

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

Works of specialist synthesis, “essential building blocks of historic environment research”, are closely affiliated with research frameworks; they are the culmination of thesis and antithesis, yielding fresh knowledge for updates to frameworks and being the consequence of deficiencies identified by research agendas (HE, 2015, p. 7). Established in 1996 as a three-stage process (resource assessment, agenda, and strategy), research frameworks were intended to “facilitate better planning and decision-making in development-driven archaeological projects, and to provide an interface between academic, professional and public archaeologists” (HE, 2015, p. 6; Belford, 2020, p. 360). Such is their importance within archaeology that a demonstrable awareness of relevant research agendas is a criterion for ACIfA membership (CIfA, 2024). Nevertheless, research frameworks are not without problems regarding scale, coverage and focus (HE, 2015, p. 4).

A ‘resource assessment’ is an account of current archaeological knowledge, whilst a ‘research agenda’ lists gaps in current knowledge (HE, 2015, p. 6). The term ‘(archaeological) investigation’ will refer to research/inquiry at all stages; ‘(archaeological) project’ will be used as defined by Barclay *et al.* (2016, p. 20). Where applicable, acronyms will be introduced and used thereafter.

Just as synthesis is crucial to frameworks, so FAIR data sharing is vital to synthesis in locating and linking fragmented datasets (HE, 2023; Richards, 2018). Synthesis in archaeology “relies on the cumulative acquisition and sharing of data” (Schachner, 2015). However, synthetic research is not standard practice in archaeology, which is a “substantive archaeological problem” (CfAS, 2017).

This essay contextualises and synthesises the outcomes of a specific Oxfordshire archaeological excavation by examining its Roman research objectives through the foreseen, and unexpected, relevant research agendas of the *Solent-Thames Research Framework for the Historic Environment* (Fulford, 2014a).

The archaeological project

The project is known as ‘Swan School and Meadowbrook College, New Marston, Oxford’ [hereafter ‘Swan School’]. Nearly two hectares of the development site (5.6 hectares) were excavated by Cotswold Archaeology [CA] between April and July 2019. The site was situated on the north-western outskirts of New Marston, with Oxford located south-west (CA, 2021a, p. 5).

It had previously undergone archaeological works: a Heritage Statement (RPS, 2017) and trial-trench evaluation over two phases; the digital data is on the *Archaeological Data Service* [ADS] (2018a; 2018b). No archaeological remains were found during the second evaluation phase. The first phase, in the south-western half, revealed two Neolithic flint fragments, Middle and Late Iron Age/Early Roman pottery within ditches and pits, and eight ditches containing 53 sherds (1251g) of Roman pottery, which informed the placement of the excavation (ADS, 2018a, p.13-14).

The fieldwork comprised three excavation Areas (A, B and C) and a watching brief (Area F) (CA, 2021a, p. 14). It uncovered a Middle Iron Age settlement, with two enclosures, a sub-enclosure and three roundhouses, which dipped in activity from c. 150 BC until the Late Iron Age/Early Roman period. The transitional trapezoidal enclosure and two trackways gave way to a rectilinear enclosure at a three-trackway intersection; during the Late Roman period, c. AD 200-400, a subsection of the Oxford Roman pottery industry was established at the site (Barker, 2023; p. 257).

Aims and objectives

The excavation’s aims and objectives are outlined in the *Archaeological excavation* report (CA, 2021a, p. 10-14). General aims involved “establish[ing] the character, quality, date, significance and extent of any archaeological remains or deposits” (CA, 2021a, p. 10). Specific objectives further assessed the remains based on significance, survival, condition and quality. Additional targets included preserving a record and preparing an appropriate archaeological archive, including material from previous work.

The project identified research aims from Oxford City Council's [OCC] *Oxford Archaeological Resource Assessment 2011*, containing Iron Age and Roman research agendas (Beckley and Radford, 2012a; 2012b). Its goals were consistent with Hey and Hind's (2014) *Solent-Thames Research Framework* [STRF], addressing chronology, land-use, social organisation, built environment and material culture.

This essay's objective is to investigate the extent to which STRF, as a broad sub-regional framework (approximately 9,871 km²), achieves CA's research objectives by contextualising and synthesising the excavation's results (Hey and Hind, 2014, p. 1-2, Figure 1.1). The scope will focus on the fully Romanised period, termed 'Period 3', c. AD 70-410, primarily featuring a farmstead and pottery kiln, with specific reference to Fulford's (2014a¹) 'The Roman Period: Research Agenda' within STRF (Barker, 2023, p. 259). Relevant thematic research agenda include *A research strategy and updated agenda for the study of Roman pottery in Britain* (Perrin, 2011).

