

# MERSEYSIDE IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

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## Introduction

The seminar organized by Merseyside Archaeological Society in 1986 provided the opportunity to undertake the first detailed study of the Roman settlement within the post-1974 county of Merseyside. Little work on the subject had previously taken place in the area, although Wirral was included in general accounts of Roman Cheshire (eg Watkin 1886; Thompson 1965; and latterly Petch 1987), while the southwestern part of the former county of Lancashire has received slight attention in county surveys (eg Watkin 1883). The compilation of the Merseyside Sites and Monuments Record and the preparation of a series of District Archaeological Reports under the auspices of the Archaeological Survey of Merseyside from 1977 onwards have provided an invaluable basis from which to approach a more detailed study of the Merseyside area in the Roman period.

Differences between the paper as presented at the seminar in 1986 and its present revised form illustrate the rapid growth in known finds and sites from the county and its immediate fringes (Fig. 1). However, the present work should be seen very much as an interim statement summarising the state of knowledge in 1988 at the start of a programme of research into the Roman settlement of the county. Further work will be aimed at clarifying answers to some of the many questions raised here. It is hoped to publish the supporting evidence and the results of further work in a forthcoming Liverpool Museum Occasional Paper.

## The Wider Background

Geographically Merseyside forms the coastal fringe of the lowland Lancashire Plain and the northwestern extension of the Cheshire Plain and is dominated by the twin estuaries of the Dee and Mersey. Any coherent view of settlement in the Roman period must take into account the wider geographical context and reference for comparative purposes is made to work outside the county of Merseyside.

In England as a whole, until the last two or three decades, archaeologists have tended to concentrate on the more visible and physically substantial types of Roman settlement, the towns, villas, and forts, although in some areas, notably Cranborne Chase, rural settlements were examined as early as the late 19th century. In the northwest the overwhelming emphasis in Romano-British studies has been placed on the military history of the frontier region, in particular charting the invasion routes into the north and determining phases of occupation of forts, with a

predilection for the excavation of fort defences. Very little was known of the civilian rural settlement in the region, particularly in the lowland regions.

The most significant development in Romano-British studies since the war has been the application of air photography to the rural landscape. This has shown that the countryside in the Roman period over much of England and Wales can be seen to have supported a network of so-called 'native' farmsteads, a type of settlement in use in the late Iron Age and continuing into the Roman period. These vary in form, size and date but are detected in air photographs as ditched enclosures, occasionally with hut circles visible in the interior and sometimes with associated field systems.

Recent studies in lowland England have demonstrated a high density of farmsteads and villages, particularly along the well-drained gravels of river valleys such as the Avon in Warwickshire, the Nene in Northamptonshire and the Thames in Oxfordshire. Even apparently less favourable types of location or soil, such as heavy and wet clay lands, which were previously considered as sparsely settled, were seen to have supported significant populations in the Roman period.

Nearer to Merseyside, the West Midlands has similarly seen a great increase in cropmark enclosures. Over 600 have now been recorded from Shropshire, almost a two-fold increase over the last decade (Burrow 1979, 64; P. Ward pers. comm.). Some areas of the north-west, notably Cumbria through the work of Barri Jones and Nick Higham, have also produced a rapid expansion in known settlements, with concentrations in river valleys and in the proximity of forts. The significance of these enclosures for the rural settlement in the north-west in general has been discussed by Jones and for Cumbria in more detail by Higham and Jones (1985). However, an understanding of this class of site is hampered by a lack not only of excavated examples but of any field evidence for date to allow interpretation of the aerial photographs.

The growing realisation that the rural landscape of much of Roman Britain was cleared of woodland and exploited intensively for agriculture has profound implications for our perception of the Roman settlement pattern in apparently 'blank' areas such as Merseyside. Previous assumptions of extensive woodland cover and a very low population for the area cannot be accepted without the basic fieldwork which in other areas has proved so fruitful. Merseyside may never have supported a high population but increasingly evidence is coming to light of a network of small settlements over some areas which points to exploitation of even relatively marginal land.

