TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference
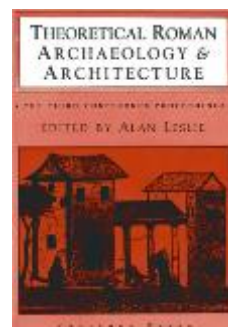## www.trac.org.uk

Architectural and social change during the Roman period

Simon Clarke

Recent examinations of the progress of acculturation within Roman-period Britain have become much more sophisticated in their views of information flow and cultural response. Firstly it has been noted that the adoption of Roman material culture does not imply a corresponding acceptance of Mediterranean-style social organisation. Of particular importance has been J. T. Smith's 1978 paper, which claimed to have identified positive evidence for continued Celtic family organisation within the villa architecture of Britain and Gaul. Since then most writers have worked from the assumption that the social structure of the British countryside remained basically that of the Late Iron Age, except where solid evidence existed to the contrary. Secondly it is now widely recognised that society was not monolithic, and that acculturation would proceed at different rates for different social groups. It is only a small extension of such logic to accept that the pace of change would vary for different aspects of an individual's life, particularly between public and private life. Here I wish to consider the implications of the adoption of Roman architecture in the private sphere both in the major urban centre

of Cirencester and its rural hinterland.

WHO OWNED VILLAS?

The clear spatial distribution of villas around Roman towns was first noted by Rivet (1955). The explanation for this phenomenon has remained a matter for debate. Economic explanations have concentrated on the demand for produce to support the urban population, which is seen as having stimulated a cash-crop economy in the countryside. Such models saw villas as the residences of entrepreneurs who had invested their profits in a Roman-style house (e.g. Rivet 1969). Socio-political explanations of the distribution have interpreted villas as the country homes of an élite participating in urban-based political activity (Branigan 1977). Recognising that not all urban centres saw the same development of villas in their hinterlands, Hodder and Millett (1980) developed two statistical indices to measure the decline in villa density with distance from the town. In simple terms the tests appear to show that in most cases the character of villa distribution around towns reflects not the size of the economic market, but the town's political attributes. For the province as a whole this suggests that villa location was governed by access to the political rather than economic aspects of the city. However, the statistics for villa density around Cirencester suggest it was completely atypical of public cities. The qualitative reasons for this result are not difficult to identify. Hodder and Millett's tests assumed that villas were centred on towns and were intended to find out why. But the distribution of villas in the region of Gloucester and Cirencester was not at its most dense in area of the towns, but rather between them, clustering around two Iron-Age oppida, Bagendon and Minchinhampton. It therefore seems highly probable that most villas not only represent a political élite, but also that this élite was descended from that of the late pre-Roman period.

MULTIPLE PROPRITORSHIP AS PROPOSED BY J. T. SMITH

If the residents of villas were indeed natives of Britain, J. T. Smith argued that their social and economic arrangements should still be manifest as deviations from the classical architectural ideal (Smith 1978). In particular Smith felt that the Celtic practices of partible inheritance and the holding of property in common by several nuclear families would lead to what he called multiple proprietorship. According to Smith the presence within a

single villa of two or more family groups was evidenced by such features as the duplication of bath facilities or entranceways and recurring patterns of rooms or even their symmetry about the central axis of the building. The arrangement of courtyards in irregular configurations, in Smith's view, indicated that the residents of each wing were expressing their independence by their failure to arrange themselves at right angles to the end block (see fig. 1).

THE EXTENDED FAMILY

In an earlier paper (1990) I was happy to reject most of these minor deviations from classical architectural as evidence for multiple proprietorship (Clarke 1990, 342). However, where specialist functions such as bath suites were duplicated, as at Chedworth, I could only argue that the phenomenon was numerically insignificant and therefore unsuitable as evidence for the social structure of villa society as a whole (Clarke 1990, 341). But let us accept that such features do indicate the presence of distinct family groups within a single house. Would this represent a major deviation from social practice in the core region of the Roman empire? The Roman 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 sense it meant the estate and included everything and everyone under the control of the household head. It included 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, aunts, and cousins etc. However this should not be misunderstood. A son was not freed from obligation to the family when he came of age or even at the time of his marriage, except by the express will of the family head (Gardner and Wiedemann 1991, 3). Hingley in his consideration of the Roman household, carefully avoided the term extended family, which he characterised as the typical Celtic family type (Hingley 1989, 7). Sjoberg (1960, 157), however, leaves us in no doubt. He 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 wives and children of the latter and perhaps other relatives such as widowed daughters or sisters of the family head, as well as numerous servants. While in Sjoberg's view the realisation of such an ideal was a luxury of the rich it was also an essential ingredient of their success. It prevented the dissipation of their power in the break up of

