

THE NATURE OF ROMAN IMPERIALISM

Romanization

Well over half a century ago, Francis Haverfield (1912) discussed Romanization and defined it both in terms of historical process and material changes in native culture. These alterations were shown to have been brought about by the Roman presence and resulted in native culture more closely resembling that of Rome. Here, in attempting to evaluate these processes again, I intend to build on the foundations laid by Haverfield, but with the considerable advantage of the larger data-base for the understanding of changes in the material culture in the Empire provided by recent archaeological research. In summary, Haverfield stated: 'First, Romanization in general extinguished the distinction between Roman and provincial . . . Secondly, it did not everywhere and at once destroy all traces of tribal or national sentiments or fashions' (1912, 18). This conclusion parallels the idea, developed by Brendel (1979), that 'Roman' culture was by definition a cosmopolitan fusion of influences from diverse origins rather than purely the native culture of Rome itself. We must thus see Romanization as a process of dialectical change, rather than the influence of one 'pure' culture upon others. Roman culture interacted with native cultures to produce the synthesis that we call Romanized. These transformations, and their products, are worthy of examination not simply for themselves, but also as an instance of social, economic and cultural change of wider significance. Of considerable interest are the processes of change and their context within the societies involved. The intensity of archaeological research in Britain makes it a useful province within which to examine these issues.

Britain was finally conquered by Claudius in AD 43 at a comparatively late stage in the growth of the Roman Empire, after the Mediterranean littoral, together with most of western Europe, had already been incorporated. The aim of this book is to examine the integration of Britain into the Empire, thereby exploring more wide-ranging ideas about Romanization. In this it is recognized that Britain is not a typical province, if indeed such existed, but it is equally contended that she should not be seen as exceptional unless sound reasons are found to support such an idea.

Understanding the process of Romanization requires an appreciation of the different societies involved in the interaction which produced the province of Britain. It is

essential from the outset to realize that Romanization was a two-way process of acculturation: it was the interaction of two cultures, such that information and traits passed between them (Slofstra 1983). As such its products were not simply a result of change initiated by the Romans. It is also important to understand that in her expansion, Rome dealt with peoples, not territories. The processes of cultural change which we call Romanization reflect the influences brought to bear by the Roman élite on the different native peoples with whom they were dealing. Thus to understand Romanization we need to have a view of the protagonists and the systems within which each operated. In this chapter the essence of the Roman system as it affected Britain is introduced, before the societies of Iron Age Britain are evaluated in chapter 2.

Roman expansion

Any understanding of the nature of Roman imperialism demands first, an evaluation within a broad historical perspective of the motivation for Roman expansion, and secondly, a brief assessment of the social structure which acquired that Empire. Such an assessment need not be developed in detail here since it has been the subject of a considerable literature elsewhere (cf. Blagg and Millett in press). Nevertheless, without this perspective Roman Britain cannot be properly understood, since it did not exist in isolation as a separate entity, but was a small, perhaps insignificant part of a much larger Empire and thus of a broader historical process.

This process began with the expansion of the City of Rome from a local centre, first to hegemony over much of Italy, then to dominion over former Punic territories, and thus to domination of the Aegean. The more far-flung areas of Gaul and central Europe were absorbed before the eventual incorporation of Britain. The process of expansion was neither steady nor planned and some of the Aegean areas incorporated during the Republic were only brought under direct Roman government after failed attempts at indirect rule under the threat of Roman might (Crawford 1978, 62–73). Many areas were incorporated as a result of annexation by individual Roman generals using the excuse of defence as a cover for aggression. Their motivation lay in the necessity to gain victories, which were vital within the competitive social and political system of Rome. Such victories gave or reinforced personal political status and helped to establish a position in the internal power struggles at Rome. The most extreme and celebrated example of this process was Caesar's conquest of Gaul, which brought with it Rome's first direct, if abortive, intervention in Britain. The system also allowed those involved in successful wars to benefit financially from the booty of conquest (Finley 1973, 56) and the subsequent exploitation of the provinces. The scale of this economic benefit seems in some cases to have been enormous (Crawford 1978, 172ff), although it is almost impossible to evaluate its overall scale or impact.

