

# Chapter 5 Discussion and Synthesis

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## INTRODUCTION

Thornhill Farm is one of a number of settlements excavated along the gravel terraces of the Upper Thames Valley that have in the past 25 years transformed our understanding of the region in the Iron Age and Romano-British period (Figs 5.1–2). Throughout these periods the area remained intensely settled, as cropmarks on aerial photographs show (Benson and Miles 1974; Leech 1977), although the nature and form of settlements often underwent significant alteration. Of particular importance is the evidence for widespread periodic settlement shift and discontinuity, representing major landscape reorganisation seemingly tied in with changes in site economy. Within Romano-British studies in particular, close analysis of such rural communities has often been neglected in favour of urban and military aspects, and yet it has recently been re-emphasised (Taylor 2001, 46) that the study of rural society and social practice is of vital importance in understanding the history of the province.

## INTERPRETATION AS A PASTORAL SETTLEMENT

Extensive excavations between 1979 and 1989 of a cropmark complex near the confluence of the rivers Thames and Coln in Gloucestershire revealed two main areas of occupation, at Claydon Pike to the east and Thornhill Farm to the west. At both sites evidence suggested the practice of specialised pastoral activity, at least within middle to late Iron Age and early Roman contexts. This hypothesis was based upon the following:

*The physical organisation of the site.* Thornhill Farm in particular was characterised by the intensive redefinition of a series of enclosures, most of which appeared to be nondomestic in function and which were interpreted as paddocks and seasonal pens used in stock management (see Chapter 3 and 'Analysis of site organisation' below).

*The plant and invertebrate evidence.* Environmental sampling was a crucial part of the archaeological investigation, and it revealed a later prehistoric landscape characterised by grassland and plants supportive of a pastoral interpretation with regard to land usage (see Robinson, Chapter 4).

*The faunal evidence.* Despite the highly fragmented and very degraded nature of the animal bone assemblage, it appeared at the assessment stage that horse remains were over-represented at

Thornhill Farm, and could therefore be indicative of specialised horse ranching at the site (Levitan 1990). Subsequent full analysis of the faunal assemblage has rendered the specialist horse rearing interpretation more or less obsolete (see Levine, Chapter 4), although pastoralism is still advanced as the primary economic basis of the site, with an emphasis instead upon cattle ranching. Taken together with the other aspects highlighted above, it does therefore seem to be the case that Thornhill Farm – probably along with the later prehistoric phase of Claydon Pike – is likely to have been a specialist stock raising centre, albeit operating largely within a subsistence economy (see below, 'Site economy'). All subsequent analysis and interpretation is based upon this premise.

## ANALYSIS OF SITE ORGANISATION

Eight separate structural phases have been identified at Thornhill Farm (see Chapter 2 for summary), ranging from the middle Iron Age (c 300–50 BC) to the later Roman period (3rd–4th century AD). Within this broad chronological development, there are three major transformations in settlement character, representing changes in socio-economic strategy tied in with wider developments in the landscape, and particularly with developments at the settlement at Claydon Pike less than 1 km away. To be able to understand in depth the nature of these changes, it would be necessary to look at the social and symbolic aspects of settlement structure and development, which involves detailed spatial analysis of site organisation. Unfortunately, any attempt at such analysis for Thornhill Farm is extremely problematical because, in many cases, the separate structural elements (enclosures, pits, structures etc) have by necessity been assigned to various phases on the bare minimum of evidence, and therefore may not be truly representative of the original spatial layout. Additionally, the positioning of the open area trenches inevitably distorts the true picture. Therefore, although general patterns of settlement shift and organisation can be discerned, more detailed analysis is not possible. This is made all the more difficult by the relative lack of stratified and phased diagnostic artefacts and ecofacts, which ensures that functional interpretation of features is often largely based upon their morphology (see below). The difficulties of interpreting site organisation within settlements of the Upper Thames Valley have been previously highlighted (Hingley and Miles 1984, 59), and open settlements, often with

differential levels of stratigraphic integrity such as Claydon Pike and Thornhill Farm, are particularly problematic in this respect.

### ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

Just as there are problems with analysis of site organisation at Thornhill Farm, there are also inherent difficulties with structural analysis of the main component features.

#### Domestic structures

In total there are 13 features that have been interpreted as possibly representing roundhouses within the Thornhill Farm site, although in most cases the evidence is far from certain (Table 5.1). Virtually all of these are tentatively assigned to Iron Age phases, with the exception of three possible roundhouses that seem to come from a later date (Periods E and F). Different construction methods may well have been used, although there are difficulties in that there is a lack of knowledge of the degree of truncation of the Iron Age ground surface, which could result in postholes and/or gullies remaining in some areas but not others. Nevertheless, it would seem that a number of the middle Iron Age roundhouses (eg S206 and S207; Fig. 3.1) are quite similar in form to other such buildings within the region, in that they are defined by a penannular drip gully, about 13 m in diameter, with an entrance facing east (Allen *et al.* 1984, 91–93). Perhaps the best examples of roundhouses are S200 and S210, which seem to derive from the later Iron Age (see below, ‘Site reconstruction’), although they were probably not contemporary (see Chapter 3). Despite being positioned just 1 m from each other, they appear to be of different construction methods, with S200

being defined solely by a ring of postholes, possibly with a porched entrance, and S201 consisting of a penannular gully with an incoherent arrangement of postholes within. S 200 belongs to a class of post-ring houses, and a similar ‘porched’ example can be found at nearby Claydon Pike (structure XVIII; Allen *et al.* 1984, 91). It is thought that the posts probably represent the inner support ring, with the outline of the walls projecting from the outer ‘porch’ posts, thus significantly increasing the inner surface area of the building.

Nearly all of the remaining postulated roundhouses have been identified by curvilinear gullies, with their interpretation sometimes strengthened by the presence of domestic material (eg E130; Fig. 3.1). The lack of any coherent internal features within some of these enclosures (eg E11; Fig. 3.19) could suggest that a mass wall technique such as turf was being used, which would not necessarily leave any trace. Such techniques are thought to have become quite widespread in other rural settlement sites in the region during the late Iron Age and Roman periods (Henig and Booth 2000, 95).

