

THE ROLE OF THE FRONTIER SETTLEMENT AT MANCHESTER

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INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter outlined a view of the changes in economic and social life brought about by the Roman conquest. It also identified a new problem, namely, what was the role of the civilian settlement around the fort. This, the final chapter, will attempt to present an explanation and description of the role of the first town at Manchester.

Bartel (1980) has published an analysis of current thinking on the broad classes of policies practised by conquering societies. It is clear from this work and the discussion above that the broad policy of the conquering Romans was one of "acculturation". The policy of the Empire was to convert new lands into Roman territory and to install new methods of production and trade. From the work of Athens (1977) discussed above we can see that this may well have been necessary to avoid problems of economic and social instability within the Empire as a whole. As part of the acculturation process, during the attempt to convert Brigantia into a Roman province, the fort at Manchester was established. Associated with this fort was a civilian town or vicus, that was probably founded both to provide facilities for the troops and to act as an administrative centre.

Such vici are commonly found throughout the North-West, although they vary in sizes and importance. They often lacked many of the amenities, such as fora and baths, found in larger Roman towns, but despite the fields often found around them (Jones and Walker 1983) they had a range of production processes and buildings out of keeping with a village. In the 4th century BC, Xenophon noted the difference between towns where a number of trades were practised by one man and those where one man had one trade. This observation was recalled in the 1960s when Hensel (1969) coined the term "incipient towns" to describe towns that were distinguishable from villages by their range of trades. It is the range of trades and industries that mark out North-West

vici from neighbouring rural sites.

Vici settlements associated with forts, occurred throughout the fringes of the Empire and often formed the core of later larger towns established as an area was fully integrated within the Empire (Wacher 1969, 23-4). As the Empire ceased to expand, the vici became the "valid urban form" (Salway 1980) in those areas such as the North-West, which did not become fully acculturated.

Vici in these areas were supported not so much by agricultural and industrial specialisation, but by the wealth of the garrisons they were situated near to, and the needs of the administration. Normal towns in the south, however, had a marketing function apparently much wider than that of the vici. This is to be expected because as agriculture becomes more specialised more institutions are needed in which to exchange goods. In fact, as has been pointed out above, a linear increase in farming specialisation can require a geometric increase in organisation and institutions. Agricultural and industrial specialisation would be impossible without markets or methods of redistribution, because those who concentrated on one product would fail to obtain other goods essential to life.

The relationship between towns and agriculture in Roman Britain has been discussed frequently by many authors. Collingwood and Myers (1975, 198) saw the town as "economically parasitic on the countryside"; whereas Todd (1980, 197) saw a thriving countryside as a crucial prerequisite for town growth. Hodder and Millet (1980, 75) concluded that "the status of towns" was a crucial factor affecting villa distribution; in other words, towns encouraged growth in the countryside. It is probably impossible to separate which of the two developments came first, as both urban markets and rural specialisation depend upon each other. Individual towns could, however, be encouraged by Imperial edicts; indeed, according to Hingley (1982), administered markets were set up in

Britain. From Pizos in Thrace comes an inscription of AD 202 recording that:

"Our lords the greatest and most godlike emperors ... have given orders that the existing market centres shall be made more outstanding and that new centres shall be created. That these centres might be established on a more permanent basis I (that is the Governor) persuaded prominent citizens from the surrounding villages to settle ... in them".
(Johnson et al 1961, 224)

The inscription goes on to record that the settlers would have immunity from taxes, frontier and transport duties and that the soldiers would help maintain some buildings.

However, despite the possibility of deliberate encouragement it is known that the countryside and industry in the North-West did not become acculturated or metamorphosed. This meant that the vici in our area did not develop into permanent towns but remained islands in a sea of dispersed settlement.

The vici in the North-West display, as a group, unusual assumed characteristics. They are often abandoned with a fort, as at Melandra (Glossop), where the fort and the vicus were abandoned cAD 120. Vici can, however, grow into large regional centres after forts are abandoned; for example Carlise, despite the loss of a fort, grew into a 30ha settlement (Daniels 1978).

Vici were often supported by an administrative role, as well as a direct role as a market for the auxiliary. For instance Corbridge, which was a bridgehead fort in the 2nd century, became a depot and finally a market town with a relatively small military presence (Daniels 1978). Vici were also marketing and production centres, as is shown by the inscriptions from Bowness and Benwell, and the range of industrial processes found within such sites as Vindolanda Vicus II and Manchester.

Vindolanda as published (Birley 1977), shows the variability in the occurrence of vici in that sometimes forts do, sometimes do not, have associated civil settlements. From cAD 95 to cAD 125 the site was occupied by a 3.24ha fort which appears not to have had an associated vicus. From cAD 163 to cAD 245 a 1.8ha stone fort was accompanied by an unusual vicus or possibly a military annex (Salway 1965). Two other characteristics of these settlements or vici appear to be generally accepted as axiomatic. Firstly, if vici are supported by a garrison's basic needs, the larger the garrison the larger the vicus. Secondly, the greater the settlement's administrative and marketing role, the larger the vicus will be.