0 _____ 30 m

N ←——+——→

m - Mosaic

Misaligned Entrance

Unit One

Unit Three

Courtyard Arranged
at Non-Right Angles

Bath Block

Unit Two

Bath Block

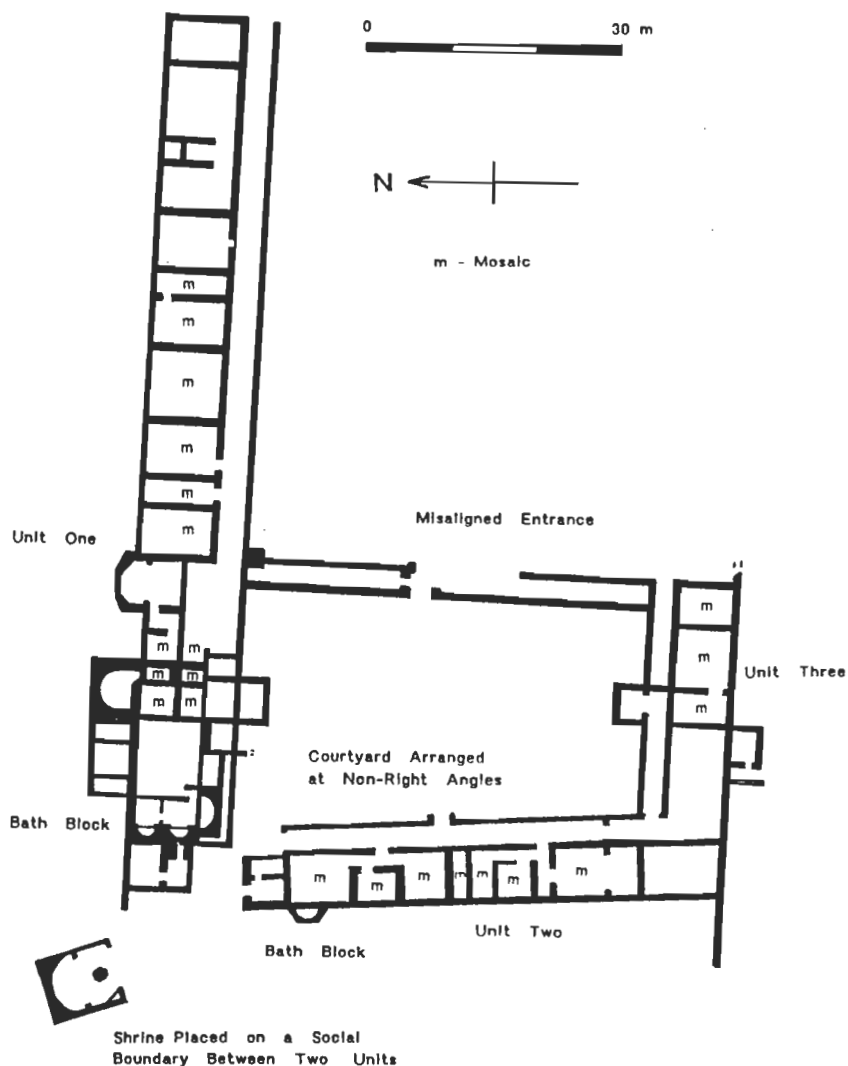Shrine Placed on a Social
Boundary Between Two Units

Figure 1. Multiple proprietorship at Chedworth villa after Smith.

property and ensured a ready supply of family members to fill key polit-
ical, educational, and religious posts within society (Sjoberg 1960, 157). If
we accept that this is a realistic view of the Roman élite family, then the

adoption of Roman architecture by the Celtic élite would have caused neither major social change nor the need to modify the Roman model to fit the existing social structure.

ARCHITECTURE AS A REFLECTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND NATURE

