

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMAN VILLAS IN SUSSEX

An examination of the development of Roman villas in Sussex as an aspect of the impact of the Roman conquest in the region. This is a precis of an article by David Rudling for the Sussex Archaeological Collections.

The Roman conquest of Britain in the 1st century resulted in dramatic alterations to this island's social and economic environments. The results of these changes, together with equally major changes in technology, make the period of Roman occupation one of the most distinctive and dynamic episodes in the history of south-east England.

The Conquest and the Client Kingdom

Soon after the invasion, the Romans established in southern England a client kingdom consisting of part of Sussex, and probably also other areas to the north and west. Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus became king between AD 43 and 52, and was probably dead or retired before AD 78.

According to Tacitus, the king remained loyal to the Romans for a long time, and it is clear from archaeological evidence from Sussex that during his reign he was fairly successful in introducing elements of Roman culture into his kingdom – the famous temple dedication found in Chichester being an impressive example. In addition to the generally widespread acceptance and the distribution

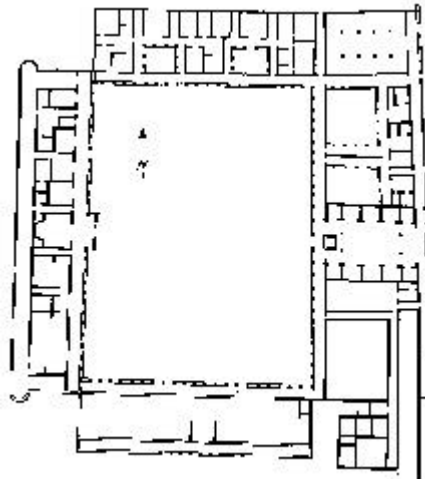
of products of Roman manufacture, such as coins and pottery, various other archaeological discoveries in Sussex also shed light on the processes of romanisation during the period of the client kingdom, especially so in Chichester which was clearly developing as a romanised centre. The undated dedication inscription referred to above is proof that there was a temple to the gods Neptune and Minerva erected with the permission of King Togidubnus, and paid for by a guild of

artisan craftsmen. Also, evidence for extensive areas of industrial activity may indicate a developing civilian market.

Romanisation (i.e. the adoption by the native Britons of aspects of Roman culture) during the period of the client kingdom was also occurring in the countryside. Sussex has a relatively large number of early villas and at least some may date from the reign of Togidubnus. These have been dated by finds of half-box tiles, the earliest type of wall-jacketing found in Britain.

Subsequently in the late 1st/early 2nd century new types of wall-jacketing were introduced. Finds of such tiles at over 15 sites demonstrate both a

considerable expansion of villa construction and alterations to earlier buildings. Who were the owners of these establishments, and what were the economic conditions which provided the finance for such building projects? It is probable that these villas were the property of the native aristocracy, which was 'left in peace to develop in the strongly philo-Roman atmosphere created by the client kingdom of Togidubnus' (Cunliffe 1973, 79). The wide distribution of the