Detailed internal spatial analysis of Iron Age domestic roundhouses has been conducted at a number of sites in southern Britain, and this type of approach can provide valuable information on indigenous social practices (Hughes 1995, Oswald 1997). In particular, Hingley (1990, 131) has suggested that there was a conceptual division between a ‘public’ central space containing the hearth and a ‘private’ peripheral zone for sleeping, storage and other domestic activities. What studies such as this emphasise is that it is by examining the changing patterns of functional areas – and not just building types – that we may start to understand developments in social organisation. One of the primary ways in which this type of study works is

Table 5.1 Potential domestic structures at Thornhill Farm

Feature no.	Period	Diameter	Entrance orientation	Structural details
S 206	A	c 13 m	E	Ring gully
S 207	A	c 13 m	E	Part of probable penannular drip(?) gully
S 209	A	c 9.6 m	SE	Two gully arcs possibly representing roundhouse. Pits with ‘domestic’ debris within
E 130	A	c 14 m	?	Possible gully around a structure
882	B	?	?	Curvilinear gully with domestic debris in terminals
S 200	C	8.2 m or 11.4 m*	SE	Postring demarcation with porch
S 201	C	c 9 m	SE	Recut penannular gully with incoherent arrangement of postholes in interior
(E74)	C	c 8 m	?	Ring gully detected as crop mark - roundhouse?
(E 52)	C	8.5 - 10 m	SE?	Cluster of postholes inside rectilinear enclosure. Three possible rings may represent roundhouses
117 & 228	C	c 13 m	?	Two curvilinear gullies possibly part of a roundhouse
100 & 104	E	?	?	Two gullies which may have defined site of roundhouse
E 11	F	7 m	W	Penannular gully
E 7	F	6-7 m	?	Annular ditch

\* Diameter depends upon whether wall is on circumference of post ring or putative porch.

if we have enough spatial information – specifically from diagnostic finds ('tool kits') – to be able to determine functional areas. Unfortunately at Thornhill Farm we do not have sufficient data to be able to attempt such analysis, as not only did most of the fills from features comprise a mixture of redeposited material, but also many of the structures were obscured by later activity.

### Enclosures

Thornhill Farm consisted for the most part of a series of enclosures of varying size and shape. It was felt that enclosure function was likely to prove key in understanding the economic basis of the site, in particular, providing an opportunity for the reconstruction of the stock management system. To this end, attempts were made to classify the enclosures on the basis of morphology and artefact distribution, although results proved to be disappointing, primarily because of the lack of associated functional 'tool kits' as mentioned above. With the scarcity of such diagnostic material, any classification would have to be based upon morphology alone, and although structural comparison with other sites in the Upper Thames Valley (eg Claydon Pike and Farmoor) may provide some indication of function, there are risks with such a strategy (Hingley 1984, 72). It is clear that an integrated contextual approach is needed, concentrating on how and why features were built and used, rather than just abstract structural classification.

Overall, despite the obvious areas of limitation within the data, a general reconstruction of the Thornhill Farm site and economy is possible, and does provide valuable information on socio-economic practice. This is especially important when the site is viewed in a wider perspective, as a component within the Iron Age and Romano-British landscape.

### SITE RECONSTRUCTION

Throughout much of its existence, Thornhill Farm would have been characterised by open grassland, punctuated by systems of broad ditched enclosures, smaller enclosures (perhaps for specialist pastoral purposes such as winter corralling, birthing etc), and a number of structural elements, some of which were undoubtedly domestic dwellings (see above). The problems of interpreting settlement organisation have been highlighted above, but it does appear that there were a number of major structural phases reflecting changing socio-economic regimes.

#### Middle Iron Age (Period A; Fig. 3.1)

The earliest settlement identified at Thornhill Farm belongs to the middle Iron Age, a time of increased diversification and specialisation in the Upper Thames Valley and elsewhere (Allen 2000, 10). This

was a period when the first gravel terraces of the Thames floodplain were being colonised by a number of open and enclosed settlements such as Claydon Pike, Glos. (Miles and Palmer 1984) and Mingies Ditch, Oxon. (Allen and Robinson 1993).

At Thornhill Farm, up to three foci of domestic activity were located, although not all may belong to this period, and even if this were the case, they need not all be contemporary, as the location of the settlement may well have shifted. Each of the foci was characterised by at least one probable roundhouse gully – and possibly three in the case of the western salvage area – along with a substantial oval shaped ditched enclosure. In only two cases (S210 and S206) were the definite entrance terminals of the roundhouse gullies found, and in both instances they faced to the east, with that of S206 aligned towards the opening of the large oval enclosure (E149). The function of these large enclosures is unclear, as in no case was there any demonstrable evidence of contemporary internal structures. A possibly comparable enclosure at Claydon Pike (Allen *et al.* 1984, 97, fig. 3.6.1) contained a roundhouse gully, along with large quantities of domestic material, while at least one other at Farmoor, Oxon., seems more likely to have functioned as either an occasional animal pen or for the storage of materials (Area III, enclosure 3; Lambrick and Robinson 1979, 25–26, 70–72). On balance, the latter interpretation seems more likely at Thornhill Farm, at least for enclosure 120, and it could well be that such a combination of one or more roundhouses and a substantial ditched stock enclosure was the basis for a functionally cohesive and largely independent settlement unit. If this was the case, then there may have been three such units surrounding a central open space (Fig. 3.1). Such an arrangement of grouped settlement units is readily paralleled by the Iron Age settlement at Gravelly Guy, Stanton Harcourt (Oxon.), where it was suggested that there were internal divisions between different households within the settlement (Lambrick and Allen, forthcoming).

The only features from the central area at Thornhill Farm were a substantial pit grouping from the Northern Salvage Area and a single pit (3247) containing an almost complete inverted pot in Trench 22. Whilst the single pot deposit may represent a ritual act (although not necessarily contemporary with the period A settlement; see Timby, Chapter 4), it is difficult to interpret the features in this area as representing communal activities. Indeed there may only ever have been a single settlement unit of a family group shifting location over a century or more of occupation, as has been suggested for the middle Iron Age phase at Claydon Pike (Miles *et al.* forthcoming).

Finally, although it does appear to have been an open settlement, it is possible that the substantial ditches from Trench 8 and the western salvage area formed part of an outer boundary, perhaps related to the pastoral function of the site.

**Late Iron Age–early Roman (Periods B to F;**  
Figs 3.5, 3.10, 3.15, 3.18)

The apparent lack of recognisable structural features dating to the latter half of the 1st century BC (Period B) may indicate either a significant lessening of activity, or else continued use of earlier pottery styles at the site. Whatever the case, by the early 1st century AD, there was a radical reorganisation of the settlement, with activity occurring on a much larger scale (Fig. 3.5). The major focus of the site transferred to the east, where a series of subrectilinear enclosures were built alongside domestic roundhouses (Table 5.1). Domestic structures of any type are quite rare in the Upper Thames Valley in the later Iron Age and early Roman period (Allen *et al.* 1984, 100), and therefore their presence here is of particular significance. The clearest examples are probably from Period C (*c.* AD 0–50), in particular the post-ring structure 200 and penannular gully S201, although the dating evidence is equivocal (see above, Chapter 3). It is likely that most later buildings were of mass-walled construction which would leave little trace. Both S200 and S201 had entrances facing south-east, with that of S200 being aligned toward the entrance of a large ovoid enclosure (E80) in the same manner as S206 from Period A, suggesting possible continuity in some elements of site structure. The gully of S201 was clearly later than E80, and therefore possibly S200 as well, and its multiple recuts suggest a much longer life span for this structure. Another possible roundhouse from this phase was represented by the posthole cluster within E52, although there is no way of telling if it was contemporary with any of the others, and therefore the total population of the site remains obscure.

