

ASPECTS OF ROMAN IMPERIALISM AND ITS IMPACT

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INTRODUCTION

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This volume has concentrated, so far, upon the military history of Roman Manchester and the direct evidence from excavations.

Early Manchester, with its frontier fort and associated civilian settlement, is a type of site found throughout the fringes of the Roman Empire. Roman forts and their *vici* occur in such diverse countries as Germany, Turkey, Russia and Libya.

The final section of this work will seek to review the role played by such sites within the Empire as a whole. In order to do this, some idea of how the Empire functioned both within the North-West and as a whole is needed. However, as no overall consensus about how the Empire grew and developed exists, because of the complexity of the problem and because of the lack of agreed methodological and theoretical techniques, we present here a general view of the reasons for the growth of Roman imperialism.

We are forced by the nature of the evidence, to rely upon deductive reasoning, and have selected a theoretical viewpoint that we feel both lends new insight into the development of Manchester, and has the virtue of being in keeping with other larger evolutionary theories (Renfrew et al 1982).

A THEORETICAL APPROACH

Subsistence Theory

M Morris

Simple societies, such as Bushmen or Aborigines, which gain their food through hunting and gathering, operate within a complex or mature environment composed of a wide variety of plant and animal species interacting in a complex manner. Such systems are characterised by low energy turnover, relative stability (Gall and Saxe

1977, 257), and a tendency to exploit a wide variety of resources (Putman and Wratten 1984, 352-5).

In contrast, complex agricultural systems such as that of the Romans, represent the maintenance by man of a localised artificial environment, which is deliberately kept at an early or simple stage of succession. Unlike the mature system exploited by the hunter gatherer, this simplified ecosystem is characterised by high levels of energy turnover, in the form of cereal crops, and flocks (Gall and Saxe 1977, 257-9; Athens 1977). For human society, therefore, agriculture may be seen as an adaptive strategy which allows greater energy return and higher levels of population than are possible from a natural mature ecosystem.

The artificial and simple ecosystem, maintained by agriculture, with its early stages of succession, tends naturally to diversify and become more complex as agricultural crops are forced to fight against the inroads of weeds and more natural vegetation, so that the maintenance of a simple stage of succession is fraught with problems. These include the exhaustion of soil nutrients, the danger of pests, crop diseases, and climatic fluctuation (Athens 1977). Unless these factors are controlled or compensated for, energy or food production within an agricultural society will be unstable, and there will be the real threat of starvation and, ultimately, the collapse of that society (Isbell 1978, 304-6). Thus, while the potential of crop production is great, in practice it is relatively difficult, and agricultural societies are forced to adopt strategies to solve the problems posed by trying to maintain an artificial system.

One strategy is increasing specialisation. Agricultural production may become more specialised in an attempt to gain the maximum food return from the available resources (Gall and Saxe 1977, 260-2). In addition, centralised administration may develop to articulate the increasingly complex and diverse parts of society

(Segraves 1982, 296).

A second and related strategy is expansion. Stephen Athens (1977, 376) writes;

"If production is locally unpredictable, due to climatic and ecosystem perturbations, territorial extension of the cultural system would minimise the effect of a drop in productivity in any one area. In this way, energy flow to the system as a whole would remain stable".

In other words, the problems inherent in maintaining an artificially simple ecosystem by the use of agriculture are reduced by incorporating new and different zones of production into the system (Gall and Saxe 1977, 262-3). In this respect, expansion may be seen as the search for stability by a particular society.

Thirdly, complex agricultural societies may be made more robust by utilising energy producers who are not fully integrated into the dominant social and economic structures (Gall and Saxe 1977, 262-3). Such producers have been described by Isbell (1978, 305) as "essentially redundant individuals whose numbers can be increased or decreased with minimum information loss to the system". An example of this strategy may be the extraction of surplus from largely self sufficient peasant producers.

Subsistence Strategy in the Roman Empire

The three themes outlined above can be observed in the organisation of food production and supply in the Roman Empire, and are directly relevant to a greater understanding of the province of Britannia.

Specialisation can be observed in the dominant system of agrarian production, which was based on the villa and the urban centre (Percival 1976, 145). The villa was structured so as to produce a surplus which was funnelled into and through the town as tax or in exchange for consumer products (ibid 156-7). In general, although capable of utilising technical innovation (Applebaum 1972, 237-40), the villa system was typified by organisational efficiency in effectively exploiting traditional techniques (Percival 1976, 106-17). Most villas concentrated on producing particular crops or livestock (ibid 163), but even those that carried out a variety of activities were organised along specialist, and in comparison to peasant production, efficient lines. The villa buildings had rectangular and often complex plans with divisions between livestock and humans, storage and living areas. The estate population was also generally hierarchically separated into specialist groups (Applebaum 1972, 104). Significantly the villa system was resilient in the face of uncertain conditions, typically having granaries (Jones, A H M 1966, 368), and capital reserves to fall back on (Jones, A H M 1973, 774). In addition the owners were often based in the relatively secure urban areas.

