

# Chapter 7: Discussion of the Roman Settlement and Shrine

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## INTRODUCTION

The Roman settlement at Higham Ferrers is one of a number of high status and/or major nucleated sites situated along the Nene Valley between the towns of Irchester and Titchmarsh (see Fig. 7.8 below). Most of these valley sites (with the major exceptions of Redlands Farm and Stanwick) have yet to be properly investigated and so their exact nature and development remain unknown (Parry 2006, 72-91), but it is clear that this region was fully integrated into the economic, political and social structure of the Roman province.

Excavations at Higham Ferrers from 2001 to 2003 revealed only the northern part of the Roman settlement, with the consequence that we do not have a full understanding of its origins, scale, development and economy. Nevertheless, substantial parts (*c* 3 ha) of the site were excavated, including 18 buildings, which formed a 'domestic core', along with outlying enclosure systems, small cemeteries and a shrine complex. In all but the earliest phase (Phase 3), these elements seemed to be focused entirely around the north-south road going through the site, which shifted location slightly throughout the settlement's long existence. This road, which may have continued right along the eastern side of the Nene Valley (see below), was probably a key stimulus in the physical, economic and social growth of the site. The public shrine in particular would have benefited immeasurably from the flow of traffic along the road, and indeed may owe much of its elaboration—which is in some way incongruous with the remainder of the settlement—to this factor.

What follows in this chapter is an account of the spatial organisation and development of the roadside settlement and shrine, along with discussion of the apparent economic basis, social structure and ritual practices of the communities using the site. The significance of a site such as Higham Ferrers lies ultimately in its relationship with the local and regional settlement and land-use pattern. In this respect we are fortunate that the site lies immediately south of the Raunds Area Project, an intensive area (*c* 40 sq km) of archaeological survey including fieldwalking, magnetometer survey, cropmark analysis and excavation, which has identified a large number of Roman settlements both in the Nene Valley itself and on the Boulder

Clay plateau to the east (Parry 2006; see Fig. 7.9 below). The relationship of Higham Ferrers with the sites identified in the Raunds Area Project, together with other sites in the region, will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

## SETTLEMENT ORGANISATION AND DEVELOPMENT

### Settlement origins

The Iron Age settlement discussed in Chapter 3, which lay *c* 370 m to the north-east of the Roman site, produced ceramic dating evidence which suggests that it did not continue into the latter part of the late Iron Age. This would leave a considerable chronological gap (*c* 100 years) between the end of occupation here and the earliest occupation at the Kings Meadow Lane site, which ceramic and coin evidence indicate to be in the early 2nd century AD. There are indications, however, that the landscape was not abandoned at this time, but that the focus of occupation shifted to another location, possibly to the east, where an Iron Age and early Roman settlement has been partially investigated just over *c* 1 km from the Higham Ferrers site (Mudd 2004; OA 2004a). There is evidence for a reduction in activity at this location from the early 2nd century AD (with occupation ceasing from the later 2nd century), possibly coinciding with the establishment of the settlement at Higham Ferrers, which may have been better positioned along the road going from Irchester in the south through the Nene Valley to Stanwick, *c* 3 km to the north, and beyond.

The establishment of a roadside settlement at Higham Ferrers in the early 2nd century would certainly correlate with the broader picture of change in the Nene Valley, with villas like Redlands Farm being established and Stanwick being transformed at about this time (Parry 2006, 152, 170; see below). However, some caution must be exercised, as the excavation examined what was probably only the northern periphery of the settlement, and this could represent expansion from an earlier 'core' area of occupation to the south. Nevertheless, a small excavation (20 m by 18 m) undertaken by Mr E Greenfield in 1960 on a site *c* 200 m south of the 2001-3 excavations did reveal a couple of buildings, the earliest of which was dated to the late 1st or



Fig. 7.1. Outline of the earliest (Phase 3) Roman settlement

early 2nd century (Meadows 1992, 82). On balance, this suggests that the settlement is indeed likely to have been first established around 60 years or so after the Roman conquest. While the origins of the Kings Meadow Lane sequence might have been slightly later, the difference is not likely to have been great.

### The earliest settlement (Phase 3)

The earliest features of the Roman settlement to be uncovered during the 2002-3 excavations comprised three stone-footed roundhouses, two of which were accompanied by wells (Fig. 7.1). The largest building (10920) lay *c* 60 m east of the north-south roadway, near to the southern boundary of a substantial (though shallow) rectangular enclosure, while the remaining two (10910, 11340) to the west and south-west were seemingly unenclosed. It is likely that the enclosure was constructed later than the roundhouse and associated well, and may have been part of a wider network of boundaries to the east and north-east (including enclosure 13080), mostly revealed by geophysical survey. However, the dating of these boundaries is uncertain (see Chapter 4) and they could well relate to the next phase (4) of settlement expansion.

The significance of boundaries within and around settlements has been highlighted by authors such as Hingley (1990) and Bowden and McOmish (1987), who suggested that they may have acted as indicators of social status rather than as defensive emplacements. Certainly the enclosure ditches (12880, 12310) surrounding 10920 were not of a defensive nature, and—assuming there was not some other archaeologically imperceptible barrier—there was a 20 m gap in the south-western corner, which was presumably the entranceway. The size of the entranceway and the possible internal water-hole (11991) suggests that the enclosure (together with enclosure 13080) may have had an agricultural function, as a corral for livestock, although there was no evidence for means of closing off the opening in the enclosure that would have been required by such use.

There are some indications that the ditches surrounding building 10920 did have a non-utilitarian character, in that both produced large quantities of finds (along with a subadult human vertebra) within single fills dated to the later 2nd century, possibly representing ‘closure deposits’ with a ritual aspect. They were also the focus for inhumation burials in a later phase, while a small contemporary cemetery of three cremation burials and one inhumation was located just to the west of ditch 12880.

It remains uncertain if building 10920 was enclosed as a symbol of social exclusion and status, although it was the largest of the circular structures. However, the nature of the associated finds assemblage does not indicate any status distinction, and indeed it is building 11340 that has produced an

unusually large collection of samian pottery (19.4% of total assemblage), which along with a possible miniature votive shield and possible ritual pits, suggests that it was this building that may have been of higher status or served some sort of specialised function (see below).

All three buildings are, however, likely to have been primarily domestic structures, with evidence of internal hearths/ovens in two of them (that in 10910 had probably been truncated). The differences in building construction suggest that they were not all built as one phase, and unlike the others, building 11340 probably continued in use into the 3rd century (Phase 4). It is likely that they represent the piecemeal expansion of settlement from the south, and in this respect their circular form is quite interesting. The single excavation *c* 200 m further south revealed a rectangular building of approximately contemporary date or possibly even earlier (late 1st/2nd century AD; Meadows 1992, 82). It may therefore be the case that rectangular structures lay at the central core of the settlement and roundhouses occupied marginal locations, a pattern which has been highlighted on other settlements within the Nene Valley (Taylor 2001, 50). It has been suggested that these peripheral circular buildings may have represented secondary households or had ancillary agricultural/craft activity roles in the larger settlements (*ibid.*, 51-2).

The western boundary of the roundhouse group comprised a roadside ditch, which probably ran the length of the settlement. In contrast to later structures, none of the roundhouses seemed to be focused upon the road, with the nearest of them (11340) being over 20 m east of it, and with entrances (where discernible) facing south-east. A projection of the road southwards places it approximately in line with the buildings revealed in the small 1960s excavation, although no obvious road was picked up, so the arrangements of the buildings here remain unknown.

### Settlement expansion and development (Phase 4)

The later 2nd century heralded the start of major changes in the excavated part of the settlement, as two of the three roundhouses were abandoned and/or dismantled and the settlement expanded northwards along the axis of the main road (Fig. 7.2). It may be significant that the only roundhouse to remain in use was the one nearest to the road (11340), while all but one of the newly established buildings were rectangular masonry-footed structures.

There appears to have been an increased emphasis on physical definition of space from this time, with a number of plot divisions being tentatively identified, possibly part of an ongoing shift to spatial segregation of domestic and productive activities identified by Taylor (2001, 51). The main settlement (in this area at least) was still restricted to the eastern side of the road, and the gravel



Fig. 7.2. Outline of settlement expansion and development (Phase 4)

pavement constructed along its length is testimony to the road's perceived importance. Construction of this pavement appears to have been a collective effort, suggesting some level of municipal administrative control within the settlement, which influenced its spatial organisation. The main north-south road was also re-metalled and probably widened at this time, with a branch road heading into the valley to the south-west (although the extent and origins of this road remain uncertain). It is quite likely that the shrine itself, which was established during this phase to the west of the road, was also part of the 'municipal' redevelopment of the settlement, especially given the monumental nature of some of its architecture (see below for discussion of shrine).

Seven different plots (A-G) were identified fronting onto the roadside pavement (see Chapter 4, Fig. 4.11), of which at least four had evidence of masonry buildings in this phase. As already pointed out in Chapter 4, these plots may bear little relation to actual property boundaries at the time, but nevertheless they do indicate an increasing desire or need to clearly differentiate zones within the newly expanded settlement. Of particular importance is the apparent division between 'public space' such as the roadway, pavement and even possibly the shrine exterior, and 'private space', formed by barriers (buildings or walls) along most of the plot frontages, with enclosed areas behind. This appears to mark a distinct contrast with the more open settlement of Phase 3, in this part of the settlement at least.

The chronology of the buildings and boundaries in Phase 4 is such that it is impossible to say with any certainty whether the settlement expanded as a single planned episode, or in a more piecemeal fashion. However, on balance it would seem that the gravel pavement, newly metalled road and basic plot divisions occurred as part of the same developmental impetus (along with the shrine), while development within the plots themselves may have been undertaken on a more ad hoc basis. The buildings and plots have already been described in detail in Chapter 4, and so the discussion here will only account for their overall spatial organisation, function and development.

Plot A in the southern part of the site was only partially revealed, as boundaries and buildings were seen to continue further south. The rear boundaries of this plot cut through the middle of roundhouse 10910, thereby providing a clear break with the earlier phase of settlement, although the well associated with this structure continued to be used, presumably out of convenience. The original rectangular masonry building (10860) in this plot was the only structure of this phase to have its narrow side fronting onto the roadside pavement, thereby not having maximum use of the 'street frontage'. This may have been the reason why it was also the only building that was soon largely demolished and rebuilt on an approximately perpendicular alignment (11370). Such a radical change can

perhaps be seen as an indication of the importance of the road in the social and economic environment of the settlement.

Building 10860 contained no floor surfaces or other indication of function, although it was quite unusual in that it may have had a tiled roof made completely of imbrices (see Poole, Chapter 5). No other buildings apart from religious structures had ceramic tile roofs, but there is nothing else to suggest that this building had a ritual function. Building 10860's replacement (11370), which was clearly partitioned and had two additional annexes, contained a hearth and an oven structure with charred food remains, thus indicating its domestic nature. Cool (2006, 51) has recently pointed out that rooms with both hearths and ovens would have enabled a wide range of cooking practices to be carried out, and were often part of large houses belonging to the upper classes. However in this instance, there is nothing else to indicate that the building was of high status, and indeed, a dump of worked bone waste just outside the building suggests that bone working was practised here, although it is impossible to say whether this activity was restricted to any one of the internal areas defined by partitions. The area to the rear of the building contained a well-defined metalled 'yard', with access presumably through a side passage between the building and the plot B boundary.

Plot B (c 20 by 40 m) was unusual in that it incorporated the only surviving building from the earlier phase (circular building 11340) and indeed for most of Phase 4 this was the only structure within the plot. This building was demolished at some point in the 3rd century. Prior to the construction of building 11620, a limestone wall stretched across most if not all of the roadside frontage, possibly to enable privacy for the area behind, most of which (apart from circular building 11340) was kept quite clear. There was no water source within this plot, although the earlier well 12340 behind it remained in use. The differences between this plot and those to the north and south are quite pronounced and may have something to do with the 'special function' that has been suggested for building 11340 (see above and *Ritual and religion* below). This suggestion is supported by the presence of a possible ritual pit (12826) located just beyond the eastern boundary of the plot.

Building 11620 was built at some point in the 3rd century, but it remains uncertain if it was ever contemporary with building 11340. As no floor surfaces or internal features were revealed in this building, its function – though presumed to be domestic – must remain unknown.

