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Fishbourne revisited: the site in its context

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The excavation of the Roman complex at Fishbourne near Chichester in southern England began in 1961. The excavation lasted for 8 seasons, and the results were published in 1971 (Cunliffe 1971). The coincidence of these dates appealed to the anniversary-conscious editor of this Journal, who suggested to the writer that 1991 would be an appropriate occasion to stand back to consider Fishbourne in the light of our greatly enhanced knowledge of the formative years of the province of Britannia.

A great deal has changed in the last two decades, not least the research interests of this writer. The excavations at Fishbourne took place in the Age of Innocence, before professional archaeological units had become a reality in Britain. The entire excavation was manned by volunteers — usually a team of about 100 — drawn largely from schools and universities: many of them wore head bands decked in flowers, male hair was frequently shoulder-length, and conversation often turned to questions of the morality of the Vietnam War. It was a time of confidence. In Romano-British archaeology there was also a satisfied assurance: an historical framework existed, and all that was needed was for it to be filled out by energetic archaeological endeavour. Many of the large projects initiated at that time were undertaken with more enthusiasm than thought for the publication implications of working on a grand scale with the result that the majority remain unpublished today. How innocent we all were!

But enough of nostalgia. Fishbourne was excavated, the site was put on permanent display to the public, and the two-volume excavation report was published within 3 years of the end of the field programme. Thereafter the results were in the public domain for criticism and discussions.

Reviewing, for this paper, what has been written on the subject since, the overriding impression I have gained is how inconsequential the excavation and what followed from it seems to have been. The discovery of an elaborate masonry building of the late 1st c. A.D. has offered a slightly new perspective on the early stages of Romanization, and has provided a context for endless speculation about the career of a local client king, Tiberius Claudius Cogidubnus (whose existence was briefly noted by Tacitus and confirmed by an inscription found in Chichester in the 18th c.), but in terms of the social and economic development of the province — which must surely be the prime concern of those specializing on Roman provincial studies — the impact of Fishbourne has been minimal. I am not bewailing the fact — merely observing it. From the now more distant viewpoint of one who has become firmly wedded to prehistory, the reason, I believe, lies partly in the enormous data-surge facing the Romanist, unused to working on a commensurate scale, and partly in the traditional approach to Romano-British studies which has, until very recently, relied largely on narrative enlivened by the anecdotal, rather than on the analytical and systematic approach which underlies the normal method of the prehistorian. For example, detailed quantifications of economic and cultural data which allow changing patterns of behaviour within the site (both spatially and chronologically) and between sites to be made, have been the norm in British prehistory for the last three or four decades, but are only beginning to be adopted among Romanists. The quantifications of pottery and animal bones given in the Fishbourne report were unusual for the time, but techniques are changing fast and set against, say, comparable quantifications for the Iron-age hillfort at Danebury (Cunliffe 1984a, 231-331; Grant 1984) the methods and analysis we used there were very simple. Even so, the level of analysis published for Fishbourne in 1971 is creditable when compared with other major Roman sites published 20 years on.

Something of this debate echoed through the pages of *Antiquity* (Cunliffe 1984b; Todd 1985; Cunliffe 1985), but two recent works of synthesis, Richard Hingley's *Rural settlements in Roman Britain* (Seaby, London 1989) and Martin Millet's *The Romanization of Britain* (Cambridge 1990), at last mark a turning-point in Romano-British studies.

This, however, is not the place for polemic, and in the rest of this paper I will stick to my brief and focus on two subject areas: the question of the sequence and chronology at Fishbourne, and the social context