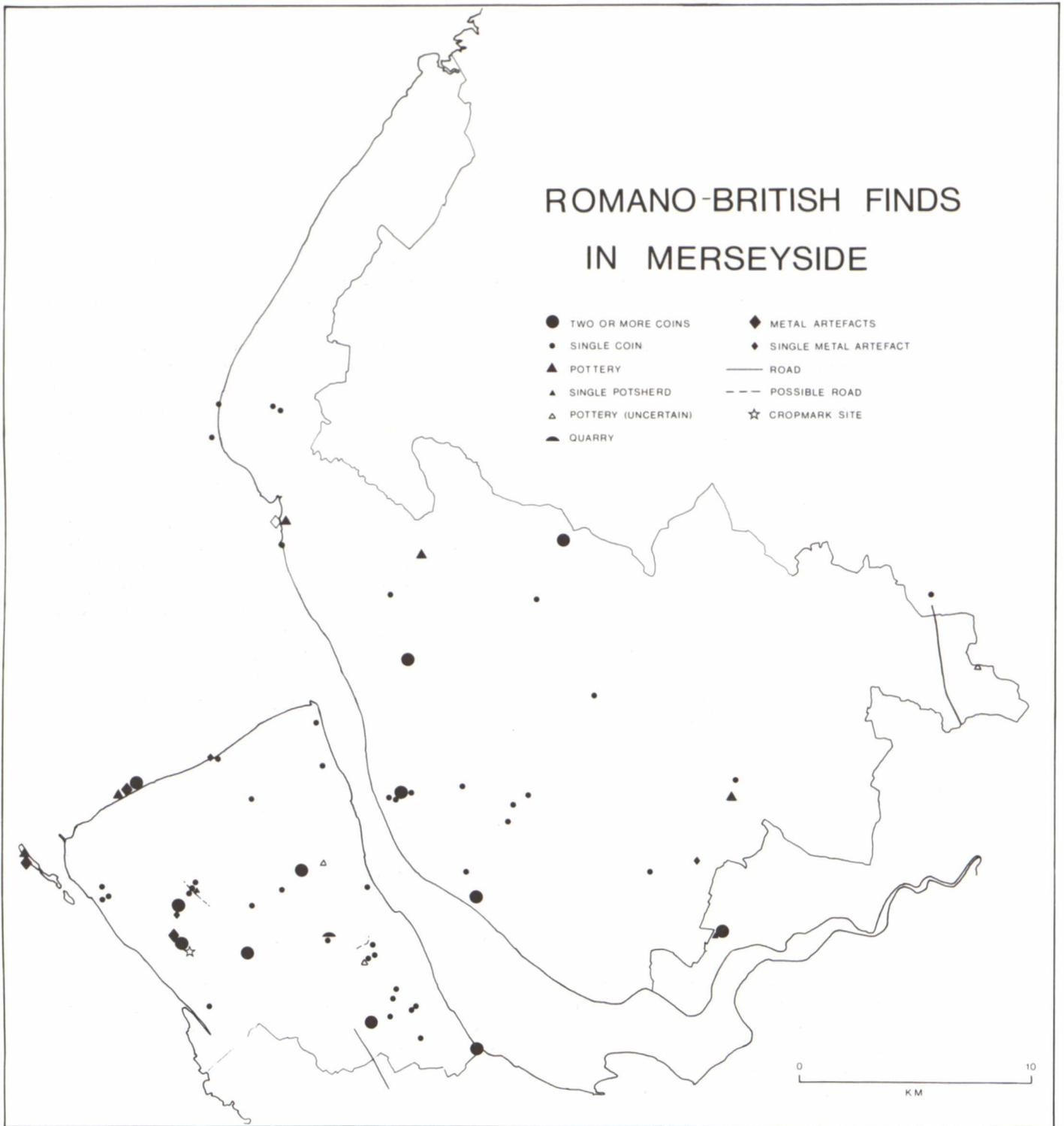


Figure 1: Romano-British finds in Merseyside to 1987.

### The Limitations of the Evidence

The evidence for Roman settlement in Merseyside is still sparse by comparison with many areas of lowland England, but is steadily increasing. Much of the county area is now covered by industrial or residential buildings and is no longer accessible to fieldwork. Even in the 19th century, before the major changes in the landscape took place, the lack of dedicated amateur antiquarians, with a few notable exceptions, meant that many finds were undoubtedly lost without record. Up to 1988 only one recorded archaeological excavation had taken place on a Roman occupation site in the county, no less than half a century ago on Hilbre Island by Professor Newstead. Both the structural evidence and finds were meagre, amounting to a posthole, partially sealed by a layer of burnt clay and nearby a patch of black earth in which were found 23 sherds of 3rd-4th century pottery from three vessels (Newstead 1927, 137-138). Since then sections across Roman roads have formed virtually the only excavated evidence for the period. A section was cut across the Roman road between Wigan and Wilderspool, near Winwick Hall Lodge just outside Newton-le-Willows (Dunlop and Fairclough 1935, 107), and a further section across the same road recorded in 1985 (Fig. 2; Philpott forthcoming). A Roman road from Chester along the eastern side of Wirral was sectioned at Street Hey, Willaston (Jermy 1960, 2-10). The rescue excavation and recording of a very short section of Roman ditch at Irby in 1987 is described below.

### Sources of the Evidence

Apart from these minor excavations, the principal source of evidence for the county until recently has been chance finds, mostly of coins, either reported in local journals and newspapers or brought into local museums. The largest source of such objects has undoubtedly been the seashore at Meols. During the 19th century large quantities of brooches, coins and other items were recovered by local people and sold to collectors such as Hume, some eventually finding their way into local museums (Hume 1863; Watkin 1886, 274-285; Chitty and Warhurst 1977). In the last decade the activities of metal detector users have yielded as many coins and other artefacts as had been recorded over the past century, but from many areas of the county. When these objects are made available to archaeologists for study and the findspots accurately recorded, the enhanced quality of the data enables both the significance of the objects themselves and the evidence for settlement to be fully appreciated and integrated into other research techniques.

The most important element in the recovery of evidence of settlement patterns in the Roman period is the systematic application of the array of fieldwork techniques available to the archaeologist. Over the last few years the Archaeological Survey and others have carried out fieldwork as part of a co-ordinated research

programme to locate and record sites of medieval and earlier date which cannot be located using map or documentary evidence. In Merseyside a fieldwalking programme in a series of transects across the county, undertaken by Ron Cowell, has covered a representative sample of soil, drift geology and topographical types. The programme was still continuing in 1988 and the detailed results are not yet available (Cowell forthcoming). Some preliminary findings have been incorporated below. Such systematic fieldwalking has the merit of providing a relatively objective sample of artefacts over a given area, with the distinct advantage over air photography of much less dependence on soil type or drift geology for results. It has the disadvantage, however, that for periods when ceramic, stone and, to a lesser extent, metal artefacts were scarce or absent, sites are difficult or impossible to detect.

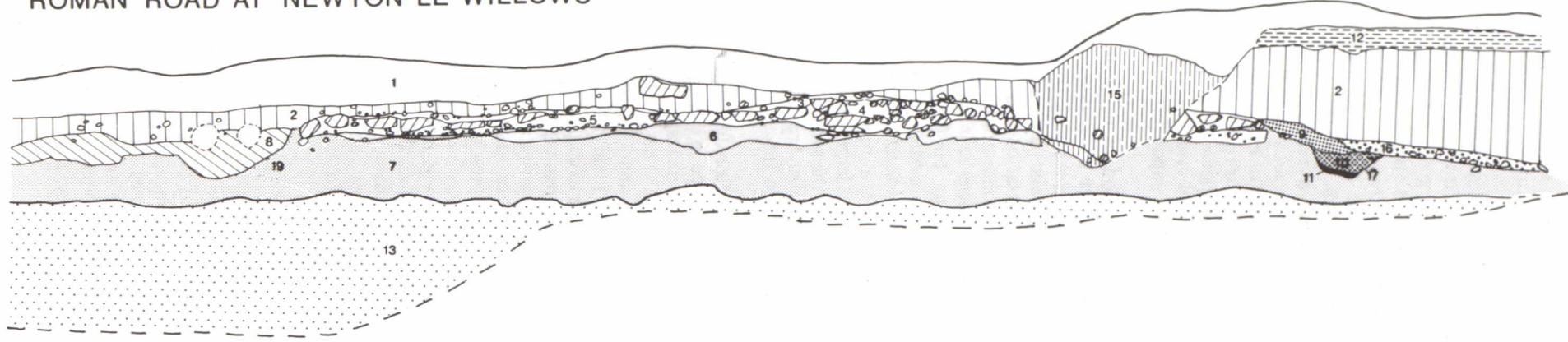
The main contribution of fieldwalking has been the location of a number of scatters of Roman pottery. Some of these are represented by no more than three or four dispersed and abraded sherds which may represent the dispersal of middens and manuring of fields but denser concentrations which may indicate settlement nuclei have been noted in a few locations. As the local Roman fabrics closely resemble some medieval and post-medieval unglazed wares, the occurrence of a few isolated sherds of soft, light orange, sandy sherds is not a reliable indicator of Roman occupation. However, larger groups of sherds are found frequently enough in the same vicinity as metal detector finds of Roman coins or brooches to enable a Roman date to be assigned to the type.