In contrast to plot B, plot C (c 25 by 50 m) contained evidence for up to six buildings within this phase, making it one of the densest concentrations of structures within the excavated part of the settlement. Three buildings (10850, 10880 and 11630) forming an L-shaped complex seemed to be built together as a coherent unit fronting onto both

the roadside and a probable 'lane' aligned eastwards towards the rear of the plot. The only circular building to be built in this phase lay within an internal courtyard, which was at least partially paved/metalled, formed by this L-shaped complex together with two rectangular buildings to the rear. The water source for these buildings was a well (12885) within the courtyard.

All the buildings within the L-shaped complex as well as the circular building are likely to have been primarily domestic in nature, with at least one hearth encountered in all except 10850 (the hearth/ovens within this building were assigned a late Roman date). This latter building had a large jar set into the floor, possibly for storage, while further large fragments of storage vessel were found in a pit just to the north. Another jar was found set into the ground immediately north-east of the circular building.

It is very difficult to see any differences in terms of function or status between the 'L'-shaped complex and the circular building. Infant burials were found within both and the ceramic and finds assemblages do not show any major differences. Building 10850 contained storage vessels and quernstone fragments, while building 10880 also contained quern fragments, along with two copper alloy votive leaves, highlighting the integration of domestic and religious spheres (see below). Circular building 10870 contained a spindle whorl and modest amounts of pottery but no finds of any great significance, and it is assumed to be domestic in nature. Its entrance faced eastwards towards the rectangular buildings at the far end of the plot. One of these buildings (10900) was positioned behind the eastern boundary ditch that ran the length of the settlement, suggesting that it was not part of the main 'domestic core' of buildings, but instead associated with the larger field and paddock enclosures extending to the east. The building contained minimal pottery, along with quern fragments, bone-working waste and a hearth, and it is quite possible that it had domestic, craft-working and agricultural functions. Building 10980, built slightly later, was of almost identical size and construction and presumably served a similar 'ancillary' function.

Plot C effectively marked the northern limit of the main 'domestic core' of the settlement at this time, with just one certain building (10810) of Phase 4 lying beyond this point. Nevertheless, the plot boundaries (D to G) still seem to have been laid out during the 3rd century, and there is some evidence for a structure with a hearth within plot D. Little can be said about this possible building, except that it was associated with fragments of wild boar bone, which are otherwise restricted to the shrine. As this plot seemingly opens out onto a zone opposite the monumental shrine entrance, it is possible that the structure was in some way associated with the religious precinct, although this interpretation is very tentative.

Plot E to the north of this had no evidence for any activity during this phase and may well have been

used for agricultural/horticultural purposes. Plot F contained a single rectangular building (10810) set back 12 m from the roadside pavement, along with a large waterhole (12955) and a possible cesspit or latrine (10804). Building 10810 was one of the few buildings on site with definite evidence for an entrance threshold, in this case facing westwards across the gravel pavement and road to the shrine beyond. The building was physically partitioned, the northern and southern rooms being of quite different character. The worn uneven limestone surface in the northern room incorporated a well-used stone-lined drain, which must have been integral to the room's function. The fact that the room was subsequently extended northwards in timber may suggest that this was in fact a byre for livestock (or was later used as such), a possibility supported by its position adjacent to two 'pen' type enclosures built during the later Roman period (see below). The unpaved southern room in building 10810 contained an embedded coarse ware storage jar and a central hearth, and was clearly the domestic side of the building. Finds included a reasonable number of hairpins in addition to coins and nails. As with the other domestic plots, water was supplied from a waterhole to the rear of the building.

North of this plot, the site remained largely empty, aside from field boundaries, two wells and a small cemetery. The extent of this presumably agricultural field system is not known, although the geophysical survey to the east of the settlement revealed a large group of rectilinear enclosures stretching back at least 200 m (see Chapter 4 Fig. 4.1). The nature of the agricultural economy at the site is discussed below.

#### **Final expansion and decline of the settlement (Phase 5)**

The roadside settlement continued to expand northwards throughout the 3rd century and into the 4th century, with little or no apparent hiatus in activity (Fig. 7.3). However, a major change during this phase is the near abandonment of the shrine by the end of the 3rd century, and, perhaps related to this, the deterioration of the main north-south road and gravel pavement. It is unlikely that it was a lack of roadway traffic that led to this decline, as the deep wheel ruts in the late surface testify, but it would seem that whatever 'municipal' resources went into creating and maintaining the shrine, road and pavement were no longer present. Instead there seems to have been more emphasis on the individual development and maintenance of plots, as seen by the laying down of discrete areas of stone paving along the road frontage of specific buildings in the settlement. This general situation is seen in many larger urban settlements (eg Verulamium; Niblett 2001), with public buildings declining at the expense of increased embellishment of townhouses, but it is not often witnessed within smaller settle-



Fig. 7.3 Outline of final phase (5) of settlement

ments such as Higham Ferrers. Interestingly, the major exception to urban municipal decline is the establishment of walled boundaries around towns, and the one later embellishment at Higham Ferrers outside the plots and agricultural field systems, is the provision of a new roadside ditch (and bank?), which possibly also defined the western settlement boundary and northern entrance. To the south of this proposed entranceway, the plots along the eastern side of the road continued to develop through into the late Roman period, and the development of these is summarised below.

Building 11370 in plot A underwent internal alterations in the late Roman period (new flooring and posthole partition), but no major changes occurred until its demolition at some point in the 4th century. As with other buildings in the site, the exact date of demolition is uncertain, but the overall ceramic and coin sequence does not suggest much activity beyond the mid 4th century.

The organisation of plot B changed considerably during this phase, with rectangular building 11630 probably going out of use in the late 3rd/early 4th century, not too long after it was built. However, a paved area was constructed along the road frontage on the western side of this building, which points at some occupation continuing beyond the period when the roadside pavement was no longer maintained. It is possible that the interior of this plot remained largely open for most of the 4th century, although there is evidence for two smaller structures of unknown function.

The overall layout of the building complex within plot C appears to have remained little altered into the late Roman period, although it is possible that a number of buildings (10880, 11630 and 10900) went out of use, or perhaps saw a change of use to a non-domestic function. The only major structural alteration was the western extension on building 10850, which projected across the old gravel roadside pavement, with an external paved surface abutting it. The building's interior was also refloored in stone, with postholes, a hearth and a possible corndrier inserted, possibly indicating change to a more agricultural or industrial function, especially as very few 'domestic' finds were recovered, aside from a dump of pottery in pit 12698.

Circular building 10870 clearly continued in use for some time, with a series of stone floor surfaces being laid out, and distinct radial divisions of space being set out around a central focal hearth. Finds distribution was limited to the better preserved northern floor surfaces and included toilet articles, jewellery, a sewing needle and an agricultural tool. This building was clearly still a functioning domestic space, with the radial divisions hinting at segregation of activities, although there is nothing in the finds distribution itself to suggest this. Building 10870 was cut by ditch 11530 at some point in the 4th century, which probably had the effect of creating an open courtyard, with 'ancillary' building 10890 still functioning along the eastern

boundary. Indeed this building was actually extended in this phase, although as with most other plots, there is little to suggest much activity beyond the mid 4th century.

The previously unoccupied plot D to the north had building 10840 constructed along its western side facing the road, with an ironstone wall to the north blocking access into the area behind, thus creating a definite boundary between what seems to have been public and private space. The building was clearly domestic in nature with a well-built hearth/oven and large quantities of finds including personal ornaments, tools and household items recovered from occupation and destruction deposits. Two sunken pottery vessels in the floor by the western wall were probably used for culinary storage purposes, as were similar vessels from elsewhere on the site. A lift key and a slide key indicate the need for security. Some 43 coins were found within this building, and although these included 4th century issues (up to AD 360), most were of late 3rd century date, and were thought to represent a hoard. The high number of coins from this period (along with two 2nd century issues), together with the number of personal items recovered, means that the assemblage as a whole is quite similar to that of the shrine, which lay directly opposite. As building 10840 was constructed around the same time as the shrine's near abandonment, it is possible that some of the material here represents objects selected from the shrine area. However, none of the objects is of a specific religious nature and so the purpose of this selective curation – if genuine – remains unknown, although it may be relevant that there was a tentative association between this plot and the shrine during the previous phase (see above).

The building may have been one the latest occupied on site, as a late internal surface layer contained quantities of late Roman pottery along with mid 4th-century coins. A small group of five adult inhumation graves was cut into the earlier eastern boundary ditch of the plot; one of these gave a radiocarbon date of the later 4th/early 5th century, commensurate with the late dating of the building along the plot frontage.

Two buildings (10820 and 10830) were constructed in previously unoccupied plot E, both aligned NW-SE with their shorter sides facing the road and with a metalled pathway between them leading to the rear of the plot. Access along this pathway was seemingly controlled by a gateway, thus restricting entry into the 'private space' behind. The alignment and position of these buildings suggest that they were constructed at around the same time, although they were of slightly differing form, with 10830 having unusual rounded corners, very similar to a late Roman building discovered in the 1960s excavation further south (Meadows 1992, 84-5). Both buildings had entrances fronting the roadside, with areas of well worn, defined pitched limestone paving indicating heavy

traffic, presumably leading to and from the road.

Building 10820 to the north had a clearly divided interior, with two rooms of differing function. The main room to the front contained a hearth and was most probably domestic in nature, while the rear room, which was added at a later date (early-mid 4th century), seems to have been a specialist workshop, maybe associated with ironworking, as it was one of the few buildings on site to contain smithing waste, albeit in small quantities.

The original back (east) wall of this building was aligned with the east wall of the earlier structure 10810 in plot F to the north, suggesting some consistency in their planning, and the north wall of building 10820 would have formed the southern boundary of the courtyard in plot F, which faced onto the road (see below). There is therefore a possibility of some connection between the occupants of the two buildings; maybe they belonged to a common kin group. The back wall of building 10830 in plot E was also upon the same alignment and can be viewed as part of the same architectural and possibly even social group. The interior of this building contained two hearths and considerable amounts of domestic debris, thus indicating its likely function.

Both buildings may have continued to function into the latter half of the 4th century but are unlikely to have continued until the end of the Roman period.

Plot F was developed in this phase to form an open courtyard facing the road, framed by building 10820 of plot G to the south, building 10800 to the north and original building 10810 to the east (Plate 7.1). This 'public' space was not seen in any other plot in the settlement, although it still contrasted with the 'private' space to the rear of the buildings, part of which now contained enclosures probably used to pen livestock. The northernmost building (10800) was one of the smallest on site (36 m sq) and despite the presence of hearths may not have been domestic in nature, as there was an almost complete lack of any finds. A storage or even a commercial function has been postulated, but evidence is lacking. The building faced onto the courtyard and it can perhaps be viewed as a separate 'room' of the main building 10810, which continued in use, as evidence by a later floor surface associated with 4th-century pottery and coins. However, the quantity of late Roman material was not as great as in the two buildings in plot E to the south, suggesting that occupation was shorter lived.

A single large rectangular building was constructed in the most northerly plot (G) in the later 3rd or 4th century. Although only its short axis faced the roadway, the scale of the building (100 m sq) and narrowness of the plot ensured that it covered most of the road frontage, with the exception of what was probably a pathway along its



Plate 7.1 View facing north-west over buildings 10820, 10810 and 10800 towards the Nene Valley

southern wall leading to the rear of the plot. The building's construction method differed from that of others in the settlement, and it appeared to have an unusually large entrance directly onto the old gravel pavement, although no additional paved areas were noted, in contrast to the situation in buildings further south. It seems likely that the building was domestic in nature, although its size, construction methods and large entrance do mark it out as 'special' in some way. The small cemetery at the rear of the plot continued in use, with the eastern ditch (11270) being recut.

Assuming that ditches 10700/10960 marked the northern boundary of the main settlement, then an open area (24 by 48 m) south of this boundary and north of plot G may represent communal space, possibly for the use of livestock upon entering the settlement. The presence of a substantial waterhole (10589) here would support this interpretation.

The rectilinear enclosure system extended beyond the main settlement. A substantial enclosure (c 75 m sq) just to the north was devoid of features, and was clearly integrated with further boundary ditches continuing on the same alignment to the east of the excavated area, as revealed in the geophysical survey. It would seem that each settlement plot probably had a network of large and small enclosures to the east, used for differing agricultural purposes (see below). Enclosure systems were also revealed extending to the north and it is likely that the overall area of agricultural land associated with the settlement was quite substantial. A single masonry building in this area of northern enclosures is suggested as a possible temple building and is discussed below, although there is always the possibility that it was for agricultural use. Other areas of paving in the vicinity may represent hardstanding for more insubstantial buildings, while two wells contained enough domestic material in the 4th-century backfill (pottery, animal bone, leather shoes etc) to hint at occupation in this area, lying c 100 m north of the main settlement. Two groups of burials also suggest habitation in the vicinity. None of the features in this area need date any later than the mid 4th century.

