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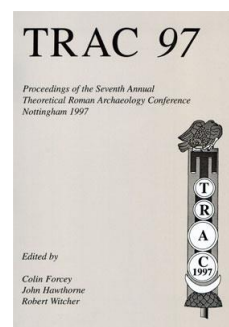
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Social Change and Architectural Diversity in Roman Period Britain

by Simon Clarke

Introduction

Research into the Roman period countryside has always been dominated by the study of a single settlement form: that of the villa, and, in particular, the luxury residential element within it. Hingley has argued that this bias, evident in both excavation and synthesis, originated from the peculiar interests and preconceptions of the predominantly male, cultural and political élite of Britain as an imperial power (Hingley 1991:91–5). This group identified strongly with the villa owning class, believing themselves, as leaders of the British Empire, to be the heirs of Roman civilisation. In the post colonial era the love affair with classical culture has cooled considerably. The imposition of straight roads, hot baths and *pax Romana* are no longer accepted uncritically as a ‘Good Thing’. But for all the current posturing about the need to set a new agenda which pays proper heed to indigenous cultures and less prominent elements within the wider population, we are still strangely mesmerised by the houses of the rich and powerful (cf. Millett 1990). Villas, along with cities and forts, are still receiving far more attention than their significance as a proportion of the archaeological record merits (Hingley 1989:4, figure 4, 1991:figure 1). Nevertheless the intellectual climate of Britain has changed remarkably. The disproportionate interest in villas, though it continues, has increasingly to be justified by academics sensitive to accusations of gender, cultural and class bias. This special pleading has most frequently been achieved by the assertion that villas represent a totally new form and therefore held a particular importance to the interpretation of social, economic or ideological change in the Roman period. This argument has some validity. Change is always of interest and there is undoubtedly much still to learn about the social structures prevalent within villas. However in choosing to study luxury houses in isolation, and in viewing the changes within them as emblematic of change within society as a whole, our perception of the Roman period is significantly skewed.

The Villa as Product of Economic Change

This problem is exemplified by Eleanor Scott’s (1990) paper ‘Romano-British Villas and the Social Construction of Space’, which explored the wider implication of the new architecture, drawing heavily on the methods of Hillier and Hanson (1984). She proposed that the introduction of the corridor to British architecture represented a major social innovation, fundamentally altering the flow of people within domestic space (Scott 1990:159–61). Firstly, by adding a corridor to the front of a range of rooms, members of the household were further insulated from society as a whole, by providing an additional stage in the journey between a hostile outside world and the sanctuary of the living space. It could also have acted as a means of discriminating between different types of visitor by allowing access to a choice of rooms without having to pass through a central family space (see figure 1). To Scott’s mind this was an architectural manifestation of society’s anxiety with an increasingly disembedded economy, which required the admission of ever more strangers over the threshold (Scott 1990:164). Scott’s reading of villa architecture as a sophisticated manipulation of space is correct within the

