

## Introduction

This work comprises an analysis and reinterpretation of the distribution and material culture of rural settlements in Wales and the Marches during the Roman period. Its geographical focus is the region of modern Wales and areas of England historically associated with the Marches, including parts of the historic counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, and Cheshire. Incorporating areas which span the modern border between England and Wales is intended to break down the conceptual boundaries which have often marginalised Wales within the wider field of Romano-British studies. The chronological focus of this work is the Late Iron Age and the Roman period.

Though there is a long tradition of work on the Roman period in this region it has often been biased towards military archaeology and associated narratives. Large-scale syntheses such as *Roman Frontiers in Wales and the Marches* (Burnham and Davies 2011), while providing a valuable overview of evidence within this region, have to some extent perpetuated this bias. Where consideration has been given to the rural settlements of this region and their material culture it has often been as backdrop to military activity or concerned specifically with their interaction with the Roman occupation (Davies 2004).

While the broad pattern of rural settlement in this region has received limited attention, the increasing availability of data and recent discoveries which challenge the traditional views of rural settlements in this region - such as the villa sites of Abermagwr (Davies and Driver 2011) or Rossett (BBC 2021) - demonstrate that Wales and the Marches are fertile ground for re-examination.

An opportunity for a re-examination of the rural settlements is also provided by the availability of the Rural Settlement of Roman Britain Project dataset (Allen *et al.* 2015). This project sits within a growing body of 'Big Data' projects which compile large datasets over a broad geographical and chronological span. The RSRB compiled settlement and material information from excavated rural settlements in England and Wales, bringing together traditional publication and grey literature to form a publicly available database. This book presents the results of one of the first doctoral projects to make use of this data, and as such contributes to understanding the ongoing utility and value of such datasets for secondary research.

### 1.1. Aims

The aim of this project was to explore three major study areas and associated research questions, as outlined below:

- Regionality

How are settlements distributed throughout the study region and does this change throughout the Roman period? What factors are involved in the distribution of these settlements? To what extent can chronological change be observed?

- Economy

What is the economic basis of rural settlements in the study region? How can production, distribution, and consumption be explored through material culture?

- Personal Identities and Socio-Cultural Practice

How are personal identities expressed through material culture during this period, and does this change? Can interaction between the rural and military/urban be identified?

These questions were explored using the data made available by the Rural Settlement of Roman Britain Project. The distribution of settlement and material culture was mapped using Geographic Information Systems. Supplementary data was compiled using a ceramic methodology devised for this study to allow for the collection and analysis of the pottery data from a wide range of sites. This methodology sought to counter issues of standardisation to provide a fresh perspective on the regional ceramic pattern.

### 1.2. Study Structure

Chapters Two and Three provide an overview of current knowledge and literature regarding the archaeology of the Iron Age and Roman periods in this region. Both chapters outline the theoretical debates which have structured the wider discipline of archaeology in recent decades and explore how these debates have informed and impacted work which has been conducted in Wales and the Marches.

Chapter Four outlines the parameters of the study region in detail. The use of modern political boundaries within archaeology, while practical from the standpoint of data collection, imposes divisions on the data which did not exist in the ancient world and so the study area of this work comprises areas of both England and Wales. The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain project is introduced and discussed in greater detail, with an exploration of the

strengths and weaknesses of this and other 'Big Data' projects.

This chapter also introduces the ceramic methodology developed for inter-site analysis of ceramic assemblages across the whole study region. The lack of standardisation across pottery reporting means that it is difficult for researchers using secondary data to perform such analyses, and for the purposes of this study a methodology has been used which enables the collection of data from a wide range of reports.

Chapter Five provides a high-level overview of distribution patterns of settlements and material culture. It provides the definitions for and a broad introduction to the site types and finds which form the basis of further analysis in the rest of the study.

In Chapter Six, the evidence for regionality is explored in greater detail and the reasons for regional differences are considered. Patterns of changing land use are identified through a chronological analysis of site distribution. Site morphology is also explored through the distribution of roundhouses and rectilinear structures.

Chapter Seven considers the economic processes at work and presents the evidence for production, distribution, and consumption within the regional economy. The distribution of finds and structures associated with both agricultural and non-agricultural production are explored to understand the economic basis of rural settlements. The ceramic assemblage is analysed to explore how goods moved through economic networks and to what extent rural sites were engaged in those networks. Finally, patterns of coin use are analysed to explore the extent to which the rural settlements of Wales and the Marches were integrated into a transactional, monetary economy.

In Chapter Eight, the construction and presentation of identities and the social practices of rural sites are discussed. The distribution of finds associated with the care and presentation of the body are considered to explore changing attitudes towards the expression of identity. Distributions of ceramics are used to explore food and dining practice throughout the period.

Chapter Nine brings the themes of this work together in a final discussion to consider the full breadth of evidence which has been presented. It presents a reconsideration of the place of Wales and the Marches in the broader field of Romano-British archaeology. It also provides a critical review of the datasets used within this study and presents suggestions for future work.