### The end of the Roman settlement

The roadside settlement of Higham Ferrers was certainly in decline from the mid 4th century onwards, although it is uncertain how far occupation extended towards the end of that century. The latest radiocarbon date from one of the inhumation burials was cal AD 345–430 (UB-5215, 1649 ±20), while only two coins were dated after AD 378, and only minimal quantities of later 4th-century pottery were present. It is unlikely that this pattern merely represents settlement contraction, as dating evidence from the single excavation further south within the presumed heart of the settlement indicates that occupation there had also ceased by

about the mid 4th century (Meadows 1992, 85). The settlement was probably not suddenly abandoned, but more likely declined over a period of up to 40 or 50 years to such an extent that by the end of the century there may have been little more than a handful of families living within the now mostly deserted and overgrown remains of a once thriving settlement. It is unlikely that any sustained occupation continued far into the 5th century. This is somewhat different to the situation at Redlands Farm villa c 1.5 km to the north, which only appears to go into decline at the end of the 4th century, while at Stanwick the largest corridor villa itself was not built until around AD 375 (Parry 2006, 152, 170; see below).

The Saxon occupation of the Higham Ferrers area is discussed in another volume (Hardy *et al.* 2007), but it is worth briefly summarising the earliest elements here. The earliest Saxon occupation can be dated to approximately the mid 5th century, probably at least 40 to 50 years after the final abandonment of the Roman settlement. These may have been small groups of possibly first-generation immigrants making their way up the Nene Valley to a suitable location, with the higher Boulder Clay areas apparently being ignored (Parry 2006, 94). An alternative view often advanced is that such groups represent indigenous population who have undergone a cultural change, thereby indicating an underlying ethnic continuity (see Ward-Perkins 2000 for general overview of this debate). In reality it is likely that there were many different communities with contrasting cultural identities at this time, but it is unlikely that there was ever any strict division of population along ethnic grounds. Whatever the case, there clearly was a substantial element of disruption at Higham Ferrers during the late and early post-Roman period, with little to suggest the inhabitants of the 4th-century settlement were the direct ancestors of the 5th-century population in the area.

Dating evidence from the first sunken-featured buildings at Higham Ferrers suggests that they initially ignored the now ruinous Roman settlement, establishing their community on cleared land further up the dry valley to the south-east. The sunken featured buildings located in the Roman settlement must have represented expansion into the deserted site, with one lying within the shrine precinct and another adjacent to building 10800. It has been commented upon (Hardy *et al.* 2007) that the location of these sunken featured buildings on either side of the road may suggest that this feature was still in use, perhaps connecting further early Saxon settlements along the Nene Valley (see below). A small scatter of Saxon pottery from Greenfield's excavation to the south (Meadows 1992, 88) suggests activity across the settlement during this period, but not apparently on any great scale, and possibly deriving from stone-robbing rather than re-occupation.

## MORPHOLOGY, ECONOMY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Archaeological classification of Romano-British settlement types, from major urban centres and 'small towns' to villas and farmsteads, can be based upon various factors, including morphology, scale, status and economy. King (this vol.) has already highlighted some of the problems inherent with such categorisation, along with the difficulties in making subsequent inter-site comparisons (in this instance between coin assemblages). With sites such as Higham Ferrers, the difficulties are compounded by the apparent differences in material culture between the shrine (see below) and adjacent settlement, but even when the settlement is viewed separately, it may not be readily clear 'what type of site it was'. For instance, can the economy of Higham Ferrers be characterised as a rural agricultural producer economy or an 'urban' consumer economy, and is there evidence for any intrasite social hierarchy? The settlement has in the past been classified as a 'small town' (Taylor 2001, 57), although admittedly this was prior to analysis of the current excavation data, which as we shall see below does not readily support such categorisation. However, it must be said that the definition of such sites is somewhat problematic (and has received much attention; eg Johnson 1975; Rivet 1975; Burnham and Wachter 1990; Burnham 1995; Millett 1995; Booth 1998), especially as many settlements within this general category have little or no evidence on matters such as economy and social structure. Be that as it may, it is the character of the settlement at Higham Ferrers that is important, rather than the label that is attached to it. Aspects of the site plan can be used to shed some light on this. In broad terms the site appears to belong to the simple road junction frontage category of Burnham's morphological scheme (Burnham 1987, 159-160) – on the (unproven) assumption that at least some activity was associated with the south-west trending subsidiary road as well as the main north-south road. As well as the roads themselves, features such as the roadside pavement and monumental shrine suggest a degree of 'municipal' planning, but this contrasts with the arrangement of the other buildings, which is very informative. While there is a reasonable density of buildings, particularly in Phase 5, their relationship to the road is striking, in that most of the buildings on the road frontage lie parallel to it, rather than end on. This arrangement is unusual in a developed 'small town' context, in which the 'end on' arrangement of strip buildings is much more characteristic. Local examples occur at Ashton (*ibid.*, 177) and Durobrivae (eg Mackreth 1995, 149, fig. 13.1), where this pattern is seen in relation to the minor streets as well as the major road. Interestingly, the rather limited evidence from Irchester suggests a less organised pattern of buildings (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 143), perhaps comparable to that seen

at Higham Ferrers itself. Burnham (1987, 176-178) has characterised the 'spacious plots', a description which applies to most if not all of the plots defined at Higham Ferrers, as agricultural in nature '...likely, therefore, to be most common at settlements close to the village:town threshold' (*ibid.*, 178). The layout at Higham Ferrers is strongly reminiscent of that at sites such as Catsgore (Leech 1982, eg 8, fig. 5) and the simple character of many of the buildings at the two sites is also comparable (*ibid.*, 30, fig. 20). These similarities support the interpretation of Higham Ferrers as having a largely agricultural emphasis, although the absence of 'corn driers', a feature in a number of the Catsgore buildings, is notable.

The overall environmental evidence from Higham Ferrers presented in Chapter 6 provides another angle on the character of the settlement, and it also suggests a far closer comparison with rural agricultural settlements than to urban sites. Most of the environmental evidence came from late Roman samples in the wells and so we do not have a detailed impression of economic development over the 250 years or so of occupation at the settlement. However, a generalised account does provide a good overview which helps us to understand the nature of the site.

The overall economy was based upon a mixed arable and pastoral regime, although the ratio between the two could not easily be determined. Crops (mainly spelt wheat and hulled barley along with flax) were almost certainly cultivated to some extent in the immediate vicinity on the upper valley slopes. It appears that long-term storage of large quantities of grain was not occurring on site, or at least not in the vicinity of the wells, although the settlement was engaged in a range of activities related to the later stages of agricultural processing. It has been suggested by Robinson (see Chapter 6) that some of these activities (eg the de-husking of wheat) were at least partially centralised rather than always being undertaken on a small scale at a household level (there is for example at least one quern fragment which suggests a mechanically operated mill. See Shaffrey Chapter 5), and no doubt any surpluses (if any existed) would have been sent to the major markets nearby such as Irchester, or used as taxes. This has important social connotations, suggesting a collective element, which is discussed further below. Also of economic importance to the settlement—though probably more in terms of subsistence—was horticulture, and it is likely that much of the space around (and specifically to the rear of) the buildings was given over to the growing of crops such as cabbage, swede and turnip, as well as culinary herbs like summer savoury, coriander, celery and fennel.

There is ample evidence that hay was brought into the settlement, most probably from hay meadows located down on the lower terraces and floodplain of the Nene Valley, just 150-200 m further west. Hay would have been an important resource for the winter feeding of animal herds, and it seems

likely that it was cultivated by the occupants of the settlement. The management of livestock would have been of fundamental importance within the integrated agricultural economy of the settlement. The insect evidence indicated a relatively open area, with a few isolated trees and thorn bushes, and with buildings interspersed with small areas of pasture (and vegetable plots) which contained high concentrations of animals. It is probable that some of the smaller enclosures such as those in plot F were used for such purposes, with the dung then being removed for manuring the arable crops.

The beetle evidence suggests the presence of medium and large-sized herbivores, and this is borne out by the animal bone assemblage, which indicated a fairly typical Roman rural pastoral regime dominated by sheep and then cattle, with smaller quantities of pig. There were no significant developments noted in animal husbandry practices during the three Roman phases, although the number of sheep was reduced in the later Roman period, while cattle became more common. The overall dominance of sheep is quite different to that of urban or military sites (Dobney 2001, 36) where cattle usually predominate, and this again serves to emphasise the rural nature of the settlement. A predominance of ewes and lambs suggests an emphasis on dairy production, although meat consumption and wool production was also a likely concern. The latter activity is also indicated by insect evidence from well 8032 to the north of the main settlement, where an ectoparasite associated with sheep fleeces was found, suggesting that wool was being cleaned prior to spinning (see Robinson, Chapter 6). It must be remarked, however, that only a single spindlewhorl was recovered from the settlement.

Despite the overall dominance of sheep, cattle would also have been of significant economic importance, especially in the later Roman period. The unusually high number of young cattle (but not very young calves which might indicate dairying) at the site may be due to the inhabitants selling surplus adult and elderly animals to larger urban markets, with younger cattle being kept for local consumption, perhaps as a way to conserve resources for winter (see Strid, Chapter 6). The only other domesticated animal of significance in the settlement is pig, which gradually increased in importance from the early (8.8%) to late (14%) Roman period, though still remaining a relatively minor component of the diet. It is likely that pigs were kept in small numbers within the settlement plots, and may have had a special significance, as pig meat was highly esteemed within the Roman diet (Dobney 2001, 36).

The overall evidence indicates a fairly open settlement with a number of buildings interspersed with horticultural plots and small paddocks, surrounded to the north and east by arable fields and with a trackway leading westwards off the main road down to hay meadows on the Nene floodplain. The faunal remains (insects and verte-

brates) did not indicate an urban environment, while the range of cultivated plants used at the site was typical for rural settlements of this date in the region, with no examples of imported exotic plants which are usually present in the larger towns.

It is clear that the main economic impetus of the settlement was agricultural, although the establishment of the shrine in the later 2nd century may well have brought further economic benefits for the community, in terms of catering for the needs of 'pilgrims' at the site (see below). Other evidence for economic activities is strictly limited. Very small-scale metalworking occurred, mainly concentrated in late Roman contexts and in particular in building 10820, while small quantities of slag and coal were recovered from a quarry pit in Greenfield's excavations further south (Meadows 1992, 85). It is perhaps surprising that there is so little evidence for iron smithing, and no evidence for iron smelting at all, given that Higham Ferrers lies in close proximity to a significant number of ironworking sites in the Nene Valley (Schrüfer-Kolb 2004, 42). In particular, Schrüfer-Kolb's survey of ironworking in the East Midlands suggests that primary iron production (ie smelting) is concentrated in unwallled small towns (in which Higham Ferrers is grouped), whereas walled small towns were more associated with smithing (ibid. 114-5). As discussed above, Higham Ferrers does not fall readily into any of the 'small town' categories, which may partially explain the lack of evidence for ironworking.

Other economic activities included boneworking, which was practised during Phases 4 and 5. It may be that further types of craftworking occurred in unexcavated parts of the settlement, although it is unlikely that these were ever more than local crafts providing for the needs of the community, with the possible exception of the production of 'token rings' made for offering at the shrine (see below).

The socio-economic organisation of the agricultural settlement is hinted at by the environmental and material evidence, along with the form and layout of the excavated site, although unfortunately the chronological development is not always that clear. The settlement was established at a time when individual farmsteads up on the Boulder Clay plateau were in decline (see below), and may possibly represent the start of centralisation of the agrarian economy, with large scale processing and distribution of agricultural produce. A collective approach is suggested by the roadside pavement linking the newly established plots, and the building of a monumental shrine. However, was this a collective of essentially independent households, or was there a higher landowner (eg at Redlands Farm villa) with powers influencing the settlement's inhabitants?