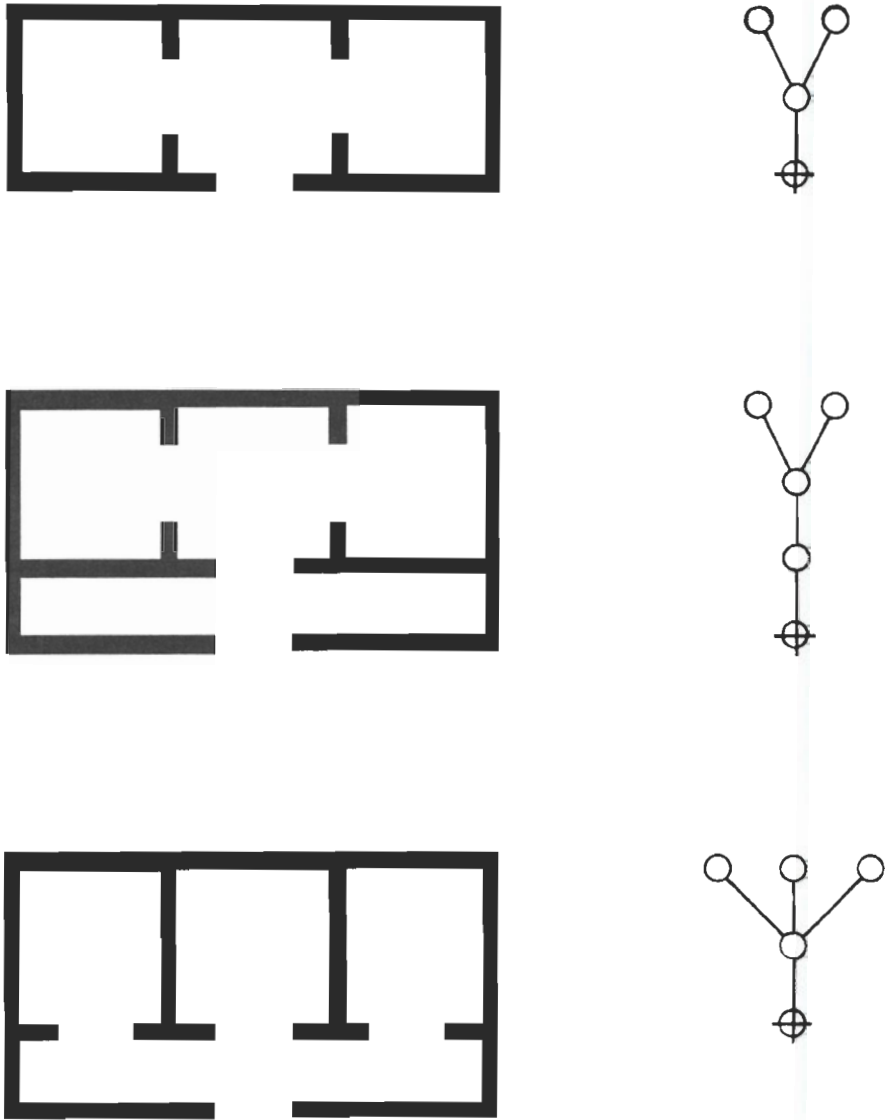


Figure 1. The corridor as Social Innovation

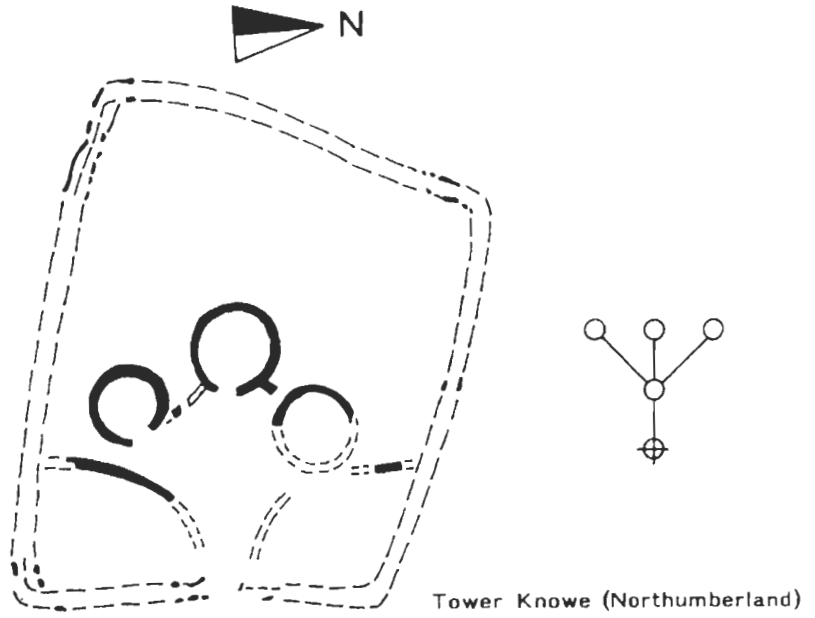
narrow logic of Hillier and Hanson's methodology.

However in contrasting the complex room plan of a villa with the undifferentiated space of an individual round house, she is simply not comparing like with like. The manipulation of space to control social interaction does not stop at the front door. Rather, as the architect Rapoport has noted, it encompasses whole settlements, indeed entire landscapes, of which the built environment is only a part (Rapoport 1990:11). If we step back from the individual building to consider the use of space within groups of structures, arranged around a family compound, the special character of villas as compared to non-villas starts to look dubious. Figure 2 compares the layout of an enclosed farmstead, comprising three roundhouses (Tower Knowe, after Jobey 1973), with a simple corridor villa (Marshfield, after Smith 1987). Clearly the open ground between the group of round houses could have functioned as connective space in exactly the same way as the villa's corridor. In fact, using the syntax of access analysis there need by no distinction between villas and traditional farmsteads.

