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12. Elite Settlements in the Roman and Sub-Roman Period

by D. Petts

The fourth century is always seen as the 'Golden Age' of villa occupation in Britain (Frere 1967:317; Fulford 1989:195; Millett 1992:195). Most scholarly work has focused on the rise and flowering of British villas (Rivet 1969; Todd 1978). The end of villa life is usually seen as a process of decline, starting with the Barbarian Conspiracy in AD 367 and ending rapidly in the early fifth century following the collapse of the economy caused by the departure of the Roman Army. The final occupation periods are typified by so called 'squatter' settlements, and the period is often characterised using such terms as 'desultory' and 'squalid'. In their consideration of the post-Roman phases at the temple site at Lydney, the Wheelers opined that the occupants "...eked out a second-hand existence entirely lacking in cultural initiative" (Wheeler & Wheeler 1937:65). It is derogatory phrases, such as these, that have shaped interpretations of final stage occupation. It is assumed that life is transitory and of lowly status, and it is often not discussed with the same importance as the more spectacular periods of villa occupation. However, it is these 'squatter' settlements that characterise the nature of life on many villas in the second half of the fourth century. In this paper I want to explore this period of transition by looking at the nature of elite occupation in the late Roman/sub-Roman south-west. This area has been chosen specifically because it is a region where there is both ample evidence for primary and secondary villa occupation, and the best evidence for sub-Roman occupation in the Romanized areas of Britain.

Unfortunately, the sub-Roman archaeological record is notoriously sparse, especially in the central areas of Roman Britain. It is admittedly slightly more extensive in the west and the north, but these are areas that were never extensively Romanized in the first place. Most of the known settlements and finds are of high-status (Dark 1994a; 1994b). Any exploration of the shifts in culture and society in this period is thus inevitably constrained by the highly partial nature of the evidence.

The Problem of Dating

The biggest issue facing the archaeologist working in this period is the problem of dating. With the decline in use of Roman coinage in Britain, we lose the most important chronological hook on which to hang our archaeological evidence. This uncertainty is further compounded by the problematic nature of the ceramic evidence. The period from AD 360–390 was a phase during which there was a relative expansion of pottery production, however, after AD 390 there was a decline in the level of production and in the repertoire of styles. During such down-swings in ceramic production, archaeological contexts tend to be down-dated to periods of higher pottery production due to the

fossilisation of the assemblages. The decrease in the quantity of pottery production also means that such contexts tend to have a higher proportion of residuality (Going 1992). The result is that often there is a tendency for the date of contexts to bunch towards periods of higher production. In this way a 'short' chronology has developed for the end of villas with most secondary activity placed towards the beginning of the fifth century.

In periods of low ceramic production, ceramics also have a longer use-life and an increased level of curation. Evidence from Cadbury Congresbury suggests that there was extensive curation of Roman pottery, possibly until the sixth century, as well as the presence of Roman sherds which had arrived on the site in moved spoil (Burrows & Rahtz 1992:147–8). The ceramics include a wide variety of pottery types ranging from samian to Black Burnished Ware. This illustrates the difficulty of establishing a satisfactory *terminus post quem* for fifth century occupation.

Mercifully, in the late fifth century, the appearance of Mediterranean imported wares, such as Phocaean Red Slip and Bi and Bii amphora, provide a *terminus post quem* of the mid to late fifth century, though the date brackets are quite broad (Alcock 1995:82–5). The period is, however, not without its own dating problems, as the distribution of these imports are limited, and they are found no further up the River Severn than the mouth of the River Parrett (Rahtz *et al* 1992).

Decline and Fall?

It is possible to identify a fairly standardised sequence in villa expansion (Scott 1990:169–70) and the pattern of villa development in late Roman Britain is moderately well known. The early simple villas were transformed and expanded over the third and fourth centuries through the addition of wings, courtyards and symmetrical facades which served to obscure the buildings behind. Within the villa, space became increasingly sub-divided and there is internal architectural elaboration with the construction of extensive mosaic pavements, hypocausts and the use of painted plasterwork. It has been suggested that this signalled an increased concern with the control of space and the constraint of movement. (Scott 1994).

