

APPROACHES TO THE INVESTIGATION, ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION OF WORK ON ROMANO-BRITISH RURAL SETTLEMENTS AND LANDSCAPES

A REVIEW

PAPER 5: THE RECOVERY, REPORTING AND ANALYSIS OF ARTEFACTS

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1. Introduction

1.1 This section is concerned with the recovery and reporting on all types of artefacts other than pottery (discussed separately by Timby in Paper 4), ranging from dress accessories and coins to more prosaic objects such as iron nails and stone tools. As with the other aspects of commercial archaeology discussed above, there is considerable variation concerning the ways through which artefacts are recovered and reported on in archaeological reports, published or otherwise. Whilst at the level of the individual report this may not always be recognised as a problem, the wide variation can pose serious challenges for those interested in comparing artefacts across sites and regions. There is, in particular, a need for considerably greater consistency, especially concerning the full quantification of artefact assemblages, and this is of fundamental importance if we are to capitalise on and extract maximum value from the artefacts excavated from Romano-British sites.

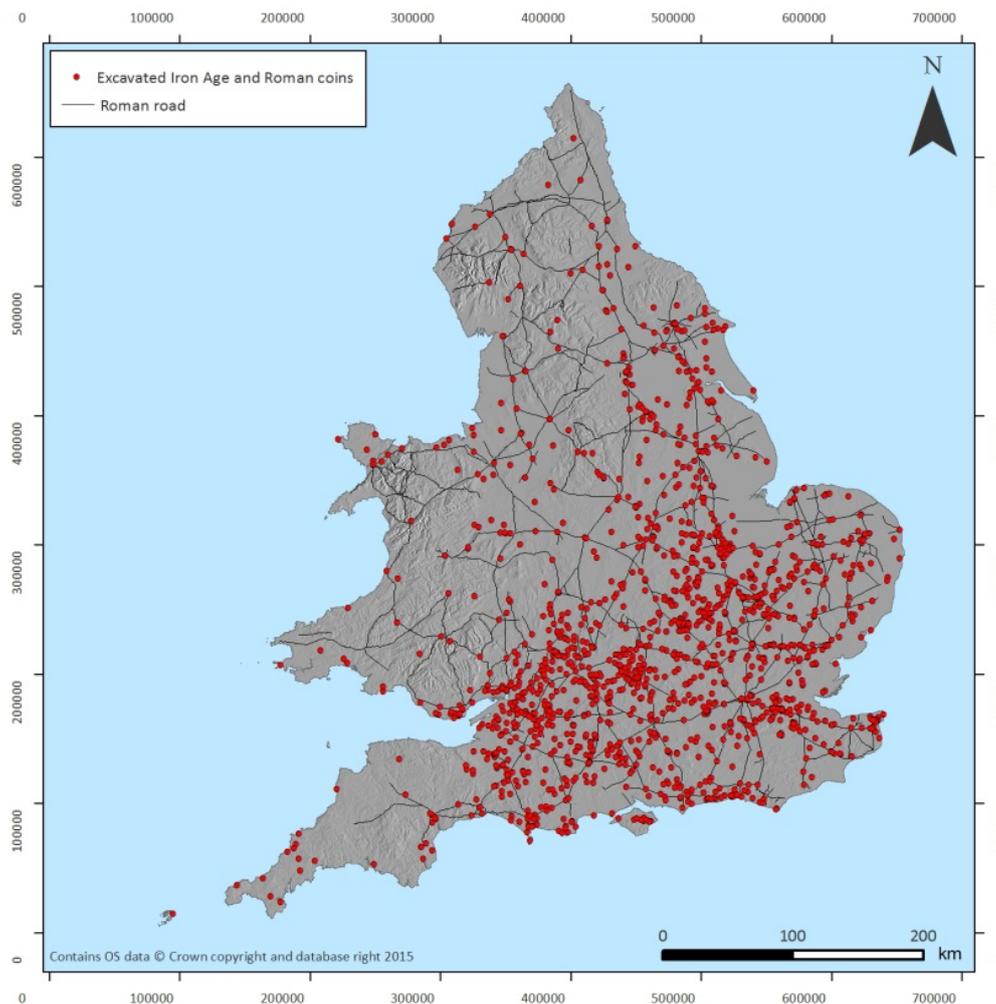


Figure 1: The geographical distribution of coins recovered from excavated sites