The remainder of the eastern side of the site consisted for the most part of subrectangular enclosures, most of which are very difficult to interpret and phase convincingly because of their intensively recut nature and the limited number of sections and recovered finds. These finds did include a small quantity of iron slag and copper alloy waste from enclosure 87 in trench 9, which suggests that at some point, limited metalworking was taking place in this area. There are notable differences between these eastern enclosures and the ‘co-axial’ enclosure system to the south, although they do both appear to be broadly contemporary. The southern enclosure system was far more clearly organised and coherently aligned, although it does appear to have developed via organic growth rather than as a singular deliberate planning exercise. The function of the co-axial enclosures is hinted at by the possible mini droveways going into E13, E4 and E23, which suggest the corralling and nurturing of livestock. Thus, the number of enclosures needed would have fluctuated with the size of the herd. They were positioned within what appears to have been a network of large outer boundary ditches that physically differentiated the area from that further east, suggesting functional divergence.

In the latter half of the 1st century AD (Period D; *c.* AD 50–100; Fig. 3.10), the focus of settlement remained in the east, although the system of enclosures was far more closely knit, and seemingly centred around E58. It is certain that not all were contemporary, although E48, E49 and E58 are thought to have been part of a single working complex. It is likely that many of the enclosures were used as temporary animal pens, possibly during pregnancy or for the nurturing of animals, and the presence of small (*c.* 3 m diameter) circular enclosures or stack rings, which could be interpreted as probable fodder stands, strengthens this hypothesis. Similar stack rings have been found in the late Iron Age/early Roman phases at Claydon Pike and Somerford Keynes Neigh Bridge (Miles *et al.* forthcoming) which are also thought to have been involved in pastoral activity. Enclosures E44 and E45 were of a different character to the others, and the small entrance and lack of guide channels in E45 means it is unlikely to have been used for animals. It may well have contained a turf mass-walled structure, as no definite domestic dwellings are known from this period, although no actual traces remain.

One of the more significant features of this period, in terms of understanding site organisation and functionality, is a funnel shaped track or droveway defined by ditches (5006–5008; Fig. 3.10), orientated NE–SW and leading into a central grassland area largely devoid of features. Structural and functional coherence between the droveway and the stock pen/settlement area is provided by two spur ditches orientated towards the latter site. This system was clearly intended to control the movement of livestock within the site. Further to the west, part of the earlier boundary ditch appears to have been recut on a number of occasions, and may well have formed a large enclosure, although sections of double ditching suggest a possible trackway in this area.

In the later 1st–early 2nd century AD (Periods E and F; Figs. 3.15, 3.18) there was the most intensive phase of occupation, according to the quantities of pottery recovered (see Timby, Chapter 4). During Period E, there were two distinct zones of enclosures to the north and south, although this may be more of a reflection of the positioning of the open area trenches than the original spatial pattern. However, it does appear to be the case that the Southern Area (Trench 7) became a renewed focus for activity, with a number of loosely co-axial rectilinear enclosures forming a coherent group, again probably associated with stock-rearing. With this functional hypothesis in mind, it is suggested that the two postholes in the centre of E15 may have represented a fodder rack. The Northern area was dominated by a substantial double-celled enclosure, E62/E75, similar to earlier such features belonging to Period D. This may represent some degree of functional homogeneity between enclosure types, although there is nothing beyond pure morpholog-

ical similarities to suggest this. E62 contained an irregular group of postholes, which may have formed a possible domestic structure, along with a stack ring or fodder stand, suggesting the enclosure of animals.

The final shift of settlement/stock enclosure organisation (Period F; Fig. 3.18) saw activity concentrate almost entirely in the Southern Area around Trench 7. A possible roundhouse gully (E11) facing west lay in the north-east corner of the trench, and one of the few enclosure groups to have any degree of specific functional interpretation lay in the central area. E30 was screened along its western side, suggesting the segregation of livestock, as would be appropriate during pregnancy and birthing, or possibly to prevent mature calves from reaching their mothers' milk (Lucas 1989). The linear boundaries to the south of the enclosures were probably still in use, although there is a high degree of uncertainty in their phasing, as many were only visible as cropmarks or were subject to very limited excavation.

### 2nd century–later Roman period (Periods G to H; Figs 3.21, 3.23)

From the early–mid 2nd century AD onwards came the most radical changes in landscape organisation and character at Thornhill Farm. There appears to have been no domestic focus, and the enclosure systems of earlier periods went out of use, representing a complete, large-scale change in land use. The site became characterised by substantial linear trackways that almost certainly linked different settlements in an archaeologically visible way (Fig. 3.21). Trackway 301 entered from the north-east, along a very similar orientation to that of the earlier Period D driveway, and thus providing the only indication of any continuity with the previous settlement. It was traced for almost 600 m across the low gravel terrace and floodplain, and probably linked up with trackway 5036, revealed mostly by cropmarks. This track probably linked the locally important and possibly official site at Claydon Pike, with a small 2nd century AD settlement known at Kempsford Bowmoor (OAU 1989) to the south-west (Fig. 1.2).

It seems that the reorganisation of the landscape involved the creation and/or redevelopment of a certain number of sites (eg Claydon Pike and Kempsford Bowmoor), and the virtual abandonment of others such as Thornhill Farm. There were a few features from the latter site (other than the main trackways) which may indicate some level of activity, although the pottery evidence suggests that this was slight (see Timby, Chapter 4). In particular, there was a ditched trackway in the Northern Salvage Area leading off from trackway 301 into a possible enclosure, while another ditch to the north ran along the same orientation (Fig. 3.21). Some continuing animal traffic is also suggested by the fill of animal trample from the Period F enclosure E30

in Trench 7, although this may have preceded the construction of the main trackways. The evidence overall suggests that the site became part of an outlying field system of an agricultural estate based on the gravel terrace and floodplain, perhaps centred around the complex at Claydon Pike. Communication and transport were clearly important considerations within this landscape, undoubtedly reflecting close connections with supply and trade in the wider region (see below 'The site in its local and regional setting').

In the later Roman period (Period H; Fig. 3.23) the trackways appear to have gone out of use, and the site was characterised by a small number of major linear ditched boundaries. The minimal quantity of pottery from this period suggests a very low level of activity, far from the main domestic centre, which may well have been the small 4th century villa at Claydon Pike.

### SITE ECONOMY

The environmental evidence was regarded from the start as a crucial element in understanding the socio-economic nature of the Thornhill Farm site, and as such, significant resources were expended in collecting and analysing the data. Yet the problems that affected other aspects of the site – most notably those concerning the stratigraphic integrity – also had a major impact in the analysis of the floral and faunal remains (see above, Chapter 4). Specifically, it is difficult to reconstruct the chronological development of the agrarian regime in detail, although broad changes can be discerned, which seem to tie in not only with the major intrasite settlement reorganisations, but also with wider developments within the landscape.

During the middle Iron Age the extensive area of uninterrupted gravel terrace at Thornhill Farm became the site of a settlement which appeared to operate a specialised pastoral regime. Whilst the known proportions of animal species present at the site is somewhat arbitrary, it does seem that cattle were most numerous, followed some way behind by sheep and horse. The possible significance of cattle ranching at this time is explored below, although it must be noted that the species proportions given are not chronologically specific, and so the pattern of species representation through time is unknown. More precise indications of the middle Iron Age environment come from the waterlogged macroscopic plant remains, which suggest grassland and dung-enriched disturbed soil, thereby supporting the overall pastoral interpretation.