Access analysis focuses on the effect of architectural arrangement on the progress of visitors through a household. However, as Ross Samson has noted, most interaction within the domestic sphere would necessarily have taken place between household members, rather than with outsiders (Samson 1990:175). Furthermore the deep penetration of strangers into villas does not seem in most cases to have been a major concern for the commissioning architects. For example, at Woodchester (see figure 3), rather than having protected the privacy of the inner group, the ground plan seems positively to have invited intrusion. In order to dramatise the scale of the monument, the Great Audience Chamber was located at the heart of the complex, so that the visitor passed through the maximum number of layers. The corridors, which Scott thought so important to the journey between public and private, were merely incidental to this route. At Woodchester, as at most villas, corridors were arranged perpendicular to the line of approach. Clearly their function had more to do with internal communication than with the handling of strangers and the relationship with the outside world. If this was the case did the adoption of classical architecture have more importance for the structure of the family group?

The Villa and Family Structure

In this debate probably the single most influential contribution has been made by J.T. Smith in a series of papers, starting in 1978 with 'Villas as the Key to Social Structure'. These outlined his belief that the introduction of the new architecture had only a limited effect on the traditional 'Celtic' society (which in his view consisted of communities of extended families practising partible inheritance). He believed that villa plans in north-west Europe habitually exhibited evidence of several socially equal families, living together within a single villa complex; what we might term multiple or joint proprietorship (Smith 1978:172). In this theory a number of related stem-families co-operated to exploit the land together, but communicated their independence within the wider group by breaking the Classical architectural canon. These were listed by Smith as having been: symmetry of elevation and plan; planning of the site as a whole in regular geometric figures, particularly right angles; a strong emphasis on a central axial approach and the monumental grouping of buildings (Smith 1978:150). As the numerous examples provided by Smith show, these rules were certainly broken very often (Smith 1978:174-80). Chedworth, illustrated in figure 4, provides one of his most persuasive examples. However this simplistic equation of social cause with architectural effect does not hold up to close scrutiny. If the supposedly deliberate deviations from classical tradition were rooted in a single social origin, we would expect them to validate each other. Smith's indicators of Celtic tenure patterns should cluster together. In fact, it has been shown elsewhere that deviations



Marshfield (Glos.)

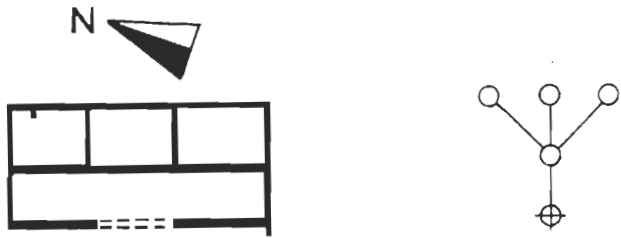


Figure 2. The Compound as Connective Space

occur together no more frequently than would be expected randomly (Clarke 1990). It is therefore very unlikely that they represented an attempt, subconscious or otherwise, to communicate a coherent social message. More likely origins for the failure of villa plans to have adhered to the classical rules of architecture probably lie in adaptations over time and the physical restrictions imposed by the sites.

This is not to insist that villas were always controlled by nuclear families. Part of the problem with Smith's approach was to assume that there was a fundamental opposition between Roman and indigenous British social structures: between nuclear versus extended families. In fact the Latin term *familia* did not have the same meaning as that of the modern family. In a general sense, it could mean a loose kinship relationship, but in strict legal terms it meant the estate, and included everything and everyone under the control of the household head. It encompassed, not only biologically related kin, but also adopted children, servants and even slaves. The core of the household was the stem-family, to the exclusion of brothers, sisters, uncles and cousins etc. However this should not be misunderstood. A man was not freed from obligation to his family when he came of age, or even when he married, except by the express will of the family head (Gardner and Wiedemann 1991:3).