2. Artefact Recovery

2.1 The wide variability in the rate at which artefacts are recovered from Romano-British sites has been referred to by Holbrook in Paper 2; this is amply demonstrated by the distribution of coins recovered from rural settlements (Fig. 1), and a long-recognised emphasis on the south and east is evident. The distribution partly reflects a far greater level of intensity in terms of archaeological investigations in the south and east, but it is also without doubt, a genuine representation of the extent to which different forms of material culture circulated in the Roman period. There may also, however, be an element of investigation bias in the distribution which goes beyond the obvious emphasis on the south and east in terms of the sheer number of investigations which have taken place. The use of a metal detector as part of the field investigation can have a considerable impact on the number of metal objects recovered. For instance, coins were recovered from 44% of the sites recorded by the RRSP project in general, yet of the 297 (8%) sites where a metal detector was specified as being a component of the investigation strategy this rose to 88%.

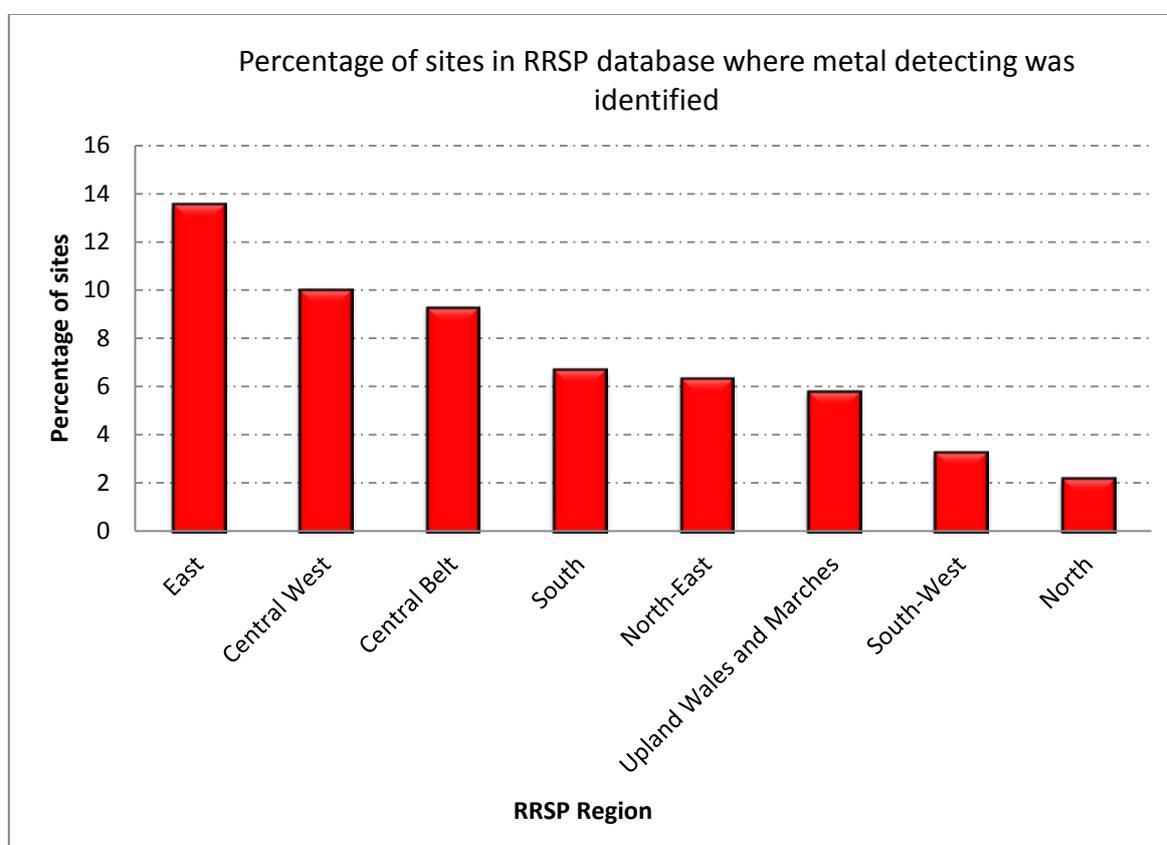


Figure 2: Regional variation in the use of metal detectors on archaeological investigations