Rippengal (1993) has also rejected Smith's model. He criticised it as being an over simplistic equation of the arrangement of space with social structure. He did feel however that the character of the dwelling had a more fundamental relevance, reflecting mankind's relationship not only with society but with the whole of nature. In his view architecture was a reflection of its two functions: as *hus*, the Germanic word for shelter, and as the Latin *domus*, man's domain, a symbol of conquest over nature. Rippengal felt that classical and native architectural styles betrayed a fundamentally different view of their position within the cosmos. The native round house was in his view an acceptance of nature, its circular form being in some way more organic than the straight lines and right angles of classical design. He also considered the materials used to be more natural, with timbers being used in their raw state, unsquared and without even their bark and sap wood removed. A winged-corridor villa in contrast represented a declaration of conquest over nature, being far more permanent and using what Rippengal describes as less natural methods and materials: fired-clay tiles, squared masonry and timbers, etc. He also detected a desire on the part of the residents to distance themselves from what little elements of nature remained: stone and wood was concealed behind a layer of painted plaster, while even elemental fire was hidden from sight by means of the hypocaust (Rippengal 1993, 93–97). In my view Rippengal is guilty of presenting an even more stereotyped image of Roman and native than Smith. There is nothing natural about Iron-Age construction techniques. The circle is no less an accurate geometric form than the rectangle, and the orientation of door-ways towards the south-east at many sites is clearly not casual. Some of the timber used in building round houses was obtained not from wild wood but from coppice, where they were grown specially for the job. Nor were beaten-earth floors and daub-covered walls intrinsically more nat-ural than concrete and plaster. The adoption of the villa form represented not dominion over nature but a desire to express solidarity with the élite of the rest of the Roman empire.

VILLAS AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Even if the villa does not imply a fundamental change in the relationship
with life, the universe, and everything, most would feel it likely that such
a radical change in architecture held serious implications for human rela-
tionships within the household. Eleanor Scott (1990, 160) has noted that
the marshalling of rooms behind a corridor greatly enhanced the ability
of a family head to control contacts with the outside world. In contrast,
any visitor to a round house would have had immediate access to every-
one present. However, to concentrate on a single building is to take a
very restricted view of architecture. A more holistic approach is offered
by Rapoport, who has noted that the house was only part of a build en-
vironment, which consisted of both indoor and outdoor activity settings
and routes between them. In theory there is no boundary to the area that
should be taken into consideration (Rapoport 1990, 1). The isolation of a
single building has encouraged us to compare villas with many rooms
with simple round houses and conclude that there was a fundamental
revision of the use of space. In fact, round houses were mostly small;
those at Danebury were mainly six or seven metres across (Cunliffe 1983,
104), those at Claydon Pike eight metres across (Miles and Palmer 1983).
The upper end of the size range is represented by the largest round house
at Crickley Hill, with a fifteen metre diameter (Dixon 1988). If we use a
twelve metre wide round house as our model for a typical Iron-Age
building a great villa like Woodchester should be compared with not one,
but forty such structures. A modest villa such as that at Hucclecote had
the floor area of about three round houses (see fig. 2). Cunliffe noted that
the households at Danebury were probably made up of groups of huts,
those with hearths serving the cooking requirements of those without
(Cunliffe 1983, 105). If we compare a villa with an Iron-Age settlement set
within an enclosure and accessible via a single entrance, the difference
between the use of space in the two settlement types begins to look more
significant in technological rather than sociological terms.

DEVELOPMENTS OVER TIME

If the adoption of the Roman-style house by the British élite had little
significance to the structure of the family or its relationship to the world
beyond, what significance did it have? Luxury houses certainly repres-
ented massive expenditure. Unless the élite class was greatly increasing
its income, villas and town houses must have signified a change in the

