

Using a current archaeological research framework (regional or thematic), contextualise and synthesise data and results from an agreed archaeological project.

Research frameworks are an integral part of archaeological research as they: summarise our current understanding of the archaeology, identify gaps in our knowledge, provide questions in order to fill these gaps, and provide a strategy to carry out research (Historic England, n.d.). These frameworks should be referenced when carrying out archaeological research (whether desk-based or field-based) to discuss the significance of the archaeology, provide wider context to the site, and allow for targeted project aims.

The implementation of research frameworks across England has faced barriers in terms of funding, especially so in recent years (Belford, 2020, p. 362), and a review of research frameworks found that many were not up to date, or contained too much or too little information (Tait, 2014, pp. 8–9). While it is intended that archaeological projects use the relevant regional framework, this is not always the case with the review finding that only 68% of respondents considered themselves to be ‘users’ of research frameworks (Tait, 2014, p. 24). This essay will take one such project, where a research framework was not used or applied, and apply it to the framework.

The archaeological project chosen for this project is an excavation in Newport Pagnell (Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire) in 2006. In summary, the site uncovered a continuous settlement from the late Iron Age through the late Roman period (late 4th century) with a potentially continuous Anglo-Saxon settlement in the form of a sunken-featured building, and a post-medieval ridge and furrow field system. This essay will focus primarily on the Roman settlement and the transitional periods on either side. The relevant research framework is the Solent-Thames Research Framework which was published in 2014 following an initial project design in 2005 (Hey and Hind, 2014, p. 3); as such there was no research framework available when outlining the project design, or the post-excavation report. The project report does not mention any aims or objectives – merely that it was carried out as a condition of a residential planning proposal (Morris, 2007, p. 1).

Rural Roman settlement in and around Milton Keynes has been well-documented (Fulford, 2014, p. 163), and provide good chronologies which is mirrored with this site. The site in question has a detailed chronology stretching from the start of the site in the early 1st Century AD to the decline of the settlement in the late 4th Century AD (Morris, 2007, p. 48). This chronology was determined primarily through stratigraphy and pottery dating (Morris, 2007, pp. 20–22). The pottery from the site puts its initial settlement as Late Iron Age or early Roman (Morris, 2007, p. 19), and the presence of two roundhouses support this; this would suggest that the settlement originated in the late Iron Age. The transition from Iron Age to Roman is relatively unclear as the south-east had been trading with the Roman Empire prior to the conquest and local wares continued to be produced after the conquest (Fulford, 2014, p. 157). Absolute dating of the artefacts and ecofacts from this period could help in determining how far tradition was continued into the Roman period.

As mentioned in the research framework there is a lack of understanding in the claylands regarding Roman settlement patterns and the economy (Fulford, 2014, p. 181). Given the prominence of Roman settlement within this site there is prime opportunity to research the

development of the settlement over the four identified Roman periods and place it into the wider context of rural Roman settlement as identified in the research framework (Fulford, 2014). The site began in the 1st Century AD with a series of roundhouses, which have been truncated by later features, a linear ditch acting as a primary division of the landscape with several additional ditches, perpendicular to the primary ditch, setting out a field system (Morris, 2007, pp. 7–9). Regarding the economy, the animal bone remains and plant macrofossil remains recovered from these features would suggest that the land formed part of a pastoral economy and was used as grazing for cattle (Morris, 2007, p. 9), though the quantity of animal bone recovered from this phase of settlement is not enough to further suggest the type of economy or diet of the population (Morris, 2007, p. 35). Had this site been more fruitful regarding animal bone from this time period it would have fit well into the discussion surrounding agrarian regimes in the resource assessment (Fulford, 2014, p. 164).

The second phase of settlement dates from the late 1st Century to the early 2nd Century where the evidence suggests a transition to the large-scale processing of cattle and other herd animals. This phase of the site fit in well with the information presented in the framework which states that the hierarchy of animals represented in faunal assemblages within the region is: cattle, sheep, pig, domestic fowl (Fulford, 2014, p. 167), meaning that site supports the current evidence. As the site is rural it provides a good opportunity to follow the frameworks suggestion of using “similar analytical approaches” (Fulford, 2014, p. 167) to allow for the comparison of urban and rural sites. Also, given the long habitation of the site with the same trade it would be an appropriate site for further analysis into breed improvement and their relation to the status of the producer which is highlighted in the research agenda as an objective (Fulford, 2014, p. 180). Regarding the economy; ageing of the mandibles of the cattle indicates that they were primarily reared for meat with the older cattle likely represent surplus or worn out plough oxen or breeding/milking cows (Morris, 2007, pp. 36, 66). The site also has evidence of sheep being kept for meat (with the possibility of milk) as opposed to wool, with a single goat likely being kept for milk. As the majority of the animals here were being kept for meat, it is probable that the inhabitants were rearing the animals to sell as meat, likely in a nearby town such as Magiovinium and Lactodorum or perhaps Durocobrivius as these are urban centres located nearby along Watling Street (Morris, 2007, pp. 4, 56, 2007, fig. 3) and would also allow for the assessment of the “relative importance of north-south routes” as highlighted in the agenda (Fulford, 2014, p. 184).

