

Zeitschrift: Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte =
Revue suisse d'art et d'archéologie = Rivista svizzera d'arte e
d'archeologia = Journal of Swiss archeology and art history

Herausgeber: Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum

Band: 65 (2008)

Heft: 1-2: Internationaler Kongress CRAFTS 2007 : Handwerk und
Gesellschaft in den römischen Provinzen = Congrès international
CRAFTS 2007 : artisanat et société dans les provinces romaines

Artikel: Craftwork considered in the context of the evolving social and economic
structure of a Roman villa : Touffréville (Calvados, France)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-169801>

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Craftwork considered in the context of the evolving social and economic structure of a Roman villa: Touffréville (Calvados, France)*

by NICOLA COULTHARD

Extensive excavations at Touffréville in Normandy, between 1992 and 2003, yielded vestiges of diverse non agricultural productions: iron and copper alloy manufactured goods, lime, and terra cotta building materials. The role and the importance of these activities are considered as interactive components of the evolving social and economic status of the rural establishment.

The Touffréville site (fig. 1) is a vast establishment occupied continuously from la Tène D2 through to the early 5th century A.D. Profuse evidence for production activities projects a dynamic image of craftwork in a rural context. Four tile kilns, a large ironworking area with four forge hearths, twenty lime kilns organised essentially in pairs or in batteries, five small lime pit kilns, seven slaking pits and two copper alloy production areas clearly qualify specific activities. Chippings indicating a form of woodworking, and numerous partially conserved combustion features indicate other activities, less well identified. These all took place within a villa framework, though evidence of agricultural activities, the central pillar of a villa economy, was scarce.

Though occupied continuously, the site does not represent a functional continuum; the chronological phases project different images of the establishment's organization

and prosperity. Assessment of the economic role of the productions can only be undertaken by considering the activities as integral parts of the phase to which they correspond. Four sets of criteria have thus been evaluated: architecture and the disposition of the buildings; agriculture; production activities; material culture. The emerging pictures for each phase are dissimilar, highlighting several changes in the overall organisation of the establishment.

An imposing Iron Age settlement (c. 60–30 BC)

The layout is structured by imposing ditches delimiting a large and topographically commanding enclosure. The only habitation preserved is located outside the enclosure, not far from the entrance. Differential consumption of meat within, and outside of the main enclosure, depicts areas with distinct functions, suggesting a spatially discrete social hierarchy. Evidence of copper-alloy working detected inside the enclosure through combustion and copper alloy waste, and fragmented crucibles bears witness to craftwork. As for material culture, artefacts are rare, due to truncated levels. The essentially local pottery assemblage is very fragmentary. Coins indicate regional circulation patterns.

Despite partial preservation, the topography and morphology of the site suggest a significant settlement with social and probably functional spatial divisions. In the context of this occupation phase, the presence of craftwork indicates a certain prosperity, the demand for manufactured items is probably generated by residential requirements.

A flourishing «proto-villa» (c. 30 BC–70 AD)

A series of elaborate buildings with both oak and stone footings, organised around a courtyard, constitutes a “proto-villa”. They have earth, mortar or cement floors, the walls of the main residence are plastered and painted, and a masonry basin defines a bathroom. The agricultural criterion is approached essentially through the zoological assemblage, which highlights modifications in animal husbandry, reflecting Roman practices and tastes in meat consumption. Livestock includes larger imported cattle, slaughter ages are younger, and the horse meat “taboo” is respected.

A profusion of features and production waste correspond to different craftwork activities. A 100 m² workshop