CA's Roman research objectives are applicable to six agendas: 'Inheritance' (12.2), 'Environmental evidence' (12.3), 'Landscape and land-use' (12.4), 'Settlement' (12.6), 'Civitas capitals and other towns' (12.7) and 'Crafts, trades and industries' (12.11) (CA, 2021a, p. 13-14).

Questions linked to inheritance include closer dating of mid-1st century AD assemblages via scientific techniques to investigate continuity of local tradition. Important environmental objectives cover reconstruction of agricultural landscape, identification of agricultural regimes by size and shape, additional subtleties in agricultural patterns, and better understanding how Roman activity on the floodplain was affected by alluviation and water level changes. Landscape/use objectives address establishing husbandry practices through significant, well-preserved bone assemblage(s). Settlement goals involve distinctions between floodplain/terrace and manufacturing zone occupation, increased characterisation of landscape boundary migration and disuse patterns, and regional relocation/reorganisation patterns. The project's objectives identify

¹ The excavation report cites online links, dated 2010; these links are no longer accessible.

work is required to improve the regional pottery fabric series and seeks to enhance existing Roman frameworks using vessel typology.

Research agendas not represented in project-specific aims/objectives include 'Social organisation' (12.5), 'Ceremony, ritual and religion' (12.8), 'Warfare, defences and military installations' (12.9), 'Material culture' (12.10), 'Communications and trade' (12.12) and 'The Isle of Wight' (12.13) (CA, 2021a, p. 13-14). The latter is irrelevant, whilst military attributes were considered improbable based on previous investigations.

Synthesis of results

The finds and biological evidence are tabulated in the Appendix.

Farmstead Morphology:

The earliest farmstead component (Phase 3.1) comprised sub-circular Enclosure 8.1. The enclosure's ditch contained large quantities of 3rd to 4th century pottery, suggesting backfilling in the Late Roman period, despite being stratigraphically early (Barker, 2023, p.270). The farmstead's main activity dated from the 2nd century AD. It subsumed a conjoined rectangular enclosure system around the intersection of three trackways. This 'complex' type of farmstead layout most often occurs in the Central Belt region (Allen and Smith, 2016). Roman smithing activity is evidenced by fragments of slag cake from Phase 3.3; however, the workshop location is unclear (Dungworth, 2021, p. 153). Domestic activity is not well-evidenced. The farmstead's enclosures probably represent an industrial zone, perhaps on the outskirts of a wider farmstead district (CA, 2021a, p. 56).

Pottery production:

A well-preserved pottery kiln ('kiln AL') was uncovered beside the northern boundary of sub-enclosure 9.2. Its structural layout, characterised by oval/'tear-drop-shaped' firing chambers and short flues with ventilation notches and paddled clay walls, featured similarities with nearby kilns, such as Rose Hill, Cowley and Blackbird Leys, Zone D (CA, 2021a, p. 56-7). This aligns with agenda 12.11.2 by contributing information about the relationships between kilns, workshops, and settlements. In all three instances, stone-lining was only applied

to the stoke pit and flue junction. Oxfordshire kilns usually featured clay tongue pedestals projecting from the firing chamber's rear wall. The pedestals supported a suspended floor for pottery vessels during firing. There is no evidence of a pedestal in kiln AL, but it is possible that a single-flue updraught kiln with a permanent unsupported floor was used (Barker, 2023, p.273).

The Oxford Roman pottery industry was a significant producer in Britain, particularly from the mid-3rd century AD. Distribution was widespread, stretching east along the Thames and west to the Severn Valley. The Oxford industry's success was partially due to the road connecting Alchester to Dorchester; other crucial factors were an abundant clay supply and access to water and timber (Barker, 2023, p.273).