2.2 These statistics merit some qualification. Firstly, metal-detector use was not consistently recorded by the RRSP team from the outset of the project, partly because it is not always made clear in site reports whether or not a metal detector has been used, and it seems likely that there are greater numbers of sites where a metal detector was used and which coins were not recovered. Secondly, there seems to be considerable regional variation in terms of the employment of metal detectors during archaeological investigations, and it is of note that the geographical distribution of sites where metal detector use appears to be most common correlates in broad terms with the areas in which metal artefacts may be considered most likely to be recovered (Fig. 2). Given the pressure on resources in commercial archaeology the omission of metal detecting from sites in the north, for instance, may seem justifiable, although it of course increases the likelihood that, even if metal objects are present at a rural

settlement in the north, they are less likely to be recovered than those in the south. This is of importance because if coins or other metal objects are present at rural settlements in the north (or south-west, or Wales) they are arguably of increased significance than were they to be recovered in the south or east. Although far more common at military sites, it is of note that metal artefacts such as coins and brooches sometimes *are* recovered from rural sites in the north, however infrequently, and such discoveries are of fundamental importance for contributing to our understanding of various aspects of the rural economy, social status, identity and native/military interaction in such areas.

3. Quantification

3.1 A significant challenge for anyone seeking to compare artefacts at the inter-site level concerns quantification. Efforts to understand variation in the frequency of all classes of object are seriously undermined by a lack of a comparable measure of frequency between sites. It should go without saying that basic numerical quantification of all objects recovered should be regarded as a minimum requirement, although too often this is not the case. For instance, examining a sample of 679 recent reports from sites reported on between 2010 and 2015, reports for 67 sites (10%) either completely lacked information on finds or did not provide sufficiently detailed information or quantification of artefacts. Whilst this is a small minority of reports, it represents a not insignificant reduction in the number of sites with artefacts which could otherwise contribute towards the studies of the geographical and social distribution of various types of artefacts included in the Roman Rural Settlement Project volumes. Where a report lacks finds information entirely it becomes impossible to consider how its artefactual assemblage compares to those from morphologically similar types of site, making it far more difficult to assess its status and the role it may have played in its local economy. Furthermore, it is then also unable to contribute to our broader understanding of the ways that material culture circulated across time, space and between different groups of people. Basic descriptive overviews of artefact assemblages, whilst better than nothing, are also of limited value. The frequency with which artefacts are recovered from different Romano-British rural settlements can vary immensely, even between sites located in close proximity, and the relative abundance of artefacts of all types can provide important insights into the function and status of individual settlements. However, without full, clear and accurately quantified catalogues of objects our ability to compare assemblages is hindered considerably. Consistency is also vital, and in order to be able to compare finds assemblages most effectively precise finds reporting needs to be extended to all types of objects, not just to coins, brooches and other artefacts of intrinsic interest, but also to more prosaic objects such as nails and unidentified pieces, of all materials. Basic counts and weights of such objects are valuable, yet need not always require the attention of specialists and could be undertaken by people with little training. Such quantification should be regarded as a minimum standard, yet, in addition, it would be of further benefit, as discussed by Holbrook in Paper 2, for finds reports to consistently present calculations of artefacts recovered by area investigated or, preferably, by m³ excavated, allowing for far more accurate comparison of object frequencies, at both the intra- and inter-site level.

