

# ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE UNDER THE ROMANS

J Walker

## INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter outlined the relatively low degree of development in agriculture that took place in the North-West, in comparison to the rest of Roman Britain. This chapter looks at the economic and social effect of the Roman invasion on the North-West and reviews not only the initial changes brought about by the conquest, but how the Roman system also changed. It incorporates evidence on how specialisation in agriculture gave rise to the integrated economic and social structure of the Roman Empire.

## THE PRE-ROMAN ECONOMY

The pre-Roman Brigantian economy was organised on three broad levels: overseas trade, specialist local production, and home industries (Cunliffe 1978, 287). The home-based industries, producing agricultural equipment, were the cornerstone of this self-sufficient economy. Apart from general agricultural tools, the main products were wool and leather goods, wooden items, basket work and pottery containers. Specialist production centred on the processing of metals and minerals, as well as the manufacture of martial equipment. Evidence for overseas trade in the North-West is restricted, but this is probably due to the nature of the sites investigated.

Such traded items seem not to have been sold for money or even valued solely in terms of economic worth, but rather were distributed not just from necessity but to reinforce social obligations. Indeed, Cunliffe (1984) has suggested, and there is no reason why the same argument could not be extended to the north, that in southern Britain freemen owed tithes to their local kings and that these people in turn redistributed a large proportion of their income to retainers and other social groups. This system, therefore, provided a mechanism for the distribution of goods.

## THE PRE-ROMAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

This simple economy met the needs of a loosely confederated Celtic tribe (Hawkes 1973, 65) consisting of two broad social strata: the knightly class, which included Druids and craftsmen; and the peasants (Todd 1978, 198).

The knights were the military and political base of tribal affairs and may have met in tribal gatherings (Tacitus *Germania*, II). They owed allegiance to the Brigantian royal house led by Queen Cartimandua. This allegiance was not, however, unqualified, as from AD 51 until her defeat in about AD 70, Cartimandua was opposed by her husband Venutius who led an anti-Roman tribal faction (Cunliffe 1978, 132). In an attempt to curtail her husband's activities Cartimandua had, at one point, captured his brothers and kinfolk. In many tribal societies, like the Brigantes, chieftainship or "kingship" is not assumed merely by right of birth, but depends upon a melange of economic and social ties reinforced by blood links. In capturing her husband's brothers and kinfolk, Cartimandua reveals that the royal house and, any pretender, depended for their support upon the will of the knights as channelled through blood links. The intermittent nineteen year struggle between Venutius and the queen, also reveals the loosely knit nature of Brigantian leadership.

However, the tribe was capable of large-scale works, as at Stanwick in Yorkshire, where a defended site that initially covered 42ha was expanded around AD 70 to enclose over 1500ha. Wheeler (1954, 25) interpreted this as a defended stock enclosure built to hold elements of the tribe's main wealth, in the form of cattle, and to protect it from the advancing Romans, although this analysis is now questioned.

There was not, on the evidence of Irish sources, a single type of kingship but a series of grades held together by ties of rather personal allegiance (Cunliffe 1983). Each sub-chief, or

minor king, was the head of a 'tribe' or rather tribal group that was dominated by the knights (FLAITHI) and the skilled men (DES DANA). The majority of the population consisted, however, of freemen who paid a tithe to the king and the chief knights. This common 'peasant' class seems to have been organised, as was the rest of the society, around extended families that covered four generations. Caesar also mentions slaves, debtors and freemen as making up a part of the peasant group (de Bello Gallico VI, 13-15).

What is clear, however, is that there is not a great range of types of settlements from the North-West to go with the apparent range of social classes. Cunliffe (1978, 219) identifies three main types of settlements in the area: isolated huts in one or two fields, densely inhabited areas, and small clusters of huts surrounded by fields. There are then no clear-cut examples of social elitism in houses or farms unlike such sites in the Roman period.

This apparently simple society underwent changes as a result of its conquest by the Romans. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote of his father-in-law Agricola's policy towards the Britons, and, by virtue of the chronology, the Brigantes, thus:

"To induce a people, hitherto scattered, and uncivilised ... to grow inured to peace and ease, Agricola gave private encouragement and official assistance to the building of temples, public squares and private mansions ... He praised the able ... expressed a preference for British natural ability ... and ... in place of distaste for the Latin language came a passion to command it. And so the Britons were gradually led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable - arcades, baths and sumptuous banquets. They spoke of such novelties as civilisation when really they were only a feature of their enslavement."

(Cunliffe 1978, 343)

The process of conquest that involved the founding of towns, the subjugation of tribes and the conversion of the economy did not always go well: Dio in the 2nd century records the following case:

"The Romans were holding portions (of Germany) ... and soldiers of theirs were wintering there and cities were being founded. The barbarians were adapting (and) were becoming accustomed to hold markets. ... So long as they were unlearning (their old) customs gradually ... they were not disturbed by the change ... and were becoming different without knowing it."

(Cary 1955, 39-40)

The new Governor Varus "strove to change them more rapidly" and tried to raise money from them and as a result they revolted and imposed the single greatest defeat on Roman arms in the early history of the Empire.