Late Iron Age and Roman pottery comprised 3975 sherds (77,405g) (CA, 2021b). Transitional wares (c. 1st century AD) accounted for approximately 15%. Of the fully Romanised assemblage (3247 sherds, 66,784g), Oxfordshire wares accounted for over 90% by weight (Banks, 2021, p. 123-125). The most common products were M17 white ware mortaria and colour-coated wares, especially C45 bowls, C18 jars and C97 mortaria; these were possibly produced simultaneously from c. AD 250 onwards (Barker, 2023, p.273). Locally produced reduced, oxidised and white wares dominate the pottery not derived from kiln AL. The recovery, analysis and publication of the assemblage fulfils STRF's agenda **12.22.5** to collect evidence of local pottery production and publish in detail material associated with kilns (Banks and Barker, 2022). Due to Oxfordshire's well-established pottery industry, imported and regional wares are rare, accounting for 1% (42 sherds) (Banks, 2021, p. 125).

Land-use & crop cultivation:

By the mid-1st century AD, Oxfordshire's landscape had been cleared extensively; the floodplain was used for hay meadows and grazing, with cultivated higher ground (CA, 2021a, p. 58). Botanical evidence was unable to significantly contribute to the STRF's land-use agendas (**12.4**), only that hedgerows and mixed deciduous trees were accessible to the farmstead's occupants (Barker, 2023, p.274). Questions about woodland location and fuel use (**12.4.9/10**; **12.11.3**) are answered by the site's findings. Charcoal from kiln AL represent a

variety of locally sourced taxa, with no indication of an over-reliance on non-local woodland(s). Willow and poplar from the floodplain provided less favoured but sufficient fuelwoods for sustained heat inside the kiln (Challinor, 2021, p. 195). The poor soils south and east of Oxford were suited to dense woodland; this fuel source likely factored into the location of Oxfordshire's pottery production and informs **12.3.2** of STRF's research agenda (Barker, 2023, p.274).

Evidence for plants and cereals is limited (CA, 2021a, p. 58). Radiocarbon dating was not applied to spelt wheat or barley; advancement of research agenda **12.4.3**, to better date Roman brewing practices, goes unaddressed. The cereals reflect the main cultivars during the Roman period and may provide evidence for a Roman cultivation signature (**12.3.4**). Agenda **12.3.2**, concerning variation in agricultural regimes, is tentatively addressed by the recovery of stinking chamomile suggesting exploitation of local water-retentive clay soils (West, 2021, p. 187). Farming methods (**12.3.3**) are evidenced by crop-processing waste as tinder inside kiln AL (Barker, 2023, p. 274).

Animal husbandry:

Animal bones evidencing human exploitation were mostly recovered from Phase 3.2 features. Cattle were the predominant species, accounting for 35%, with sheep/goat in similar quantities (32%); pig and equid combined constitute 15% (CA, 2021a, p. 57). Cull patterns indicated cattle and sheep/goat were used for meat and secondary products (Barker, 2023, p. 273). The presence of all carcass components indicates on-site culling, processing, consumption, and disposal; this reflects sustained self-sufficiency within the farmstead and its economy. During Phase 3.3, sheep remains culled prior to reaching maturity suggest meat production was the priority (Holmes, 2021, p. 165). Perinatal cattle bones imply breeding took place near the farmstead; this provides evidence of breed improvement (**12.4.12**). As Fulford (2014b, p. 166) states, animals' age profiles "can assist in characterising and mapping Roman farming in the Thames-Solent corridor". Equid age indicators (8-15 years) and premolar wear suggest horses were kept for transport (CA, 2021a, p. 57). Wild food sources (red deer, fish, eels) were recovered in limited quantities. A high marine diet was reflected in the isotope ratios of one of the Phase 3.3 inhumations, which bolsters STRF's research agenda **12.4.11** (Barker, 2023, p. 274).

Human remains, religion & ritual:

“Two inhumation burials placed in graves and three occurrences of disarticulated human bone (adult and neonate) were identified within the [Middle to Late] Roman Phase 3.2 farmstead” (Clough, 2021, p. 178). No significant items were found alongside the human remains. Radiocarbon dates were obtained from the inhumed individuals, both probably adult males. The ranges span from the mid-3rd century to the post-Roman period (258-534 cal AD and 240-530 cal AD) (Aitken, 2021, p. 200, Table S1). This fulfils research agenda **12.8.3**, to radiocarbon date burials which potentially post-date AD 400. The hind leg of a dog, two juvenile sheep/goats and partial sub-adult horse remains represent possible Roman ritual activity (CA, 2021a, p. 59). Neonate bones recovered from the same pit as partial sheep/goat remains increase archaeological understanding of animals in religion and ritual (**12.8.1**; Barker, 2023, p. 275).