When describing the Roman household, most archaeologists have carefully avoided the term 'extended family', an attribute which is usually reserved to describe the typical pre-Roman family type (e.g. Hingley 1989:7). However this contrast is probably false. Sjöberg for example noted that the structure of the ideal extended family shows a remarkable uniformity throughout the non-industrial urbanised world. It should include a man and his wife or wives, their unmarried children, married sons, the latter's wives and children and perhaps other relatives such as widowed daughters and sisters of the family head, as well as numerous servants (Sjöberg 1960:157). While in Sjöberg's view the realisation of the extended family was a luxury of the rich, it was also an essential ingredient of their success. It prevented the dissipation of power in the break up of property and ensured a ready supply of family members to fill key political, educational and religious posts within society. That these observations hold true for the Roman family has been confirmed in the archaeological record by Italian villas and town houses, which frequently exhibited exactly the duplication of facilities noted by Smith in north-west Europe. At Pompeii, 'twin atrium houses' such as the House of the Faun (figure 5) are probably the result of the amalgamation of a number of earlier properties. This process has been clearly demonstrated in other large properties, for example the House of the Vestals (Bon *et al.* 1997:40–47). However, the continued existence of two main entrances and duplication of reception areas would have allowed two family members to pursue separate political careers, perhaps a father and son or two brothers. If Sjöberg's model of élite family structure can be applied to late prehistoric, north-west Europe, then the imposition of Classical architecture on indigenous British society would have caused neither major social upheaval, nor the need to greatly modify villa design.

Architectural Diversity

Though one identified change and the other continuity, Scott and Smith were both guilty of focusing their studies on an incredibly narrow band of the population, while making bold claims for the insights it gave them into society as a whole. In reality there is no simple answer to questions of continuity or change between Iron Age and Roman period Britain, because neither society was monolithic. Clearly various social elements may have responded very differently to external influences (Galtung 1981). While Scott argues about the implications of complex room plan for society's economy and world-view, it must be remembered that the majority of