The surplus produced on the land was redistributed

within Roman society to feed, protect, and buffer key elements of the organisational system. For example, the towns and cities, representing integral mechanisms in the administration and control within the Empire system, were well buffered against subsistence crisis. Rome and Constantinople had elaborate and safeguarded supply networks (Johnson 1936, 460-6). The military was also supplied on a regular basis from far afield (Jones, A H M 1966, 312). Many towns and cities maintained both state and private granaries (Jones, A H M 1973, 811, 1333) which could be used in times of famine. On occasion the state intervened directly to re-establish its organisational system by the emergency redistribution of resources (Broughton 1938, 745; Collingwood 1937, 112-13). This is well illustrated by the large scale shipping of corn from Britain to supply the population of damaged cities of the Rhineland in the mid 4th century (Ammianus Marcellinus XVII 2; Zosimus II, 5).

The effect of territorial expansion was usually an increase in potential productive capacity and consequently greater resistance to crisis. The villa/town system of production and redistribution was introduced to a greater or lesser extent into conquered territory (Sjoberg 1960, 70-1). The Romans attempted to minimise their investment in new lands by not changing more of a subject society than was necessary for their purposes. In Britain for example, much of the existing tribal system was retained (Hingley 1982, 30) in a social transformation which was in many ways a synthesis between two cultures (Frere 1978, 342). The likely return on investment was also taken into account; it is probable that initially the Roman interest in Britain was focussed on "that part of the island south of the Fosse Way, socially and economically susceptible to Romanisation" (Cuncliff 1979, 363).

A broad agrarian reorganisation did however take place in the province (Bowen 1969), partly with the encouragement of capital investment from Rome (Applebaum 1972, 223; Dio LXII 2). As the Roman influence expanded north and west, the villa system became widespread (Frere 1978, 301-2). For example in south Somerset and north Dorset during the 1st and 2nd centuries, 55% of identified new settlements on existing farmlands were villas or associated tenant farms, while the newly formed areas all appear to be associated with the villa estates (Leech 1982, 232).

Other writers have stressed different motives for expansion into Britain. Salmon (1974, 9-15) emphasises defence and trade considerations, and these were undoubtedly important factors. In contrast Hingley (1982) suggests that the Roman objectives was to extract the maximum amount of energy, raw materials and manpower from the province. He presents a persuasive model which explains the administrative and economic system imposed purely in terms of parasitical efficiency. It has been argued above, however, that integration with the Roman system was more interactive than Hingley suggests. What in the provincial sense may be seen as exploitation can be viewed in the wider context as redistribution; and as far as the system as a whole was concerned,

the nett energy balance of an individual component of the Empire was irrelevant.

The third aspect under discussion relates to the non-integrated sector of the Roman state system. Much of the farming in the Empire was carried out by independent peasants and small farmers (Rivet 1969, 180); the level of integration varied significantly within and between areas. Substantial differences in wealth occurred (Jones, A H M 1973, 808-10), and there was a degree of overlap between the successful peasant farm and the small villa. In addition it is possible to contrast the high numbers of peasant producers in the densely urbanised province of Egypt (ibid 779-80, map V opp 1069) with the self-sufficient tribesmen of northern England who had only minimal contact with the state and market system (see Chapters 10-12). What nearly all agrarian producers had in common however was that they were forced to produce a surplus for redistribution by the state. In contrast to the villa/town system, the peasant economy required little or no investment to set up or maintain. In addition, while such populations were locally vulnerable to poor harvest or other crises, in overall terms they were resilient (ibid 1041) and therefore a reliable source of income. Consequently the peasantry was generally poorly buffered in comparison to key elements of the state (Gall and

Saxe 1977, 262-3). The extraction of resources from the peasantry by the state took priority even when they were starving (Jones, A H M 1973, 811). Nevertheless their economic importance was recognised, and there are several instances where rural conditions were relieved by the distribution of food from urban granaries (Jones, A H M 1973, 795, 810-11, 1333; and c.f. Isbell 1978, 308).

It should be emphasised that the buffering of the key element of the Roman system tended to have 'knock on' benefits for the less well integrated sections of society, particularly in terms of internal and external security and protection. This encouraged higher and more stable overall population levels than would have been possible in a less complex society.

Conclusion

Critical to the success of the Roman Empire in seeking subsistence stability were the strategies of specialisation, expansion, and the retention of the less well integrated peasant sector. The importance of each of these aspects has been briefly outlined above. In the following chapters the social and economic impact of the Romans in the province of Britannia and in the North-West in particular is analysed within the interpretive framework.