Hucclecote

Cirencester   Insula xii

Woodchester

◯ Largest Crickley Hill Round House

◯ Typical Claydon Pike Round House

○ Typical Danebury Round House

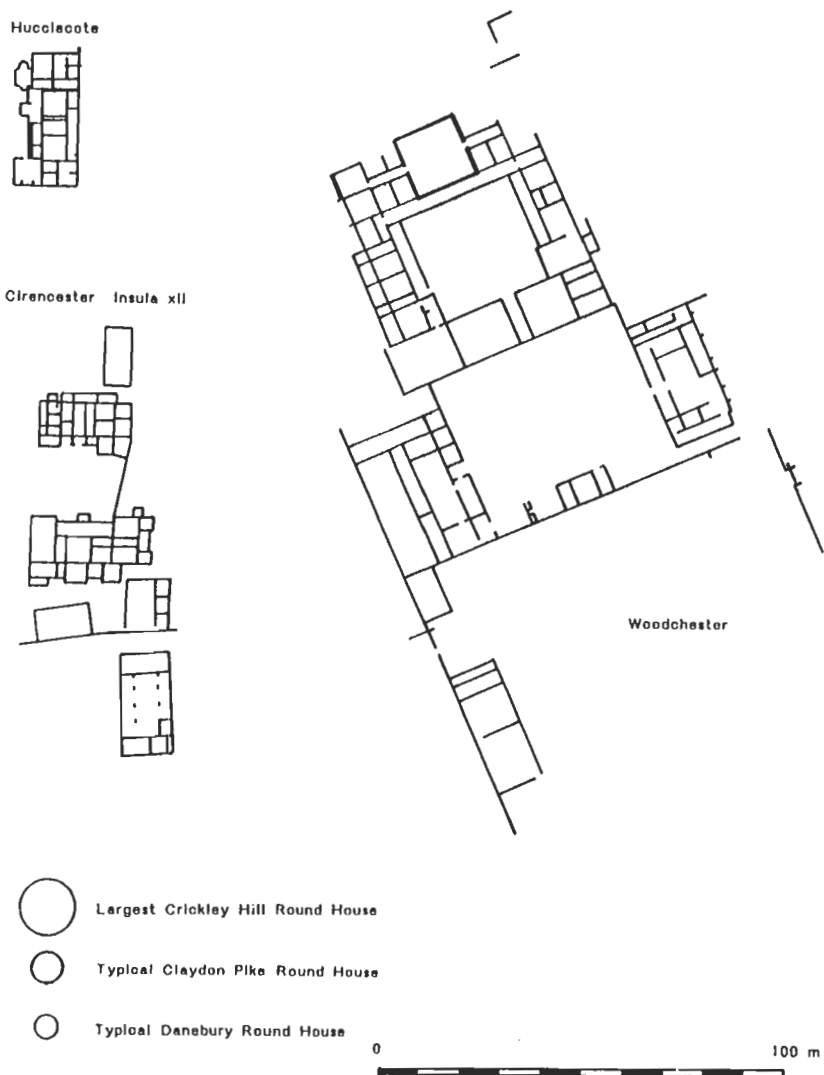0   100 m

Figure 2. Roman houses and Iron-Age huts: a comparison of scale.

pattern of spending. It is therefore worth quickly reviewing the sequence
of villa developments.

The first villas appeared in Britain rapidly after its entry into the

Roman empire. The so-called proto-palace at Fishbourne was built in the late 50s or early 60s (Cunliffe 1971). The first indications of villas in the Dobunni region are neither as impressive nor as well documented, but nevertheless indicated the adoption of a highly Romanised architectural style very soon after conquest. Ditches villa, in the parish of North Cerney, had certainly been built by the end of the third quarter of the first century. Although without mosaics or elaborate under-floor heating, this half-timbered building possessed a well-developed ground plan and plenty of indications of luxury in the form of *opus signinum* floors, painted plaster, and a rich collection of imported goods (Trow and James 1988, 83). More luxurious, but not quite as early, was Woodchester villa, originating in the late first or early second century. Even at this early stage it possessed an impressive array of rooms, provided with such luxuries as imported marble veneers (Clarke 1982, 217). Such sites, however, were exceptional. Few sites in the Cotswolds merit the title villa before the late second century, even though a fair proportion were occupied from the earlier roman period and a few show signs of continuous occupation from the Iron Age. The number of villas that can be shown to have been occupied reached a peak in the early fourth century, about the same period as most villas, including Woodchester, entered their most luxurious phase.

The construction and development of the largest and most elaborately decorated houses at Cirencester itself seems to follow a similar pattern with relatively modest private buildings being the norm until the end of the third and early fourth century. There certainly were earlier luxury houses, for example building 2 in *insula* XI, which dated to the late first or early second century and was equipped with a mosaic and painted plaster walls (McWhirr 1986, 247). Yet in terms of scale and sheer numbers, these early examples were eclipsed by buildings that were demonstrably occupied in the fourth century, for example the villa-like complex in *insula* XII (McWhirr 1986, 21–70).

Closer examination of both Cirencester and surrounding villa sites using modern excavation techniques would certainly reveal more examples of early luxury dwellings. Giles Clarke's re-examination of Woodchester, a site originally excavated in the late eighteenth century by Lysons, is a case in point (Clarke 1982). Similarly, the failure to penetrate the lower stratigraphy of Cirencester, due to the great depth of remains and the reluctance of excavators to destroy mosaics and monumental architecture, which might have concealed earlier remains, has certainly left the later period over-represented. However, I believe, for this region

at least, that the luxury house was a phenomenon that did not develop fully until the late Roman period.