Within the excavated settlement, there is little to indicate the differential display of wealth or status, at least in terms of architecture or archaeologically visible material culture. Although it is acknowledged that status and wealth can be displayed in

many different ways, this settlement was established within an area populated with villas and small towns, and so it can be assumed that the inhabitants operated within the same social milieu, with recognisable means of expression of status.

The most obvious shift which may have dictated social change is from the open roundhouses of Phase 3 to the roadside plots and rectangular buildings of Phase 4, although in terms of associated material culture, there was little change except in quantity of objects. Certainly we cannot say that the rectangular buildings were more 'Romanized' than the circular structures, and indeed it is one of the latter type of structure (11340) that had the highest concentration of fine ware samian pottery on site. With the possible exception of 10860, none of the buildings appears to have had a tiled roof or any architectural embellishments, in distinct contrast to the shrine and possible northern temple, with most being simple one-roomed dwellings with central hearths and compacted earthen floors (although a number had paved surfaces). There was some increase in physical differentiation throughout the phases, although in only a few cases (a possible byre in building 10810 and metalworking shop in building 10820) could this be related explicitly to function. This increased segmentation is noted at other settlements (Taylor 2001, 51), and may be linked in the case of the Higham Ferrers site with the apparent erosion of central organisation in the later Roman period (see above).

One socio-economic factor not yet discussed is that of the use of slaves within the settlement, as indicated by the recovery of two shackle fragments in Phase 4 and 5 contexts (Cat. nos 58-9; see Scott Chapter 5). Such a 'fetter' type of shackle (designed to clasp around the ankles) is the most common type of slave restraint in Roman Britain, with a concentration in East Anglia and parts of the East Midlands (Thompson 1993, 148). It remains uncertain how far the presence of such shackles indicates the widespread use of slaves on agricultural estates, but it is most likely that they had some role in the agrarian regime (*ibid.*, 149).

Purely from the evidence of the excavated settlement, therefore, there is nothing to suggest anything other than an agricultural community of socially homogenous families (some at least with probable dependent slaves) practising collective farming and with some effort put into creating and maintaining municipal elements within the site, at least until the later Roman period. However, it is of course also possible that people of higher status resided elsewhere in the unexcavated parts of the settlement, or even that Higham Ferrers represents a community of agricultural workers within the territory of a nearby villa such as Redlands Farm (see below). The major factor against Higham Ferrers being just a simple satellite agricultural settlement is the presence of a substantial shrine across the road from the main core of domestic buildings, which will now be discussed.

## RITUAL AND RELIGION

Aspects of ritual and religion pervaded all areas of Roman life, and so it should come as no surprise that objects and deposits that may be regarded as votive in nature should be found across the settlement. However, the quantity of these votive deposits is more than would be expected from the northern periphery of a typical non-villa agricultural settlement, and this must be due to the presence of a substantial and partially monumental shrine in immediate proximity.

### The shrine

#### *Location and chronology*

The shrine at Higham Ferrers was situated across the road from the main settlement and appears to have been deliberately segregated from this domestic zone, with the road itself acting as an outer boundary (Fig. 7.4). It was positioned on the very edge of the valley side just before it dipped quite sharply down towards the river Nene (Plate 7.2), and as such would have formed a highly visible landmark within the valley, possibly even invisible with the town of Irchester c 4 km to the south-west (Lawrence, pers. comm.).

High visibility is quite typical of Roman temples in Britain, where such sites may have acted as geographical and spiritual points of reference within the landscape (Smith 2001, 150). It may not be a coincidence that the shrine also lay adjacent to the single Bronze Age cremation burial on site (aside from the ring ditch c 300 to the east), although whether this had any influence on the location of the shrine would obviously depend upon whether the burial mound (if one had ever existed) was still visible at this time. However, such association between Roman religious practice and earlier monuments is well established (Williams 1998), with a Bronze Age barrow at Stanwick, for example, being the focus for ritual deposition in the Roman period (see below), and an entire shrine complex at Snow's Farm Haddenham being positioned in relation to an earlier round barrow (Evans and Hodder 2006).

The shrine is dated by coins and ceramics to the later 2nd and 3rd centuries, the time when the settlement layout to the east was radically altered. However, there remains the possibility that a cult focus existed in the vicinity before this time, as all of the brooches within the shrine were of a 1st-century AD date (see below). There are reports of Iron Age and early Roman coins being recovered by metal detectorists further up the valley to the north (on the opposite side of the road to Area G; Lawrence pers. comm.), but this remains unsubstantiated.

It is uncertain whether all components of the shrine were constructed at the same time, or if they represent a sequence of development. The divergent alignments of the inner and outer precinct may suggest the latter (see below).

**Structural organisation**

The shrine was characterised by a distinct boundary wall along three of its sides, while the fourth—which faced west towards the river—was apparently left open, apart from a short (*c* 4 m) section in the south-west corner, which terminated in a slight (0.5 m) eastern in-turn. Although it is possible that a boundary of some kind did exist along the remainder of this side (eg turf wall), it may have been the break of slope itself which acted as the temenos limit, as has been suggested for three sides of the temple at Henley Wood in Somerset (Watts and Leach 1996; Smith 2001, 92). Interestingly, despite the lack of a perceptible physical boundary on this side, some control over entry into the shrine must have been exercised, as only 2% of the animal bones within the precinct (which were not appar-

ently buried) showed signs of gnawing, implying that dogs were successfully kept out.

The distinct boundary on the settlement side furthered the segregation of the shrine from the domestic core, while the open western view suggests a cult with strong associations with the river. Ritual deposits within riverine contexts are not uncommon in Britain (eg Fitzpatrick 1984; Bradley 1998; Booth *et al.* 2007, 208), with a ‘ceremonial object’ being recovered from the River Nene near Peterborough (Green 1975). In a number of temples, such as at Nettleton in Wiltshire (Wedlake 1982) and Bourton Grounds in Buckinghamshire (Green 1966), natural waterways formed an integral part of the cult site, and were clearly a religiously significant landscape feature (Smith 2001, 150).

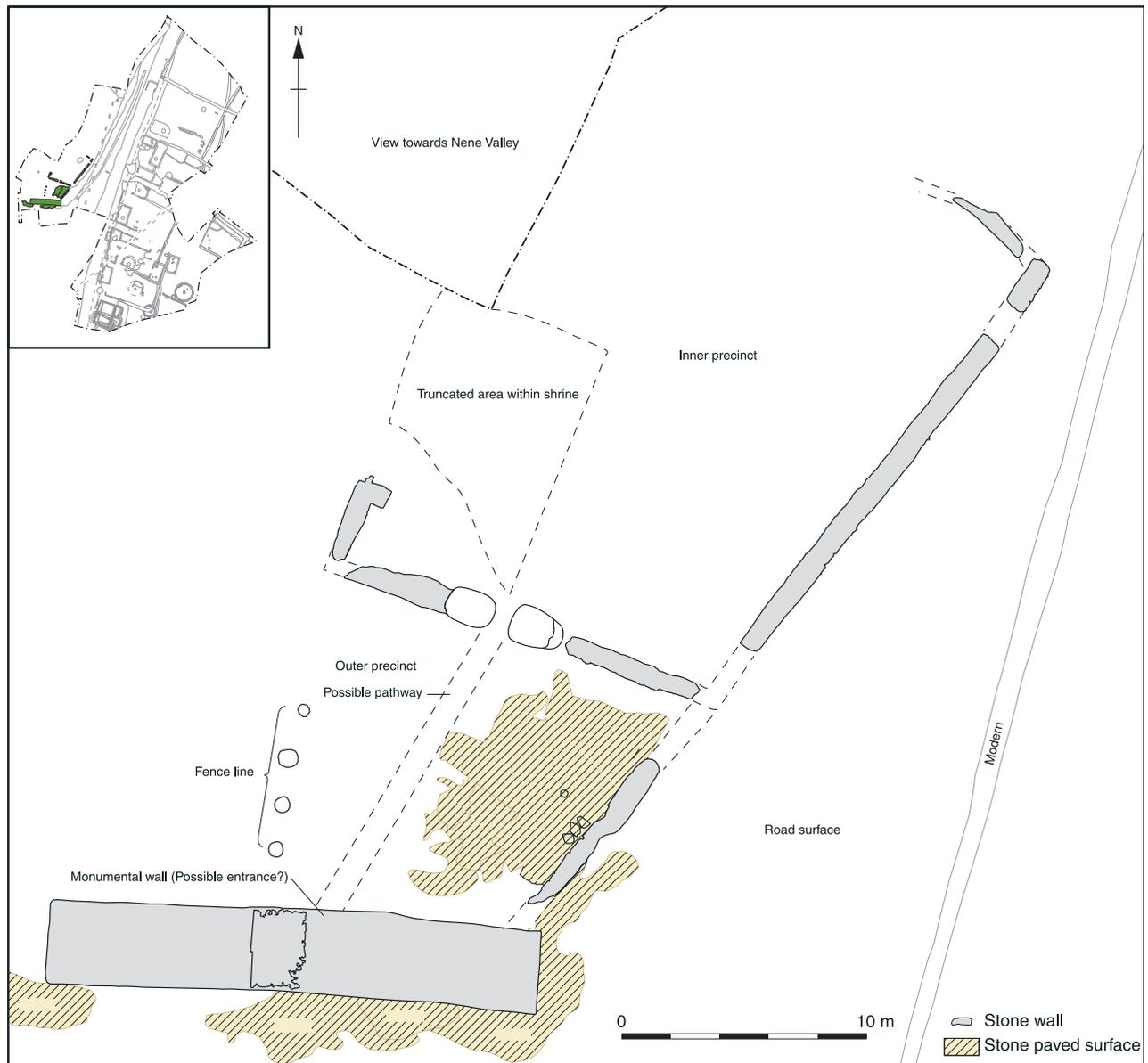


Fig. 7.4 The shrine



*Plate 7.2 View facing south-west from the eastern shrine wall across to the Nene Valley*



*Plate 7.3 Pitched stone foundations of the monumental shrine 'entrance'*



*Plate 7.4 Artist's reconstruction of the monumental entrance to the shrine*

The religious complex was divided into an inner precinct, within which lay most of the associated finds but no actual structure, and an outer annexe to the south. The lack of a shrine building is not too problematic as it was the boundary and cult focus/altar which were the most important physical aspects of a religious complex (Turner 1979, 15; Barrie 1996, 148), and the distribution of finds shows that some kind of cult focus certainly existed at Higham Ferrers (see below).

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect in terms of the shrine's physical structure is the huge (20.5 by 3.6 m) pitched limestone foundation, which formed the southern boundary of the annexe to the shrine (Plate 7.3). The scale of this feature is incongruous not only within the wider settlement, but also within the shrine itself, where the only feature having even a loosely comparable element of monumentality was the entrance into the main enclosure, *c* 14 m to the north. The remaining precinct walls were just *c* 1 m in width. Such incongruity highlights the possibility that the southern boundary wall was of a different phase than the rest of the shrine, which is also suggested by its divergent alignment with the inner precinct wall. An earlier origin is not out of the question, especially as there are significant numbers of 1st-century AD brooches within the shrine (see below). There is even the possibility that the initial monumental structure was reduced in size (from 20.5 to 12 m) when it was incorporated into the later 2nd century shrine, as the remaining limestone foundations are aligned with the western boundary (fenceline and wall) of the temenos. However, this is far from certain, and indeed it could be argued that the presence of such a monumental construction would be even more incongruous within the context of the earlier phase 3 settlement (or even pre-settlement), and so unfortunately its dating must remain uncertain.

As the monumental boundary was significantly robbed, its exact form and function are also uncertain, and it may have had more than one structural phase (see above). Colonnade fragments (Plate 7.4) and a concentration of ceramic tile in the shrine area may hint at some degree of architectural embellishment, though these could have come from the inner entrance. The width of the wall could easily have encompassed substantial niches, possibly for pieces of religious sculpture. Aside from the small relief

panel, which is unlikely to have derived from this structure, the only fragment of masonry sculpture from site was a bas relief possibly representing the torso of a quadruped (SF 3197), found reused in a floor surface in building 10810 (see Davenport, Chapter 5). However, there is no way of knowing whether or not this derived from the shrine.

It can be presumed because of the substantial foundations that the structure was of a significant height. Its very location on the edge of the escarpment leading down into the Nene Valley suggests that a prominent and dramatic visual presence was a fundamental part of its *raison d'être*, and it would almost certainly have been visible from as far as Irchester to the south-west. This prominence, and possibly the quality of the building stone, may explain why this monument had been so thoroughly robbed.