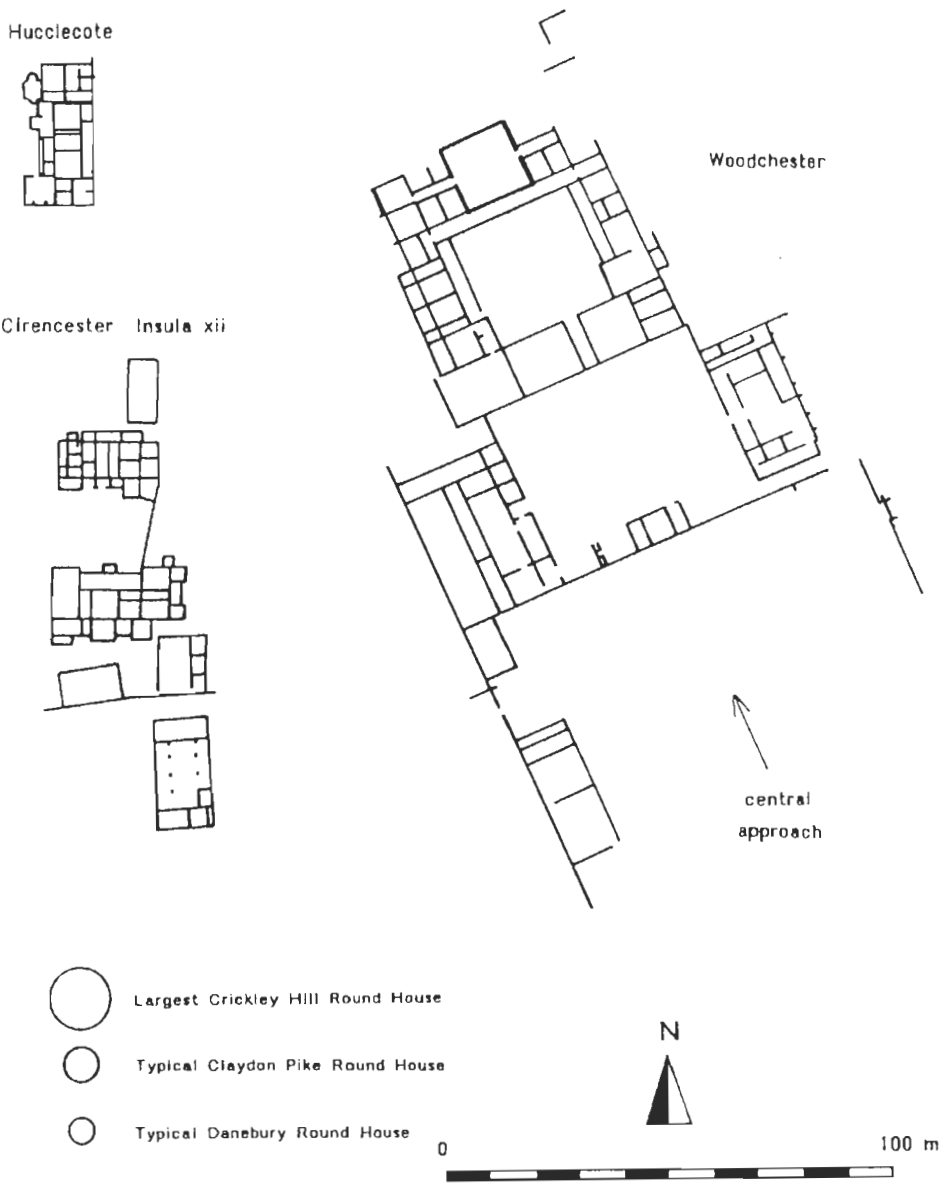


Figure 3. Roman Houses and Iron Age Huts: A Comparison of Scale

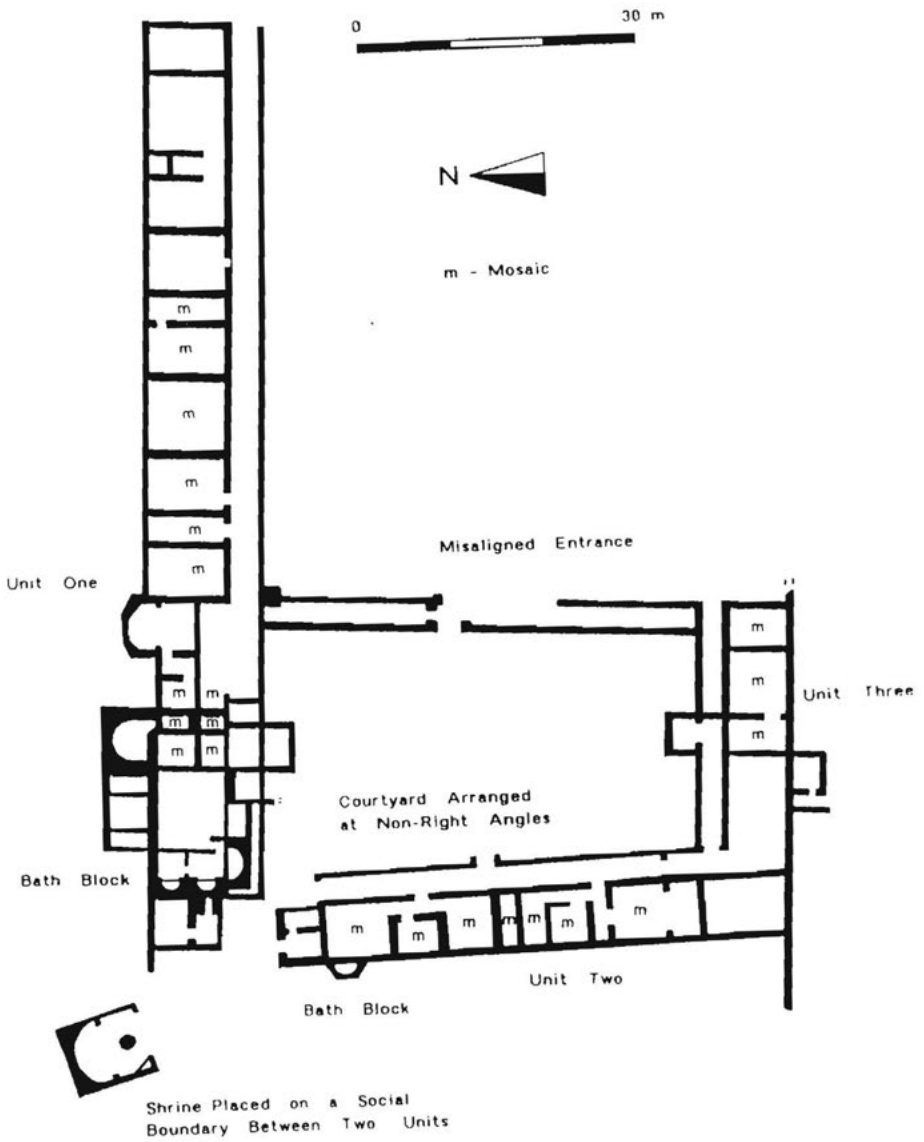


Figure 4. Multiple Proprietorship at Chedworth Villa (after Smith)

