) [actually just in Warwickshire] and (perhaps) Ibstock. All are on/near Roman roads and were succeeded by Roman towns. The road network is probably a product of the military phase, but as more of the town sites produce evidence of large pre-Roman precursors the date of the routes joining them is also called into question.

Three of Roman Britain's great highways : Watling Street, Fosse Way and Ermine Street pass through the counties and now that Gartree Road can be shown to continue its path beyond Leicester in the direction of Chester (a discovery of the 1990's) this too can, perhaps, be added to the super-highway category, though not mapped in surviving documents from the period. Other known roads include that linking Leicester and Mancetter; a partially known road from Leicester to Tripontium; the Salt Way along the Ironstone escarpment linking Ermine Street and Fosse Way and then continuing into Charnwood; King Street Lane linking Thistleton and Goadby Marwood (and probably continuing to Margidunum); Sawgate Lane along the south side of the Wreake/Eye Valley linking the Fosse to Thistleton. Other routes are postulated and more will ultimately be proved, following up clues from field names and from excavation (eg Wanlip). Leicester was clearly at the hub of the road network reflecting its high status. It was the civitas capital of the Corieltavi, indicated by its name (Ratae Corieltavorum) and the characteristic suite of public buildings (principally the forum/basilica complex, but also the public baths, macellum and temple(s). A considerable amount of excavation work was undertaken during large scale development in the 1960's and 1970's concentrating on (but by no means exclusively examining) the public buildings. The baths were published by Kenyon (1948), the forum by Hebditch and Mellor (1973), and the macellum is largely written up by remains unpublished (Cooper, forthcoming). Other sites in the west of the town were published by Clay and Mellor (1985) and Clay and Pollard (1994). Two reasonably large areas of the eastern part of the town have been looked at in more recent re-development. The

Causeway lane site has been recently published (Connor and Buckley 1999). Work on the town defences has also been pulled together (Buckley and Lucas 1987). A major revelation has been the extent of extra-mural suburbs, not yet fully defined. West of the Soar these produced pottery kilns and evidence of tanning (Lucas 1977 and forthcoming) while south of the town hitherto undefined length of Roman road (presumably ultimately heading for Watling Street) was traced lined with simple strip buildings thought to be workshops (Finn 1994 and forthcoming). Cemeteries have also been examined close to (and in the West succeeding) these extra-mural areas. The Newarke Street excavations have produced the first large group of burials scientifically excavated (Cooper 1996). The Causeway Lane report has begun to tackle a range of research themes for the Roman City building on the other recent reports. These include town planning and land use (arguing that the *insulae* were laid out in the late 1st century defined by ditches but actual streets were not constructed until c.120); evolving social conditions; trade and industry; and the fate of the city in the 4th century.

Small Towns

Ratae was not the only urban centre. No less than 11 'small towns' have now been identified with some confidence and two more as possible contenders. This may be close to the full number as the former apparent gaps in the network have now been filled - although the discovery of the 'new' site at Barrow/Quorn halfway between Leicester and Red Hill (in Notts) may mean that even more will appear. It is perhaps significant that the information on the two new sites has come from the metal detector community. This class of sites have been (fairly) recently described (Liddle 1995) and details will not be repeated here. The town sites are:

MANCETTER (where a stone building complex has been recently evaluated close to Watling Street and fieldwork has shown a large area of ribbon development on the Leicestershire side).

TRIPONTIUM (where Jack Lucas is still digging)

?MARKET HARBOROUGH (where material continues to be recovered from gardens)

MEDBOURNE

?SKEFFINGTON (a large area of metal-detected fields)

GREAT CASTERTON

THISTLETON

KIRBY BELLARS (a large area of metal objects and pottery along a Roman road)

GOADBY MARWOOD

VERNEMETUM

BARROW/QUORN - small excavations in 1950's produced huge density of finds. Recent detecting suggests a large area of finds followed up by "garden walking" exercise

RAVENSTONE/IBSTOCK.COALVILLE - still growing area of finds

The sites have certain things in common:

- good road links (often at cross roads)
- mostly near river crossing
- many coin finds
- no more than one larger stone building
- mostly timber or stone strip buildings

- often in an apparently significant relationship with a villa
- often evidence of large late Iron Age settlement
- often evidence of industry and/or religious complex

All the characteristics of these sites strongly suggests that these are, indeed, small town sites and not, as has been suggested by some, agricultural villages dependent on the nearby villas. There does seem to be a real relationship but what it is we do not know. Certainly the villas also seem to have pre-Roman origins at the few sites where we have evidence (eg Thistleton and Medbourne). The case of Lockington where a villa is next to a large Iron Age settlement may be an example of a villa/town relationship where the town failed to survive into the Roman period, perhaps because of a new river crossing.