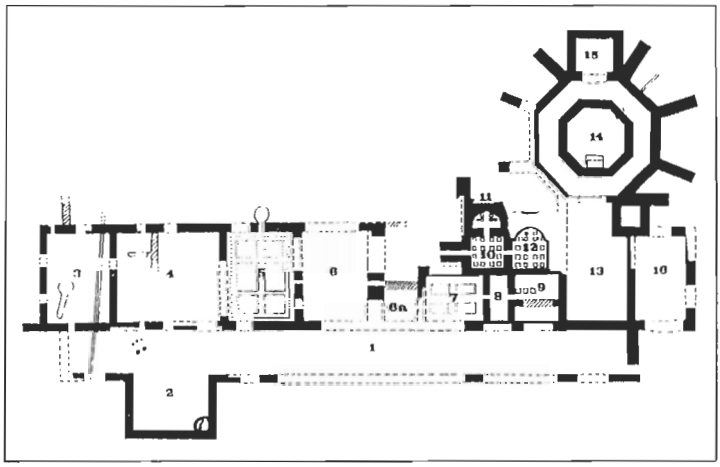

Figure 1. The Roman villa at Lufton, Somerset (found in Hayward 1972)

The control of space is also reflected outside the main villa building, where the use of courtyards and walls served to increasingly separate the domestic sphere from the productive sphere (Scott 1990:165–9).

However, it is necessary to question how far this model of increased complexity in elite residences holds firm for the later fourth century and onwards. After about AD 350 there is a definite collapse in the number of villas being constructed *a novo* (Gregson 1989:26), and many villas are seem to be completely abandoned. It is important not to deny that in certain areas a 'Romanised' form of life continued on villa sites. For example, at Hucclecote (Glous) a mosaic sealed a Theodosian coin (Clifford 1933:328) and at Atworth (Wilts) room 28 possibly has a *terminus post quem* AD 390–5 (Mellor & Goodchild 1940). These examples suggest that at certain villa sites there is a continuity of what may be broadly termed '*Romanitas*'. Such examples of continued villa life are isolated. Elsewhere, there was continued occupation of villas, however, this was not villa life in the traditional sense. Instead, occupation appears to be much simpler with less investment in the decoration of the building.

There are several characteristic aspects of this latest phase of Roman occupation. Firstly, occupation layers grow up over Roman floors such as mosaics, and these layers are often rich in artefacts which may suggest a different attitude to the disposal of rubbish to that previously known. Such deposits have been found at Lufton, near Yeovil (figure 1). For example, in Rooms 2 and 3, there are dark occupation layers containing pottery and animal bone (Hayward 1972). Such deposits have possibly been found at Keynsham where Room J and the corridor have thick deposits of black soil over the original floors which appear similar to the deposits found at Lufton. Mosaic floors are also often covered by rough floors and levelled, as occurred at Wraxhall (Wilts) where Room 10 was levelled with rubble and ten inches of clay (Sykes & Brown 1961). Even very large villas such as Woodchester, saw such changes: in Room 10 the mosaic was replaced by a concrete floor (Clarke 1982:201).

Secondly, the cutting of hearths and ovens through floors becomes increasingly common. This suggests that there was either a change in the utilisation of rooms, whose primary function was originally domestic, or alternatively, a change in the nature of the domestic occupation itself. This shift in the use of space also occurred at Lufton where a smithing hearth was placed in room 2 and a cooking hearth was constructed in Room 4 (Hayward 1972:64), and at Dewlish a coin of Honorius was found associated with cooking hearths which were built directly onto a mosaic floor (Branigan 1976:101). A hearth was also placed above a possible occupation layer at Atworth in Room 3 and corn dryers were inserted into Room 2 and in the bath block (Mellor & Goodchild 1940).

This alternative use for Roman architectural elements is also seen in other contexts, such as at Kings Weston (Glos.), where a rubble platform built over the portico utilised fragments of the primary facade (Boon 1950:13–5). Roman building material is also known from a number of wells at Roman sites, such as Brislington. The deposits within these wells may suggest some form of ritual context (Poulton & Scott 1993:119). The possibility of a ritualised response to Roman architectural material demonstrates the importance of not considering Roman material culture as a passive index of romanization. Material culture is being used in an active way to negotiate cultural identities.