The fabrics of the Roman wares found locally are usually soft, light orange in colour with some sand, and other iron-compound inclusions and occasionally a few small flecks of mica. The general fabric description appears to match that proposed by Webster as Cheshire/Lancashire Plain fabric (1982, 15) but it has not yet been possible to compare the Merseyside sherds directly with those manufactured at Wilderspool or Northwich. No Roman grey ware or black-burnished ware has so far been recovered from fieldwalking, although the latter is present both in rescue excavations at Irby and in Newstead's excavations on Hilbre. Their absence in fieldwalking may be due to their poor visibility against dark soils. Fine wares too are almost entirely absent, the exceptions being a sherd of samian ware at Thurstaston and an abraded, possibly colour-coated sherd, from Rainhill.

### Air Photography

Previous work on air photographs in Merseyside has been largely confined to the study of existing county council vertical coverage, taken for planning rather than archaeological purposes. The amount of archaeological detail is very variable and although a few flights were made for archaeological reconnaissance by the Archaeological Survey, it was not until 1987 that the

# ROMAN ROAD AT NEWTON-LE-WILLOWS



- |   |  |                            |    |  |                                  |         |  |                                   |
|---|--|----------------------------|----|--|----------------------------------|---------|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1 |  | Topsoil                    | 6  |  | Red sand foundation              | 11      |  | Coarse sand and pebble ditch fill |
| 2 |  | Silt sand soil             | 7  |  | Silt sand soil                   | 12      |  | Modern track surfaces             |
| 3 |  | Silt sand soil and pebbles | 8  |  | Coarse sand and fine pebble wash | 13      |  | Natural sand                      |
| 4 |  | Sandstone slab surface     | 9  |  | Silt sand                        | 14 & 15 |  | Modern ditch fill                 |
| 5 |  | Pebble surface             | 10 |  | Silt sand ditch fill             | 16      |  | Sand and pebble wash              |

Figure 2: Section across the Roman road at Crow Lane, Newton-le-Willows.

same department began a systematic programme of archaeological air photography in the county. The advantages of air photography for detecting ephemeral archaeological sites which are not rich in artefacts and therefore unlikely to be located by fieldwalking has been appreciated for some time and has produced dramatic increases in the number of known Roman rural sites elsewhere in the northwest and in the Midlands (Higham and Jones 1985; Burrow 1979).

The potential of aerial photography in Merseyside has been discussed by Sheppard (1978). He defined three broad landscape areas within the county, which correspond with differences in drift geology and drainage patterns. Northern Merseyside (comprising the northern half of St Helens District and much of Sefton) has an extensive coverage of windblown sand, which coupled with poor drainage, has led to the development of peat bogs over a considerable areas. The sand itself has fairly good potential for cropmarks but intact peat is resistant to drying and differential growth of overlying vegetation is limited. Southeastern Merseyside (the southern parts of Knowsley, Liverpool and St Helens Districts) has produced numerous cropmarks of post-medieval and later field boundaries, despite a nearly continuous blanket of boulder clay. The latter is notorious for poor development of cropmarks due to the moisture-retentive properties of the clay which inhibits the differential drying of subsoil essential for variation in the rates of growth and ripening in crops (cf Riley 1987, 35-37). Boulder clay also forms the predominant element of the drift geology of the third area, Wirral, but much of the peninsula is obliterated by urban development or is down to pasture and the potential for cropmarks there is greatest on the sandstone ridges.

### Cropmark Sites and Settlement in Merseyside

In recent years several cropmark sites of certain or possible late Iron Age/Romano-British date have been recorded both within the county and also outside the boundary. They vary from oval to rectangular in shape and all appear to be single-ditched enclosures. In only one example is there possible evidence of associated field systems. The evidence from the 1988 air photographs has still to be assimilated and verification of sites on the ground is still continuing but several have produced Roman material.

The best-known cropmark site in Merseyside is the single ditched oval enclosure at Irby. Fieldwalking has produced a thin scatter of Roman pottery from the area around the enclosure but almost none from within it. Flint flakes have been recovered from both inside and around the enclosure. However, a field 300 to 400m to the northwest in Thurstaston has produced over a dozen Roman brooches, a scatter of Roman pottery, a key, and coins dating from the late 1st to the 4th century. A very worn Republican legionary *denarius* of Mark Antony from the same field may have been

lost as late as the 3rd century. There are clearly two distinct sites, although the nucleus of the second has not yet appeared as a cropmark. The lack of Roman pottery from the oval enclosure suggests that intensive occupation did not occur during that period and the three hut circles visible in the interior suggest that it represents a late Iron Age farmstead which was superseded by the neighbouring site before the introduction of Roman material culture, perhaps in the late 1st century. A shift in the settlement nucleus is common in other regions and the presence of two successive farmsteads on different sites does not necessarily require a disruption in ownership or a change in the pattern of landholding.

Within a radius of three or four kilometres of the Irby cropmark, further concentrations of coin and brooch finds suggest the presence of other farmsteads. The most important of these is a concentration of 4th century coins found at Irby Mill Hill, about 300m from a feature interpreted as a farmstead enclosure ditch. At least ten coins are known from a restricted area and, unless they represent a dispersed hoard, they indicate that occupation continued here at least as late as the 370s. The general date of the material from within and near the ditch was a little earlier than the coins (Philpott forthcoming). The fragments of a black-burnished jar dated to the late 2nd or 3rd century (cf Gillam 1968, 16, nos. 138 and 143: dated AD 180-250 and AD 190-280 respectively), and a nearly complete imitation Dragendorff 38 flanged bowl, found within a few metres of the ditch, was probably mid 3rd to 4th century in date, while possible Severn Valley ware sherds would fit best in a 2nd or 3rd century context. The difference in date between the two concentrations of finds may not be significant. However, the discrepancy in date might be explained by a shift in the site or principal activity of the farmstead in the 3rd or early 4th century. To attribute the two concentrations to different farmsteads would perhaps imply a density of settlement greater than the sparse evidence can sustain.

