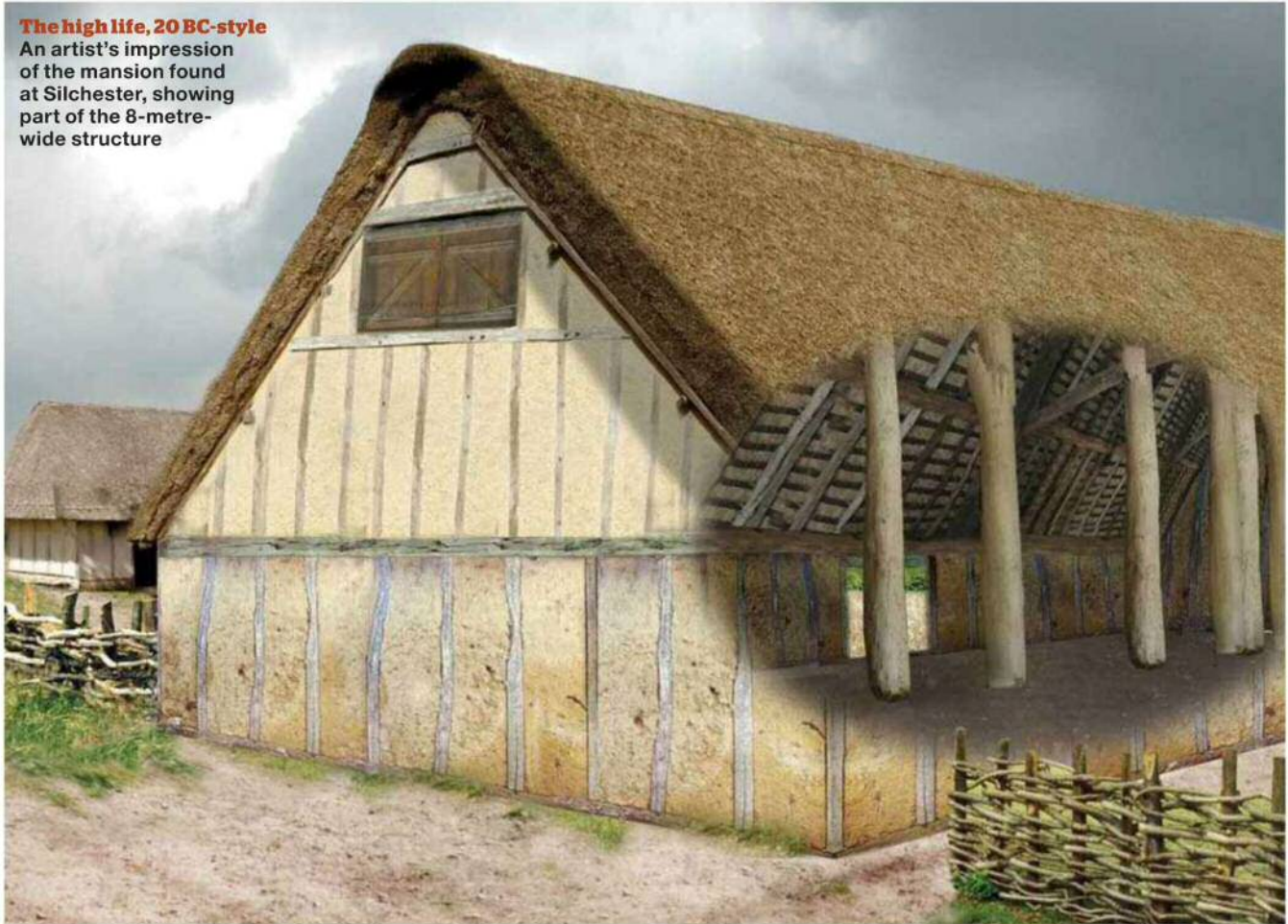


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The high life, 20 BC-style

An artist's impression of the mansion found at Silchester, showing part of the 8-metre-wide structure



Secrets of the Iron Age 'aristocrats' revealed

The remains of a huge Iron Age building are offering some intriguing clues into what life was like for the upper-class inhabitants of ancient Britain.

David Keys reports

The lives of wealthy ancient Britons were influenced by the Roman culture of continental Europe as early as the late first century BC – decades before the Roman conquest of Britain – evidence found near the remains of a vast Iron Age mansion in Silchester in Hampshire suggests.

The structure, which is thought to be the largest pre-Roman urban residential building yet found in Britain, dates from roughly 20 BC. Analysis of artefacts discovered at

the site, carried out by a team of archaeologists from the University of Reading, indicates that its inhabitants used tableware imported from northern Italy and central and northern France, and drank wine brought in from southern Italy. They also used expensive glassware imported from the Mediterranean world.

Dining was not the only part of aristocratic life that was influenced by mainland Europe, either. Following the discovery of the first tentative evidence in

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Urban planning Recent excavations at Silchester add weight to the theory that the Iron Age settlement was laid out to a pre-determined grid. **1** Students plot the outline of a late Iron Age house in this trench in the north-west quarter of the site. **2** The site of the Iron Age mansion and a mid-first century AD timber building. **3** Further elements of the Iron Age layout, including a first-century BC ditch

2009, analysis of the orientations and positions of excavated buildings at the site, together with hundreds of finds unearthed in 2011 and 2012, has added weight to the idea that Iron Age Silchester was laid out according to a pre-determined street grid similar to those of settlements across the Channel.

Extrapolating from the 3,000-square-metre sample area that has made up the focus of the project so far, the team believes that the town probably had a population of between 5,000 and 10,000 people and was made up of around 1,000 houses. Although most were modest buildings of approximately 7 metres square, archaeologists now suspect that between 15 and 30 of the residential properties were far grander affairs.

Standing with its front door on one of the town's main thoroughfares, analysis of the mansion suggests that it would have measured between 28 and 35 metres long and 8 metres wide, had up to 250 square metres of living accommodation and as

much as 1,400 cubic metres of space. It was almost certainly roofed with thatch, and the dimensions of the surviving post holes from the main upright timbers indicate that it would have stood approximately 8 metres tall.

This discovery that the building was part of a planned town has wider implications, too. Evidence suggests that several other Iron Age towns were established in south-east Britain in the late first century BC, meaning that it's likely that some were also built to a grid.

Michael Fulford, professor of archaeology at the University of Reading and director of the Silchester excavation, said: "Most people have assumed that the Roman conquest brought Roman culture to Britain in the mid-first century AD. But we are now beginning to realise the way in which Roman culture on the continent – including house designs and town planning traditions – had already been influencing parts of Britain for as long as a century."

The Silchester dig is set to continue until 10 August before starting again next summer, and visitors are able to visit the site to see the archaeological excavation as it unfolds.

For more details and images from this story, visit historyextra.com/silchester

The mansion's inhabitants used tableware imported from northern Italy