Finally, the total number of rooms used within the building appears to decrease. Rather than occupying the entire building, it is common to find only two or three rooms being used. In some cases, it appears that there is more than one group of rooms being utilised, suggesting domestic units with separate farming or industrial structures, or alternatively it may imply more than one domestic unit present on the site. At Atworth, one unit seems to have consisted of Rooms 2 and

3. Room 3 had a hearth inserted into it. A door was made between the two rooms whilst the door from Room 3 to the corridor was blocked. It also seems that there was a small unit still in use in the other wing, where there is late occupation in Room 28 (Mellor & Goodchild 1940). Outside the main area of study, the growth of multiple small units is also attested at Piddington (Northants) where the excavators recognised six small units associated with black occupation layers containing animal bones and broken pottery (Selkirk 1996:62).

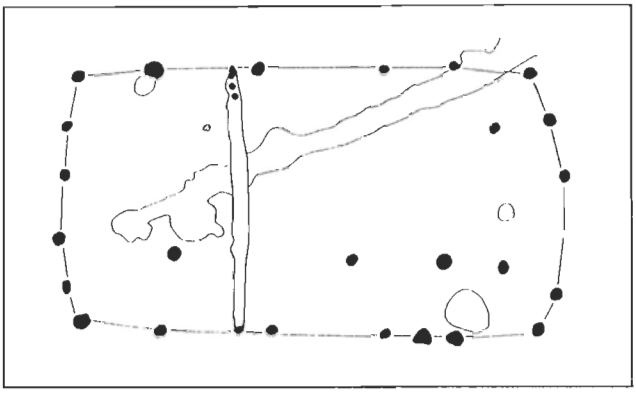

Figure 2. Sub-Roman structure from South Cadbury (found in Alcock 1995)

It is possible, therefore, to recognise a fairly distinctive pattern of utilisation in Roman villa buildings of the late fourth century. This pattern is primarily identified by the use of two or three roomed units (figure 2). Often one of these rooms has evidence for agricultural production whilst the other appears to be more domestic. Unlike most typical villas from the first half of the fourth century, the space is not extensively subdivided and shows less separation of different types of space. These basic units reflect the standardised units postulated by Drury (1982:295, figure 4) as contributing towards the characteristic Romano-British floor-plan. This pattern of rooms is also seen at one of the few villa-type structures built in the later fourth century, such as Bradley Hill (figure 3) (Leech 1981:179, figure 3). At this site, the spatial organisation is very simple, with the main structure consisting of two units: one a simple residential section and the other a byre or barn. Bradley Hill is unusual as it is so closely integrated with a cemetery. Unlike sub-Roman sites the cemetery is not separated from domestic space (Dark 1994b). It would appear that by the late fourth century there was an increasing parity in the use of space on villa sites.

As discussed earlier, the first half of the fifth century is a chronological mine-field, however, it is possible, albeit tentatively, to isolate a primary phase at Cadbury Congresbury (Rahtz *et al* 1992:237). This phase (phase 3I) appears very different in character from late Roman sites, but quite similar to the late fifth and early sixth century structures on the same site, and also parallels the occupation from South Cadbury (Alcock 1995:30–40). On the basis of such evidence it seems fair to assume that earlier fifth century occupation on hillforts has more in common with later sub-Roman settlements than earlier Roman villa sites.

Sub-Roman houses appear to have only one or two rooms, and in plan are reminiscent of the simple late Roman structures discussed above (figure 2). It is this basic organisational principle