3.2 It is critical that the methods of investigation are clearly set-out in the finds report; whether or not a metal-detector has been used on site, or whether an assemblage has been sieved, has an important impact on the rate of recovery of objects. The best finds reports note where a metal-detector has been used, and this can increase our confidence that certain sites, or particular parts of sites, produce genuinely low frequencies of coins or other metal artefacts (e.g. Taylor *et al.* 2013). It is also important to note whether iron objects have been x-rayed, as this can have profound implications for the identification of iron artefacts. Artefacts recovered from stratified contexts should be distinguished from those recovered from topsoil, either in a separate list or table, in order that those concerned with comparing frequencies can distinguish rapidly between them, and choose to include or omit these finds based on their own requirements.

3.3 Many Roman rural sites produce evidence for industrial processes such as iron working, and evidence for smithing and smelting is often discussed in site reports. However, whereas the total weight of iron slag is often presented, further quantified data are not always provided. The presence of hammerscale in environmental samples, for instance, is indicative of smithing on site, and whilst its presence is often noted, sometimes with an indication of relative abundance in different features, there are seldom efforts to quantify it more precisely, although there are of course exceptions (e.g. Brooks 2013). Given the varied approaches towards providing such information, it was impossible for the purposes of the Roman Rural Settlement Project to attempt to record anything other than the presence/absence of evidence for ironworking. More widespread and consistent approaches towards presentation of volumetric data for industrial waste such as iron slag and hammerscale (including the different types present), as is increasingly being argued for archaeobotanical assemblages (see Lodwick in Paper 7; Van der Veen and Jones 2006), would allow for far more meaningful assessments of the scale of metalworking which took place. A further issue regarding iron working specifically concerns the ways through which iron smelting and smithing sites are recognised and differentiated from one another. The presence of tap slags from shaft furnaces are widely regarded as the principal way of identifying smelting sites, with Roman period hearth bottoms typically seen as the products of smithing, not smelting. However, smithing hearth bottoms can be confused with the bottoms of bloom furnaces, and, as Allen has shown (2012; 2006), these features, usually thought of as being Iron Age, persisted in use into the Roman period. The assumption that plano-convex lumps of slag are derived from smithing and not smelting should be resisted until specialist scientific analysis of diagnostic slag indicates one way or the other. This is of considerable importance as if many potential bloom furnaces have erroneously been assumed to be smithing hearths we may be seriously underestimating the scale of Roman rural iron production.

4. Presentation

4.1 There are various ways through which finds reports are presented, and some are considerably more successful than others. The traditional approach - a brief summary followed by a list of artefacts presented by material-type, usually consigned to an appendix towards the end of the report - remains most common. In many respects this makes the most sense. Specialists in different types of materials or objects produce their own reports, and the structure of finds catalogues in such a way means that it is relatively straight forward for a specialist concerned with particular aspects of material culture to locate the aspects of a finds assemblage that they are looking for. However, such finds reports rarely make for compelling reading, and are usually off-putting for the non-specialist who wishes to learn about the site. At some Roman rural sites relatively small-finds assemblages may seem to be of fairly limited value for contributing towards the overall discussion of an individual site, and while it may seem unrealistic to expect a few nails and fragments of copper-alloy to contribute a great deal to the understanding of a site, infrequent finds can be as important for site interpretation as large assemblages, and the size of a finds assemblage, no matter how small, merits some interpretative discussion.

4.2 However, even where sizeable finds assemblages occur, these are too-often presented in unimaginative ways, with discussion of individual aspects of the finds assemblages limited to individual specialist reports. In shorter journal articles the decision is sometimes made to include a selection only of the more 'significant' or interesting finds. The value of such selective lists is questionable. There are other ways of presenting information on finds which make them accessible to a non-specialist reader, and some practitioners are considerably better than others at integrating finds into the broader interpretation of a site. Of note is Cool's overview of the finds assemblage from Catterick (2002), where the functional artefact groupings first proposed by Crummy (1983) was used successfully to consider a number of broad themes including 'what people looked like', 'what people did', 'what the insides of houses were like' and 'who/how people worshipped'. Such finds summaries do not replace

the need for specialist reports, yet they add value to them. This approach has been increasingly adopted by archaeological contractors and should be encouraged.

