

Cirencester and the Cotswolds: the Early Roman evolution of a town and rural landscape

Neil Holbrook

The Cotswolds hills are a plateau of Jurassic rocks, mostly Oolitic limestones, in western England. From their S limit near the city of Bath the plateau trends in a northeasterly direction through Gloucestershire into S Warwickshire. A steep scarp rises from the lowland river valleys of the Warwickshire Avon and Severn up to an area of high wold plateau and a dip slope which falls in a southeasterly direction towards the valley of the Thames. On the high wold and dip slope, the limestone produces thin, well-drained soils which, while not of the highest quality, are sufficient today to support widespread arable agriculture. In the valley bottoms, deposits of alluvium and clay generate damper, heavier soils, in large part given over to permanent pasture. The Roman and later town of Cirencester lies on the SE edge of the Cotswold dip slope, at the point where the valley of the river Churn opens out to enter the broad plain of the upper Thames.

The Cotswolds have long been known for their wealth of Roman remains, notably the town of Cirencester (*Corinium Dobunorum*), the hot springs and temple complex at Bath (*Aquae Sulis*), and numerous richly-appointed villas (fig. 1). The purpose of this paper is to review a number of recent discoveries made in and around this region (fig. 2), and to examine how these affect our understanding of the Late Iron Age and Early Roman settlement archaeology and, in particular, the origins and early development of Cirencester.

The Cirencester area in the Late Iron Age and Early Roman period

No conclusive evidence of pre-Roman activity has been found within the area later included within the walled town of *Corinium*, although the rising ground on either side of the Churn has produced good evidence for settlement from the Bronze Age onwards. Some 4 km to the north of Cirencester, on the W bank of the Churn, lies a series of Late Iron Age sites, collectively referred to as the Bagendon complex (fig. 3), where a large dyke system partially enclosed an area of between 80 and 200 ha. Only limited investigation of the interior has occurred, revealing a surfaced road, metalworking and evidence of coin minting.¹ The Bagendon dykes probably date from the early 1st c. A.D., finds of Arretine and S Gaulish samian suggesting activity from at least a decade or so before the Roman invasion of Britain in A.D. 43.² Other elements of the complex include a hillfort at Ditches, which probably dates from the 1st c. B.C., and two rectilinear enclosures at Middle Duntisbourne and Duntisbourne Grove, which have produced evidence of occupation contemporary with that at Bagendon, including pottery imports from the continent.³ An isolated pit discovered during the renewal of a modern sewer in Stratton watermeadows on the W bank of the Churn hints at further activity in the area south of the dyke system.⁴ The nature, form and purpose of the Bagendon complex are debated, but it is likely that the site was established by a group involved in trade with the kingdoms of SE England. To date there is no evidence, or necessity, to believe that Bagendon was a major nucleated settlement containing a significant population; it is best regarded as a trading site, although perhaps containing some ritual aspects.

Bagendon represents a new development in the settlement archaeology of the region, as its location was peripheral to the principal axes of Later Iron Age trade within the Cotswold-Severn region, and indeed it may have been deliberately sited in an area which had not previously been densely settled.⁵ In the past, distributions of specific traditions of coins and

1 Clifford 1961; Trow 1982.

2 Dannell 1977.

3 Trow 1989; Mudd *et al.* 1999, 77-97.

4 Holbrook forthcoming.

5 Moore 2006a, 148-51 and 218-22. It is noteworthy that molluscs recovered from the enclosure at Mid-