Elsewhere in Wirral, cropmarks are not so well defined. Recently recorded cropmarks near Brimstage and Heswall may be further examples of 'native' enclosures but to date neither has been examined on the ground.

In St Helens district and further north, the Domesday account of extensive woodland in Makerfield hundred and the occurrence of a number of British placenames in and around the hundred (eg Ince, Wigan, Bryn, Culcheth, Penketh) together with a paucity of Roman finds, have been taken to indicate that much of the area was uncleared woodland in the Roman period. However, the Roman road from Wilderspool to Wigan passed through Newton-le-Willows and the good quality agricultural land on light soils within a corridor along the road is unlikely to have been ignored. At Winwick, not far from the line of the road, a cropmark of a single ditched quadrilateral enclosure has produced Roman pottery (Cheshire Sites and Monuments

Record). Nearby, air photography has located field boundaries which bear no relation to the post-medieval field system and may be associated with the Roman enclosure. The neighbouring township, Burtonwood, has produced a further concentration of pottery which, when considered with thin scatters of pottery from the valley of Newton Brook and the Sankey, probably from manuring of fields rather than settlement nuclei, suggests that occupation of the river and stream valleys in the Roman period was rather more extensive in St Helens district than has previously been thought.

At Garswood a cropmark has been observed in the form of three sides of a probable rectangular, single ditched enclosure with an entrance in the centre of the short side. It lies within a medieval hunting park and other features in the same field, a pronounced curving bank and a cropmark ditch at a short distance away, may be features connected with the park. Medieval parks were usually located in well wooded areas to provide cover for deer and other animals and this immediate area may have subsequently reverted to woodland after clearance in the Roman period.

At Cronton an oval single ditched enclosure was recorded from the air in 1988, with another possible cropmark, of similar form, within two or three hundred metres. The likelihood of at least one being of Roman date is supported by the discovery of a copper-alloy bust, probably 2nd century in date, from the same field (Lloyd-Morgan in Philpott forthcoming). The presence of two possible adjacent enclosures may be another example of settlement shift although further work is needed to recover more finds in order to establish the relative chronology of the two sites.

### Settlement Type

The sparse but increasing evidence of cropmark enclosures in Merseyside suggests that the predominant unit of settlement was the rural farmstead. No unequivocal military sites have so far been recorded within the county and the only exception to the pattern of enclosed farmsteads is the probable nucleated settlement at Meols which is discussed below. Beyond this, there is no evidence for specialized nucleated industrial settlements such as Wilderspool or Middlewich in the Cheshire plain.

In the absence of excavation on the Merseyside enclosures, we can do little more than speculate on the types of structure employed in the area. The hut circles visible within the cropmark enclosure at Irby are of a type conventionally explained as eaves-drip gullies or as foundation trenches for circular timber houses. Similar circles within a subrectangular enclosure were noted on an air photograph in the Bollin valley at High Legh, Cheshire, and on excavation were found to correspond with a circular stone wall. This site, the closest excavated Iron Age/Romano-British farmstead to Merseyside, had two adjacent enclosures, one oval, the

other sub-rectangular. Dating evidence was virtually absent with only a single pot sherd recovered, of indeterminate Roman or medieval date (Nevell 1987, 24-28). Circular houses were the predominant type in the late Iron Age in both upland and lowland Britain and another relatively local example occurs within the recently discovered Iron Age enclosure at Great Woollen Hall Farm, Greater Manchester (Nevell 1987). Further north the type persisted at some sites through the Roman period, with a circular house within a native enclosure occupied in the 4th century at Fingland on the Solway Plain in Cumbria (Richardson 1977, 58-59; Shotton 1984, 59). However, the circular house was superseded by romanized rectangular structures, which were in some cases simple villas, on many sites in the south and Midlands (eg Hales, Staffordshire: Goodyear 1974, 6-7). In the northwest of England, the same tendency to replace the circular house type by rectangular buildings in the 3rd or 4th century has been noted on several sites in the territory of the Carvetii (Higham and Jones 1985, 97). At a rural site at Crossfield Farm, Penrith at least four rectangular structures had been erected within the elliptical enclosure by the 4th century (Higham and Jones 1985, 97).

Other non-structural features noted at Cumbrian enclosures are what would be expected in agricultural sites practising a mixed economy. Roadways or paths, enclosed yards, probably for stock, and a ditch and timber-revetted bank surrounding the farm are the usual components found in excavation (Higham and Jones 1985, 95). None of these features has yet been recorded in Merseyside but they provide a body of evidence against which future results can be compared.

Both the cropmark enclosures and the concentrations of pottery appear to represent small native farmsteads, although only at Winwick do both elements occur together. Such farmsteads probably supported no more than an extended family group in a pattern which is increasingly seen as typical of rural settlement over much of the north and the Midlands (eg Higham and Jones 1985, 99). Villas, which were dependent on both fertile land and easy access to markets for their agricultural products, are significantly absent from large areas of the north; the only recorded villa in the north west is a relatively unsophisticated example at Eaton-by-Tarporley near Chester (Mason 1982; 1983). The concentrations of pottery, coins and other metal finds recovered from Merseyside do nothing to contradict the conclusion that the settlement pattern is one of dispersed farmsteads.

### Topography and Geography of Roman Sites in Merseyside

Taylor has warned against the kind of geographical determinism in our approach to Romano-British settlement pattern which assumes that the location of settlements is directly related to the presence of positive

environmental features, ie 'good' sites, which were obvious to their inhabitants. The recent vast increase in recorded Romano-British farmsteads in some areas of lowland Britain has produced many examples in 'poor' locations, situated on unfavourable soils, in wet conditions, on exposed sites or lacking a water supply (Taylor 1982, 2).

Despite Taylor's warning, the location of Roman sites in Merseyside does appear to exhibit some preference for certain types of drift geology and topographical situations. In Wirral some have seen the distribution of finds as essentially coastal (eg Petch 1987, 213) and there is no doubt that such a location would have offered the significant advantage of alternative food resources (fish, wild fowl, molluscs) and ease of communication by water along the estuaries. However, in Wirral the presence of light, easily worked, soils for arable production appears to have been a primary factor in site location. Sites, or findspots of artefacts, therefore, tend to concentrate on the Permo-Triassic sandstone ridges, often on south-facing slopes and often close to the 30m contour near the upper limit of boulder clay drift deposits. Settlements were thus located to take maximum advantage of a range of environments and natural resources. The heavier clay soils, supporting oak woods, would provide woodland cover for game, grazing for pigs, firewood and timber for building or fencing, as well as lush pasture when cleared. The free draining, lighter soils of the sandstone ridges were better suited to arable cultivation although inclined to loss of fertility unless manured. Some groups of finds on boulder clay suggest that lower lying locations were not neglected, however, and even relatively marginal land on the edge of the mossland at Moreton appears to have been exploited in the Roman period.

