

# Between Villa and Town

## Excavations of a Roman roadside settlement and shrine at Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire

by Steve Lawrence and Alex Smith

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## Summary

Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook a series of archaeological investigations on land around Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire, from 1993 to 2003. This work revealed occupation from the Mesolithic through to the medieval period, including part of a substantial Roman roadside settlement and shrine. This volume deals with the Roman remains, in addition to excavated early prehistoric and Iron Age activity in the local area. The important early to mid Saxon settlement and the medieval remains have been published elsewhere (Hardy *et al.* 2007).

The earliest occupation is represented by an extensive redeposited flint assemblage attesting to significant (probably early) Mesolithic activity at the site. Sparse Neolithic occupation was indicated by two pits and a scatter of tools. A late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ring ditch surrounding a probable cremation burial was found to the east of the Roman settlement, while a second cremation burial, within an inverted early Bronze Age Collared Urn, was found in the far western part of the site.

A middle to late Iron Age settlement was located c 370 m north-east of the Roman settlement, and consisted of a series of enclosures with associated ring gullies and other settlement features.

The excavated part of the Roman settlement was established in the earlier 2nd century, with evidence for circular buildings, wells and a small cemetery. The settlement was bounded to the west by a ditch delimiting the eastern side of a north-south road. The layout of the settlement changed significantly during the late 2nd to 3rd century, with a series of mostly rectangular buildings aligned upon the eastern side of the north-south road. A gravel 'pavement' was constructed along the whole length of the roadside frontage of the settlement, while on the western side of the road, a monumental shrine complex was constructed.

During the late 3rd to early 4th century the settlement expanded to the north, although the shrine to the west of the road fell into disuse at this time. The religious focus may have shifted to a small 'temple' at the northern periphery of the settlement. The settlement (or at least the excavated part of it) was abandoned during the second half of the 4th century, with the buildings being subjected to stone robbing, a process that continued into the post-Roman period.

At the time of the Saxon reoccupation of the site (mid 5th century onwards), many of the late Roman boundary ditches still existed as remnant earthwork hollows.

## Résumé

Entre 1993 et 2003, Oxford Archaeology (OA) a entrepris une série de fouilles archéologiques dans les secteurs de Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers et du Northamptonshire. Ces travaux ont permis d'attester une occupation continue entre le Mésolithique et le Moyen-Age ainsi que les vestiges d'une voie et d'un édifice cultuel d'époque romaine. Ce volume traite de l'ensemble du site et de ses phases à l'exception de la période saxonne qui a déjà fait l'objet d'une publication en 2007 (Hardy *et al.* 2007).

Les traces d'activités les plus anciennes remontent du Mésolithique. Elles se traduisent par la découverte d'un dépôt de silex, de deux fosses et d'outils. Toutefois, ces vestiges sont épars et paraissent davantage témoigner d'une occupation ponctuelle que permanente. Les phases comprises entre le Néolithique et le Bronze Ancien sont attestées par la présence d'un fossé circulaire qui a probablement dû entourer une sépulture à crémation et qui a été localisé à l'ouest de l'implantation romaine. Une incinération du Bronze Ancien a été clairement identifiée à l'ouest de cette dernière.

La fin de la Protohistoire est représentée par une série d'enclos du milieu du second Age du Fer implantée au nord-est de l'occupation romaine et

associée à des fosses circulaires et d'autres structures.

Les secteurs antiques fouillés ont livré des bâtiments circulaires, des puits et une petite nécropole du II<sup>e</sup> siècle. La limite de l'occupation est matérialisée à l'ouest par un fossé barrant tout un secteur oriental alors bordé par une voie formant un axe nord-sud. Cette occupation se caractérise par plusieurs phases chronologiques distinctes. Autour des II<sup>e</sup> et III<sup>e</sup> siècles, un changement significatif s'est opéré. Il se traduit par l'apparition d'une série de bâtiments rectangulaires longeant le côté oriental du site. Cette dernière, délimitée par l'axe nord-sud, lui-même flanqué d'une allée constituée de graviers, fait face à un complexe cultuel alors implanté dans les quartiers ouest. Au cours des III<sup>e</sup>-IV<sup>e</sup> siècles, le site s'est étendu au nord alors que le secteur cultuel est laissé à l'abandon. On suppose que celui-ci a été déplacé en périphérie nord et remplacé par un seul édifice de taille bien plus modeste. Le site semble avoir été abandonné pendant la deuxième moitié du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle et avoir servi de carrière de pierres, exploitation qui a continué bien après le Bas-Empire. Le milieu du V<sup>e</sup> siècle se caractérise effectivement par une relative abondance de fossés attestant de travaux de terrassements.