The increased quantity of environmental samples from the later Iron Age (Period C) provides a clearer indication that the management of grazing on the valley bottom was the primary economic function of the site at this time. This was a period when the physical organisation of the settlement also suggested a marked degree of pastoral intensification (see above). Furthermore, the differential

condition of the pastureland may suggest an emphasis on horse rearing, although the general animal bone data in no way corroborates this. It is more likely that cattle were the predominant species nurtured at the site, with possibly a very limited emphasis on horse breeding, perhaps to maintain the population of work animals. It is likely that most horses would have been used as riding, traction or pack animals, although secondary use for bone, hides and possibly meat is indicated on a small scale. Despite the apparent unsuitability of the land for sheep grazing, this species is also well represented (probably more so than is apparent), which reflects the economic importance of this animal.

The overall evidence, at least from the cattle bones, suggests that these animals were reared, butchered and consumed on site, and thus points to a subsistence rather than a commercial economy, although it must still be remembered that the faunal data is not chronologically differentiated. The inhabitants as a whole would have produced food for their own consumption and work animals for their own purposes. Nevertheless, the apparent specialised pastoral nature of the site and lack of evidence for cereal cultivation suggests that some kind of exchange links must have been established with other settlements. It is possible that crops were grown on higher terraces by the Thornhill Farm inhabitants themselves, but on balance, given that the domestic focus lay on the lower gravel terrace, this was probably not the case. Crops such as spelt wheat may have been imported and then processed on site, as indicated by the quernstones, although the quantity of cereal remains was much less than at neighbouring Claydon Pike, suggesting a marked difference in the concentration of domestic habitation. If goods such as cereal crops were being brought into the site, even on a very small scale, then it must undoubtedly have been surplus animals or animal products such as meat or dairy produce that were being exchanged in turn, although in what quantity and how far is uncertain.

The environmental evidence indicates no significant alterations to the patterns of land use after the Roman conquest, with animal husbandry continuing as before, and plant/cereal remains being imported in limited quantities for animal fodder, bedding and consumption by the occupants of the settlement. At the start of the 2nd century AD there are more important indications of a change in site economy, although the evidence is limited to a small number of waterlogged seeds from the trackway ditch to the south of the main settlement. These indicate the presence of hay meadows, which establishes a link with the changing patterns of land use at Claydon Pike where hay meadows also appear at approximately this period (Robinson forthcoming). The changes at Claydon Pike correlate with significant reorganisation in settlement character and the land use developments at Thornhill Farm may be intimately related to this (see below). Although the

seed evidence from Thornhill Farm seems to have come from the final phase of the settlement (Period F), it is quite possible that there was a gradual change from pasture to hay meadow, which was ultimately related to the abandonment of the settlement and the introduction of new trackways. Unfortunately, the chronology of site development is not accurate enough to be sure of any exact correlation.

There is very little evidence to indicate how the land was being used in the later Roman period. It is assumed that the linear boundaries were part of an outlying field system, possibly connected with the modest villa at Claydon Pike, but no suitable samples were recovered from late Roman (Period H) contexts, and so the nature of any agricultural activity remains uncertain.

### **SOCIAL STATUS AND DIETARY HABITS**

Determining the relative social status of archaeological sites is fraught with difficulties, as the measurable indicators such as imported pottery can be quite subjective (eg Brown 1997, 100). The meaning and social value attributed to such objects is likely to have been quite context specific (Faulkner 2000), and we are sometimes guilty of imposing universal interpretative parameters onto specific classes of archaeological finds. Nevertheless, when viewed in their local context, there are aspects of the material culture which may shed light on apparent social and cultural differentiation. Meadows (2001) has examined the social contexts of a number of sites in the Upper Thames Valley – including Claydon Pike – in terms of the consumption of food and drink, and it is useful to briefly compare some of the findings with Thornhill Farm. The late Iron Age–Roman transition phase of Claydon Pike contained relatively large quantities of Roman-style imported goods, including much ceramic material associated with food preparation, storage and to a lesser extent consumption.

At Thornhill Farm the pattern of food preparation and consumption was quite different, with very small amounts of imported Roman-style wares, and an absence of comparable table forms in local coarsewares. Henig and Booth (2000, 173–4, fig. 6.11) have presented the proportion of fine and specialist wares from a selection of 1st and 2nd century AD sites in Oxfordshire and the Upper Thames Valley, and Thornhill Farm contained some of the lowest quantities of such material. Therefore, although the inhabitants of Thornhill Farm did seem to have local and regional trading links, they appear to have either not been able, or to have had no desire, to use new vessels or products such as oil and wine reflective of Roman cooking, eating and drinking habits. The paucity of imported Roman-style goods and lack of wares associated with serving is even more pronounced at Old Shifford Farm (Hey 1996), where it was suggested that the inhabitants were more concerned with the prepara-

tion of food to be consumed communally than with the serving of individuals (Meadows 2001, 247). However, in contrast to Old Shifford Farm, an emphasis on individual status is suggested at Thornhill Farm by the quantity of brooches found there, which were the largest single category of small find. Jundi and Hill (1998, 126) have argued that in addition to being tied in with new ways of appearing, such personal items may well be associated with periods of social anxiety, perhaps in this case connected to the eventual abandonment of the settlement in the early 2nd century AD. Such a suggestion may be strengthened by the fact that the highest concentration of brooches did occur in the area of latest settlement activity (Trench 7), dating to the later 1st and early 2nd centuries AD (see Chapter 4).

### THE SITE IN ITS LOCAL AND REGIONAL SETTING

Despite the fact that stratigraphic difficulties at Thornhill Farm precluded detailed spatial analysis, the general development, functions and environment of the site are known in some detail (see above). An aspect of particular interest is Thornhill Farm's relationship with other sites in the Upper Thames Valley and southern Cotswolds, specifically Claydon Pike less than 1 km to the east. A wider comparative analysis of the site provides much greater scope for an understanding of its character and place in the local and regional landscape.

#### Middle Iron Age (c 3rd–1st century BC; Fig. 5.1)

It is generally accepted that the population of Britain was rising in the later prehistoric period, and in areas such as the Upper Thames Valley aerial photography has shown settlement density to be high. The wider economy of this and surrounding regions was based upon a broad system of mixed agriculture, which was well suited to exploit the considerable ecological diversity of the landscape.

On the limestone uplands of the Cotswolds faunal remains recovered from a range of Iron Age sites suggest that animal husbandry was carried out on a considerable scale (Darvill 1987, 145–146). Sheep are well represented in the faunal assemblages and were the predominant animal kept on many upland sites. Susceptibility to liver-fluke and foot-rot meant that the animals were less suited to the wetter, lower-lying ground of the river valleys, though they were certainly present in some numbers on the lower gravel terraces, including Thornhill Farm. Although important in the Cotswolds, animal husbandry was not the exclusive mode of production. Hingley and Miles have noted that the many Banjo enclosures which appeared in the region during the middle Iron Age were ideally located to support a mixed economy with easy access to both upland pastures and well-watered valleys (Hingley and Miles 1984, 57). This sugges-

tion is supported by evidence from Wessex, where the excavation of Banjo enclosures at Bramdean (Perry 1986) and Micheldever Wood (Fasham 1987) have revealed grain storage pits and other signs of a mixed economy. The considerable capacity for grain storage demonstrated at sites such as Guiting Power (Saville 1979) confirms that cereal production was practised on the Cotswolds and that it was relatively successful.