North of the Mersey, the preference for coastal situations was more strongly marked. A hoard at Otterspool and several coin finds in Liverpool, some but not all of which can be dismissed as modern losses, suggest some settlement close to the Mersey, while growing evidence for Roman finds further southeast along the Mersey estuary reinforces the picture.

The northeastern part of Merseyside (Knowsley and St Helens districts) with its blanket of boulder clay has long been considered a virtual blank as regards Roman settlement. While the flat claylands around Bold have failed to produce any indicators of settlement, gradually fieldwalking, chance finds and air photographs are populating the previously empty landscape. The cropmark at Cronton, representing one or possibly two enclosures, begins to provide a settlement context for a late 2nd century hoard found at 'Old Sprink' Farm, Tarbock in 1838 (VCH 3, 1907, 177) and further fieldwalking finds in the same area may represent at least one more farmstead. Two Roman coins and a sherd of samian ware were found near Ditton railway station in 1881 (OS Card 48 SE.3). Along the fringes of the Mersey, windblown sand overlying clay provides

light, if easily leached, soils and at least two concentrations of Roman finds may indicate settlement, one conveniently situated for fording the Mersey near Hale. Further to the northeast, as noted above, the Burtonwood-Winwick-Newton area is beginning to produce sufficient evidence from fieldwalking and air photography to postulate a series of farmsteads along the valleys of the Sankey and Newton Brook, while the sandstone ridge at Rainhill has produced a small quantity of Roman pottery in a situation reminiscent of Wirral sites.

The northwest of Merseyside has so far produced fewer traces of occupation. Towards the coast, in Sefton district, the prevalence of poorly drained mossland with low ridges of higher ground, on which most of the medieval villages were situated, would tend to limit the potential area for settlement. However, in the 19th century some finds were recovered from the shore at Altmouth and two separate coin finds were made in Formby village suggesting some settlement near the coast. Few Roman finds have so far been recovered from the slightly elevated ground, though Melling and Lydiate offer some potential both for cropmarks and settlement. A complex series of field systems visible on an infra red air photograph of Melling may include several phases of landscape development and a possible contender for a native enclosure appears among this. A very thin scatter of Roman sherds and a coin of Diocletian from another part of Melling demonstrate that the area was not a complete blank in this period.

Barri Jones has drawn attention to the possibility of occupation on the fringes of the mossland, between the 25 and 35 foot contours (7.6-10.8m) (1979, 79). At that level settlements can take advantage of alternative sources of food while remaining above the relatively high water table prevailing in the Roman period. Air photography by Jones has revealed traces of field systems at Lydiate and Maghull (Jones 1979, 79 and Fig. 10.3) but no date has been assigned to these and some at least are likely to be post-medieval. That the fringes of mossland were not neglected for settlement can be seen at Rufford, West Lancashire, where field walking by members of the West Lancashire Archaeological Society has revealed Roman pottery on a tongue of higher land projecting into mossland (A. Coney pers. comm.). Similarly in the mosslands of the northern Fylde, at Upper Rawcliffe, Lancs, a circular univallate enclosure lying at 8m AOD has produced pottery dated to the end of the 1st or early 2nd century (Goodburn 1979, 292).

### Meols

Meols is without doubt the most important, but also the most enigmatic, Roman site in Merseyside. During the 19th century over 80 Roman coins and more than 70 brooches, along with considerable quantities of other metal artefacts and a little pottery, were recorded as having been found on the shore at Meols (Hume 1863;

Watkin 1886, 278). Collections of finds were made and have survived in part in the Williamson Museum and Art Gallery, Birkenhead, the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, Warrington Museum and Liverpool Museum. Publication of the Roman material is currently in progress (Chitty and Warhurst 1977; Lloyd-Morgan unpub.).

The circumstances of retrieval of the finds indicate that during the 19th century material was being eroded out of early land surfaces along the shore near Dove Point and deposited on the beach (Hume 1863; Watkin 1886, 277). Metalwork and coins are heavily represented in the surviving material with only a few sherds of Roman pottery and tile, perhaps a result of either 19th century collection strategies or of the differential deposition of artefacts through water action. The brooches from the site illustrated by Hume and Watkin are largely late 1st to 2nd century types (eg Hume 1863, 71-72, Pls. III, IV; Watkin 1886, 278). However, the extensive coin list, which is nearly half as large as that from Ribchester and two thirds of that from Wilderspool (Shotter 1979, 3, Table 1), suggests continuous occupation from the 1st to 4th century (Watkin 1886, 282-283). Further artefactual and coin evidence indicates a strong possibility of continuity both from the Iron Age and into the sub-Roman period (*cf* Bu'lock 1961).

The function of the site at Meols has been the subject of much discussion. The proximity of the lead mines across the Dee at Halkyn mountain, Clwyd, and the lead processing site at Pentre, which saw a decline in use in the 3rd century, have stimulated the idea of Meols as a centre for lead smelting and redistribution (Jones 1980, 97; Laing and Laing 1983, 6-7). Meols has also been seen as a possible temporary observation post, guarding the sea route to Chester, based partly on the presence of a lunular pendant and an Aucissa brooch, types of artefact which occur on military sites (Lloyd-Morgan unpub.). However, the pendant is of a British type found most commonly in the south and east of England on non-military sites (Jackson 1985, 172) while the Aucissa brooch is not exclusive to military sites and may simply reflect the early date of occupation. The coastal location and good access by water to Chester and via the Mersey to south Lancashire and mid Cheshire have stimulated the idea that Meols was a transshipment point for river boats plying the Dee and Mersey to transfer their cargoes to sea-going vessels (Peich 1987, 216).