households continued to live in one or two rooms. Villa plans can at best give us an indication of the aspirations of a tiny minority of the population. Any attempt to assess more general change must take a more holistic view, involving both rich and poor, more and less Romanized elements within society. There are excellent reasons why studies of contrasting settlement forms are so very rare. Obviously there is only so much data that can be handled at once. Restricting the scope of an investigation to a narrow class of sites is a highly convenient stopping point. In addition any attempt to compare a large villa, like Woodchester, with traditional non-villa settlements, like those common in the Upper Thames Valley, ends up pointing out differences so obvious that they appear inane. More complex analysis like that of Hillier and Hanson becomes impossible because the data sets are just too different. Nevertheless if we wish to understand development over time we must also acknowledge the great diversity which existed in the Roman period, even at the risk of stating the obvious.

Building Shape

The most immediately apparent aspect of Romano-British architectural diversity, is also perhaps the most difficult to interpret sensibly. Though we have come to associate the Roman period with rectilinear buildings, curvilinear houses continued to be built long after the conquest. Smith essentially dismissed the transition from roundhouse to rectilinear villa. He regarded architectural style as a superficial façade, a passing fashion, behind which the true character of society was concealed (Smith 1978:149). Others, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) have read detailed meanings into this architectural innovation. Rippengal, for example, suggested that the change-over reflected a fundamental revision the position of human's within the cosmos (Rippengal 1994:93-4). He linked the adoption of the 'unnatural' rectangular form with the development of construction techniques, which (in his view) subjected raw materials to far greater changes than were common in the Iron Age; fired ceramic tiles rather than thatch for the roof; dressed stone replacing wattle and daub for the walls; concrete superseding beaten earth floors; the concealing of fire beneath a hypocaust rather than plainly visible as an open hearth. While the 'natives' lived in *huts*, husbanding the resources of nature, the 'Roman' form was the *domus* representing domination of the natural environment (Rippengal 1994:94-7). Whether, as Rippengal suggests, the circle is really any less an accurate geometric figure than the square (Rippengal 1994:94-5) is a matter of opinion. The association between geometric form and new building technique, however, was not a particularly close one. At most sites the new building form was constructed first in traditional materials. The new technology of concrete, tile and masonry was introduced substantially later. For example, at Claydon Pike, rectilinear architecture was present from the late first century, but a true villa was not erected until the late third century (Miles 1983). In any case, to regard traditional building materials as having been more natural is grossly misleading. The timber of Iron Age houses was not gathered from wildwood; it was harvested from carefully managed coppice (Jones 1986:122). Daub was not just mud; it was a combination of soil, dung and straw, which had to be as carefully blended as plaster or concrete. Using terms like architectural 'honesty' to describe the curvilinear tradition, Rippengal clearly betrays his sympathies (Rippengal 1994:95). Though couched in the post-modern jargon of deconstructionism, this analysis tells us more about the modern myth of the 'noble savage' than the meaning of Roman period houses to those that built them.

Bourdieu's comparison of the house to a text written by those who dwelt within it remains an intriguing analogy. Clearly buildings have meaning for those that built them, reflecting their vision of social structure and the world they inhabited. For example the alignment of Iron Age