In the third phase, mid-late 3rd Century into the fourth the cattle processing appeared to stay largely the same but also progressed into small-scale bronze casting with pieces of a small crucible and a mould that would have been for either a brooch or horse harness fittings (Morris, 2007, pp. 32, 48), and while there is nothing specific about Roman bronze casting in the agenda it could be used to contribute to two objectives in particular: the publication of well-dated assemblages, and the “exploitation” of PAS (Portable Antiquities Scheme) to aid in the understanding of variations of material culture within the region (Fulford, 2014, p. 182). While the latter aim is aimed at finds submitted to the PAS (often through metal-detecting), it would be beneficial to combine the finds from excavations such as this to a database as this would allow for easier analysis of the material culture of the region, especially regarding metalwork.

There was one inhumation discovered on the site, along with a single mandible. The inhumation dates to the late Roman period, and has been identified as male older than 40 years (Morris, 2007, p. 40). The research framework makes specific reference to further analysis of cemeteries but not lone burials from rural sites. However, as the burial is the only evidence of mortuary practice from the site and its unusual pattern of being in within the enclosures of the site it should warrant further analysis. There is a reference to non-villa settlement and burial practices in the research agenda but this is in reference to areas of chalk-based geology (Fulford, 2014, p. 180) however the site in question is clay and limestone (Morris, 2007, p. 2), although this should not preclude the site from study relating to this as the agenda for clay and limestone is more about the general characterisation of the specific areas relating to settlement patterns as these areas have a lower understanding of the archaeology (Fulford, 2014, p. 181). It is unknown if there was a villa associated with the site as there was no evidence of settlement with the excavation area, though based on location of the finds it is presumed that the main area of occupation was located to the north of the excavation area (Morris, 2007, p. 47). Furthermore assessment of the pottery regarding the fineware/specialist wares would suggest that the site was more associated with that of a small agricultural community (Morris, 2007, p. 22) and would therefore be unlikely to have had a villa which would make this site important for further study under the research agenda. The animal bone evidence would also suggest that there was not a villa associated with the site as there is an absence of deer which is a common feature of Roman farmstead sites (Morris, 2007, p. 36).

As mentioned previously, this site provides continuity from the Roman period to the Anglo-Saxon period though, again it is unclear if it was genuine continuity or there was a brief pause in occupation. The transitional period from the Romans to the Anglo-Saxon's is one that has been highlighted in the research agenda as requiring further study. This site would be able to contribute answers to some of these questions; one such question would be investigating the assumed continuity of the Roman occupation and the Anglo-Saxon occupation. This chronology becomes less clear during the transitional phases, particularly so during the transition into the Anglo-Saxon period partly due to the lack of Anglo-Saxon features in the excavation area (only one sunken-featured building was identified with others predicted to be south of the excavation area (Morris, 2007, p. 16)) and the relatively small assemblage of pottery. The Saxon pottery from this site dates from AD450 to AD850 but it is unclear whether this is from continuous settlement or a later reoccupation (Morris, 2007, pp. 45–46); this would be complemented by the aforementioned radiocarbon dating of Anglo-Saxon features, which would potentially aid in the aim of dating the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlement (Dodd and Crawford, 2014, p. 228). The Anglo-Saxon finds from the site do not appear as to be particularly useful in the identification of continuity of occupation or a later reoccupation given their broad date range, though the pottery from this region is highlighted in the research agenda as requiring better definition and dating (Dodd and Crawford, 2014, p. 228) which this site could contribute to through the use of absolute dating on the pottery itself and the ecofacts from the correlating samples. The use of scientific/absolute dating would enable a greater probability for the dating of transitional sites and possibly allow for further chronologies to be established.

In conclusion, the project would have benefitted from having targeted aims and objectives that could have guided the project and would have provided something for which analysis

could be based on. The research framework provides specific questions that could have been assessed throughout this project, and while the research framework had not been published when this project was carried out, it is still worth noting. Additionally, while the project had a chapter on the archaeological background of the site it could have been bought up in the discussion more, more in depth and relevant to the archaeology excavated. Overall, given that the project was carried out prior to the publication of the research framework it has tackled some of the generic research questions that every archaeological project should aim for, and has the potential to provide answers to some of the research questions and contribute to the current understanding of the archaeology in the Solent-Thames area.

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