It is clear that these various roles are not mutually exclusive and the settlement at Meols, like a medieval town, may have simultaneously performed a range of administrative, commercial, minor industrial, military and agricultural functions, whilst remaining a relatively small settlement, perhaps with the administrative status of a *vicus*. However, the attractions of a safe anchorage in close proximity to two navigable rivers providing access inland would appear to provide the primary *raison d'être* for the siting of the settlement and

examination of the finds assemblage provides some support for the commercial role as paramount. The coin evidence, together with the presence of a late 1st century Kentish mortarium and imported amphorae among the very small sample of surviving pottery, argues for continuous occupation apparently unaffected by changes in military dispositions in the northwest. The negative evidence of an absence of manufacturing waste or smelting products is, of course, inadmissible, given the peculiar circumstances of recovery of the artefacts. However, the fact that Meols was established long before the decline of Pentre and the early start of the lead industry in north Wales suggests no primary dependence on lead processing for the settlement.

The site may have served other functions. Trade with Ireland is attested by Tacitus by the late 1st century (*Agricola* 24) and by finds of Roman material in Ireland, and such trade may, as in the Viking and later period, have involved importation of raw materials such as furs. In addition, numbers of fish hooks suggest that fishing played an important part in the local economy. These are undated and constitute a 'type fossil', showing no typological development (*cf* Roman examples at Fishbourne villa: Cunliffe 1971, Fig. 51, nos 149-150). The surviving examples may date to any period from Roman to post-medieval but it is unlikely that such an abundant and obvious source of food was neglected in the Roman period. A further probable role is that of market centre for agricultural produce in the northern Wirral and Sefton/Liverpool coastal area.

There is little unambiguous evidence for Roman structures at Meols. Among the Meols material in Liverpool Museum are two combed Roman flue tile fragments, which should indicate substantial masonry buildings. Timber-framed buildings with floors of puddled clay, vertical timbers resting on or set into sandstone blocks and clay wall infill, were noted in sand-dunes at Meols in the 19th century (Watkin 1886, 281). No dating evidence was present and Watkin's scepticism of a Roman date is well founded; the structures could well be timber-framed houses or cottages from the medieval settlement.

### The Chronology of Settlement in Merseyside

An assessment of the chronology of Roman settlement in Merseyside is hampered by the lack of excavated sites and the scarcity of datable artefacts of all types. Continuity of settlement from the Iron Age is particularly difficult to identify given the virtual absence of Iron Age pottery and other artefacts in Cheshire and Lancashire. On the evidence of artefacts alone, all sites found in fieldwalking appear to date from the Roman period although there is a strong probability that at least one was of Iron Age origin. Almost nothing is known of the Iron Age settlement in Merseyside, although the two northernmost of the hillforts in mid Cheshire, at Helsby and Frodsham, which overlook the Mersey, indicate the presence of a significant Iron Age

population in the Mersey valley. Two possible Iron Age hillforts in Merseyside, at Camp Hill, Woolton and Berry Hill, Knowsley are unconfirmed. Air photography and environmental sampling are perhaps the most promising techniques for locating Iron Age sites in the county and for reasons stated above the oval enclosure at Irby may be assigned tentatively to this period. Three Celtic and three Carthaginian coins found in the 19th century at Meols have been seen as later introductions (eg Chitty and Warhurst 1977, 35). Two of the Celtic coins, however, now in Liverpool Museum, are early 1st century BC Armorican issues and have the characteristic Meols patina (Warhurst 1982, xx). If genuine ancient losses, they point to some activity before the Roman conquest, perhaps in recognition of the value of the safe anchorage at Meols on the western sea route, but it is unnecessary to infer that mineral wealth was the only attraction of the site prior to the Roman conquest (Laing and Laing 1983, 6-8).

In the virtual absence of datable pottery, the only evidence for the chronology of the Roman settlement of the area is that of the coins and metalwork. Single finds provide little useful evidence and concentrations of objects permit tentative statements of known periods of occupation for only a few sites. Hoards may have been secreted away from settlement sites and although providing an indication of occupation as well as of accumulation of wealth somewhere in the vicinity, they do not permit conclusions to be drawn on the location of specific sites.

Early Roman coins are known from only a few sites in Merseyside and, with the exception of two Republican *denarii*, all date to the last third of the 1st century, suggesting a loss near the end of the century at the earliest. However, 2nd century pieces, from Trajan (98-117) to Marcus Aurelius (161-180), occur not only in greater numbers but also over a much wider geographical area. Brooches are not as closely datable as coins but may indicate occupation in the later 1st to 2nd century at a number of sites, notably Thurstaston, but also at Hale, Barnston and Heswall. The dearth of later 2nd to mid 3rd century coins throughout Merseyside is a result of a much wider shortage of coinage in circulation and a higher intrinsic value of such coins and cannot be seen as evidence of abandonment or poverty (Casey 1974, 43-44). Coin finds are most prolific for the late 3rd and 4th century on both sides of the Mersey. This largely reflects the low intrinsic value of these small bronze pieces, which would have been easily lost and not assiduously sought, but also bears a strong correlation with the pattern of coin loss on sites which were continuously occupied.

In lowland Britain as a whole, the later Roman period has been seen as a period of technical improvement and innovation in crop production, notably through the introduction and spread of the coulter and the asymmetrical plough share, which facilitated cultivation of heavier clay soils (Jones 1982, 102). The Merseyside area shows an apparent increase in activity during the

later 3rd to 4th century as reflected in finds of that period. However, at present the vast majority of finds datable to that period are coins, and economic factors, as discussed below, are as likely to have produced this effect as progressive expansion onto heavier soils.

The end of the Roman period is marked by the rapid collapse of the marketing system with a consequent dearth of datable manufactured items on sites. The end of the period is marked by even greater obscurity than that with which it began. The only artefacts of sub Roman date are from Meols, indicating continuity of occupation and of trade. A Byzantine coin, minted in Carthage in AD 540-541 and found in a garden at Moreton, is unlikely to be a modern loss and may be further evidence of such activity. One intriguing find, an Anglo Saxon small long brooch of 6th century date, was recovered from the same field as numerous Roman brooches and coins at Thurstaston. The item predates the Anglian settlement of the Wirral, and raises interesting, if as yet unanswerable, questions about the continuity of settlement in Wirral in the British interlude between the Roman and Anglian periods.

No clear pattern of the chronology of settlement in Merseyside emerges from the disparate strands of evidence presented above. Continuity of rural settlement from the late Iron Age is a distinct possibility with slight evidence of settlement shift within Taylor's 'agricultural units' (1982, 8-9). Trade through Meols may have begun in the Iron Age and continued apparently without interruption until the medieval period. Exploitation of the area was not confined to coastal regions, the sandstone ridges and the river valleys but included settlement on the heavy claylands of south and east Merseyside. The overall increase in coin loss may reflect expansion in the area under occupation through the 2nd century but the impression of growth in density of settlement in the late 3rd and 4th century which is suggested by the relatively numerous coin finds is more likely to be the result of wider economic factors.

