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Beyond the Hinterland: Understanding Rural Settlement Pattern in the Late Pre-Roman Iron-Age to Roman Transition Period in South Shropshire

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Thesis

The aim of my thesis represents an attempt to realize the extent of the effect Roman culture and economy had on rural Cornovian society from the perspective of the development of the new relationships determined by the Roman administration, infrastructure, urban centres, and socio-economic relationships (civil and military), in order to identify and explain the processes that facilitated cultural and socio-economic changes in Cornovian society and so Romanization. The development of urban centres introduced a new element into the landscape of the late Iron-Age providing new foci for the rural agrarian economy through which Roman culture and urban civilization, in effect defining the Roman, could have been transmitted, informing native culture. The introduction of the Roman economy can be expected to have had a fundamental effect on the pattern of settlement in an established socio-economic agrarian system.

The basic premise of the thesis is that Roman administration and the development of the region as a part of the developing province had little, if any, effect on the native Cornovian society in the very marginal and relatively isolated area of the south Shropshire Hills, and that the rural native population lived in a state of indifferent separation rather than a conscious communal rejection of Roman culture. On this above assumption we must consider a separation of the elite from the general rural community and that it is this latter
population, who must be assumed to be the majority, who are the subject of this research. Therefore, implicit is Cornovii as an identifiable regional grouping and specifically the population of the south Shropshire Hills.

To address the thesis questions need to be asked of the evidence. The evidence exists in the form of settlement pattern, which must be related to the requirements of agriculture within the landscape and the prevailing environment. The requirements of agriculture itself exert a deterministic effect on the nature of the agriculture, i.e. arable and pasturage in varying proportions. The elements of the terrain such as altitude, aspect, slope, hydrology and soils determined the location of settlement. Settlement evidence in the south Shropshire Hills demonstrates a diversity rather than conformity. The commonality is that enclosure prevails and that the landscape seems to have been densely populated and exploited. Exploitation of the landscape was primarily agricultural in that wealth and status was vested in land and settlement. The predominance of the hill fort suggests this in that the Cornovii are poorly represented in material culture. A significant aspect is that they were aceramic, despite the late Iron Age pottery industries of the Clee Hills and Malverns, their only concession being course salt vessels of the northern salt producing area on the Midland Plain. Another significant aspect is that the elite did not issue coins of their own and the extent and way in which they used coins of other tribal groups remains uncertain.

The Cornovian response to the Roman conquest and the establishment of Roman administration must be understood in the context that the Cornovii were a dynamic society driven by the internal processes that cause change in response to external stimuli. Therefore, the thesis addresses the rate, extent and the nature of change in late Cornovian society, which defines the Cornovii as a recognizable cultural identity.

**Methodology**

The problem with any primary research is the quantity and quality of data available, both existing and recovered from fieldwork, and must be recognized
as a limiting factor to the research. However, the selected evidence must be representative of the area of research if bias is to be avoided. The area of research in South Shropshire is defined by the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which has remained primarily rural although not natural in that human activity can be attested since 6,000 years BP. The area consists of glacial and river valleys with their surrounding hills rising to over 200 metres above the floors of the valleys.

The characterization of settlement within the rural landscape is central to the research. This is achieved through selected field studies from the geographical area of research in South Shropshire. This research includes known and evaluated sites and the field study of unevaluated sites. The location of settlement can be determined by the solid and drift geology, especially pedology for an agrarian society, and hydrology.

Prior to any field work the collection and analysis of existing datasets is required as an informed base on which to proceed. These major sources can be summarized as follows.

1. The datasets of the Historic Environment Record (HER) concerning identified Iron-Age and Roman sites, although the lack of evaluation may mean other pre-historic sites may be included and will require deletion.
2. The datasets from the National Monuments Record.
4. Soil surveys on the agricultural quality of soils from the Soil Survey of England and Wales. In addition to this will be the records of the historic use of this land. Earlier, although not ancient, use of land may be indicated by toponymy. Palynological records here are of significance in detecting agrarian changes in response to the Roman conquest and incorporation into the Romanitas.
5. Whimster R. (University of Cambridge) Wroxeter Hinterland Project enclosure plots outside the area.
6. Terrain maps for the evaluation of settlements within the landscapes and their relationship to water, soil and seasonal weather.

7. The datasets of the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the evidence of the material culture.

A review of the current data before any new fieldwork is essential with the production of maps and tables representing the evaluation of the data for analysis. This activity provides a resource as a basis for further primary data recovery. The aim here is to seek patterns in the distribution of sites against the natural landscape and their later relationship to the imposed Roman infrastructure as military and civil urban settlement, and the system of roads in the area. The study takes into account the degree of preservation of recorded sites, and, by way of distribution modelling, to interpolate the gaps in the landscape. The detail required includes the proportions of sites recorded as visible earthworks, which can be surveyed in the field as structures, against those only surviving as crop or soil marks. In addition to this, the distribution of finds previously recovered and recorded as surface finds, from excavations and recovered from observation; on and in the proximity of sites, provide a record of change or continuity in the material culture and indicate the temporal limits of occupation of a given site; their relationship to the late Iron Age and Roman landscape, the extent they reflect and represent changes in activity, and settlement pattern is also evaluated. Since the research is to study the changes that occurred in the landscape, the sites recorded and included will be both Iron Age and Roman thus all categories of typologies and morphologies. The terms enclosed, unenclosed or open, nuclear, linear and dispersed are used, however value judgments implicit in the terminologies of hillfort and villa are avoided since it is important that the sites and landscapes are evaluated on their own terms without such presumptuous impositions.

Within the settlement locations the architectural typologies, where recoverable, are important indicators of cultural affiliation and approximate dating of a site. The expected building forms of the Cornovii would consist of round-houses but the forms of those sites demonstrating Roman characteristics would be rectilinear. Where identifiable, a comparison of the
distribution of round to rectilinear constructions and their coincidence is an indicator of continuity, whether the round-house continued or was replaced or was concomitant with rectilinear buildings, or change in the abandonment of a site.

The study includes an attempt at evaluating the pattern of land enclosure and field patterns, although survival tends to be tenuous. Established field boundaries can be viewed as durable impositions in the landscape and directly attributable to settlement and land use. However, many sites demonstrate that later field boundaries do not respect their situation. Yet the mapping of these in the landscape against settlement will further the research into the extent of Roman agricultural practice in the form of land divisions.

G.I.S. modelling, with the use of ArcGIS, will be employed as a method of understanding the nature of rural settlement, change and continuity. Comparing models of regional rural settlement patterning and the prediction of settlement patterning in South Shropshire will emphasize the regional characteristics. The predictions can then be compared against the reality of field observations and the existing datasets. This will be based on the natural resources in the landscape that determine locations and chosen according to agricultural practice and resource exploitation. Thus, changing priorities would inform settlement patterning. Such changing priorities, should they have existed, would in themselves be indicative of changes in economic imperatives and social change.

In summation, by surveying and evaluating the evidence, an explanation of the processes of change, spatially and temporally, in the context of the developing Roman infrastructure in order to understand the effects of those processes on rural settlement and the Cornovii is sought and a void in our knowledge of this area filled.