Evidence of arable expansion into the gravel terraces of the Upper Thames Valley can be found at sites such as Ashville, Oxon., where cultivation of heavier, wetter soils strongly suggests that increasingly unsuitable land was put under the plough (Jones 1978, 93–110). Inevitably, continued expansion of the arable base could not be sustained indefinitely without fundamental changes to land use. Lambrick has outlined a model, based on the Upper Thames Valley, which views a gradually expanding arable base as a prime source of pressure on traditional pasture (Lambrick 1992). This led to pastoral intensification in the form of enclosed paddocks and artificial water holes, while on the lowest gravel terraces and the floodplain itself, specialist pastoral farms appeared, such as Mingies Ditch, Claydon Pike and Port Meadow, although the latter site appears to have been occupied on a seasonal basis (see below). The initial construction of the Thornhill Farm site would have been part of this intensification.

The socio-economic character of such settlements and the relationships between them and those of the Cotswolds have been the focus of much discussion over the past twenty years (eg Hingley 1984, 1989; Allen and Robinson 1993, 149; Allen 2000, 13; Meadows 2001). Hingley's (1984) social distinction between the communal 'open' settlements of the river valley and independent enclosed settlements of the higher ground has proved in recent years to be blurred (Allen 2000, 14). In particular, the enclosed specialist pastoral sites on the First Gravel Terrace at Mingies Ditch and Watkins Farm are thought more likely to have been established by individual family groups as more or less self-contained units (Allen and Robinson 1993, 149). Quite significantly, an unusually high percentage of horse bones was recovered from both sites, some of which came from immature animals, leading to the suggestion that at least one aspect of their economy was based upon horse rearing, perhaps for the supply of other sites (Wilson and Allison 1990, 61; Wilson 1993, 133).

The specialist nature of these sites implies that they would have been part of a wider agricultural network, and the presence of processed cereal grains suggests relationships with arable sites on the higher and better drained terraces (Allen 1990, 79). A more community-based farming system is better demonstrated by the transhumant pastoral settlement at Farmoor (Lambrick and Robinson 1979) and probably Port Meadow (Atkinson 1942). Such temporary encampments, probably occupied

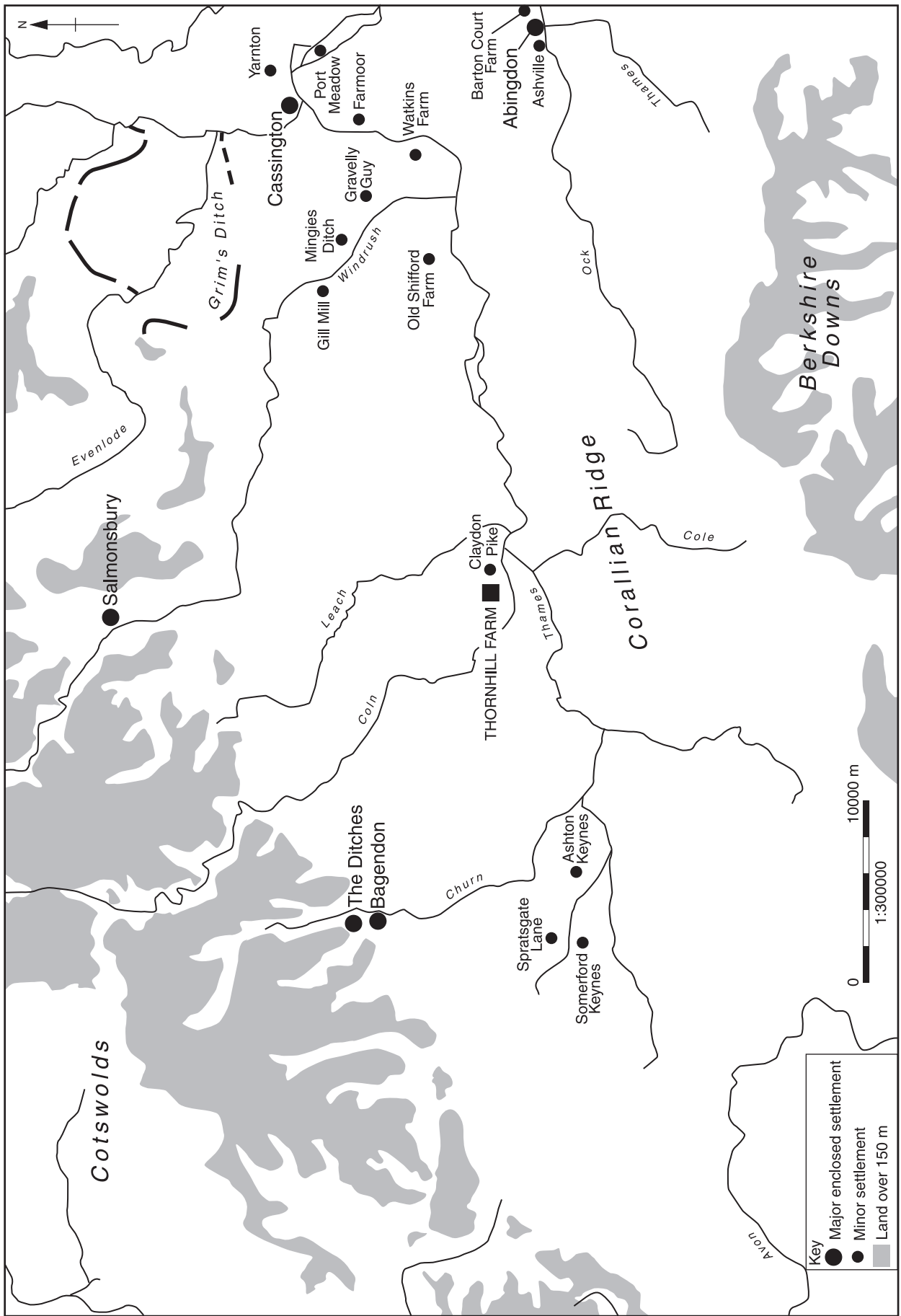


Fig. 5.1 Thornhill Farm in relation to principal middle-late Iron Age settlements and other sites mentioned in the text



on a seasonal basis in between episodes of flooding, imply a wider communal aspect to landscape organisation.

At Claydon Pike settlement commenced during the middle Iron Age on gravel islands that provided protection from flooding. Indications are that it operated a pastoral economy, with evidence for roundhouses and associated enclosures that began on the westernmost island and shifted to the east over a period of a century or so (Hingley and Miles 1984, 63). In many ways the site is similar to that at Thornhill Farm, and it is possible that at this stage there was some element of communality between them. Both would have relied upon other sites operating a mixed economy – probably located further to the north on higher, better drained land – to supply them with cereal crop produce. Additionally, both sites contained small quantities of Malvernian pottery and Droitwich Briquetage implying longer distance trade to the north, although the quantities of the latter are minimal at Thornhill Farm.