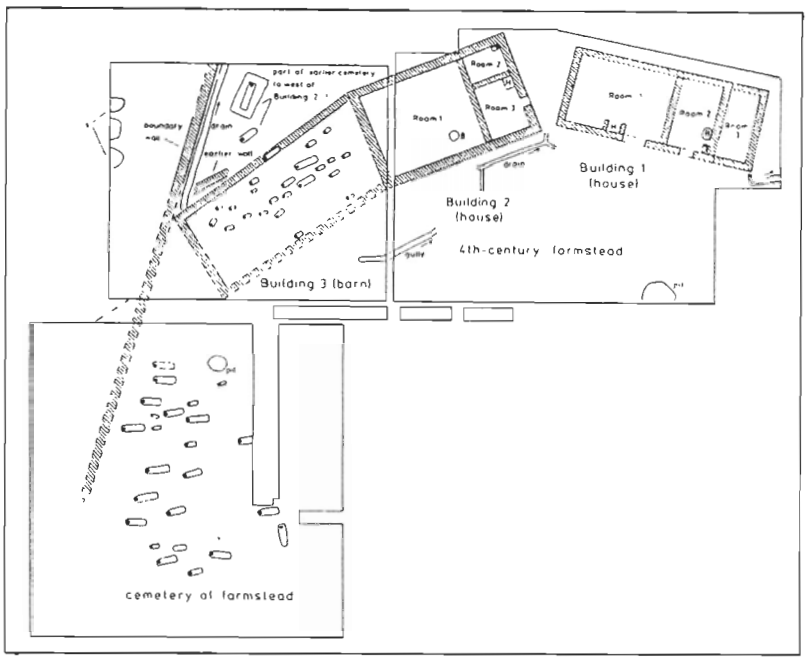

Figure 3. The Late Roman settlement at Bradley Hill, Somerset (found in Leach 1981)

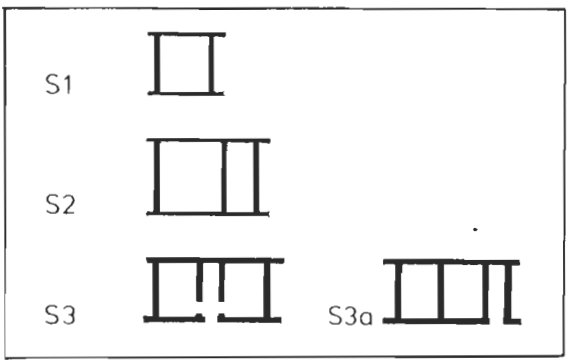

Figure 4 Representative room sets from Roman Buildings (found in Drury 1982)

that has been recognised as contributing towards a general early mediaeval building tradition in Britain (James *et al* 1984). There were, however, some constructional differences. Even at Cadbury Congresbury, where there is no shortage of stone, the buildings appear to have been predominantly built out of wood (Rahtz *et al* 1992:193). The real difference between these sub-Roman sites and late Roman sites is in the separation between living space and productive space. Although there is evidence for craft production, possibly of high-status, at Cadbury Congresbury and South Cadbury (Alcock 1995:124, Rahtz *et al* 1992:238), neither site has any significant evidence for agricultural

production. In contrast, the unenclosed site at Poundbury has evidence for a high-level of agricultural production, notably in the presence of a number of grain-driers (Green 1987). This difference in economies is also reflected in the faunal evidence from both Cadbury Congresbury (Rahtz *et al* 1992:186–8) and Dinas Powys (Gilchrist 1988), which suggests that meat was not arriving on the hoof, the implication being that these sites were not a focus of animal production.

Models for Change

We have seen that it is possible to delineate three broad phases in the nature of elite settlement:

PHASE I Early/mid-fourth century
- –Traditional villa settlement
- –Complex space including courtyards, wings and corridors
- –Internal architectural elaboration such as mosaics and hypocausts

PHASE II Late fourth/ early fifth century
- –Very few 'Romanised' villas
- –Most settlements in villas have seemingly sparse occupation with only one or two rooms in use.

PHASE III Mid-fifth century/ seventh century
- –Elites living in simple hall structures, often within hillforts
- –Strongly separated from productive spheres
- –Possibly increased evidence for association with high status production

This pattern is open to three different interpretative models:

Model One: There is a continuity in the basic social structure. The same native elites are in power, the only difference in the late fourth century is that there is merely a decrease in the extent of Romanization. The few villas which are most Romanized could be interpreted as the villas of those at the top of the social hierarchy. In the same way that Romanization occurs amongst the elite in the early Roman period it can be argued that the native elites are those who cling to the remnants of Roman material culture in the dying days of the empire.