Industry

The two most visible industries archaeologically are pottery/tile production and metal-working. Both have urban and rural manifestations. There is large-scale pottery production at Mancetter and production of unknown scale at Ravenstone, Market Overton (/Thistleton?), Great Casterton and Leicester. A widespread rural industry has been revealed - mostly by fieldwalking - in west Leicestershire. Many of the sites lie around the margins of the medieval extent of Leicester Forest (Liddle 1982) while more recent work is beginning to reveal a similar pattern around at least the southern margin of Charnwood. Kilns are also known at Stonton Wyville and Greetham, and ?Burley in Rutland which may be the first indication of a wider pattern. Similarly, large scale iron working was undertaken at Goadby Marwood and Thistleton with other production at Medbourne and Great Casterton. Rural working has been found at several sites at Ridlington on the edge of Leighfield Forest (and, again, more work in this border Leicestershire/Rutland area may show this to be a large industry), Clipsham, Whitwell (Todd 1981), Eaton etc (and the difficulty of dating iron slag may have caused us to underestimate Roman working)

Trade

Pottery gives an indication of “trade zones” across the East Midlands. In Leicestershire and Rutland Derbyshire Ware can be used to demonstrate a North West Leicestershire zone. Grey ware styles found eg. At Whitwell and Empingham in early Roman period at least suggest Wardley Hill formed a barrier to the carriage of breakable, if not perishable, “low value/coarse” pottery; detailed study of, eg. mortaria may help clarify this and extend it into the late period: relationship of Mancetter to Lower Nene Valley mortaria is an indicator. Distribution of characteristic early Roman/”romanised” styles such as rusticated ware also has potential for posing questions such as the extent of early Leicester’s market hinterland and/or social adoption of “Roman”/alien styles. Distribution of different amphora types, both within Leicester and inter-settlement, also requires analysis and interpretation - extent of usage of commodities carried or practice of decanting from stocks held in Leicester may be indicated by dearth of types other than olive oil amphora (and Gaulish wine amphorae?) away from city.

Rural settlement

Naturally, the largest Roman industry was agriculture. Most settlements in the countryside are likely to have been - in part at least - farms but as most are known from fieldwalking we have only relatively crude data. We can distinguish between sites that produce evidence of stone and tile buildings and those that do not, and where

the buildings were presumably timber and thatch (or cob?). The former are generally termed villas and the latter farmsteads - but this is crude.

We have partial plans of the 'villa' class (out of 41 on the SMR) and none are complete (fig x). In recent years PPG 16 sites have started giving us plans of 'farmsteads' as well (fig x) (xx out of c 320 on the SMR). In some areas we have large areas where extensive fieldwork has been undertaken. The south east Leicestershire surveys have found more than four "farmsteads" to each "villa". Smaller 'windows' have been opened in other parts of the counties but large areas have yet to produce any "villas" but much further work is needed. Detailed fieldwalking can reveal ?manering scatters that can give an idea of the size of arable areas as well as changes in land use (eg a large area of the Medbourne survey area farmed in the Iron Age and Early Roman periods is depopulated in the 3rd century). Environmental sampling can give us some idea of what was being grown and the vegetation in the surrounding landscape. Evidence of this nature is accumulating and has great potential (Monckton 1995).

Transitions

As ever in archaeology there is much interest in the beginning and ends of periods. Most Roman rural sites seem to have Iron Age precursors. Settlements are not generally abandoned in the mid 1st century but in the 2nd and 3rd centuries - probably giving us clues as to the process of romanisation - as this also seems to be when "villas" appear. The adoption of a real money economy is, however, problematic although 3rd and 4th century small change is regularly found on all kinds of sites. Fieldwork is also showing that a large proportion of sites occupied in the 4th century also produce Anglo-Saxon material - although structures are not always found in excavation. This strongly suggests that there is more continuity in the 5th century than used to be credited.