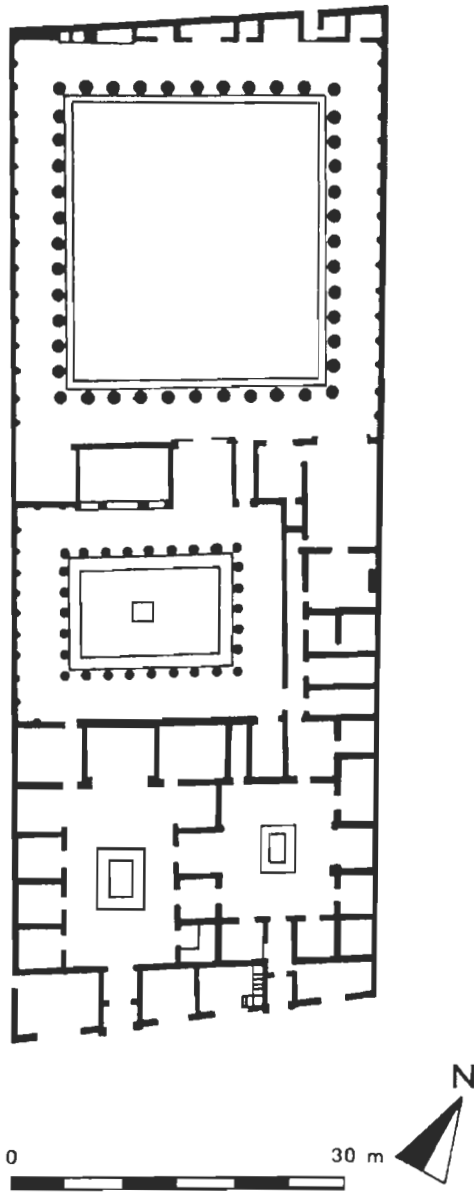


Figure 5. House of the Faun, Pompeii: Twin Atrium House



Figure 6. Middle Iron Age Fairford, Claydon Pike

houses' doorways to the sunrise at the equinox and mid-winter, strongly suggests an intimate association between dwellings and religious belief systems (Oswald 1991, Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994:48). But architectural form, along with orientation and method of construction have no intrinsic meaning. The same features will have encoded different messages at different times and places. There may well have been considerable disagreement as to how to read a message even within a single community. Nevertheless the house was clearly a powerful tool of self expression, and should not be regarded as anything so frivolous as fashion. Curvilinear forms are almost unheard of in Romano-British urban and quasi-urban centres (For a discussion of the small number of exceptions to this rule see Bidwell 1985:28–31.) Even quite small communities outside forts in the frontier zone have conspicuously failed to provide evidence for round houses (cf. Sommer 1984). Acceptance into such communities clearly required possession of a rectangular dwelling. Conversely in the rural hinterland immediately around forts the native population steadfastly adhered to the circular form, in many cases in spite of sustained proximity to Romanized communities (Jones 1984). Though its meaning might be uncertain, building shape was clearly crucial to social identity in Roman period Britain.

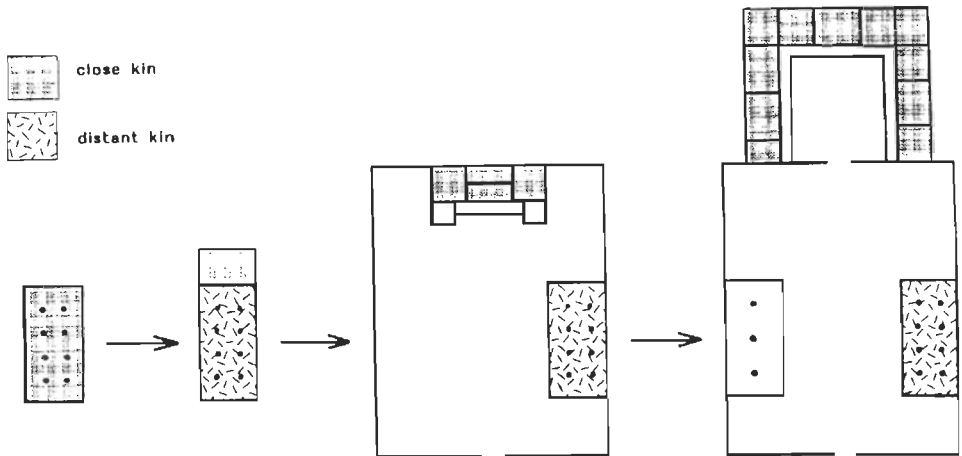


Figure 7. Model for increased social complexity within the villa

Population Size, Architectural and Social Unity

The second aspect of diversity which needs to be examined is that of scale. This is rarely considered properly, because published diagrams are invariably reduced to fit the space available. If plans are compared objectively (see figure 3), it immediately becomes apparent that the largest villas were gigantic. Woodchester's sixty-four excavated rooms cover over 4500 square metres, compared to about 50 square metres for a typical eight metre round house at Claydon Pike (Miles and Palmer 1983). In other words Woodchester's roofed area was probably in the order of five or ten times larger than individual Iron Age and early Roman period hamlets of the Upper Thames Valley (see Figure 6). Only if groups of settlements co-operated to exploit the landscape, as Hingley (1988:75–81) has suggested, could they have represented an economic community of comparable scale. The only individual Iron Age settlements to rival the populations of such palatial villas were large and medium sized hillforts. But these are more frequently compared with Roman towns (c.f. Cunliffe 1976), because we do not normally think of them as single integrated households in the way that Woodchester clearly was.