How the Solent-Thames Research Framework supports the investigation

The STRF Roman research agenda can be applied to aspects of the ‘Swan School’ excavation’s Phase 3 with mixed success, and the project’s archaeological data does not consistently fulfil its objectives.

The project’s objectives are favourably addressed regarding ‘Crafts, trades and industries’ (**12.11**) and ‘Settlement’ (**12.6**). The forthcoming article mentioned by Barker, intended for publication in the *Journal of Roman Pottery Studies*, will fulfil research agenda **12.11.5** by providing “detailed pottery descriptions and illustrations” (2023, p. 273; Banks and Barker, 2022). The Roman farmstead’s development and abandonment (**12.6.4**) is well evidenced by archaeological data (CA, 2021a, p. 68-110). The site addresses ‘settlement characterisation and economy’ agendas by increasing researchers’ understanding of local woodland (**12.6.2**) and uncovering evidence of site specialisation (i.e. pottery production), thus informing economic agendas (**12.6.1**).

Despite its best intentions, the archaeological investigation was unable to fulfil STRF agendas in two crucial areas: ‘Environmental evidence’ (**12.3**) and ‘Ceremony, ritual and religion’ (**12.8**). According to Barker, “botanical evidence

[...] has made a limited contribution to our understanding of land-use and the local environment during the Roman period” (2023, p. 274). Similarly, a small metal assemblage was recovered, including two brooches (penannular and bow), hobnails, a *nummus*, and steelyard (Walton, 2021, p. 147-148). The brooches could be termed “major finds” but were recovered from subsoil; only the hobnails were recovered from graves, and the extent of metal detecting is unclear. Subsequently, the metalwork group falls short of achieving agenda **12.8.4**.

There are notable instances where the project did not anticipate findings capable of informing specific research agendas. No objectives linked to ‘Ceremony, ritual and religion’ were proposed. ‘Material culture’ agendas, especially developing the Oxfordshire fabric series (12.10.2), were not utilised. There is a lack of focus on ‘Communications and trade’, principally “the extent of trade and traffic along the south coast of Britain” (**12.12.3**) given proximity to the Alchester to Dorchester road in the pottery-producing region (Fulford, 2014a, p. 183). Furthermore, “the dearth of Roman coins [...] suggests that monetary activity was not a feature of activity” (Walton, 2021, p.147).

The STRF is aware of its shortcomings and rises to meet future challenges:

“Levels of knowledge and understanding will change over time and the Research Framework will need to evolve alongside these changes” (Hey and Hind, 2014, p. 293).

Conclusions

This essay set out to contextualise and synthesise results from Cotswold Archaeology’s excavation at ‘Swan School’. The findings suggest most aims and objectives were applicable to the *Solent-Thames Research Framework’s* Roman agenda. Notwithstanding the limited botanical and ‘major’ metalwork evidence, this assessment indicates CA’s approach to “generating new understanding” was highly considered and broadly suited to the various available Frameworks (HE, 2015, p. 7). Given Oxfordshire’s significance in the Roman pottery industry, additional aims/objectives investigating trade may have produced substantial contributions to our collective archaeological knowledge and future resource assessments.

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Appendix

Table 1: Artefacts recovered (CA, 2023a, p. 41, Section 6.1).

Type	Category	Count	Weight (g)
Pottery	Late prehistoric	2354	26,528
	Late Iron Age and Roman	3975	77,405
	Post-Roman	31	423
	<i>Total</i>	<i>6360</i>	<i>104,356</i>
Lithics	Worked	13	28
Metals	Iron	104	608
	Copper alloy	9	37
	Lead	4	89
	Composite lead and iron	1	278
	<i>Total</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>1012</i>
Mortar		6	537
Coins	Roman	1	3
Glass	vessel	8	134
CBM	Tile (roof, floor and wall), brick	16	700
Fired/burnt clay/daub	All	869	18,209
Clay tobacco pipe		4	18
Stone	Worked	2	4572
	Burnt	37	1900
Industrial waste	Metalworking	-	3151
Bone	Worked	1	1

Table 2: Biological evidence recovered (CA, 2023a, p. 45, Section 7.1).

Type	Category	Count	Weight (g)
Animal bone	Fragments	6400	55,521
Environmental samples	Bulk soil samples	91	-
Human bone	Inhumation burials	2	-
	Disarticulated remains	5	-