* The excavation in 1992 was funded by “*Les Ciments Français*”. The programmed excavations (1993–1996; 1998–2000; 2003) were funded by the *Conseil général du Calvados* (Calvados Department Council) and the *Ministère de la Culture* (French Culture Ministry). The poster was written by Nicola Coultard using data from reports by, or discussions with, Karine Jardel (pottery) and Mélanie Demarest (metallurgy and small finds), Cécile Germain-Vallée (geomorphology), Conseil général du Calvados, 36 rue Fred Scamaroni, F-14000 Caen; Véronique Mattered-Zeck (carpology) and Jean-Hervé Yvinec (zoology and archaeoentomology), Centre de Recherche archéologique du Val d’Oise (CRAVO), 21 rue des Cordeliers, F-60200 Compiègne; Philippe Ponel (archaeoentomology), Laboratoire de Botanique historique et palynologie, ERS CNRS, 6100 Marseille; Anna Baudry-Dautry (zoology), Civilisations Atlantiques et Archéosciences, UMR 6566 du CNRS Campus de Beaulieu, 35042 Rennes; Nadine Dieudonné-Glad (metallurgy of iron), Faculté des Sciences Humaines, 8 rue Descartes, F-86022 Poitiers; Philippe Fluzin and Marion Berranger (metallurgy of iron), Laboratoire Métallurgies et Cultures, UMR 5060 du CNRS, Institut Polytechnique de Sevenans, Rue du Château, F-90010 Belfort. Jacqueline Pilet-Lemière et Pierre-Marie Guihard, le Laboratoire de Numismatique, Centre de Recherches Archéologiques et Historiques Médévales (CRAHM), Unité Mixte de Recherches 6577 du CNRS Université de Caen, F-14032 Caen.

produced copper-alloy objects near to the main dwelling, and mainly blacksmithing, but also bloomsmithing, took place in an iron working area covering over 100 m² with four forge hearths. Lime production was very important with sixteen kilns (two batteries of four and four pairs), transforming local limestone. Seven combustion structures remain unidentified.

of Roman acculturation. Diversified craftwork reflects demands generated by the running of the establishment (iron, lime), alongside demands for specific goods emanating from an aspiring elite (copper-alloy). A pragmatic, occasional diffusion of products (iron, lime) beyond the domain itself, perhaps to developing farms in the direct vicinity, is possible.