#### **Late Iron Age (c 1st century BC–mid 1st century AD; Fig. 5.1)**

Study of the changing hydrology and sedimentation of the Upper Thames Valley has revealed a marked increase in floodplain alluviation during the late Iron Age and early Roman period (Lambrick 1992). This has been interpreted as evidence of clearance and increased cultivation in the catchment area (Lambrick and Robinson 1979). One of the most logical places to expand cultivation would have been onto the slopes and uplands of the Cotswolds where the soils were relatively dry and light. The net effect would have been increased alluviation in the valley bottom, but more importantly, a considerable increase in pressure on traditional sheep pasture. The demand for more traction animals would have encouraged more intensive methods of cattle production, as would the loss of traditional grazing land. It is suggested that by the late Iron Age this pressure was to lead to significant pastoral intensification.

The radical reorganisation of the Thornhill Farm settlement into a network of paddocks and enclosures suggests close spatial control and intensive care of the livestock, at least at certain critical times of the year. A further indication of intensification was the digging of artificial waterholes, which might also be interpreted as evidence for pressure on pasture. At Claydon Pike the changes occurring during the early 1st century AD were even more pronounced, with a major settlement dislocation transferring activity over 200 metres to another gravel island in the south (Miles *et al.* forthcoming). The new site at Longdoles Field consisted of a series of pits, gullies, small multiply recut enclosures and linear boundaries, and appears to represent a nucleated settlement associated with livestock farming, with evidence for occupation (although no definite

buildings) and minor industrial activity. The presence of imported Roman tableware, amphorae and mortaria suggests that late Iron Age–early Roman Claydon Pike was possibly of a different (higher?) status than neighbouring Thornhill Farm, with at least some of the inhabitants choosing to express their wealth through Roman style eating habits (Meadows 2001, 235). Interestingly both sites produced around the same number of brooches dating to the 1st–mid 2nd century AD, implying that the wearing of such items had little direct connection with external Roman influences.

Aside from Thornhill Farm and Claydon Pike, very few similar types of settlement are known on the Thames Valley floodplain and lower terraces, perhaps in part because of our relative ignorance of floodplain archaeology. There are a handful of well-known cropmarks, such as those at Port Meadow, which have been plotted, but very few sites have actually been excavated. At Yarnton Worton Rectory Farm excavations revealed a series of enclosures belonging to the late Iron Age and early Roman period, along with domestic material and the probability of domestic buildings (Hey and Timby forthcoming). Despite the detailed analysis of this particular site, the extent to which the floodplain might have been utilised in the later prehistoric period is still difficult to assess. The suitability for settlement would have changed with the shifting hydrology of the valley, and many more sites could be masked by the thick alluvium which covers much of the valley floor. Around Thornhill Farm environmental evidence suggests that these lower lying areas were not used for arable cultivation, but consisted of unbroken grassland, and this is likely to have been the same over much of the Upper Thames Valley area.

Despite the paucity of sites similar to Thornhill Farm and Claydon Pike, there is increasing evidence for late Iron Age settlement in the Thames Valley region. In many cases, such as Barton Court Farm (Miles 1986), these were new settlements built on previously unoccupied sites, while others, like Thornhill Farm, were the subject of radical reorganisation. A number of low-lying middle Iron Age sites, such as Mingies Ditch and Watkins Farm, were abandoned at this time, and two of the principal features of earlier settlements – cylindrical storage pits and circular roundhouse gullies – largely disappeared. Such widespread disruption to intra- and intersite settlement organisation seems to have been at least partly induced by agricultural changes, which may in turn have been linked to wider socio-political changes, in particular the increasing control exerted over the landscape by the native elite.

#### **POLITICS AND TRADE**

The emergence of a more hierarchical socio-political system based around increasingly centralised polities was a feature of the later Iron Age in parts

of southern and eastern Britain (Haselgrove 1989, 2). The Upper Thames Valley was at the juncture of three such tribal polities, the Dobunni, Atrebatas and Catuvellauni, as indicated by coin distributions (Creighton 2000). Thornhill Farm lay within the territory of the Dobunni, whose sphere of influence covered a topographically varied landscape, from the floodplain and valleys of the rivers Thames and Severn, to the exposed limestone uplands of the Cotswolds. At its heart lay the possible tribal capital of Bagendon (Fig. 5.1), although the status and function of this site in late Dobunnian society is still little understood (Clifford 1961; Darvill 1987, 166–168). Whatever its function, Bagendon was clearly a site of special importance to the Dobunni as a great deal of resources were obviously used to raise the extensive dyke system, suggesting a well-developed system of social co-operation or compulsion.

There were a number of other late Iron Age defended sites and linear systems with often quite substantial earthworks, both in the Cotswolds region (eg Salmonsbury, Dunning 1976) and in the Thames Valley itself (eg Abingdon, Allen 1997). The most extensive was that of Grim's Ditch in north Oxfordshire (Fig. 5.1), which eventually at least partially enclosed an area of c 80 km<sup>2</sup>, and later contained a notable group of Roman villas, many of which had early origins. Such earthworks may well have been connected with the rise of a socially stratified elite, possibly as trading centres or strongholds along strategically important routes (Lambrick 1998 12). Bagendon and the nearby fort at The Ditches (Trow 1988) possibly formed the centre of an important aristocratic estate (Trow 1990, 111–112). This is suggested not only by their scale, but more importantly by the large quantities of 'luxury' imported goods found there, undoubtedly the result of more intense long distance trade.

The traditional communication routes of the Jurassic Ridge and Thames Valley provided convenient and well established channels for exchange, and artefactual evidence confirms that the Dobunni entered into trade on a regular basis with their neighbours. The study of coinage has proved a useful indicator of Dobunnian trade patterns. Van Arsdell has identified a number of exchange zones, 'gateways' and trade routes, which suggest considerable trade and exchange between the Dobunni and the Catuvellauni to the east, the Corieltavi to the north-east and the Welsh tribes to the north-west. In addition, coins have been found as far away as Hengistbury Head and Hayling Island on the south coast, perhaps suggesting an extended link with coastal traders (van Arsdell 1994, 26–29).

Classical texts make it clear that British tribes were involved in the export of commodities to the continent. The goods listed by Strabo (Geography IV, 5, 3) are highly unlikely to have all been supplied by the core tribes of the south-east, implying that the tribes of the periphery must have been involved in the supply of some of the raw materials, even if

indirectly. The emergence of Thornhill Farm as a specialised livestock ranch, together with the increasing importance of beef in the late Iron Age diet (King 1991), is therefore of considerable interest, although it must be reiterated that the faunal evidence points to a subsistence level economy, and any trading of commodities is likely to have been quite limited. To what extent Dobunnian beef and hides might have formed part of the British export trade is impossible to quantify. If it existed, exchange is likely to have been indirect, conducted through a series of local transactions and tribute payments. It has been suggested that the accumulated effect of such trading was actually responsible for the emergence of the powerful tribal elite, whose success was based upon the effective control of resources (Haselgrove 1982, 79–88).