This brings us to a third point of comparison: the level of integration between architectural elements. Again there was a massive contrast between the largest villas and the most simple non-villa settlements, with shades of grey in between. Settlements like Iron Age and early Roman period Claydon Pike exhibited exceptionally low levels of architectural integration, and not simply because roundhouses could not be fitted together into contiguous blocks. Enclosure and drainage ditches around individual houses failed to articulate with each other, as expected if the community had co-operated closely as a whole (Evans 1989). Woodchester, on the other hand, displayed a very high degree of architectural unity, successfully integrating industrial, storage and ceremonial elements, with accommodation for a population which must have run into three figures. Even though it was constructed over about two centuries (Clarke 1982:217) it retained a strong sense of overall planning, with monumental grouping of buildings, accurate right angles and a balance, if not strict symmetry, about a central axial approach.

Social Implications

One of the most obvious implications of this material diversity was that, if society as a whole shared the ideal of the extended family, then it was an ideal attainable by only a few. In addition it was the new settlement form, the villas, which most evidently supported extended families, the supposedly pre-Roman, 'Celtic' social structure. Now clearly architecture is only one way in which a community could express social cohesion (cf. Hingley 1989:147–8). Nevertheless the degree to which the social group is defined by architecture in the Roman period raises an interesting possibility. Was the aspiration of Britain's indigenous élite to control a large household only fully achieved in the Roman period? Were villa owners 'continuing' a pre-Roman tradition that had existed only in the imagination, ours and theirs?

Putting the villa back in context, into a landscape dominated (numerically) by non-villa settlements, carries implications for our understanding of attitudes to privacy and the relationship of the household with the outside world. The villa has been taken, by Scott and others, as evidence for the retreat of the élite group from a wider community (Scott 1990:170). In this model the élite's kith and kin might at one time have been regarded as equals or near equals. By the Roman period, however, their status had become distinctly inferior. A similar view is taken in Hingley's model for increased social complexity on Romano-British rural settlements (Hingley 1989:153–6). From living in a single, shared room the headman and his family steadily achieved a more remote and elevated position within the community, moving first into a separate room, then a separate block and finally their own private compound (see figure 7). This is a useful model, but does not properly acknowledge the change in size of the settlement's population. Rather than representing a retreat into privacy by the villa owner and his immediate family, the development of a very large house could be as interpreted an expansion of the household to include a far larger kin group, which in the past might have been allowed to go own way. Far from fearing the intrusion of strangers over the threshold as Scott envisaged, there is good reason to believe that powerful landholders were projecting their sense of inclusion and control well beyond the villa itself into the surrounding landscape. At Woodchester, for example, a perfectly straight access road (partly preserved as the modern village street, partly visible as a cropmark) extended the villa's monumentality for several kilometres. This monumental approach probably led past a series of family mausolea, indicated by the discovery of a sarcophagus now in the Stroud Museum (Clarke 1982:215). Visitors to Woodchester would have been acutely aware that they were entering the domain of a powerful individual long before they crossed the threshold into the villa itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion the study of Roman period rural society through architecture has suffered from an excessively stereotyped view of both indigenous and Roman culture. In part, this has derived from the long standing neglect of non-villa rural sites and the practice of studying villa plans in isolation from the rest of the archaeological record. These particular failings are diminishing as the interests of excavators gradually becoming less biased, and the contribution of native cultures are more fully recognised. However there is a more fundamental problem with most approaches to the subject. There is a widespread tendency to view Roman period archaeology primarily in terms of a narrative history, chronicling the introduction of new elements into material culture. Though the term Romanisation is widely discredited (cf. Hingley 1996), analysis continues to be geared, first and foremost, to explaining the process of change, almost inevitably succumbing to the idea of progress. Diversity of settlement types between and within regions has remained a secondary consideration, even an irritating distraction. It has often been dismissed simply as failure to develop, either because of the population's poverty or sheer bloody-mindedness. Even where writers have argued that change in material culture is not matched by changes in social structure, as in the case of J.T. Smith, they are usually only reacting against this prevailing view, rather than setting a new agenda. To argue that the replacement of traditional round houses with villa architecture indicated either continuity or change is to tell only half the story. Villas were merely one element within a landscape, in most cases still dominated by a more traditional architecture, and our approach to the archaeology should reflect that.

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