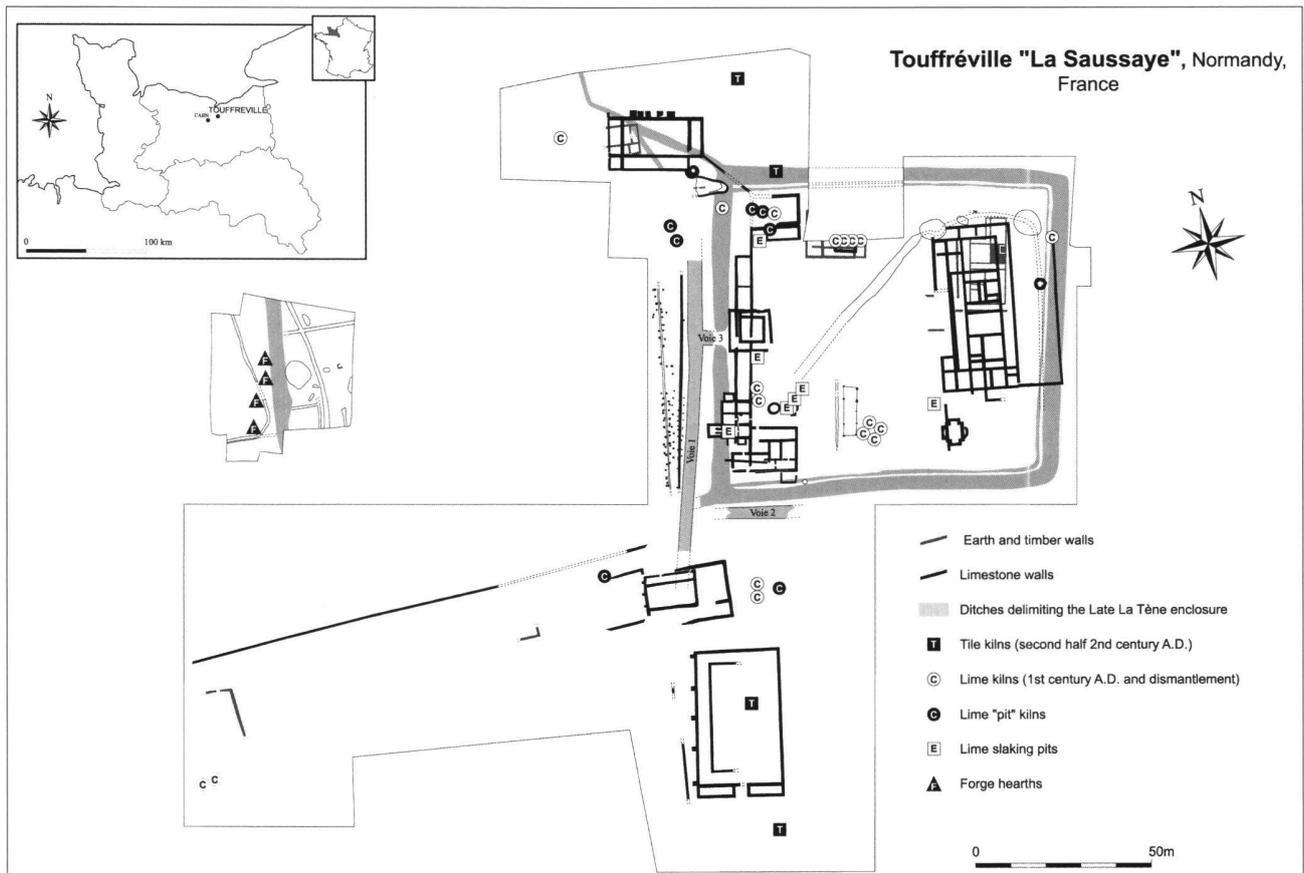


Fig. 1 Plan of the Touffréville site.

Material culture is well represented by diversified high quality goods including many imports. A regionally atypical assemblage reflects a clear demand for Roman material culture, and the means to procure it.

This first Gallo-Roman occupation phase is immediately extensive, organised and dynamic, projecting a strong image

A villa (c. 70–130 AD)

A major building programme is undertaken during this occupation phase. The razed timber buildings are replaced by a classical masonry villa which reaches its most extensive development in the early 2nd century. Little remains of

the superstructures, but destruction levels yield fragments of columns, tesserae, painted wall plaster... Ironically, we only dispose of indirect evidence of agriculture, through a set of copper-alloy bells and a phalera indicating the presence of animals, and the possible use of one of the buildings for stabling.

Three lime kilns corresponding to this «mortar intensive» building phase are the only traces of non agricultural production. For the material culture, pottery remains are diversified and numerous, with notable wares such as a carrot amphora suggesting the maintenance of a comfortable social status. New regional productions are also present, such as moulded necked jugs and Norman Gauloise amphorae.

To summarize, beyond the standard attributes of a classical villa, the topography confers a further ostentatious characteristic to this most extensive phase; the roofs of the large villa were visible for up to 10 km across the fertile plain below. Craftwork is now limited to a few lime kilns that are chronologically associated to the major construction work.

Terracotta production (c. 130–170 AD)

The main villa house is *at least* partially abandoned, as are other buildings. Palaeoenvironmental analyses indicate waste ground with encroaching weeds, pools of stagnant water, and refuse zones. No traces whatsoever for agriculture have been detected, but craftwork takes on a new dimension, with four tile kilns simultaneously producing terracotta building materials. A shallow basin was probably used to process the marl. The production capacity being totally disproportionate to the needs of the reduced rural site, a commercial function for this production is retained. Material culture is essentially represented by pottery, and we observe that importations decline to the advantage of regional substitutes. The systematic presence of Dressel 20 amphorae indicates the continuity of olive oil importation however.

It is patent that the configuration of the settlement no longer resembles that of a villa, and the role of craftwork is very different from that observed for the earlier occupation phases. The terracotta production is exclusive, and its scale rules out autarkic needs. A commercial vocation is put forward, probably to supply a recently identified developing small town, situated but 3 km away.

A conspicuous agricultural renewal (c. 170–300 AD)

Despite an overall reorganisation comprising the transfer of the “heart” of the settlement to the centre of the site and the establishment of baths, necessitating a surprisingly ambitious water adduction system, entire sectors, including the *pars urbana*, are abandoned. Despite the scale of these works, the hydraulic system and the baths are quite rapidly

abandoned. Post holes indicate reoccupation of abandoned buildings.

A large basin modified to serve as a water trough for animals was also quite rapidly abandoned. Entomological analyses point to the presence of excrement of large mammals nearby. The zoological study reveals the presence of specific butchery waste characteristic of an activity specializing in the slaughter of young cattle; an activity comparable to that usually located in urban contexts. As for the terracotta production, it ceases completely at the end of the 2nd century.

The material culture is basically banal, the quantity of small finds diminishes overall, but occasional objects of quality are still present. The pottery assemblage is common for the region.