There are no ready parallels for such a structure within a rural Roman religious context in Britain, and interpretation purely on the basis of the surviving foundations is extremely speculative. It was undoubtedly monumental, but the sort of monument involved is less clear. The dimensions of the foundation give a length:width ratio of 1:5.6. A comparison with data from a selection of Roman arches (Table 7.1), including Verulamium, suggests that this ratio is more typically in the range 1:2.2 to 1:3.5; moreover the foundations, where noted, are usually in the form of independent blocks for the main piers, in the manner of the smaller foundations defining the entrance into the inner precinct at Higham Ferrers, which might plausibly have carried a small arch. It should be noted, however, that as reconstructed the later 2nd-century 'Riverside' arch at London had a length:width ratio of *c* 1:6.3 (Blagg and Gibson 1980, 153-7), so the Higham Ferrers proportions are not entirely unparalleled in monuments of this type. Reconstruction of the monument as an arch still seems improbable, however, and a more linear monument, though perhaps incorporating one or more relatively small openings, may be more likely.

On balance, its position alone would suggest that it represented the outer entranceway into the shrine complex, although as already mentioned, the actual opening(s) may not have been that large. Entrances into religious sites are often embellished to some degree since it is at this point that the journey from

Table 7.1 Comparison of Higham Ferrers monumental structure with known Roman arches

Name	Date	Height	Width	Depth	W:D ratio	Foundations
Riverside arch, London	?later 2C	?8.0	7.6	1.2	1:6.3	none
Verulamium S	late Antonine		14.1	4.3	1:3.3	Block for each pier
Arch of Titus, Rome	late Flavian	15.4	13.9	6.18	1:2.2	Block for each pier
Arch of Trajan, Benevento	Trajanic		14.35	6.20	1:2.3	Block for each pier
Arch of Constantine, Rome	4C	21.0	25.7	7.4	1.3.5	?
Higham Ferrers	?2C		20.5	3.6	1:5.6	only foundation



Plate 7.5 Colonnette fragment (SF 1225) within western wall of the shrine

the profane into the sacred begins (Barrie 1996). Of the 26 known entrances from major Roman temple complexes in Britain, 17 show evidence for monumentality (Smith 2001, 151; note that since this study a monumental temenos entrance has been excavated at Frilford (Kamash *et al.* forthcoming). The degree of embellishment is usually far more in character with the rest of the complex than at Higham Ferrers, but nevertheless it does highlight the complete emphasis on frontality, also often seen in Roman temple sites (Stambaugh 1978, 569).

Rituals were sometimes performed as part of the entry procedure into the temple site (eg finds outside Woodeaton temenos entrance, Goodchild and Kirk 1954; the altar outside the porch of the triangular temple at Verulamium, Wheeler and Wheeler 1936; etc.), and the group of small finds from the area to the south of the probable entrance (on the branch road leading down into the valley) may represent such activity. These finds were of a similar character to those inside the inner shrine area, and include a number of brooches, hairpins, toilet articles and hobnails, in addition to an iron key and a terret ring from a cart. The latter object may indicate the use of wheeled transport along the road leading down from the main settlement towards the valley bottom. There is some evidence for a paved area immediately south of the probable entrance, but it is uncertain how extensive this was.

Internally, the division of the complex into an inner and outer precinct is also paralleled at a number of other temples such as Hayling Island (King and Soffe 1998) and Harlow (France and Gobel 1985), representing levels within a journey into the increasingly sacred areas of the shrine. The 'outer' precinct at Higham Ferrers was at least partially paved (Plate 7.5) and defined on the western river-facing side by a line of four substantial postholes, presumably representing a physical barrier. Compared to the inner precinct (see below), finds were minimal (aside from destruction deposits, which included 4th-century coins), and it may have been that this area was deliberately kept clear – perhaps an assembly point before entering the second monumental entranceway into the inner temenos.

#### *The votive assemblage*

The inner precinct was characterised by a dense concentration of objects, the majority of which would appear to be ritual deposits. The nature of the finds has already been commented upon in Chapter 5, with the animal bone discussed in Chapter 6. Here we will examine their overall character and distribution within the shrine, and discuss the nature of the ritual activity that led to their deposition.

It is very clear that the assemblage of objects from the shrine not only differed from the settlement in terms of quantity, but also in terms of typology, which is presumably reflective of the type of the cult at the site. As already highlighted in Chapter 5, the assemblage, which includes large quantities of personal items (especially jewellery items: brooches and rings) and coins, is quite typical of those found associated with temples and shrines (Smith 2001, 155), with objects representing specific offerings to the deity. In a recent study of votive objects from the Snow's Farm shrine at Haddenham on the fens in Cambridgeshire, the preponderance of jewellery (albeit in a small assemblage) was taken as an indication of a healing aspect to the cult, by comparison with assemblages from Lydney Park and Nettleton Shrub (Evans and Hodder 2006, 368). While this may admittedly be somewhat oversimplistic, a healing aspect to the cult is certainly possible, strengthened by the presence of hairpins and dog bones (see below), both of which have associations with healing cults.

All of the brooches within the shrine were of 1st-century AD form and are therefore likely to have been at least 100 years old prior to deposition. Although these may have been deliberate archaic offerings, similar to deposits made in other temple sites in Britain (ibid., 156), there remains the possibility of an earlier religious focus on site, from which these brooches may have derived (see above).

The rings include a quantity of simple cast flat rings which were probably made and sold at or near the shrine specifically as votive offerings, as has been suggested for similar examples found at Uley (Bayley and Woodward 1993). These rings, together with the coins, may hint at a commercial aspect to the cult (see below).

Some of the objects show signs of deliberate breakage, including a bone pin whose stem was broken and partially split (Cat. no. 293; Fig. 7.5), possibly as part of the ritual. Another example shown in Figure 7.5 depicts a brooch (Cat. no. 184) whose pin has been deliberately detached and wrapped around the bow. The deliberate mutilation of objects in sacred contexts is a widespread phenomenon in Iron Age and Roman Britain, sometimes interpreted as a way of ritually 'sacrificing' the object to make it more appropriate for the deity (Green 1995, 470).

These personal and monetary offerings may either be in the anticipation of divine aid (*nuncupatio*) or more likely in fulfilment of the vow (*solutio*), both of which required specific rituals (Derks 1995). The two styli and three seal box lids may well have been connected with the *nuncupatio* ritual, as has been suggested for temple sites in north-east Gaul (ibid., 121). Further evidence for the *nuncupatio* ritual may be seen with the rolled lead sheets. At first thought to be curse tablets (appeals to a deity to punish perpetrators of a crime until reparation is made) such as those found in quantity

at Bath (Tomlin 1988) and Uley (Woodward and Leach 1993), only one sheet was found to contain text, although this was not identifiable. However, blank lead sheets have been found in quantity at Uley and they may have served as 'verbal curses', perhaps for the non-literate, or else it is also possible that such sheets were in fact inscribed with ink which has since disappeared (Tomlin, pers. comm.).

The more specific 'votive' objects found in the shrine may also have been offerings, although they could have been priestly paraphernalia (eg the cult spearhead) or temple decoration (eg votive leaves). More unusual within religious contexts (especially in the absence of an obvious shrine building) are the large numbers of iron nails (see Scott, Chapter 5), which could conceivably have been part of simple wooden structures within the inner precinct, to which offerings would have been attached. The large number of hobnails would have been well suited for making such attachments and this might explain both their presence and similar distribution (see Fig. 7.7a). Alternatively, the hobnails may represent ritual offerings of actual shoes, as these personal objects are thought to preserve the imprint of the soul, and their deposition in ritual contexts was an established practice throughout the prehistoric and Roman period across Europe (van-Driel Murray 1999, 135).

In addition to the metal and bone objects from the shrine, there are other classes of material that emphasize its special nature. The large pottery assemblage included a high proportion of samian ware and several unusual vessels including a glazed sherd, imported Moselle ware, a lamp

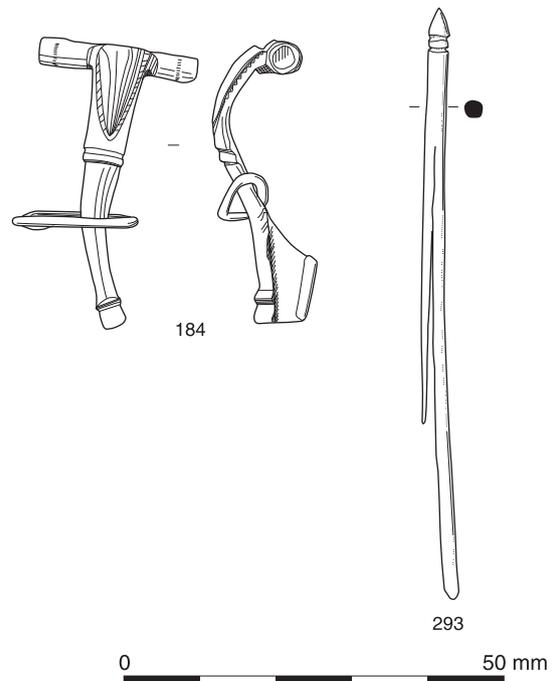


Fig. 7.5 Examples of deliberately damaged objects from the shrine

chimney and a relatively high number of colour-coated beakers (see Timby, Chapter 5). This assemblage was certainly different from that of the main settlement, and may have been used in temple rituals, with the fine wares being part of the accoutrements of ritual feasting and drinking. It has been suggested that a greater emphasis on drinking vessels (flagons/beakers/cups) as opposed to 'eating' vessels (dishes and bowls) within shrine assemblages is indicative of a higher degree of Roman influence (including urban temples), with ceremonies focused upon acts of presentation rather than consumption (Evans and Hodder 2006, 407). Interestingly, the only good quality glass drinking vessel from the site also came from the shrine (see Cool, Chapter 5).

Almost 4400 animal bones were recovered from the shrine interior, nearly all of which are likely to have derived from ritual sacrifice and probable feasting (see Strid, Chapter 6). Unlike the animal bone from some other rural temples such as Uley and Harlow, there was no great discrepancy between religious and secular assemblages, but this might have been because these other temples were located in areas removed from contemporary habitation, whereas the Higham Ferrers shrine was part of a larger settlement site. Nevertheless, it is clear that there was some selectivity within the shrine as large mammals, notably cattle and horse, were less common, with sheep and pig being the preferred sacrificial animals. The age and limb selection of these species indicate that there was a preference for prime cuts of meat. These cuts may have been brought into the shrine as specific food offerings, or else were the remains of sacrificed animals subsequently used in ritual feasts (with the remainder of the animal being removed). Other animals which may have been sacrificed include dog, domestic fowl, wild boar and a range of different wild birds. As pointed out in Chapter 6, many of the birds had special associations with particular deities, but they do not occur in enough quantity to be able to assign the name of any god or goddess to this shrine.

Overall, there would seem little within the votive assemblage as a whole to determine the exact nature of the cult, and the site may have been dedicated to a local deity of place (local spirit) or of the river itself, perhaps conflated with a Roman god. The possibility of healing and commercial aspects to the cult has been commented upon above, with the latter being particularly appropriate given its location within a settlement on a road junction. The most common conflated Roman deities in Britain are Mars (with a strong healing element) and Mercury (commerce), and although such associations here remain entirely hypothetical, they are certainly not out of the question.

In terms of the distribution of finds within the inner precinct, it was apparent from a fairly early stage of excavation that distinct patterns were emerging. Most of the finds came from the lower

parts of a thin layer of silty soil which spread across much of the interior, suggesting that the finds lay upon the Roman ground surface. Because of this, it may be expected that the finds recovered were only a fraction of the original number, and that post-depositional movement was a significant factor. However, the silty soil layer, which was a post-occupation deposit, seems to have remained fairly undisturbed, thus preserving the final location of the finds *in situ*, and presenting a reasonably accurate picture of the distribution pattern across the shrine interior. The only exception is an area (c 8.5 x 5.5 m) of recent truncation in the south-west part of the precinct to the left of the shrine entrance, where some objects may have been removed, thus distorting the pattern (Fig. 7.4). However, there does appear to be a genuine discrepancy between the concentration of finds on the eastern side of the shrine, and their relative paucity on the open western side. This is particularly striking in the far south-western corner of the precinct, where the preserved silty soil produced no finds at all (Fig. 7.6).