Plan of Fishbourne Palace

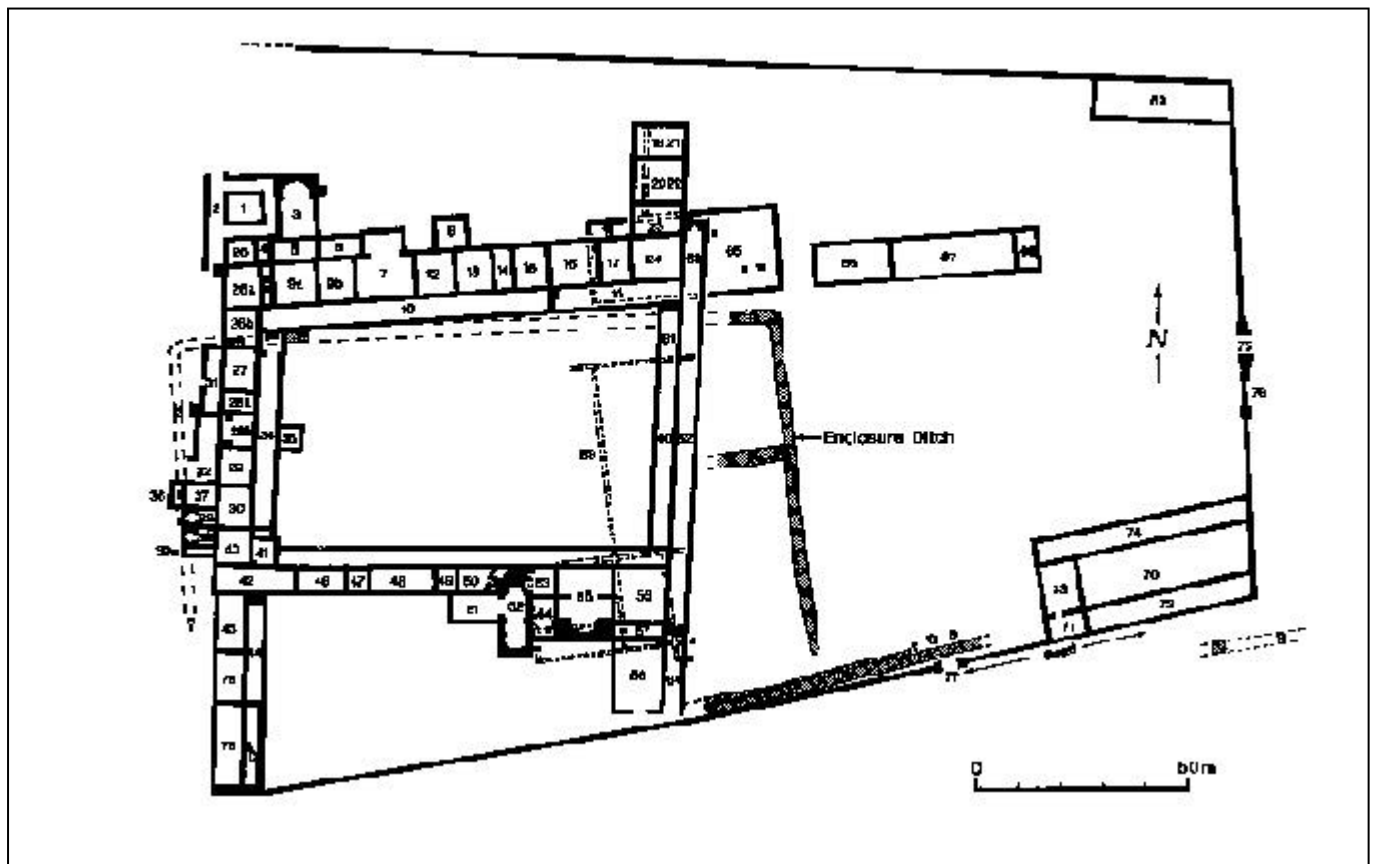
large early villas may be very significant, with each located on a distinct block of land which may 'represent the territory over which the land-owning aristocracy held control' (Cunliffe 1973, 79). Could this pattern be a clue to one distribution of the tribal sub-units, the pagi, about which so little is known (Ernest Black pers. comm.)? In most cases the major source of wealth for the aristocracy would have been the sale of agricultural surpluses from the villa estates and tenant farms. In some

cases these sales may have included valuable military supply contracts (Black 1987, 17). Some of the villa developments may have been over-ambitious and later necessitated contraction, especially since the favourable economic advantages which are thought to have benefited the aristocracy of the Sussex area in the 1st century may have diminished in the course of the 2nd century (Black 1987, 34).

One may ask whether the motivation for early villa building in Sussex had been a competitive desire by prominent men to display their status in a new, romanised way. If this is the case, then these villas must have been displayed

to people who mattered, such as governors or procurators, or legati iuridici (Ernest Black pers. comm.).

Integration into the Roman Province
Following the death or retirement of King Togidubnus his extensive kingdom was integrated into the Roman province of Britannia and probably divided into three regional tribal units or civitates, to which various administrative functions were delegated. Much of Sussex, especially the areas to the south of the Weald where there were major 1st- and 2nd-century iron-workings, some associated with the Classis



The villa at Bignor is one of the largest in Britain. It is situated on the southern slope of the Upper Greensand, just to the north of the chalk Downs in West Sussex (NGR SU 987146). It is very close to Stane Street and therefore had good communications with the Roman markets at Chichester and London. The site was discovered in 1811 and extensively excavated

until 1820. The illustration above is a modern revised version of Samuel Lysons' plan of 1819. The first of the modern excavations was undertaken by Professor Frere between 1956 and 1962. In 1985 a programme of rescue and research excavations began, and ended last year. Room numbers 1-77 are based on Lysons (1819) and Frere (1982), numbers 78-80 have

Britannica, may have been separately administered as an imperial estate (Cleere & Crossley 1985, 66-9). If this was the case, it may help to explain the apparent absence of agricultural villas to the north and east of Eastbourne.