4.3 Given the costs associated with traditional forms of publication and the lack of available space in some regional archaeological journals it is increasingly difficult to justify inclusion of all specialist data, and in such cases an intelligent interpretative summary of the finds is arguably of more value than lists of objects, especially if the lists are selective, though it is critical that full specialist data be made available online. Such summaries should also be accompanied by tables which present basic quantifications of artefacts (number of objects and weight of bulk finds such as iron slag and ceramic building material, as a minimum), which enable the reader with a rapid glance to discern whether a visit to the digital archive is required, in order to access more detailed information. Whilst tabulation of data for large finds assemblages can be cumbersome, assigning objects to Crummy's functional categories (1983) (or a variation of this) allows large numbers of objects to be summarised effectively (see for instance Cool 2002, 25). However, where summarised reports are presented it remains crucial that full specialist data be made available and easily accessible through online repositories such as the ADS. It is also fundamental to ensure that such repositories be clearly signposted in reports and vital that links to any data provided elsewhere remain live and can be accessed in perpetuity. The increased dissemination of original data in such a way, as, for instance by Framework Archaeology 2009, for the Stansted Framework Project, which was deposited with ADS, is commendable, allowing the data to be searched and manipulated by subsequent researchers with ease.

5. Contextual Information

5.1 When objects are presented in a catalogue it currently remains difficult in many cases to identify the contexts from which objects are recovered. At worst, no contextual information is provided, and objects are presented as a list only, making it impossible to relate objects to dated features, although it must be said that this is rare, and most finds reports at least provide small-finds numbers, context and feature numbers. Although the provision of this information allows objects to be contextualised by the reader by cross-reference to the stratigraphic report, this can be painstaking work, and inclusion of a brief contextual description for each find is immensely useful (e.g. 'found in the fill of the 3rd century corn drier'). Clear information about the phase of the contexts from which objects were recovered is also invaluable for artefact catalogues, meaning that specialist researchers interested in the use and deposition of objects over time can gain access to this information rapidly without having to search through different sections of the full report. Reports with complex stratigraphy and multiple phases which separate finds reports and present them by phase are very useful, as the reader can immediately determine the broad date of the contexts of the finds (e.g. Cool 2007; 2013). The reader's ability to quickly ascertain the date of deposition of objects is of particular importance as it is becoming increasingly recognised that some types of objects could circulate for considerable periods of time, and may have been deposited much later than their date of manufacture (see, for instance, late 1st-century AD brooches recovered from late 4th-century contexts at Trethurgy, in Cornwall (Butcher 2004). While the best finds reports present this information, it seems likely that the lack of such useful detail in many reports is because the finds specialist dealing with the material may have been presented with small-finds, context and feature numbers, but not a stratigraphic report, and the provision of this information to specialists is of importance if finds reports are to be of maximum usability.

5.2 It is currently rare for small-finds to be summarised and tabulated by phase in the same way as is often undertaken for zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical assemblages, yet this can also be very useful for the reader to gain a rapid understanding of the temporal use of objects at individual sites. This would also help facilitate the creation of subsequent bodies of chronological artefact data, which could in the future lead to refined understandings of temporal changes in artefact use than is currently possible. The presentation of summarised

functional categories of finds by phase is sometimes undertaken very successfully (e.g. Cool 2007; 1998; Powell 2010) and there seems little reason why the practice should not become more widespread.

6. Specifics

6.1 The extensive range of types of objects (and materials) in use during the Roman period precludes detailed discussion here of the specifics of recording objects in finds reports. Furthermore, the range of different types of objects and the variability amongst them makes it inevitable that the identification, description and interpretation of their function will involve a certain degree of subjectivity. This is amply demonstrated by the study of brooches, and the variability seen in this common type of object can make it difficult to assign classifications to them. This issue is compounded by the existence of differing typologies, principally those of Hull and Mackreth. Hull's full typology remains unpublished (although Nina Crummy continues to work on bringing this to print), yet it has been adopted by many specialists and disseminated through the work of Bayley and Butcher (2004). Mackreth was prolific, and was responsible for many commercial brooch reports. His typology (2011) is complex and can be difficult to use, although his volume contains such a large number of illustrated brooches that it remains a vital resource. Both typologies have merits and problems in equal measure, and this paper is not the place to argue for the adoption of one over the other, yet the existence of multiple typologies and the lack of consistency in terms of the classification of brooches can make it very difficult to compare brooches at the inter-site level. As such, along with clear quantification and description of objects, it remains important to provide clearly referenced parallels for artefacts wherever possible, and to present high quality illustrations of the objects being described, to allow specialists and researchers to check classifications and reclassify for their own purposes if necessary.