Model Two: There is an amalgamation of estates. The Romanized villas at the end of fourth century are the successful villa centres, whereas villas which have secondary occupation are those which fell victim to the expansive tendencies of the few successful villas. In this scenario, '*Romanitas*' is still the main life-style for the existing elites and it is through this way of life that elites continued to represent and maintain their position. The existence of sites such as Barnsley Park and Shakenoak, which appear to be turned over to purely agricultural activity in their final phases, may support this argument (Webster & Smith 1982:95–97; King 1989:58).

Model Three (my preferred model): This model hinges on the fact that not all villas were occupied by members of the same social system. The group of individuals who lived in villas were not restricted to the local native elite. We must allow that the residents of villas were a diverse group of individuals, including official administrators and bailiffs for foreign land-owners (such as Melania the Younger who sold her estates in Britain in AD 410) as well as the local Romano-British nobility. I suggest

that the different levels of Romanization found on villas in the late fourth century reflect different cultural attitudes to Roman material culture by the occupiers. The extent of Romanization should not be read as a direct reflection of status. In this case, native elites may be seen to be turning to a different architectural and symbolic repertoire, where traditional Roman forms of architectural expression are spurned in favour of an alternative manner of building. It is possible that an almost contemptuous attitude to Roman buildings may be seen in the manner in which villas were treated in the late fourth century. For example, at Brislington, there is the deposition of large quantities of villa masonry in the well (Branigan 1972), and at Lufton it appears that the wall plaster was deliberately removed and dumped in the garden (Haywood 1972). This apparent contempt is also seen in the way in which mosaics were treated (see above) and hypocausts allowed to fall out of use, such as at Barnsley Park (Webster & Smith 1982:92). In the sub-Roman period it may also be possible to interpret the move from a masonry based vernacular architecture, to one based on timber construction, as being caused by ideological changes rather than a shift in technology

The change in architectural style in the late Roman/sub-Roman period can also be seen in the physical location of the sites (Burrow 1981; Dark 1994b). The move to hillfort locations is a process which probably began in the late fourth century. This has yet to be explicitly demonstrated archaeologically, but hints of later Roman occupation may be seen at several sites such as Ham Hill and Buck Knowle (Burrow 1981:268–302), as well as Cadbury Congresbury.

It is tempting to argue that the increased placement of settlements close to impressive hillfort ramparts is also related to the sudden appearance of extensive earthen dykes and ramparts such as Bokerley Dyke and Wansdyke (Eagles 1994:23–5). Whilst these undoubtedly would have had a physical defensive role they would also have acted as a symbolic reminder of the labour resources required for their construction. Individuals who were able to mobilise the labour power to build these dykes would also have been able to mobilise these people for more offensive military purposes. Ditches and ramparts served as a direct physical reminder of the ever present threat of coercive force. This was undoubtedly an important factor in sub-Roman England.

As has already been suggested, the simple two/three room unit known from Roman sites may also have been found in higher status settlements in the late fourth century and sub-Roman period. In the late fourth century the increased parity in architectural styles between native elite and non-elite settlements could be interpreted as a movement towards the expression of status in non-architectural ways.

Powerful Places and Powerful People

In the later fourth century, items of personal adornment such as crossbow brooches, belt-sets and buckles were increasingly used as indications of status. In late Roman burial sites such as Butt Road, Colchester (Crummy, Crummy & Crossan 1993:136–41) and Lankhills, Winchester (Clarke 1979) some female burials, in adolescence and early adulthood, are found with large quantities of personal ornaments such as armlets, whereas the burials of elderly women have the typical pattern of low quantities of grave goods. This has been interpreted as reflecting the difference between married and unmarried women, with the jewellery possibly representing some form of dowry (Allason-Jones 1989:30–1).

In the sub-Roman period, the wearing and exchange of brooches appears to have been an indicator of status and, undoubtedly, the treatment of the corpses in Anglo-Saxon burials suggests that the body was used as an important channel for the signalling of status and information (Fisher

1995:161–2). The highly normative sub-Roman burial rite may also indicate a strictly controlled attitude to the adornment of the body.