### Economy of Settlements

There are two main types of evidence for the economy of settlements in Merseyside. The first concerns coins and non-locally produced artefacts imported to the sites, which provide evidence of participation in trade and the cash economy, at least on a local level. The second involves the use of environmental evidence to determine the agricultural or pastoral base of the activities of the farmsteads. Neither of these at present throws more than the faintest light on the rural economy but with the collection of a far greater body of data, each has the potential for much more far reaching conclusions.

The presence of some manufactured items on Merseyside sites indicates that the rural farmsteads participated in the wider market economy rather than operating on a purely subsistence level. Production of

a surplus would in any case be required in order to pay taxes and a locally elevated price for agricultural produce may have obtained further north, and perhaps also in the hinterland of the legionary fortress of Chester, during the Roman period under the pressure of military wages (Higham 1979b, 44).

Direct evidence of non-local artefacts is confined to pottery and metalwork. Imported pottery, whether continental or from elsewhere in Britain, is very scarce in Merseyside. Black-burnished wares formed a high proportion of the pottery in use on both military and civilian settlements in the northwest and have been found so far on the two excavated sites, both in Wirral. The presence of 1st-2nd century imported wares among the small group of surviving pottery from Meols together with an extensive coin list indicates that some kind of market economy flourished there from at least the late 1st to the late 4th century. Otherwise the pottery in use on farmsteads, especially the light orange, oxidised sandy fabrics, was probably of Cheshire Plains manufacture.

The presence of local market centres in the Cheshire Plain at Northwich, Middlewich and Wilderspool, along with the civilian *canabae* at Chester provided a range of centres for trade and exchange during the Roman period. Meols too almost certainly functioned as a local market centre, probably serving northern Wirral and perhaps coastal settlements in Sefton and Liverpool districts. Chester was easily accessible by water along the Dee estuary from the western coast of Wirral, as was the case in the medieval period, while the Mersey permitted ready access to Wilderspool and via the Weaver to Northwich. Communications by land were probably slower but a road linking Chester with Meols and branching near Mollington to serve northeastern Wirral seems a distinct probability. However, the precise alignment north of Willaston and Raby remains uncertain, despite claims to the contrary.

The impact of the presence of the legionary fortress at Chester on the economy of the Wirral farmers is difficult to determine without much more detailed evidence of non-local and local artefacts, and of the levels and nature of crop and animal production from a number of sites. The relatively high concentration of population in the legionary fortress and *vicus* at Chester at least in local terms would make considerable demands on the rural hinterland for food and other supplies, such as hides, although the ease and low cost of water transport to the fortress would have reduced dependence on local sources of supply. The influence of the legionary fortress at Chester on the rural hinterland has been seen as most profound on the area around the fortress, with an extension as far as the mid-Cheshire ridge and Helsby-Frodsham-Halton area (Petch 1987, 188). The romanizing effect of the fortress at Chester on the Wirral population, however, may have been minimal and the settlement on Wirral has been described as 'probably low-key, and largely self-contained' (Petch 1987, 188, 212). Some contact

will have been inevitable, however, since Chester probably functioned as a regional centre of taxation. Recent work has tended to minimize the impact of the Roman conquest on the economic system in rural England and Wales. The scarcity of denominations lower than the *as* in the northern provinces may indicate that coinage was not widely used as a medium of exchange outside the towns in the first two centuries AD. Coinage may have been viewed as a means of storing wealth and paying taxes. The development of a true market economy depended upon the circulation of a large volume of low value coins enabling small transactions to be made with coins, which only occurred from the mid 3rd century onwards in Britain (Lloyd Jones 1984, 130-131). The civilian *vici* attached to military sites, however, largely grew up in response to the presence of well paid army garrisons and these undoubtedly functioned as local centres of redistribution and manufacture, where trade was encouraged. The extensive coin list at Meols is consistent with its having been an active market centre for much of the Roman period.

The participation of the Merseyside settlements in the market economy in the later Roman period can be seen from coin finds in the area. The comparative use of quantities of artefacts from sites as an indicator of wealth or economic activity is likely to mislead since the factors leading to loss and recovery are too variable and diverse to be directly comparable. However, in general terms the quantity of coins and other metal artefacts from Merseyside sites is comparable with that from other sites west of the Pennines but is very low by comparison with the south and east of England.

Other metal artefacts from Merseyside include a series of headstud brooches with distinctive characteristics, which may have been produced locally (Fig. 3). Further brooches from the area include enamelled types paralleled broadly elsewhere in the northwest (Philpott forthcoming). Metal working was certainly practised at the minor industrial settlement of Wilderspool and there is some evidence for enamelling (May 1904, 73-75; Bateson 1981, 103). However, none of the illustrated enamelled bronzes parallels the 'local' headstud types.

The relative scarcity and generally unsophisticated nature of the Roman finds from Merseyside suggests a rural economy at a low level of romanization. The location of sites within some of the best arable land in south Lancashire together with the proximity of many to land which had a high potential for pasture, either on mossland or cleared oak woods on the boulder clay, suggests a mixed arable and pastoral economy, as was the case in the same areas in the medieval period. As usual, Meols provides the exception to the rule.

The only hint of industrial exploitation of the Merseyside area is the supposed use of Storeton stone for inscriptions at Chester (Petch 1987, 226). Coal is the principal mineral resource of the county, at least north of the Mersey, and outcrops at Prescott and