The concentration of finds on the eastern side of the precinct, as displayed in Figure 7.6, indicates the presence of a specific 'offering zone', where it was



Fig. 7.6 Distribution of all finds on the western side of the road

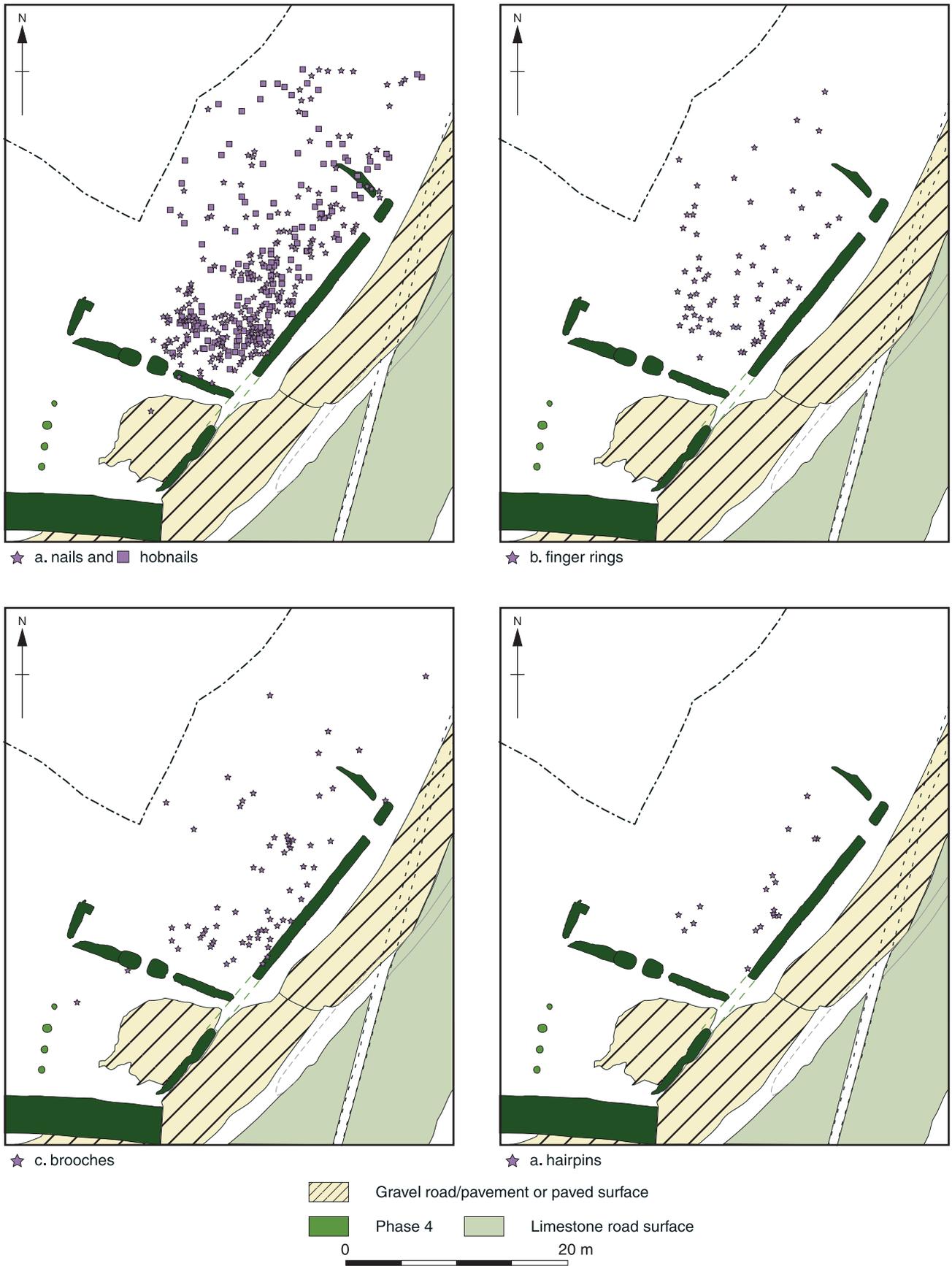


Fig. 7.7 Distribution within shrine of a) nails and hobnails b) finger rings c) brooches d) hairpins

appropriate for votive objects to be displayed. Such zones are often found in temple sites where excavation recording has been meticulous enough, with the most prominent places for display/deposition being within the temple cella around the cult image and along the boundaries of the sanctuary (Smith 2001, 154-5). While there is obviously no temple structure in this instance, the Higham Ferrers finds do clearly concentrate in the south-eastern area of the precinct, and in particular around an area *c* 3 x 2.5 m which is virtually free of any finds. No evidence for any feature was found in this space, though it must represent the site of a cult focus of some kind, perhaps an altar or image/statue that required no foundation. The eastern boundary wall was also a focus for artefact deposition, with objects being perhaps attached to the wall itself. Certainly rubble from the wall lay above many of the finds along its length.

As with most Roman temples where distribution analysis has been conducted, there was no clear evidence for segregation of different votive types, although there were some differences in their distribution (Fig. 7.7). Finger rings (Fig. 7.7b) for example have a more widespread distribution than brooches (Fig. 7.7c) and hairpins (Fig. 7.7d), which are more restricted to the southern and eastern areas. However, much of this patterning may be due to chronological factors, with brooches for example being mostly of early date (see above) and possibly deposited before many of the finger rings. All the votive leaf fragments came from the general mass of finds around the cult focus, while the ceremonial spearhead was found in the far north-east of the shrine, probably because it was not a votive offering.

As far as use of space within the inner precinct is concerned, it seems that the vast majority of the objects were displayed/deposited in the eastern half (and it is probable that the original number of objects was far greater), and therefore it is unlikely that this area was also used for gatherings of large crowds and for feasting. These activities may have been confined to the western side overlooking the river, or even have been located in the outer precinct, with access to the inner precinct being

more restricted. In this respect the inner precinct may have effectively acted as a temple building, in housing the cult focus and displaying the votive gifts, while the main public ceremonial activity took place outside.

**Association with the settlement**

The question remains as to how this whole shrine complex was integrated with the rest of the settlement. Its establishment (not withstanding the uncertain date of the monumental outer entrance) at the same time as the complete reorganisation of the settlement (or at least the northern part of it) implies intimate links between the two, and if the creation of the roadside pavement and plot divisions were part of some municipal activity, then conceivably the shrine was too. It would have been a considerable undertaking, although despite the monumentality of the entranceways the shrine itself need not have been of any great architectural sophistication. The maintenance of the site was presumably borne by the inhabitants of the settlement, probably supplemented by donations to the shrine by external visitors, though this activity seems to have ceased by the start of the 4th century. There is some evidence for limited use after this date, but it is likely that much of the shrine became derelict and overgrown, with the stone probably being re-used elsewhere. However, that fact that the deposits in the shrine interior appear to have been relatively undisturbed may suggest that there remained a 'taboo' on entering this area for some time.

**Other ritual within the settlement**

Despite the strict division between the shrine complex and the settlement, there is also evidence for ritual activity in the latter area, in the form of structured deposits and votive items. The integration of religion within everyday life was well-established, both within Iron Age and Roman traditions. Structured pit deposits have been studied extensively in Iron Age contexts (eg Hill 1995), while Scott (1991) has argued that the persistence of the practice of such deposition into the Roman period implies a continuity of underlying belief systems.

Table 7.2 Potential ritual deposits within the settlement

Feature	Context	Interpretation
Pit 11482	Within building 11340	Pit containing 'watering can' ceramic vessel buried under a roughly stacked group of limestone slabs, partly sealed by a large slab at floor level.
Pit 11576	Within building 11340	Stone filled pit with broken up oven plate.
Well 8278	Area G	Backfill of well containing pottery, a leather shoe, a fragment of a limestone colonnette and five human bones
Pit 126 98	Within building 10850	Pit tightly packed with 3 kg of 3rd-century pottery
Pit 12826	Adjacent to ditch 12310	Stone-lined pit packed with animal bone, 18.5 kg of early 3rd-century pottery, vessel glass and a bone pin
Ditch 12880	Enclosure around building 10920	Concentration of pottery and animal bone in deliberate backfill - a closure deposit?

The instances of possible ritual deposition at Higham Ferrers have been summarised in Table 7.2, although this does not include the instances of pottery vessels sunk into the ground as these may have had a more utilitarian function. In addition, two votive leaves and a model votive axe were recovered from settlement contexts, hinting at the occurrence of private domestic shrines within households, even if the objects themselves had been taken from the shrine complex.

A number of other structures revealed during the excavations could possibly be interpreted as shrines, although the evidence is far from conclusive. In Area G to the north of the main settlement, the single rectangular masonry building 8019 stands out as unusual in many respects and has been tentatively interpreted as a temple, dating to the later Roman period. It was located *c.* 120 m beyond the northern-most building in the settlement and does not appear to have been domestic in nature, its only internal feature comprising an unusual clay-lined pit filled with burnt stone, ceramic building material, pottery and animal bone. Limestone colonnette fragments were recovered from a nearby well, and together with the ceramic roof tile (if both came from this structure) point to a building of some architectural pretension, probably precluding an agricultural or industrial function. Nevertheless the modest finds assemblage from this area as a whole (to the east of the road at least) is very different from the southern shrine and so a religious interpretation must remain inconclusive.

Finally, the large number of small finds recovered from the area to the north of main shrine should be remarked upon (Fig. 7.6). The northern shrine wall does not seem to have acted as a barrier to the deposition of objects and so it must remain possible that the whole western side of the road in this area was sacred to some degree, possibly with small roadside shrines set up. One such shrine could be the truncated foundations of a structure (12456), *c.* 35 m north of the main complex, as this represents the only other known structural element on this side of the road.

### THE SETTLEMENT IN ITS LOCAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

The Roman settlement at Higham Ferrers lay within a densely populated river valley, connected by roads to a string of villas, farms and other nucleated sites between the small towns of Irchester and Titchmarsh (Fig. 7.8; see below). The wider region was also well settled during the Roman period, although there were no major urban centres, with Leicester being over 50 km to the north-west and Verulamium over 60 km to the SSE. The town of Water Newton (Durobrivae) 32 km to the north-east was also clearly of considerable wealth and importance, being regarded as one of the great industrial centres of Roman Britain, in terms of associated pottery industries that were in large-scale produc-

tion from the late 2nd century (Fincham 2004). The town was surrounded by many villas – presumably the residences of those living off the industrial wealth – and there are suggestions that it may have actually been a *civitas* capital (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 90).

This part of the East Midlands has seen a number of archaeological syntheses in recent years (Taylor 2001; Taylor and Flitcroft 2004; Parry 2006; Taylor 2006), which is testament to the wealth of evidence for Roman settlement, landscape features, agriculture and industry. Nevertheless, there is still an acknowledged admission that only a small proportion of the archaeological remains has been recorded to any significant degree (let alone publicly disseminated), with the corollary that much of the relationship between settlement and landscape remains poorly understood (Taylor 2006, 143, 159).

The region in the Roman period is generally characterised by intensively occupied rural landscapes (Taylor and Flitcroft 2004, 63), with much apparent continuity from the Iron Age in terms of basic settlement location and agricultural economy. However, there is evidence for some settlement dislocation during the later Iron Age or early post-conquest period in the middle Nene Valley area, for example at Wollaston and Raunds (*ibid.*, 73), while more gradual reorganisation and change was certainly noted in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Parry 2006, 72).

### Settlement form and distribution

As noted above, Higham Ferrers lies between the small towns/major settlements of Irchester and Titchmarsh, with the former lying just 4 km along the Nene Valley to the south-west. While only limited excavation has occurred within and around Irchester, it clearly had later Iron Age origins and was a flourishing settlement by the end of the 1st century AD (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 145). However, it was probably not recognisable as a town until the construction of earthwork defences in the later 2nd century (*ibid.*; for the date see Woodfield 1995, 133-5), around the same time as the settlement re-organisation at Higham Ferrers. The masonry defensive walls may perhaps be dated to the late 3rd or 4th century but could have been contemporary with the earthwork (*ibid.*). The overall development of Irchester is less than well known, as is the case with other possible small towns/large settlements in the local area such as Titchmarsh, Kettering and Duston. Although excavation has been minimal, there was clearly an important settlement at Titchmarsh, located over an extensive area at the junction of major road systems and occupied throughout the Roman period (Curteis *et al.* 1998-9; Fig. 7.8). The presence of a cemetery, masonry buildings, tesserae, painted wall plaster, a stone capital and a rich artefact assemblage attests to the significance of the site (including

a probable religious element – see below), although its classification as a small town must remain somewhat uncertain until further investigation.