A THEORY OF THE ROLE OF THE VICI

At first sight many of the above observations are contradictory, but they hold within them two main themes that can be derived from the arguments presented in previous chapters.

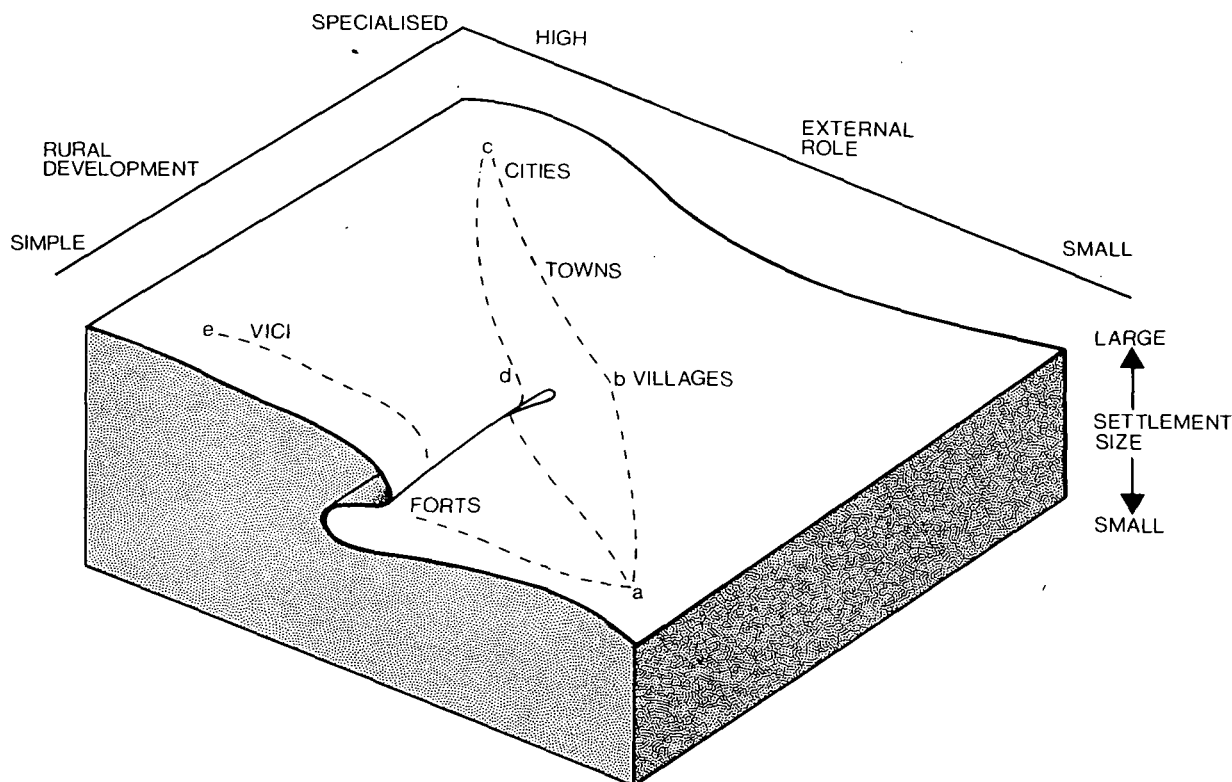
- (a) The size of a town is a function of the degree of specialisation within the countryside, so that, simply, the greater the specialisation, the greater the need for a number of activities and so the greater the town.
- (b) The size of a town is a function of its relationship to the "administrative" system of the society. That is the system in all its roles, including military, which supports specialisation. So that, for instance, a town which functioned as a regional capital as well as a market is larger than one that is solely a market. In other words a garrison is part of the administrative system that supports specialisation. This garrison, placed with strategy in mind and not markets, is paid and that pay attracts merchants. Therefore, logically, a town that has both a market role and a garrison should be larger than a town that has only one of these attributes.

Fig 12.1 illustrates the relationship between these factors. One axis, theme (a), records the degree of rural development, or specialisation, and the other the importance of the site for the "administrative" or buffer system of society, theme (b). The vertical axis records the size of the site. If we imagine that the fortune of a particular settlement is represented by a path across the upper surface of the diagram, we can now see how these factors are thought to impinge on each other. The path A to E shows how settlement grows from nothing to a vicus, because it is supported by the wealth and role of the fort which can be measured indirectly by the size of the garrison. The step is represented by a fold because it is empirically known that in some areas forts of similar size and thus presumably of similar function may or may not have had vici. By E we have a large vicus or canabae supported solely by the fort in a simple rural society practising non-specialised mixed subsistence farming. If we remove the fort then the path would be E to A and incorporate the sudden demise of the vicus at the fold, but this decline occurs at a lower level of garrison, as the system tries to maintain stability or, rather, displays inertia.