Therefore, although it has been suggested that the development and intensification of specialised pastoralism was initiated by the internal stresses of a growing population, it could also have been given significant impetus by increasing demand for raw materials emanating from the continent, and the exploitation of this situation by the native elite.

#### The coming of Rome (Fig. 5.2)

Although the invasion and advance of the Roman military undoubtedly disrupted the established pattern of trade, it is possible that at least part of the Dobunnian territory continued to be ruled for some time as a client kingdom. By c AD 50, a Roman cavalry fort was established at Leaholme (Cirencester), just 4.5 km from Bagendon (Darvill and Holbrook 1994, 53), although whether this was to repress or protect the native population is uncertain. The location of the fort so close to Bagendon has been interpreted as an aggressive move by the Romans, designed to hold down a potentially hostile population, although it has also been suggested that it could have been positioned to support the Dobunni against the marauding tribes of Wales (*op. cit.* 55). On balance, it would seem that the latter is more likely, and the exceptionally early villa at site of The Ditches may have been the residence of one of the pro-Roman native elite. The undesirable location of this villa, in an unusually elevated position away from an ample water source, suggests that the occupant had a personal or political association with the pre-Roman native enclosure (Trow and James 1989, 85). Such continuity of pre-Roman elite power is also suggested by the concentration of 1st century AD villas within the Grim's Ditch earthworks, and the construction of a villa at Woodchester near to the possible Dobunnian oppidum of Minchinhampton (Clarke 1996, 76).

A parallel to The Ditches and Bagendon sites may perhaps be found with the early Roman military occupation at Fishbourne and Chichester in West Sussex, which lay at the heart of Togidubnus's client kingdom, in or near to the old Atrebatian territorial oppidum (Cunliffe 1998). The military presence at

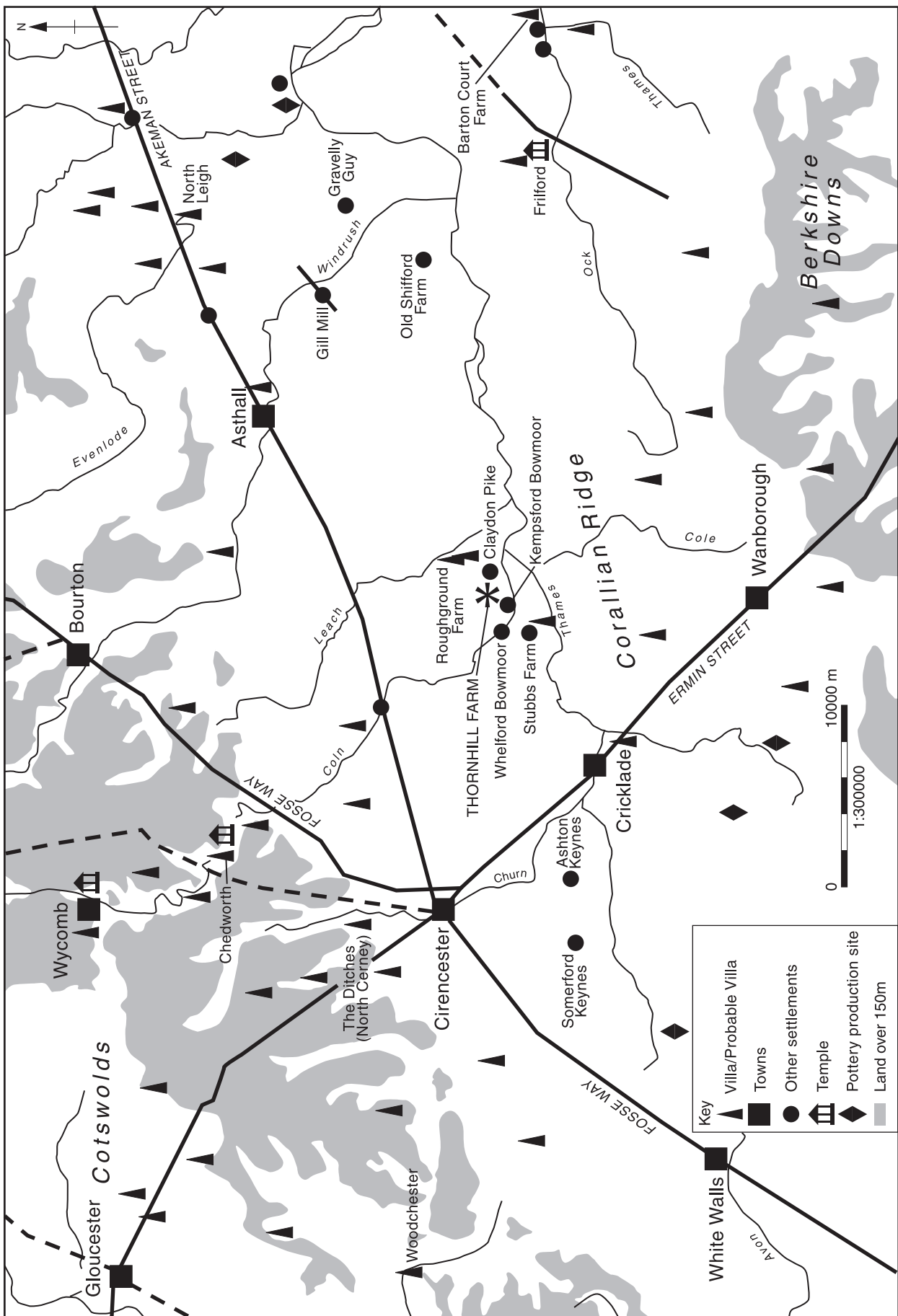


Fig. 5.2 Thornhill Farm in its regional Roman context

both sites may have been designed both to bolster the power of the local client king, and perhaps also to keep them in check. At the Cotswold site however, it is unlikely that the client kingdom would have lasted long, as occupation at Bagendon soon slid into a terminal decline, suggesting the waning influence of the local leaders, and the eventual incorporation of the territory into the province. The latter event may have coincided with the evacuation of Leaholme and the establishment of the civitas capital of Corinium Dobunorum (Cirencester) on the site around AD 65–70 (Darvill and Holbrook 1994, 55).

At Thornhill Farm, Claydon Pike and many other settlements in the Upper Thames Valley, the Roman invasion is archaeologically invisible for generations. The excavation and use of animal enclosures at the first two sites went on as before, apparently unaffected by the political upheaval. The only real difference at Thornhill Farm was the creation of a driveway which led away to the north-east of the site. Although driveways are a common feature of the early Roman period of the region, there is no reason to think that the driveway at Thornhill Farm was anything other than an entirely native development. It would appear that neither Thornhill Farm nor Claydon Pike were considered important enough to warrant a military presence at that time.