At Ashton, between Titchmarsh and Water Newton, an extensive roadside settlement and cemetery was located, with an emphasis on ironworking (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 279). In some ways the development mirrored that of Higham Ferrers, with the earlier settlement layout remodelled by the later 2nd century in the form of well-defined plots with strip buildings and wells fronting onto a main road (ibid.). In contrast with Higham Ferrers, however, the settlement continued until at least the early 5th century and the population included a sizeable Christian element (see below).

Such urban or 'semi-urban' places as those mentioned above probably acted as local commercial, industrial, administrative and possibly even religious centres (see below), with the vast majority of the population living in smaller rural farms and settlements.

The most extensive area of detailed archaeological survey in the region lies immediately north of Higham Ferrers, studied in the Raunds Area Project, which not only includes the Nene Valley but also the clay uplands to the east (Fig. 7.8-9; Parry 2006).

A range of Roman settlement forms has been noted within this area, including villas, farms and groups of farms, with all the four villas and most of the larger nucleated sites restricted to the valley. These settlements are largely characterised by groups of enclosures bounded by ditches and/or walls, some of which contained buildings (ibid., 74). One of the few sites to have been comprehensively excavated is Stanwick, 4.5 km north of Higham Ferrers, which had enclosures and stone buildings spread over 11 ha. and field boundaries over 28 ha. (Neal 1989; Crosby and Neal forthcoming; Plate 7.6). Occupation had continued from the Iron Age, with changes to settlement layout from the 1st century AD, so that by the 2nd century the buildings were arranged in rectangular plots with associated tracks. Earlier timber roundhouses were largely replaced with masonry circular buildings, and in some cases with rectangular structures, both timber and masonry. Although rectangular buildings eventually became more common at Stanwick, it seems that—as at Higham Ferrers—both forms co-existed throughout most of the existence of the settlements, probably because of the deeply established traditions of circular building seen in this part of Northamptonshire (Keevill and Booth 1997, 42). However, Taylor (2001, 52) has pointed out that

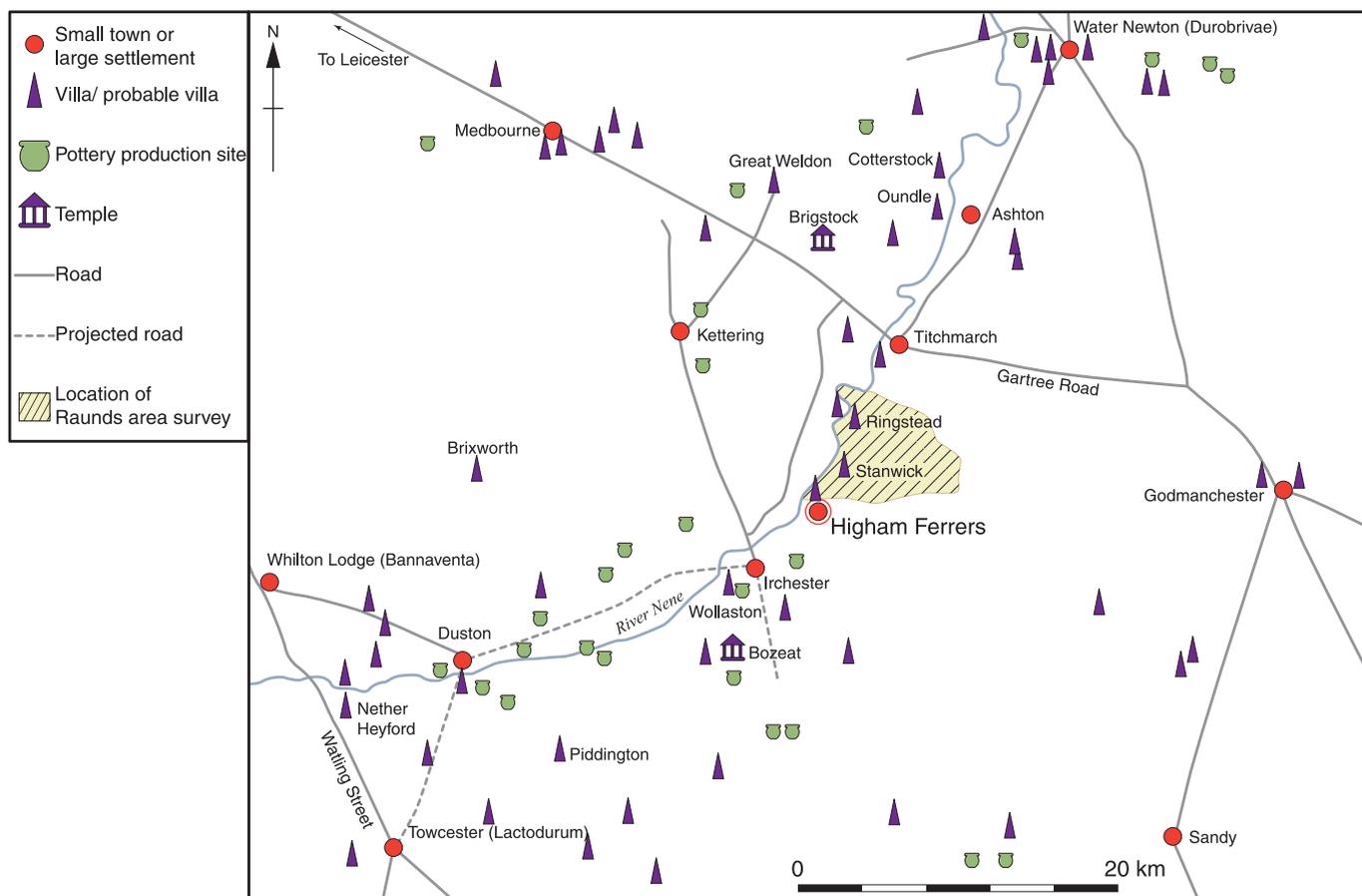


Fig. 7.8 Higham Ferrers in its regional Roman context

within larger settlements, roundhouses tended to be secondary in position and status compared to the main row-type houses.

Despite the great extent of occupation at Stanwick, the picture is that of an agricultural village comprised of a number of individual family units, and it was not until the mid 3rd century that any buildings of recognisably higher status were constructed. One of these was a substantial stone aisled building, which later developed into an ornate winged corridor villa from the mid 4th century. The rise of this building seemed to correspond with a decline in the surrounding building complexes, suggesting a major economic and social shift within the site (see below).

Other major Raunds settlements within the valley included the villas at Redlands Farm (Plate 7.7), South Woodford and Ringstead, along with a largely unexcavated site (including enclosures and masonry strip buildings) at Mallows Cotton (Parry 2006; Fig. 7.2). All of the villas appear to have been established at approximately the same time as Higham Ferrers in the later 1st or 2nd century, while ceramic evidence from Mallows Cotton and the

smaller valley sites suggest a similar date. It appears that occupation in the valley intensified during this period, with the Raunds survey indicating major settlements on the east side of the valley every 1.6 km – 1.7 km, possibly with a similar pattern on the western side (eg at Crow Hill; *ibid.*, 76). This concentration along a prime communication route (see below) is probably due in part to increased social and economic integration with the newly established/expanded larger settlements at Irchester, Titchmarsh and beyond.

The Raunds Area Project has also shown that settlement on the Boulder Clay to the east was more intense than previously thought although, with the exception of Laundes in the far east, these sites seem to have been more in the nature of small dispersed farmsteads (*ibid.*). They were generally located on prominent positions along the watershed overlooking tributary valleys, and look to have been arranged upon a series of trackways, some of which probably linked to the main valley communication routes. A few of these plateau settlements had origins in the Iron Age, while others seem to have been established in the early Roman period.

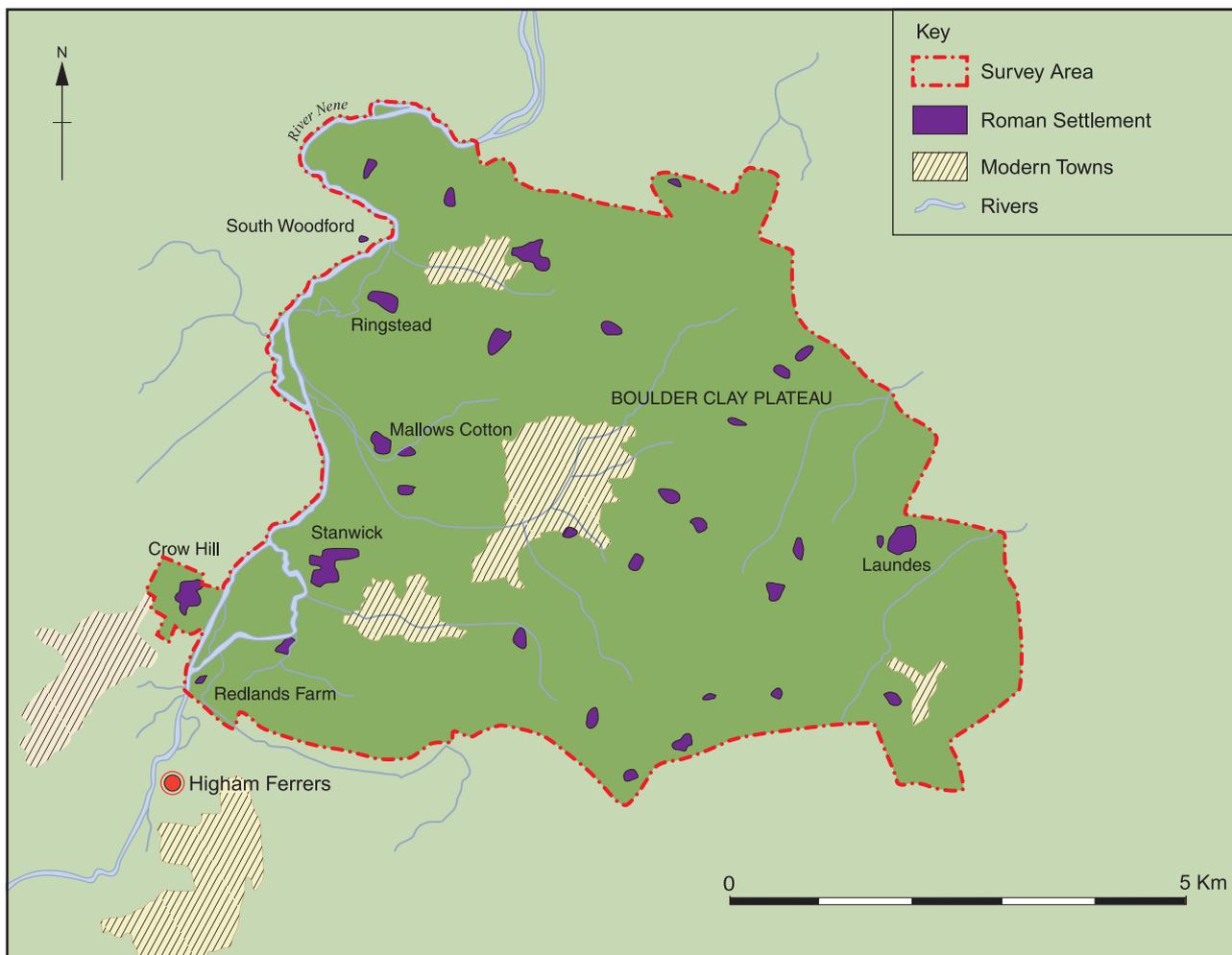


Fig. 7.9 The Raunds Area Survey



*Plate 7.6 View of paving within shrine 'outer precinct' looking east towards the settlement*

However, there appears to have been a gradual decline in settlement numbers during the 2nd and 3rd centuries (*ibid.*, 80), at around the same time as intensification of occupation in the valley, and it is hard to see how these could not be connected in some way. Did this represent some kind of collective consolidation of holdings, with families relocating to larger settlements (like Higham Ferrers) to take advantage of wider economic (and social?) networks? The situation is undoubtedly not this simple and could reflect a multitude of factors, but similar trends of settlement abandonment and nucleation are seen elsewhere in the region at sites such as at Brigstock (Foster 1988) and Medbourne (Liddle 1995, 87), while in wider terms the dynamic nature of the settlement pattern has been emphasised (Taylor 2001, 58-9; 2007, 112-3).