In contrast, the other great architectural development of the Roman period, public buildings, in particular the forum-basilica complexes, were primarily a feature of the early Roman period. Unlike at Silchester, where the forum-basilica complex is given over to industrial purposes in the late Roman period (Fulford 1985), or Wroxeter, where it is burnt down and not replaced (Wacher 1974, 383). But it saw only relatively minor changes to its fabric, so that major capital outlay was confined to the early Roman period, often linking it with a failure of towns and the flight of capital to the countryside (Reece 1980). In fact, late Roman Cirencester saw a great deal of investment, but in the construction of private residences not public buildings. We need not talk in terms of the failure of the Roman institution of urbanism. In one sense the provision of public amenities by the great and the good was a continuation of the Iron-Age tradition of the disposal of surplus wealth in acts of public generosity. The movement of expenditure towards the private sphere could be interpreted as the triumph of the concept of private property, with the élite feeling fully justified in spending the wealth they had extracted from the community at large solely on themselves.

CONCLUSION

Many of the changes that Britain saw during the Roman period continue to be interpreted in the light of a stereotyped image of both Celtic and Roman. I believe that the power base and family structure of the élite in both lowland Britain and the core region of the Roman empire were broadly compatible. Romanisation of building style need not imply major social change. The provision of public amenities such as *fora* could be interpreted as an extension of Iron-Age patterns of wealth disposal. Similarly the widespread adoption of villas or their counterparts in towns need not represent major changes in the structure of the élite family structure. However, what we have though of as one process, the adoption of Roman material culture by the élite, was something that developed and changed considerably over time. Public works were primarily a feature of the early Roman period, well before villas reached their peak. This represents a major shift in the balance between public and private spheres of life and a change in the attitude of the élite to their wealth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barker, P. A. 1979. The last occupation on the site of the baths basilica at Wroxeter. In P. J. Casey 1979 (ed.), *The End of Roman Britain*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (British Series 71).

Branigan, Keith 1977. *The Roman Villa in South-West England*. Bradford-on-Avon: Moonraker.

Casey, P. J. (ed.) 1979. *The End of Roman Britain*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (British Series 71).

Clarke, G. 1982. The Roman villa at Woodchester. *Britannia* 13, 197–228.

Clarke, Simon 1990. The social significance of villa architecture in Celtic north west Europe. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 9 (3), 337–353.

Cunliffe, B. 1971. *Excavations at Fishbourne 1961 to 1969*. London: Society of Antiquaries of London.

Cunliffe, B. 1983. *Danebury: Anatomy of an Iron Age Hillfort*. London: Batsford.

Dixon, P. 1988. Crickley Hill 1969–1987. *Current Archaeology* 11, 730–78.

Fulford, M. G. 1985. Excavations on the site of the amphitheatre and forum basilica at Silchester, Hampshire: an interim report. *The Antiquaries Journal* (1985), 39–81.

Gardner, F. J. and T. Wiedemann 1991. The *Roman Household: a Sourcebook*. London: Routledge.

Hingley, Richard 1989. *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain*. London: Seaby.

Hodder, I. and M. Millett 1980. Romano-British villas and towns, a systematic analysis. *World Archaeology* 12, 69–76.

McWhirr, A. (ed.) 1986. *The Houses of Roman Cirencester*. Cirencester: Cirencester Excavation Committee, Corinium Museum.

Miles, D. and S. Palmer 1983. Claydon Pike. *Current Archaeology* 8, 88–91.

Rapoport, A. 1990. Systems of activity and systems of settings. In S. Kent (ed.), *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space*, 9–20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reece, R. 1980. Town and country: the end of Roman Britain. *World Archaeology* 12, 77–92.

Rippengal, R. 1993. Villas as the key to social structure: some comments on recent approaches to the Romano-British villa and some suggestions towards an alternative. In E. Scott (ed.), *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: First Conference Proceedings*, 79–101. Aldershot: Avebury.

Rivet, A. L. F. 1955. The distribution of villas in Roman Britain. *Archaeology Newsletter* 6, 29–34.

Rivet, A. L. F. (ed.) 1969. *The Roman Villa in Britain*. London: Routledge.

Scott, Eleanor 1990. Romano-British villas and the social construction of

space. In Ross Samson (ed.), *The Social Archaeology of Houses*, 149–172. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Sjoberg, G. 1990. *The Pre-Industrial City*. New York.

Smith, J. T. 1978. Villas as a key to social structure. In Malcolm Todd (ed.), *Studies in the Romano-British Villa*, 149–156. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

Trow, S. and S. James 1988. Ditches villa, North Cerney: an example of locational conservattism in the early Roman Cotswolds. In Keith Branigan and David Miles (eds), *Villa Economies: Aspects of Romano-British Villas*, 83–87. Sheffield: John Collis.

Wacher, J. 1974. *The Towns of Roman Britain*. London: Batsford.