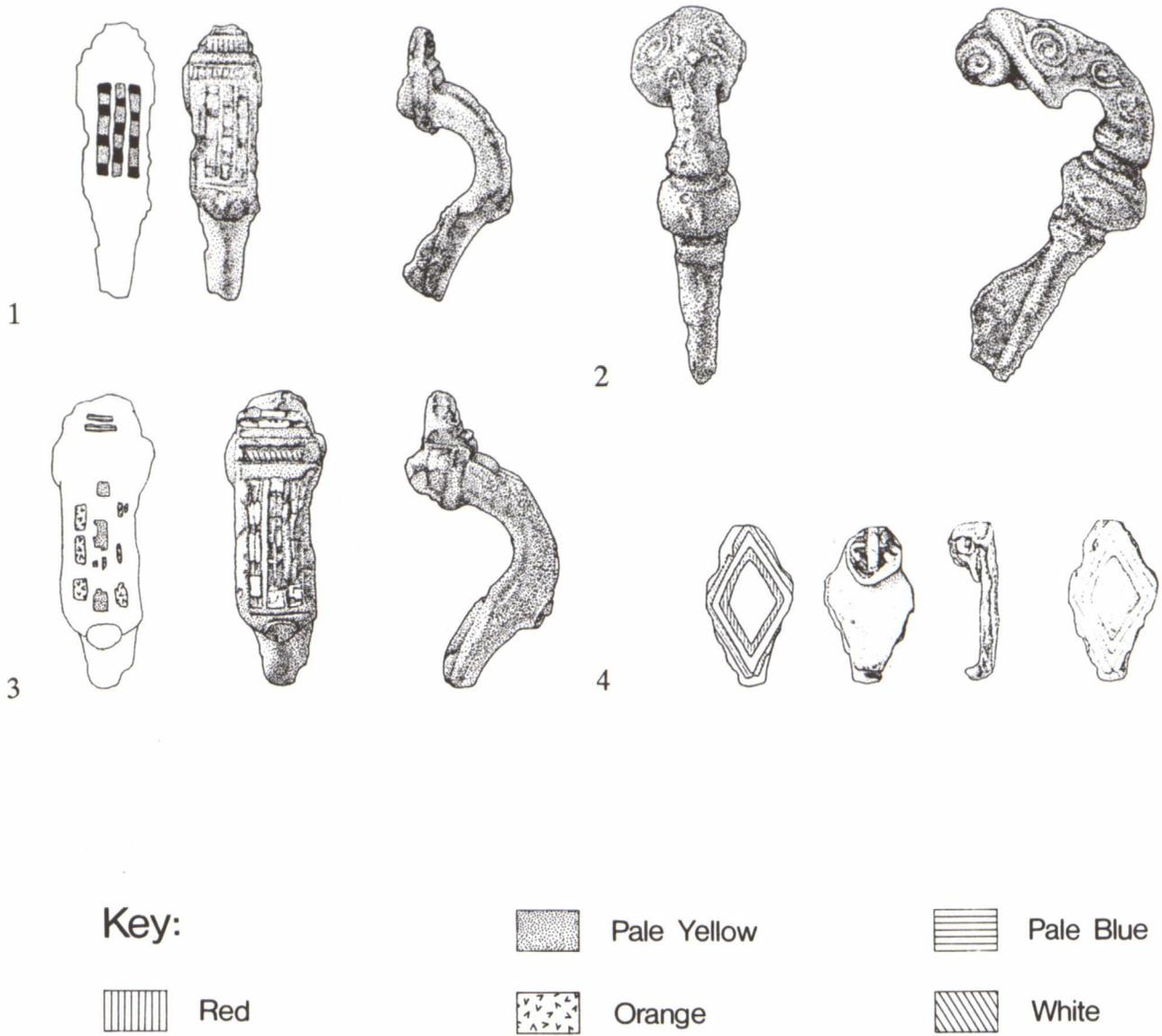


Figure 3: Roman brooches from Merseyside and surrounding area x2/3.

elsewhere may conceivably have been exploited in the Roman period, although to date there is no evidence for this (Chitty 1981, 13). Environmental evidence for the rural economy in Merseyside is confined at present to pollen analyses which show phases of clearance and cereal cultivation during the Roman period. The pollen record has the significant advantage over chance finds of datable artefacts in offering the opportunity to chart episodes of occupation and colonisation over time in a given location. So far there are no excavated animal bones or waterlogged deposits with preserved plant material which might point to the types of activity practised on the site or to the local plant or insect populations. Pollen analysis at Parr Moss in St Helens has detected a phase of clearance in the Roman period, while at Simonswood a peat horizon, probably of late Iron Age or Roman date, contained cereal pollen and other species indicative of a mixed economy (Innes and Tomlinson forthcoming). At Knowsley Park Moss the pollen from peat deposits suggested a period of cereal cultivation and deforestation from c. 1700 bp onwards (Innes and Tomlinson this volume). The cumulative impression both of finds of Roman material and the pollen work is of widespread if dispersed settlement in the Roman period.

## Conclusions

A recent statement on the priorities for the excavation and preservation of Roman sites has emphasised the past neglect of rural sites of the Roman Iron Age and recommends a number of steps to remedy this. Future work should include preservation of as many rural sites as possible, an attempt to estimate the overall number of sites by fresh survey and collation of previous work, the elucidation of landscape archaeology by a combination of air photography and intensive ground survey, and a planned regional excavation programme to enable comparisons to be drawn between various regions. Cheshire and Lancashire are cited as examples of areas suitable for such consideration (Roman Society 1985, 7).

Research into the Roman period in Merseyside is still in its infancy. Progress over the decade from 1976 has virtually been confined to the compilation by the Field Archaeology Section of published and unpublished references to finds of Roman date within the county and the addition of new finds to the records. However, an integrated research programme involving air photography, fieldwalking and environmental sampling is now under way, to be followed by selective excavation, as part of the work of the department in an attempt to address the many questions raised by the present paper. The explosion in known rural sites seen in other areas may never be equalled in Merseyside but as work progresses it can be seen the county has been extensively, if not densely, settled in the Roman period.

Future work in Merseyside and surrounding areas will be directed at answering questions on two levels. In regional terms, an assessment of the location and density of sites in the area is required, with a view to determining the factors affecting site situation, the interrelationships between neighbouring settlements and the population density in the area. Examination of the field systems which were integral to this type of site has been seen as an important element in the study of such rural settlements (Higham and Jones 1983, 64). On individual sites only excavation can yield the kind of detailed evidence of structural remains and house types, artefacts and environmental evidence which will enable the sequence, duration and nature of occupation to be understood. Selective excavation of the interior of a sample of cropmark enclosures would provide evidence for the internal arrangement of these farmsteads, period of use and economy of a settlement site of a type which has been little studied on the ground in the northwest as a whole.

Future work might also profitably include an examination of the area behind the sea wall at Meols to ascertain whether the nuclei of the Roman and medieval settlements have been entirely lost through erosion, to examine the peat layers recorded in the 19th century, to attempt to locate and identify the Romano-British occupation layers and to locate associated field systems.

It is hoped that the definition of the many problems raised in this brief survey of the evidence for Roman Merseyside will enable future research to be directed more effectively to their solution.

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