The growth of Christianity also changed attitudes towards the body. The Christian emphasis on the body as a vessel for spirituality led to an increased emphasis on sexual abstinence, fasting and ritual cleansing (Brown 1988). The body became a field of discourse through which religious power could be asserted. The importance of the body continued into death, with a shift from the traditional taboo of the dead to a celebration of the corpse, and the growth of the cult of the 'Holy Dead'.

Discussion

It is suggested that in the late Roman/sub-Roman period, power was increasingly signalled through person not place. This leads to the obvious question: why is there this move from places of power to bodies of power? I suggest that there are a number of reasons for this ideological shift. In the late third and fourth centuries, there was a decrease in the importance of the town councils as a corporate body, and many of their functions, such as tax collection and low-level judiciary functions, were assumed to individual noble families (Brown 1971:36–7). Although broadly speaking these functions were performed by the same individuals, these individuals were governing in a different social configuration. Economic, social and judicial functions were channelled through individuals rather than groups. In the words of Peter Brown, "All attempts to secure protection and redress of grievances has to pass through the great man – a patron – the boss..." (Brown 1971:37).

Another contributing factor in the transmission of power in Britain, was the changing nature of taxation in Roman and sub-Roman society. In the later Roman period, the tendency for taxation to be levied in kind increased, and it seems likely that the move from cash to goods in kind may well have extended to the payment of tributes and renders between native patrons and clients. This would be especially so in the fifth century with the collapse of coinage.

Due to the bulky nature of goods in kind and difficulties in transport, it is possible that food renders were increasingly consumed during the movement of the upper nobility around their client settlements. This form of taxation is certainly attested to in later Welsh and Saxon sources (Dark 1994a:206). With an increasingly peripatetic nobility there is less need for investment in architecture by the elite, as the nobility come to the client, rather than the client coming to them. Thus, there is less scope and need for architectural elaboration at one central loci, for the location of the interaction between patron and client becomes increasingly dispersed.

Any attempt to examine the changing role of elite settlement must move beyond the morphological analysis of the utilisation of space within the site itself. There is also a need to contextualise the sites within the wider settlement system (Hingley 1984:72–7; Hill 1995:45–7). Unfortunately, the archaeology of sub-Roman Britain is so poor that hill-forts are about the only recognisable component of the settlement pattern. This low archaeological visibility may, however, suggest something about the nature of sub-Roman occupation. It is possible that these sites may not be visible because they are not nucleated settlements, but are instead isolated farms, which are difficult to recognise due to the low quantities of sub-Roman material culture. Thus the main form of settlement may be small scattered farmsteads, with the elite living separately in hill-forts. These hill forts, however, also appear to play a role beyond that of high-status domestic settlement. They may well also have acted as a focus for the wider community.

In the less Romanized areas of Britain at this period, there were areas of what may be loosely

termed ritual foci in the landscape, such as those known at Forteviot in Scotland or Emain Macha in Ireland (Bradley 1993:124–6). These dispersed foci, containing religious sites, elite-settlement and burial sites, may, albeit contentiously, be recognised in late Roman/sub-Roman Britain. Possible examples in the south-west include Cadbury Congresbury and Henley Wood (Rahtz *et al* 1992: figure 2), the sites at Cannington (Rahtz 1969), possibly Uley Bury and West Hill (Woodward & Leech 1993:1 figure 1) and Ham Hill where the northern spur appears to have been a focus for ritual deposition throughout the Roman period, and includes possible sub-Roman burials (Burrow 1981:268–77). All these sites feature the pairing of elite sites with either temples, cemeteries or early Christian sites.

This contrasts with the typical rural occupation pattern of the Anglo-Saxon areas in the East of England. In these regions, settlements consist of a mix of halls and 'sunken-featured' buildings often scattered across the landscape (Hamerow 1991). Sites such as Chalton and Cowdery's Down are typified by the occurrence of a complex of halls and fences (Welch 1992:29–39). These sites are also characterised by a lack of a distinctive elite style of architecture. The dominant group are merely presumed to live in the largest hall. The Anglo-Saxon areas seem to have no separate elite settlement types. All levels of the social system are integrated within the same site.