## THE ROMAN ECONOMY

The large number of fragments of imported vessels discovered on the site is testimony to the commercial links of Roman Manchester. Although much of this pottery probably reached Manchester as a direct result of the military supply system, it is likely, given the size of the vicus and the range of finds from it, that some, at least, arrived through normal commercial processes.

Hingley (1982) has put forward a model, or description, of trade in Britain that broadly covers the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. He argues that the Imperial authorities sought to gain revenue by instituting an administered market system, wherein a central tribal trading nucleus, sometimes surrounded by satellite markets, or towns, was established. Imported products, the bulk of which were semi-luxury items, were sent first to the main tribal centres, then distributed to the satellite markets such as Manchester. The size and distribution of the trading centres were controlled or at least influenced, by the needs of the tax gathering process, which they were initially created to service.

It has been argued that the collection of these new taxes indirectly encouraged expansion and growth both in trade and agriculture. Farmers were forced to pay their taxes in cash that could only be obtained by selling crops relevant to the wider economy of the Empire. Once linked to this system, farmers would tend to produce more cash crops so that they could obtain the new luxury goods imported by, and through, the new centres. This pattern of behaviour has been similarly observed in newly colonised countries (Dalton 1967, 27).

Overall changes in the percentage of the population engaged in agriculture could also have a dramatic effect upon cash sales. It is clear that Roman Britain contained a much larger urban population than Iron Age Britain, and it seems likely that urban dwellers made up a much higher proportion of the population. This change in population structure would have dramatic effects; for instance, a shift from 2.5% of the population living in a town to 10% would mean a trebling of the market for agricultural produce (Grigg 1982, 104-5). To take advantage of the shift in the distribution of the population, an increase in productivity is therefore necessary and this, allied to the other factors mentioned above, increases the pressure to specialise in producing the most efficient or, in other words, saleable crop.

Bicanie has argued that there are three basic patterns of change in agriculture, which are similar to those that took place in southern Britain. If the arguments presented by Bicanie are valid, then this similarity would argue that the agricultural population of the province increased absolutely for a short period, then held its level in real terms but decreased as a proportion of the population as a whole, before, quite quickly (by the 3rd century) declining absolutely and relatively. This finding would again indicate that not only was the market for agricultural produce increasing, but so, also, was the need for

efficiency.

It should not be supposed, however, that the rate of success of this process of change from a tribal non-monied economy to a commercially based one is similar in every case, especially since "the Romans found the Brigantes tough resisters" (Hawkes 1973, 65). An analagous case might be that of the Karimojong (Dyson-Hudson 1970), who were a mainly pastoral African tribe, perhaps not too dissimilar in organisation and economy to the Brigantes, and who for at least 70 years resisted the kind of social and economic changes usually brought about by the introduction of money. Dyson-Hudson suggested that this was the result of both ecological factors and a completely different conception of worth held by the tribe, whereby cattle were seen as the only medium of value.

Finley (1973, 144) has made the point that we should beware of interpreting the Roman economy, with its mints, mines, and taxes, as a smaller version of our own. He would argue that there was a qualitative difference in the economy which was overwhelmingly based upon agricultural self-sufficiency and controlled, in part, by social ties and the perverse economies of slavery.

We do know, however, that the invasion of the North-West brought with it a broader technological base, but it is not clear whether the new products represent a structural change in the organisation of production. The new crafts were encouraged by the military as Greene (1979) has argued; and Loughlin (1977) has demonstrated that Dalesware pottery, as well as being distributed under a normal market system, had another wider distribution governed by the needs of the military. The new products seem to represent a change in production with these new mechanisms of distribution and, most importantly, the advent of many more specialist producers. This difference between the Brigantian and the Roman economy is crucial, as a greater degree of specialisation brings with it a need to provide other new types of social organisation.

Gall and Saxe (1977) together with Hassan (1979) have put forward a systems theory explanation for the growth of states and empires. Their papers argue that with increasing specialisation in production, perhaps brought about by the introduction of money and new economic pressures, comes increased or improved methods of organisation and distribution. As we have stated above, nearly all the elements of Roman civilisation, such as roads, armies, administration, and law, have had the effect of making specialisation both possible and easier.

Equally without this kind of view there would seem to be no obvious reason why the incorporation of Brigantian territory into the Empire should require the introduction of new social classes. Therefore they must be, in part, integral to the functioning of the Empire's wider economic and social system.

Indeed if we accept Hingley's argument (1982, 26-7) that, in the main, the primary function of the early forts and vici was to facilitate the

flow of taxes and goods to the core of the Empire, then there is no need for more classes than there are grades of administrators and soldiers. Yet these grades bring with them, or are accompanied by, a range of professions and classes that are a measure of the number of specialisations present within the Empire and new to the North-West. The rising number of different types of political posts also shows that society was now administered in larger groups and controlled by new types of specialised administrators at new levels (Johnson, 1982).

In summary the redistributive Brigantian economy can be seen as one of a general type of primitive economy wherein:

"A man can best satisfy the drive for power and prestige by attaching himself to a group of adherents and where competition ... is not specifically economic, but social."