During the 3rd century the south coast became threatened by pirate raiding. This increasing problem may have been one of the reasons for the sudden end of the eastern group of large iron-working sites in Sussex (Cleere & Crossley 1985, 84-5) and the destruction and abandonment of some of the Sussex coastal villas, including

perhaps the palace at Fishbourne.

Rural Farms

The basis of the Roman economy was land and its exploitation by farming to produce sufficient surpluses to support the more sophisticated aspects of Roman life: the towns, the luxurious country and seaside houses of the rich, large-scale manufacturing industries (such as pottery and iron production) and the army. One aspect of the Roman countryside that has received much attention is the villa. In archaeological terms a villa is usually identified by finding one or more of the following: masonry footings, multiple rooms, tessellated or mosaic floors, clay tiles/bricks, window glass, painted wall-plaster, hypocaust heating systems and bath-suites. It is often the presence of bath-suites that marks the difference between villa sites and the more numerous 'non-villa' farmsteads. Some of these farmsteads developed into villas, such as West Blatchington and Beddingham. Factors effecting expansion included ownership and fertility of the land, access to markets, alternative sources of income and suitable supplies of water.

The Development of Villas in Sussex

Many of the Sussex villas gradually grew out of local farms, with new buildings being of much the same size as the old, but built of stone rather than timber. Luxuries such as simple mosaics, baths and underfloor heating were occasionally added to these villas; examples include the late 2nd- to 3rd-century villa at Bignor and the two phases (late 1st-4th centuries) of aisled buildings at Fishbourne Creek. These villas are typical of the two main types of villas in Sussex and the rest of Britain: Bignor is a 'winged corridor villa' and Fishbourne Creek is an 'aisled villa'.

In contrast to villas that developed gradually, some grew rapidly, as in the case of the rich early villas discussed in the section on the client kingdom. These villas include Fishbourne, Pulborough, Arundel, Angmering, Southwick and Eastbourne, and possibly other sites at Newhaven and near Westhampnett Church. Some of these villas, such as Fishbourne, Southwick and Pulborough, are exceptional and are clearly derived from Mediterranean rather than North Gallic-type villas. The villas have some similar elements of design, construction and decoration, and may have involved the same architects and craftsmen. As there is little evidence of pre-

conquest occupation at these sites it is likely that the villas were 'imposed' on the Late Iron Age settlement pattern, and are presumably a reflection of the favourable political and economic climate of the client kingdom of the Regni.

Other major villa developments, as at Bignor during the 4th century, may have been caused by major changes in economic possibilities, by the merger of farms, or by immigration from elsewhere in Britain or abroad.

The Decline of Villas

The pattern of decline of the villas is complex. Some of the large early 'imposed' villas, such as Fishbourne Palace, may have been over-ambitious projects that contracted in the 2nd century, possibly due to social and economic changes. At the same time, however, there was a considerable increase in the building of new villas and it has been suggested that the profits of agriculture were now being 'shared amongst a larger number of landowners' (Black 1987, 34). This expansion of villa construction may have been linked to a decline in the power of King Togidubnus' heirs and nobles, especially if villa construction had formerly been restricted to the elite. Thus with the demise of the client kingdom more farmers may have aspired to live in villas, however humble in comparison with the large and luxurious 1st-century villas. In the 3rd and 4th centuries increasing inflation, pirate attacks on the south coast, and the establishment of a substantial military presence, may all have been factors which led to a large number of coastal villas being either deserted, as was Fishbourne, or contracted, as possibly at Beddingham. During this period, however, various villas located inland and away from both coastal raiding and military garrisons, as at Bignor and to the north of Chichester (and in Hampshire), were continuing to expand and develop. Finally, in the late 4th or early 5th centuries these villas too show signs of decay or abandonment. In contrast, some downland farmsteads show signs of continued occupation throughout the 4th century, and possibly into the 5th century. At Bishopstone occupation may even have continued into the Saxon period.

'The development of Roman villas in Sussex' by David Rudling is available as an offprint from Volume 136, of the Sussex Archaeological Collections. Price £3 (including