The difference between the settlement patterns of the sub-Roman British areas and the Saxon territories may reflect the difference, postulated by Durkheim, between 'Organic' and 'Mechanical' solidarity (1964). Ferrell has suggested that 'Mechanical' solidarity, "based on integration through similarities such as belief" (1995:134) is associated with a dispersed settlement pattern with integration at a regional level (1995:134–5), it is this pattern that may relate to sub-Roman society. The importance of integration at a community level may also be seen in the highly normative sub-Roman burial rite, which has little formal variation. It emphasises the identity of the group over that of the individual. 'Organic' solidarity, however, is "based on interdependence through differences such as those resulting from division of labour"(Ferrell 1995:134) and may often be related to a community living in close proximity, such as in Saxon villages. Saxon burials also tend to have a high level of variation, and carry a wide range of information about the dead, emphasising the importance of the individual personality.

It can be seen that a critical understanding of the transition from late Roman society to sub-Roman society can only be understood if the architectural traditions are not seen as monolithic entities, but as reflecting the existing cultural milieu. Such an approach fails to appreciate that material culture is constituted in a reflexive relationship with social processes. The dynamics that occurred in the transition period helped shape the spatial structure of elite settlements. An excessively normative model of society should be avoided, and thought should be given to the disparate and often competing elements within the social system. In late Roman Britain, these may include both native elites and Imperial officials. All these elements will utilise material culture and settlement space, in different ways. This suggests that the classification of settlements on purely morphological grounds can fail to take into account the different social and economic contexts in which they may be used (Hingley 1984:72–5).

The analysis of these social structures in terms of modes of production may prove particularly fruitful, and it is in these terms that the transition from antiquity to feudalism has often been studied (Anderson 1974; Wickham 1994:7–42). Wickham has conceptualised the changes seen in the later Roman period as having their root in two competing modes of production: the tributary mode characterised by taxation, and the feudal mode characterised by the taking of rent. The shift from antiquity to feudalism took place when the greatest amount of agricultural surplus went in payment

of local rent and food renders rather than in the burden of taxation. The varied groups of villa residents all occupied different positions in these modes of production and this crucial shift occurred gradually. Inevitably, however, the withdrawal of external Roman influence from active intervention in the internal governance of Britain, would have meant a collapse in the active taxation system and the conversion of taxes to rents. Whilst this was undoubtedly a process occurring throughout the later fourth century, it was this collapse of the taxation system that was crucial in determining the trajectory of the diocese of Britain. The lack of a centralised, rather than a personalised, coercive power meant that although surplus was still being extracted from the population, it was no longer getting further than the local elites, who had access to economic networks of power such as kinship and patronage.

Conclusion

The varying modes of production each had their own distinctive spatial patterns, and it is in this context that the difference between occupation of hillforts and of villas can be interpreted. Villas may be seen as part of an architectural tradition with links to the Empire. The space within the villa is primarily based around face-to-face transactions with other members of the elite and members of the imperial bureaucracy. It is upward looking, and emphasises the separation of the occupier from the agriculturally productive population, though the emphasis on the courtyard suggest that the means of production are seen as symbolically important. However, in the sub-Roman period, the move towards the paying of tribute means that the elite residence is now the end point in the transit of surplus. It is no longer converted into cash which can then be converted into Romanized building elements. Instead, the nobility become the peak of the social pyramid, and there is a shift in their relationship with their dependants. There is a new focus on the elite as the source of social power rather than the, now irrelevant Empire. The only external source of power in the south-west was the increasingly important Christian Church. However, at this early stage, it seems to be dependant on the local aristocracy and the suggested link between secular and religious sites may be interpreted as the elites controlling the church rather than seeking legitimisation from it. The control of luxury goods, produced in hill-forts, would again have emphasised the position of the local aristocracy at the head of the social hierarchy rather than as merely a small player in the wider Empire. The emphasis on massive earth based architecture would have emphasised the increasingly personalised control of labour and hence, coercive force which did not exist earlier in the Roman Empire.

It is important to be aware that the changes that occur within a group of sites can be caused by different factors at different locations. If an analysis of settlements is going to be truly useful, it is crucial to remain alert to the variety of social structures within them, and to be aware of the spatial patternings that these varied social structures created.

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