(Forde and Douglas 1967, 21).

The Romano-British economy, was of an 'intermediate' type where social relations are personal but economic ones sometimes impersonal and a degree of serving for gain occurs (Forde and Douglas 1967, 27). It was a society that brought with it new classes and forms of administrative systems essential to the new specialist agricultural producer. It also brought currency that was essential to this new economic order.

## THE LATER ECONOMY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Hingley (1982) model of administered tribal markets breaks down in the 3rd and 4th centuries to be replaced in southern Britain by what can be seen as a more mature and fully monied economy. Salway (1981, 266) wrote that "variations in visible prosperity from town to town in the third century may go back to the politics of particular cities ... in the recent Civil wars". This variation could also be due to the fact that with the advent of a more organic and natural economy, new towns and indigenous large scale production centres sprang up that were distributed with reference to population density, rather than tribal boundaries, so that the large towns now had to withstand competition. To an extent Imperial powers attempted to control and influence this process, and the inflation symptomatic of it, either through prices and incomes edicts like that of Diocletian or through tax exemptions (Lewis and Reinhold 1955, 353).

The shift towards a more monied economy resulted in a loosening of social ties from the days of Pliny, when the wealthy were acting as patrons, to those of Diocletian, when the emperor was acting against "the excesses perpetrated by persons of unlimited and frenzied avarice" (Lewis and Reinhold 1955, 464).

Despite the cautions of Finley (1973) and later authors (Garnsey et al 1983) there is a constant theme, as typified by Juvenal's Satires, of the 'nouveau riche' upsetting the social order and failing to act as patrons, despite their wealth

accumulated through trade.

Roman merchants, like medieval ones (Platt 1978) appear to have sought, however, upon gaining wealth, to become landowners. White (1967) argued that "land was the sign of a gentleman" and that trade was then within the hands of a class aspiring to land-ownership. In short, "the drive to acquire wealth was not translated into a drive to create capital ... the prevailing mentality was acquisitive but not productive" (Finley 1973, 144).

The traders who made use of the vicus booth (Phase 3) and the trading houses uncovered to the north (Jones and Grealey 1974, 33) were, despite their ability to form trading companies (Cleere 1982, 125), not a powerful section of society. It is likely that they operated in a way similar to that of later pre-capitalist traders in that costs and risks were shared by trading groups and speculation was limited to sharp dealing rather than wise investment (Geertz 1975). The change towards a more balanced and fully monetised economy that took place in south Britain in the 3rd and 4th centuries (Frere 1978, 331) may not have taken place in the North-West as, unlike in the south, coin finds are rare from rural sites and the quantity of mass-produced goods appears to be less.

In the south there developed a hierarchy of settlement consisting of colonae, municipia, civitas capitals, towns, small towns, villas, villages, hamlets and isolated farms, whereas in the North-West, the landscape remained one of forts, vici and farms (Higham 1980, 41-2). In fact the only difference in the North-West is that the farms became more numerous.

It is clear that the economy was capable in other areas of financing widespread changes in techniques, expansion into new lands and specialisation. Indeed peasant farmers are some ten times more productive per man hour than hunter-gatherers (Grigg 1982, table 8), and presumably specialised capital intensive villas are more productive than peasant farms. At first sight modern British farming appears to be twenty times more productive than peasant farming, but when fuel, transport and other costs are added (that is, the "system's buffer"), it is hardly

more productive than hunting and gathering (ibid 78-80). The massive modern expenditure on these ancillary works serves in itself to support innumerable people active within the buffer system. Peasant farmers do themselves, however, tend to be inefficient, in that in many societies, when it becomes clear that the peasant will always, by virtue of the social structure, remain a peasant, any cost-savings or new productive techniques are used by the peasant to give him more spare time, rather than more cash (Sahlins 1972, 88). Later Roman society was certainly highly structured and peasants became tied to the land so that one could expect an overall decrease in productivity and a failure to exploit new efficient techniques, and this would have the effect of limiting future Imperial plans.

## CONCLUSION

Initial increased productivity in Britain was encouraged by the conquest and this demand was met by the technique of specialisation which itself needed the markets, administration, roads and safety brought by the Romans. The new productivity was then largely absorbed by the new structures themselves, structures which we see as constituting the Empire. The difference was that society had changed in breadth and variety, population had grown and economic activity boomed. Why this did not happen in the North-West and in large areas of sparsely settled land in Wales is unclear. It may be that the Roman economy itself was exhausted, or that the native economy was, in the manner of the Karimojong, intractable. The choice between these options is simple and stark; either the western Brigantes were impossible to romanise, or the lack of development was due to the "stresses inherent at the margins of an Empire" (Barrett 1983, 427).

This failure to develop had a dramatic effect on the role of the civilian settlement and relegated it to the position of a frontier town typical of so many settlements that bordered the Empire. The evolution of the Roman economy can be seen as being in keeping with general evolutionary growth phenomena, displaying increasing specialisation and complexity through time until it was succeeded by a new approach in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries AD.