Path A-B-C can be seen as the gradual evolution of a town as rural complexity and its role increases; whereas that of C-B-A reflects its gradual demise. C-D-A can be seen as the collapse of towns after cAD 410 due to a collapse of both factors. The fact is that as far as the Manchester vicus is concerned, new roles did not arise and neither did the countryside develop new forms of production. The town was without a stable market so that when the garrison left it collapsed.

If the town possessed few or no elements of the wider "administrative" structure and yet had a thriving market, then the settlement size would be reflected in a move from C, in the upper right hand corner of the diagram, indicating the the town would be smaller.

If the Imperial institutions (those elements of social organisation that Hassan (1979) sees as the



MODEL OF VICUS DEVELOPMENT

Fig 12.1

mechanism that supports specialisation) collapsed, then there would be no market towns and consequently no markets or related institutions.

Any number of paths are possible on this surface, depending upon the interplay of factors. The diagram is merely a visual model of how influences affected the vici, but from it predictions could be sought and, perhaps, tested. For instance, a legionary vexillation fortress should, on the basis of this diagram, have a vicus because it is economically viable provided allowance is made for a time delay. From a settlement's point of view this prediction could be tested archaeologically.

The figure is not scaled, in that, although we can intuitively derive the relationships between town size, rural settlement and the sites military or administrative role, trying to say how much specialisation will give rise to a site of a particular size is fraught with problems. The figure itself is of a type known as a cusp catastrophe. It is derived from catastrophe theory and is presented in an attempt to make explicit what is thought to controlled the development of the settlement at Manchester.

In summary then, the Empire practised a specialised form of agriculture which was only possible by virtue of its administrative, military and urban organisation. The Roman system was not stable, however, and was forced to grow to survive. There were, nevertheless, factors that limited its

eventual growth so that along its fringes towns like Manchester sprang up as a result of the "administrative" or buffer system, but not as a result of agricultural demands. These incipient towns existed under the conditions outlined in fig 12.1.

The pattern of behaviour is, I believe, typical of frontier settlements that have a symbiotic relationship to their administrative system. Both the models and theories outlined here could also, through a more ambitious use of catastrophe theory, perhaps be applied to many other towns in many periods.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

This volume has hopefully charted how the frontier settlement at Manchester came about, and it has shown that early Manchester is the result of the succession of one society over another.

In considering the results of the excavation we have presented the view that Roman society expanded into the area by virtue of its specialist production methods. Expansion can be seen as a good thing from an evolutionary viewpoint, as it increased the overall number of individuals supported on the same land. Development did not take place in the North-West to the scale it did in the south, and this meant that the early town of Manchester existed within the set of special circumstances illustrated in fig 12.1.

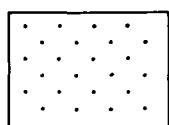
Why the Empire failed to incorporate the area into its system to the same extent as it did in the south remains unknown, and is a key research issue in archaeology's attempt to understand the working of such complex societies as the Empire. The question remains why were the western Brigantes left as "essentially redundant individuals" (Isbell 1978, 305) in terms of the Empire as a whole.

From its foundation, Manchester survived through the Roman period until the early parts of the 5th century, by which time the western part of the Empire had broken up. In the south and east of the country successive incursions of Saxons took place and a new relationship with the environment was established. In the North-West new Celtic kingdoms emerged. Why the collapse took place is not known but the recent synergetic theory (Mende and

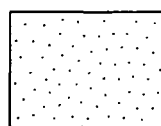
Peschel 1981) suggests that the behaviour of complex systems, like the Empire, lends itself towards a form of "fossilisation". This fossilisation gives birth to a new phenomenon whereby the system can absorb many general shocks, but the close inter-relationships between many of the most important aspects of the system means that small changes in parameters, that are crucial to the main controlling mechanism of the system, can have cataclysmic results. We do not know what those perturbations were and why the Western Empire disappeared. We do know, however, that evolving out of it was a new British society.

An understanding of complex and complicated societies remains a prime goal of archaeology for it is hoped that through such an understanding a greater insight into our own society and its future may be achieved.

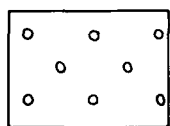
KEY TO PLANS AND SECTIONS



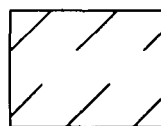
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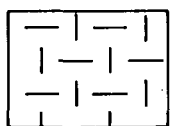
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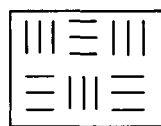
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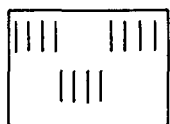
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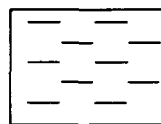
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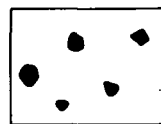
CHARCOAL



SANDSTONE



STONE SCATTER



STAKE HOLES

Fig 13.1

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