#### **Agriculture, power and control of resources**

The primary economic resource in the region around Higham Ferrers would undoubtedly have been agricultural land. Analysis of pottery scatters (from manuring) within the Raunds Area Project indicates how intensively exploited this land was, with arable obviously being a major component of the regime (Parry 2006, 82). All the valley and clayland settlements were surrounded by pottery scatters, with certain 'blank' areas probably indicating zones of permanent pasture or wood-

land, and hay meadows being cultivated along the banks of the River Nene. To the south of Irchester at Wollaston there is also evidence for significance areas of viticulture within the Nene Valley (Meadows and Brown 2000), which may have been a considerable economic resource for the local land owners. All of this suggests a very carefully managed agricultural framework in the region, with little or no 'space' between land of different settlements. However, the Raunds Area Project did note some decline in the use of arable land in the clay plateau from the later 2nd century onwards, which is probably linked to the settlement decline in this area (Parry 2006, 83). It is perhaps unlikely that land was actually abandoned from this time, but greater emphasis may have started to be placed on less intensive pastoral activity.

Whilst we may have some idea of the types of agricultural activity, we have far less knowledge on matters such as land ownership, estate boundaries, and economic hierarchy of settlements. The villas within the valley were surely the centres of agricultural estates, but the boundaries of these estates remain unknown. The apparent gap in settlement along the upper valley sides noted in the Raunds Survey may indicate that the larger valley sites' agricultural territories extended this far eastwards (Parry 2006, 76), while control of hay meadows in the valley floor may have given them significant economic advantages. Unfortunately the relation-



Plate 7.7 Overall view of excavations at Stanwick, with River Nene beyond (© English Heritage)



Plate 7.8 Excavations of the villa at Redlands Farm with River Nene beyond (© English Heritage)

ship between villa and non-villa valley settlements is very difficult to discern, so that we do not know for example whether the occupants of Redlands Farm villa (Plate 7.8) had any control over the nearby Higham Ferrers settlement (eg in relation to the provision of workers for the villa estate), or if they were both totally independent. The regular spacing of major sites along the valley may suggest the latter.

At Stanwick the emergence of a villa in the later Roman period is seen as possibly representing the rise in importance of one particular family among others within the agricultural settlement, but other possibilities are acknowledged (Parry 2006, 84). The scale of investment in the 4th-century villa certainly indicates substantial wealth, although whether this derived from increasingly monopolistic control of agricultural resources or from other sources remain unknown. Other, even larger, villas in the Nene Valley include Cotterstock (Upex 2001) to the north-east and Piddington (Friendship-Taylor 1999) to the south-west (Fig. 7.8). The villa at Cotterstock has had only very limited excavation but may have been a large courtyard villa comparable others further south in Britain such as Bignor in Sussex and North Leigh in Oxfordshire. It is suggested that the wealth of this villa derived from agricultural land and ironworking, with a possible link to the nearby industrial settlement at Ashton (Upex 2001, 89).

Some of the Nene Valley villas such as Ringstead (Jackson and Parry 2006) and Stanwick lay in peripheral locations within larger settlements, although the relationship between villa and settlement is not always clear (see discussion on Stanwick above). The settlements may have acted as market centres, possibly controlled by the villa owners, and even as foci of tax collection, which may account for the very high number of coins from Stanwick (see King, Chapter 5). Roadside settlements like Higham Ferrers may also have been local market centres, although the major markets would undoubtedly have been within the towns such as Irchester, where goods from further afield (eg pottery, quernstones etc) may have been traded (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 147).

### Communications

There are two major roads in the region around Higham Ferrers – Watling Street to the south-west and Gartree Road to the north-east (Fig. 7.8). Neither of these follows the line of the Nene Valley yet it is clear that there was at least one road that did traverse the upper western side of the valley, seemingly linking with Gartree Road just north-west of Titchmarsh. The string of villas and nucleated settlements along the lower flank of the eastern valley side suggests that another road lay on this line, possibly that which was picked up by geophysical survey running ENE away from Irchester Roman town (Taylor 2000, 9). This was

presumably the main north-south road that was the focus of settlement at Higham Ferrers, also picked up at Redlands Farm and Stanwick (Parry 2006, 81). Although it was not traced further north than this, it is highly likely to have continued through to Mallows Cotton, the villa at Ringstead and the town at Titchmarsh beyond.

Permanent and well maintained communication routes must have been of paramount importance for the economic welfare of the valley's main settlements, and there is some evidence of major engineering to help effect this. Part of a metalled road was revealed raised upon an earthwork across the Nene floodplain leading towards Irchester (Keevill and Williams 1995), while evidence for a timber bridge across the Nene was found at Aldwinckle, just north of Titchmarsh (Jackson and Ambrose 1976). As to the actual use of the river itself for transport, there is no evidence, and it remains uncertain whether it was actually navigable as far as Irchester (Parry 2006, 81).

### Religion

Excavations at Higham Ferrers were important not only in terms of investigating the social and economic development of a roadside settlement, but also in terms of the integration of religion into the lives of the inhabitants, both within the domestic sphere and of course with the monumental roadside shrine. There are very small numbers of excavated temples or shrines within the region, and one of these, at Bozeat south of Irchester, is not altogether convincing in its interpretation (Hall and Nickerson 1970). One of the few more convincing examples within a 20 km radius of Higham Ferrers is at Brigstock, north-west of Titchmarsh (Greenfield 1963). Two buildings possibly formed part of a larger religious complex c 2 km north of Gartree Road; a large circular structure contained most of the votive finds and was probably the main shrine (Smith 2001, 76). The votive assemblage at Brigstock was similar to that from the shrine at Higham Ferrers, being dominated by coins and personal items, with a smaller number of specifically ritual items, including pole tips which may be akin to the ceremonial spear head. The site was clearly a public shrine, like Higham Ferrers, but there is little evidence for its overall structure or context, since the nearest excavated settlement is the villa at Great Weldon, c 4 km to the north-west (Smith *et al.* 1990).

Much nearer to Higham Ferrers, a number of potential shrines have been excavated within the Stanwick settlement (Neal 1989; Crosby and Neal forthcoming). A Bronze Age barrow in the north-east of the site appears to have been the focus for ritual deposition within the Roman period, when a gravel path was constructed around it. Two other possible shrines comprising small rectangular buildings (one with an apse) lay within an enclosure at the junction of two trackways, perhaps at the



Plate 7.9 Artist's reconstruction of the villa at Redlands Farm

focal point of the site. A number of pieces of highly accomplished religious sculpture, including one of the goddess Minerva, were re-used in later features at Stanwick, all of which point to the presence of a shrine of some importance at the site.

It is likely that comprehensive excavation within urban contexts and smaller roadside settlements like Higham Ferrers and Stanwick will produce a great deal more information on Roman religious practices in this region. At least one Romano-Celtic temple is known within Irchester (though not properly excavated; Burnham and Wachter 1990, 146), while Titchmarsh is thought to have contained a significant religious element, based primarily upon the rich finds assemblage (Curteis *et al.* 1998-9, 175). The relationship and hierarchy (if one existed) between the shrine at Higham Ferrers and others in the region remain unknown. In a recent study of the shrine at Haddenham, Cambridgeshire, it was suggested that it may have been 'administered' from a larger sanctuary within the fens, with priests travelling out to the minor shrines for seasonal festivals (Evans and Hodder 2006, 410). Whilst a similar situation could have occurred in the Nene Valley, not enough is yet known about most of the sacred sites in this area.

There is considerable evidence for a Christian presence within the Nene Valley during the 4th century, with for example two lead tanks (one with

a Chi-Rho symbol) being recovered from a well at Ashton (Guy 1977). A probable managed Christian cemetery of over 170 E-W oriented burials was also excavated just south-east of this town pointing to a sizeable population (Frere 1984, 300-1; Petts 2003, 144). Perhaps the most famous group of Christian objects to be found in Britain is the hoard discovered in a ploughed field at Water Newton (Durobrivae), comprising nine vessels, a number of silver votive plaques and a gold disc, many bearing Chi-Rho symbols and early Christian inscriptions (Painter 1977; 1999).

It is most likely that an early Christian population co-existed with pagan worshippers, although this not to say that pagan and Christian interaction was always harmonious. The Brigstock shrines continued in use at least until the end of the 4th century, while a significant number of very late Roman boundary burials (including decapitation and shoe burials) existed at Ashton, indicating that pagan and Christian traditions were maintained alongside each other.

The apparent abandonment of the shrine at Higham Ferrers by the start of the 4th century is too early to suggest any association with a Christian presence, and if the interpretation of the building to the north of the site as a possible temple is accepted, pagan worship may have continued there until the overall decline of the settlement.

### **The end of Roman occupation in the region**

It has already been observed that settlement on the Boulder Clay, at least, had declined significantly by the late Roman period, but the situation within the Nene Valley was somewhat different. All the Raunds Area Project valley settlements on the east side of the valley had evidence for thriving late Roman occupation, although interestingly at those two sites on the west bank (South Woodford and Crow Hill) this was not the case. As discussed above, occupation at Higham Ferrers appears to have declined drastically from the middle of the 4th century, while the villas at Ringstead, Stanwick and Redlands Farm along with the settlement at Mallows Cotton all appear to have survived until at least the end of the century. Indeed the main winged corridor villa at Stanwick was not even established until the mid 4th century, while four stone buildings at Mallows Cotton were dated to the late 4th century (Parry 2006, 182).

It is most likely that the settlements in the Nene Valley and surrounding areas were affected by the great social, political and economic changes of the late empire, but unfortunately the lack of available excavated evidence precludes any detailed analysis at this stage. The exact fate of settlements whose ceramic and coin evidence continue to the end of the Roman period is also notoriously difficult to determine. It is unlikely that with the breakdown of centralised provincial authority in the early 5th century, the grand villas could have been maintained for very long, but what of the general population? Was there a general decline and abandonment of settlement at this time? The distribution of early-mid Saxon pottery in the Raunds area was distinctly different from the late Roman pattern, with the Boulder Clay area being particularly sparsely populated, probably indicating much woodland regeneration (Parry 2006, 94). Instead, occupation seems concentrated in the Nene Valley, although in most cases this did not exactly correspond with areas of late Roman settlement.

Early Saxon occupation is attested at Crow Hill, but this probably just implies the reuse of existing earthworks rather than continuity of occupation, especially as there is little evidence for late Roman activity at this site (Parry 2006, 94, 150). At Redlands

Farm, the final abandonment of the villa, probably in the 5th century, was attributed to rising water levels and flooding (*ibid.*, 153), though three possible early Saxon sunken-featured buildings were located *c* 80 m to the south-east, and may have been contemporary. There is some evidence for continuity of occupation at Stanwick, with late modifications to the villa (an oven and postholes cut through mosaic floor), a small group of 5th- to 6th-century burials along the outer courtyard wall and two buildings possibly of similar date beyond the villa area (Crosby and Neal forthcoming). Judging from the principal concentration of early-middle Saxon pottery, the main area of occupation at this time lay to the north-east of the excavated Roman settlement (Parry 2006, 171), but a light scatter of pottery did indicate limited occupation (and probable stone robbing) of the Roman buildings.

From these examples, and indeed Higham Ferrers itself, there is certainly evidence for a degree of settlement dislocation at some point in the 5th century, although there does not appear to have been wholesale abandonment of the Nene Valley, and in a wider perspective the Anglo-Saxon settlement of the region may well have initially taken place within a late Roman framework. Continuity of occupation into the post-Roman period has been demonstrated in villas at Brixworth (Woods 1972), Nether Heyford (Brown and Foard 2004, 78), and possibly at Oundle near Ashton (Maul and Masters 2005) and Wootton Fields near Duston (Chapman *et al.* 2005). Slightly further afield at Orton Hall Farm in the lower Nene Valley, a large farmstead with a number of aisled buildings was seemingly taken over in working condition by Anglo-Saxons in the 5th century (Mackreth 1996). In addition, early Saxon cemeteries have been discovered outside the towns/major settlements of Duston and Kettering (Kennett 1988), suggesting some continuity of occupation at or near these centres.

The transition from late Roman to Saxon in this region was undoubtedly complex and piecemeal, and is still not well understood. However, with further excavation and analysis of sites like Higham Ferrers that span this transition, we may gain a greater insight into this pivotal period in British history.