6.2 Regarding coins, in 2004 Brickstock produced guidance on the minimum standard for the production of Roman coin reports for projects funded by English Heritage (now Historic England). Whilst Brickstock's guidance, with each coin catalogued with full numismatic details and references, remains the ideal standard, which can be fully utilised by archaeologists and numismatists alike, it is fair to say that such standards are not always achieved for published coin reports produced for the commercial sector. Now that digital dissemination is increasing the production of full digital coin catalogues is desirable, although so long as they are easily accessible via the internet and clearly signposted, inclusion in published site reports is unnecessary. However, basic tabulated quantification of coins by date (e.g. Reece periods) and denomination (including any contemporary copies) remains essential.

6.3 It is also important to incorporate discussion of coins into a site report. That coins as site finds have a value which goes beyond their use as tools for dating features is now well recognised, and the increased use of applied numismatics has meant that coins are increasingly being used as an aid towards site characterisation. The extent to which such interpretative discussion is included is variable, although the practice of presenting lists of coins with little or no discussion has become less-common. Informed specialist analysis, comparing coin profiles with those recovered from other sites (e.g. Booth 2010; Guest 2008) can lead to a far better understanding of a site's character, status, function and role within the economy. Comparison with local, regional and national patterns of coin loss at other sites is essential if coins are to be used to interpret the nature of activity at a settlement. It is surprising to find that some coin reports continue to explain coin loss at the site-level without consideration of broader regional and provincial trends in coin loss, leading to potentially flawed interpretations of levels of activity at sites. For instance 'The coins, if used as an indicator of presence on or near the site, suggest that low-level activity was present in the 2nd century with a peak of activity from the mid-3rd century to the later 4th century, with a

possible hiatus in the late 3rd century' (Meadows 2012). Such a statement only really describes the general pattern of coin loss at most rural sites in the region of the excavated site. As with other aspects of the material culture assemblage, the contribution of coins to the interpretation of a site will depend on the size of the assemblage, yet negative evidence is nevertheless worthy of comment, especially given the broad patterns of rural coin loss which have begun to emerge through the work of the Roman Rural Settlement Project, which will form a useful basis for comparison (Brindle forthcoming).

7. Conclusion

7.1 As with the other excavated material discussed in this paper, the principal issue concerning the recovery and reporting of small finds in the commercial archaeological environment regards consistency. Greater consistency is needed regarding the way in which objects are recovered, and increased use of metal detectors to aid in the retrieval of metal artefacts, particularly from the topsoil, should be encouraged in all regions, so that sites from different areas can be more reliably compared. Greater consistency is also required in terms of the ease with which contextual and chronological information about finds can be gleaned from reports, and whereas this information can be extracted rapidly and with ease from some, from others it can be a time-consuming, difficult and frustrating process. The very nature of artefact-studies means that their analysis and interpretation is often subjective and open to interpretation, and it is inevitable that there will be interpretative and typological differences in the ways that they are recorded. Yet consistency in the ways through which they are presented, discussed and illustrated in commercial archaeological reports is necessary if we are to improve our ability to compare different types of objects across different sites and across different regions. Most importantly of all, consistent approaches towards the quantification of artefacts are badly needed. It is imperative that basic data on the numbers of finds (of all types and materials – even those deemed mundane) is provided in reports so that sites can effectively and meaningfully be compared with one another. Such information continues to be omitted from far too many reports. Our ability to undertake comparative analysis is also currently hindered by a lack of consistency regarding the presentation of information about the area excavated, the proportion of features sampled and the volume of earth shifted. These details should not be difficult to provide, yet their provision would have a profound impact on our ability to compare material from different sites in the future.

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