# Zusammenfassung

Oxford Archaeology (OA) unternahm zwischen 1993 und 2003 eine Reihe archäologischer Untersuchungen in der Umgebung von Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferris, Northamptonshire. Diese Untersuchungen wiesen eine Benutzung des Areals vom Mesolithikum bis zum Mittelalter nach, darunter auch eine große römische Straßensiedlung und einen Schrein. Der vorliegende Band behandelt die römischen Hinterlassenschaften und beleuchtet ebenfalls zuvor ausgegrabene frühgeschichtliche und eisenzeitliche Aktivitäten. Die Ergebnisse zu den wichtigen früh- bis mittelsächsischen Siedlungen und den mittelalterlichen archäologischen Überresten wurden bereits in Hardy *et al.* 2007 publiziert.

Die frühesten Besiedlungsspuren zeigen sich anhand von sekundär deponierten Feuersteinansammlungen, welche von einer starken mesolithischen (wahrscheinlich frühmesolithischen) Nutzung des Areals zeugen. Ein spätneolithischer / frühbronzezeitlicher Ringwall, welcher vermutlich eine Brandbestattung umgab, wurde östlich der römischen Siedlung entdeckt, während eine weitere Brandbestattung innerhalb einer frühbronzezeitlichen Halsurne tief im Westen des Areals freigelegt wurde.

Eine mittel- bis späteisenzeitliche Siedlung, bestehend aus einer Reihe von Einfriedungen mit zugehörigen kreisförmigen Wasserablaufgräben und anderen Siedlungsbefunden wurde ungefähr

370m nordöstlich der römischen Siedlung entdeckt.

Der ausgegrabene Teil der römischen Siedlung wurde im frühen 2. Jh. gegründet. Runde Gebäude, Brunnen und ein kleiner Friedhof konnten nachgewiesen werden. Die Siedlung war zum Westen hin durch einen Graben begrenzt, welcher die östliche Seite einer Nord-Süd verlaufenden Straße darstellte. Das Aussehen der Siedlung änderte sich beträchtlich zwischen dem späten 2. und 3. Jh., mit einer Reihe von meist rechteckigen Gebäuden welche entlang der östlichen Seite der Nord-Süd verlaufenden Straße angeordnet waren. Entlang der gesamten Länge der östlichen Seite der Straße wurde ein Bürgersteig aus Kies angelegt, während auf der anderen Seite ein monumentaler Schrein errichtet wurde.

Während des späten 3. bis zum frühen 4. Jh. expandierte die Siedlung gen Norden. Der Schrein verlor zu dieser Zeit an Bedeutung und wurde nicht mehr genutzt. Der religiöse Fokus könnte sich zeitgleich zu einem kleinen „Tempel“ am Nordende der Siedlung verschoben haben. Die Siedlung (oder zumindest der ausgegrabene Teil) wurde während der 2. Hälfte des 4. Jh. verlassen und Steine wurden von den Gebäuden entfernt. Dieser Prozess setzte sich auch in der post-römischen Phase fort.

Zur Zeit der sächsischen Wiederbesiedlung des Areals (ab Mitte des 5. Jh.) existierten noch die Reste vieler spätrömischer Begrenzungsgräben als deutlich sichtbare muldenartige Erdwerke.

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On the curatorial side the East Northamptonshire Planning Authority was initially represented by Glen Foard, who was the architect behind the formulation of a research strategy for the project, and contributed much to the formulation of working hypotheses during the excavations. Latterly, his

successor, Myk Flitcroft coped with the increasingly complex project, deftly walking the tightrope between client and archaeologist, between what was and what was not possible, and making valuable contributions to the understanding of the site.

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