#### **Reorganisation of the landscape (c early 2nd century AD; Fig. 5.2)**

At some point in the early 2nd century AD there is evidence for a widespread reorganisation of the landscape in both the Upper Thames Valley and, to a lesser extent, parts of the Cotswolds and the Vale of the White Horse (Henig and Booth 2000, 107). A great variety of sites were affected and in different ways, including the abandonment of the high status 'protovilla' at Barton Court Farm (Miles 1986) and the settlement at Gravelly Guy (Lambrick and Allen forthcoming), and a significant shift of the enclosure site at Old Shifford Farm (Hey 1996). The disruption was such that in the Upper Thames Valley at least, more sites probably terminated in the early 2nd century AD than were occupied throughout the whole Roman period (Henig and Booth 2000, 106). As Lambrick has stated (1992, 84), such widespread and persistent patterns of discontinuity are more likely to have arisen from external political and economic stimuli, rather than purely organic internal developments in economic strategy. They may well be related to the imposition of a more capital intensive system with an emphasis on increased production of resources (*op. cit.*, 105), and it has been suggested that such reorganisation may have been initiated by members of the existing native elite operating from villas founded in the later 1st and early 2nd century AD (Henig and Booth 2000, 110). Whilst this may have been the case in most areas, more direct official involvement

cannot be ruled out in some instances, with a possible example being Claydon Pike (Miles *et al.* forthcoming).

The radical reorganisation at Claydon Pike involved the imposition of a series of rectangular ditched enclosures, one with a large entrance structure and two aisled buildings, and another interpreted as a rectangular religious precinct (*temenos*), although the evidence for this is slight. At the same time, the associated material culture was also transformed, with a higher incidence of 'Romanized' ceramics (amphorae, mortaria, samian etc.) and a far more diverse range of small finds which indicated very deep-seated lifestyle changes, in terms of personal appearance, building techniques and furnishings (Cool forthcoming). While the presence of Roman material culture alone does not imply the widespread adoption of Roman ideologies (Taylor 2001, 48), when combined with the radical changes in settlement layout and architecture, it does suggest a marked disruption to the previous indigenous socio-economic regime. Both Hingley (1989, 160) and Meadows (2001, 235) have, however, argued for continuity of high status native occupation, while Black (1994, 108–9) has suggested that sites such as this may have been occupied by natives who had served in the Roman army. An alternative put forward by the excavators is that there was a change of land ownership, with the site becoming an official Roman depot or military estate (*saltus*) associated with the cultivation of hay meadows (Miles and Palmer 1984, 92; Robinson, forthcoming). A recent reappraisal of the site (Miles *et al.* forthcoming) suggests that despite the radical transformation in both settlement layout and material culture, there is no real evidence for direct official involvement, and the only significant assemblage of military finds belongs to the late 2nd–early 3rd centuries AD (Cool forthcoming). This may be connected to the later policing of a site that had some indirect connections with Roman state supply networks. The precise significance of a number of fragments of wooden writing tablets recovered from a nearby well is uncertain, but their existence does indicate writing and record keeping on site.

Crucially, the dating of this phase of the site has recently been re-examined and reassigned to the early 2nd century AD, and is thus more in concordance with the other widespread settlement changes (Miles *et al.* forthcoming). The reorganisation of Claydon Pike may therefore have been broadly contemporary with developments at Thornhill Farm, where the domestic and pastoral elements were replaced by a system of trackways and hay meadows (see above). Thus, this site seems to have become part of an outlying field and trackway system belonging to a centralised agricultural estate specialising in the production of animal fodder, which was based at Claydon Pike. This is of course difficult to substantiate with any certainty, although a radical transformation is also found at

nearby Somerford Keynes, Neigh Bridge, where a late Iron Age farmstead was transformed in the early 2nd century AD by the imposition of a regular layout of rectangular ditched enclosures and the construction of a large aisled building interpreted as a tile depot (Miles and Palmer 1990, 23). A substantial curvilinear ditch to the east may well have been part of a religious focus at the site, since it was associated with large numbers of coins, brooches and two sculptural fragments of the Capitoline triad (Henig 1993, 56, 58).

Other known 2nd-century developments in the vicinity of Thornhill Farm include the construction of masonry villas, one lying *c.* 3.5 km to the east at Roughground Farm (Allen *et al.* 1993), and another 1.7 km to the north of this at Great Lemhill Farm (RCHME 1976, 77). Low status settlements were also established at Whelford Bowmoor and Kempford, Stubbs Farm (Miles *et al.* forthcoming), and Kempford Bowmoor (OAU 1989). The latter site was connected to Thornhill Farm and probably Claydon Pike via a ditched trackway (see above).

#### The later Roman period (3rd–4th century AD)

In general, the settlement pattern of the Upper Thames Valley established in the 2nd century AD remained fairly stable throughout the later Roman period, although there were many local variations, probably relating to differential social and economic developments. There were some significant changes in the Lechlade–Fairford area, including the apparent dismantling of the aisled building complex, and establishment of a modest masonry-footed villa in the early 4th century AD at Claydon Pike. It operated a mixed agricultural economy, and the late linear ditches at Thornhill may have been a part of its outer field systems. It therefore seems that any official involvement in the area – if such had ever existed – had certainly ceased by this point, and quite possibly much earlier. Developments at this site may well have been connected to other changes in the local settlement pattern during the 3rd century, as the low status sites of Whelford Bowmoor and Stubbs Farm went out of use, and the villa estate at Roughground Farm is interpreted as becoming increasingly centralised (Allen *et al.* 1993). At some point during the later 3rd–early 4th century the area would have been incorporated into

the new province of Britannia Prima, centred on the provincial capital at Cirencester. The province seemingly experienced great prosperity for a time, with a marked increase in villa building and expansion, including the elaborate complexes in the Cotswolds at North Leigh and Woodchester (Fig. 5.2). Both the Cotswolds and the Upper Thames Valley may have seen increasing centralisation in the management of agricultural estates during this later Roman period.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

Thornhill Farm has shown how problematic archaeological investigations on the lower gravel terraces can be, but has also illustrated the potential of such sites for understanding large scale landscape developments. The Upper Thames Valley as a whole has become an intensely studied region over the past 25 years, although the lower gravel terraces and floodplain itself have generally not received as much attention as higher areas. Nevertheless, crop mark evidence and limited excavation have proven that this marginal landscape was of increasing economic importance in the later Iron Age and Roman periods, and was undoubtedly related to wider social and agricultural regimes. It is vitally important that sites such as Claydon Pike and Thornhill Farm are not seen as semi-isolated settlements, but as components in the wider changing local, regional and provincial landscape. Furthermore, their importance lies not in abstract classifications of settlement morphology and structural form, but in the analysis of changing functionality, and the reasons behind such developments.

The environmental evidence is a key element in this approach, and its importance was recognised at an early stage by the excavators of Thornhill Farm and Claydon Pike, where it formed a major part of the research programmes. As such there is a great deal of information on the development of land use and to a lesser extent the control of resources during the Iron Age and Roman periods in the Upper Thames Valley, although this has yet to be analysed to its full potential. Detailed landscape studies incorporating environmental and structural and artefactual evidence from a wide range of settlement and non-settlement sites should therefore form a priority for future research in this area.