To sum up this phase, an elaborate reorganisation points to a desire to re-establish an appearance of prosperity, but paradoxically the refurbished buildings and equipment are not maintained for long. Economic activity seems almost exclusively based on (specialized) animal husbandry. Craftwork seems non-existent.

A small agricultural settlement (c. 300–410 AD)

Occupation is limited to the central area, around a sole subsisting, partially derelict building, though traces are discreet. Pre-existing water features, a well and a large cistern, remain open and are backfilled at the very end of the century.

For agriculture, analyses of wet sediments indicate the presence of large mammals (entomology), and the close proximity to the well of a winnowing activity (carpology). A rudimentary wall encloses an area suitable to this activity. As for the preceding occupation phase, no craftwork has been detected.

The archaeologically discreet occupation takes the form of a small rural settlement continuing subsistence agricultural activities.

Conclusion

Having assessed evidence for the four defined sets of criteria by phase, several clear statements can be made. Foremost, the establishment did not maintain a stable social status during the five centuries of continuous occupation, and craftwork certainly didn't play a stable role. The same type of activity is not organised with the same objectives from one phase to another. Furthermore, the various production activities, even within one phase, are not necessarily organised with the same economic objectives.

The production activities contribute to, but also reflect, the social and economic organisation within each phase.

SUMMARY

Settlement at Touffréville spanned the Gallo-Roman period, from the late Iron Age through to the late 4th century A.D. The extensive excavations carried out between 1992 and 2003 have yielded numerous but differentially preserved vestiges of diverse non agricultural productions: iron and copper alloy manufactured goods, lime, and terra cotta building materials. The role and the importance of these activities, and also the probable destinations of the productions, are considered as interactive components of the evolving social and economic status of the rural establishment. The global image of the standing of the site is approached through complementary parameters such as the general configuration of the establishment, the types and quality of the architecture, trade within the Roman network, material culture, and agricultural activities.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Besiedlung des ländlichen Touffréville in gallo-römischer Zeit umfasst eine Epoche von der späten Eisenzeit (La Tène) bis zum Ende des 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. Umfangreiche Grabungen zwischen 1992 und 2003 brachten zahlreiche verschiedenartige Spuren handwerklicher Tätigkeiten zu Tage: Herstellung von Geräten aus Eisen und Buntmetall, Baumaterialien aus Kalk und gebranntem Ton. Die Rolle und die Bedeutung dieser Produktion sowie deren Absatzmärkte werden vor dem Hintergrund einer umfassenden Sicht auf die sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Verhältnisse der Siedlung dargestellt. Das Bild setzt sich aus mehreren sich ergänzenden Parametern zusammen. Dazu gehören die Untersuchungen der Siedlungsstruktur und deren Entwicklung, der typologischen und qualitativen Merkmale der Architektur, des Handels und Austauschs im Rahmen römischer Netzwerke, der materiellen Kultur und der landwirtschaftlichen Tätigkeiten.

RÉSUMÉ

L'occupation de l'établissement rural de Touffréville, fouillé entre 1992 et 2003, est retracée depuis La Tène finale jusqu'à la fin du IV^e siècle. L'occupation gallo-romaine a livré de très nombreux vestiges d'activités artisanales: production d'objets en fer, en alliages de cuivre, de chaux et de terre cuite architecturale. La place et l'importance de ces productions, ainsi que la destination des produits, sont abordées à travers l'image globale de l'évolution sociale et économique de l'établissement. Cette image se dessine par des paramètres complémentaires tels que la configuration de l'établissement et ses modifications, la nature de l'architecture, les échanges avec l'extérieur, la culture matérielle et les activités agricoles.

RIASSUNTO

L'insediamento rurale di Touffréville, fu abitato dal periodo di La Tène finale fino al termine del IV secolo. Gli scavi intensi, condotti tra il 1992 e il 2003, permisero di riportare alla luce numerosi reperti di attività artigianali: alcuni oggetti in una lega di ferro e rame, della calce e del materiale di costruzione in terra cotta. Il ruolo e l'importanza di tali attività come pure la probabile destinazione dei prodotti sono considerati delle componenti interattive dell'evoluzione sociale ed economica dell'insediamento. L'immagine si delinea mediante parametri complementari quali la configurazione dell'insediamento e le sue modifiche, la natura dell'architettura, gli scambi con il mondo esterno, la cultura materiale e le attività agricole.