The impetus for expansion was not therefore a simple one derived from a systematic expansionist design. It was rather a complex of motives, the roots of which lay in the highly competitive system of power within Roman society; a system where instability was endemic and power concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy. Moreover, the personal political and economic fortunes of this group were closely bound up with their success in the military sphere. Military service was essential within the social structure

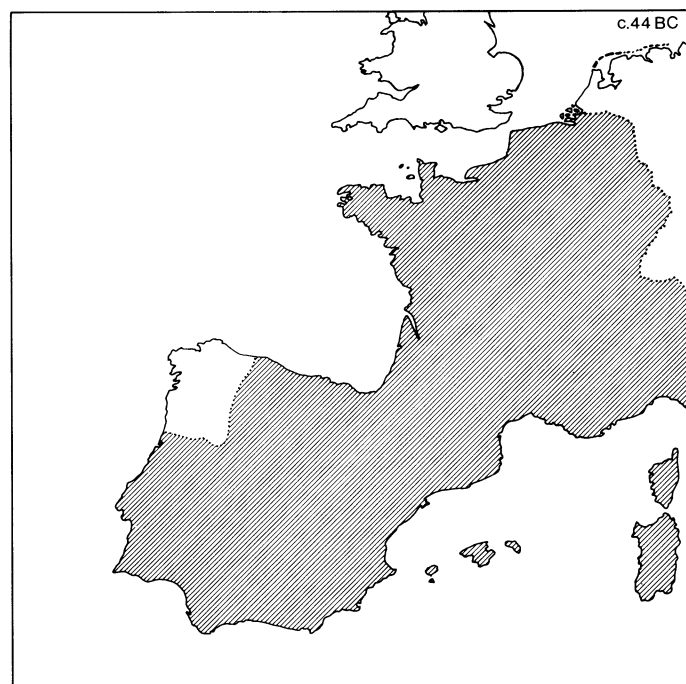
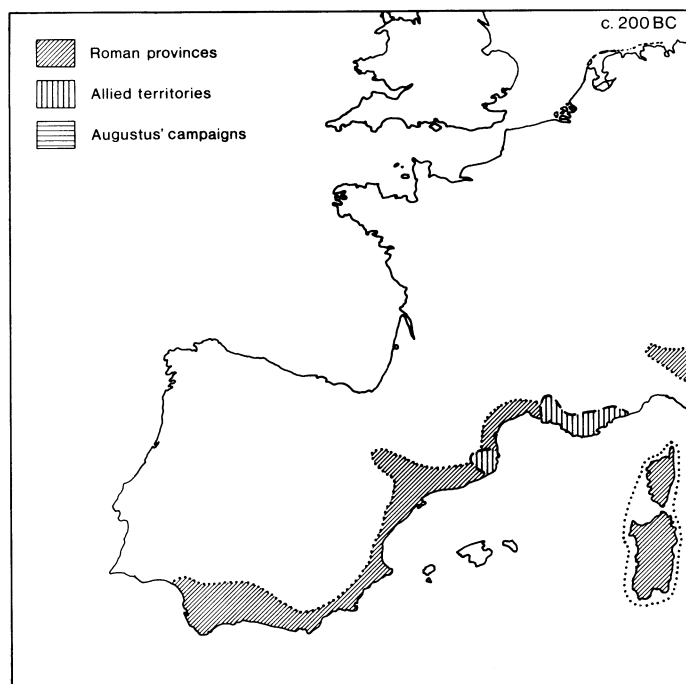
of the Roman élite and a *sine qua non* for political advancement (Birley 1981b, 4–35). Indeed, it seems clear that the whole ethos of Roman society and its economic system came to be reliant upon wars of conquest, so that Rome became a truly militaristic society (Hopkins 1978, 1–96).

Power in society was held by a wealthy élite whose status and economic success were defined by land ownership (Finley 1973; Hopkins 1978). This group needed to expend vast resources on public displays of its prestige and on the maintenance of the client networks which exemplified its power base. The élite also increasingly relied upon conquest to bring them both wealth and the slaves who underpinned production on their rural estates and in Rome itself.

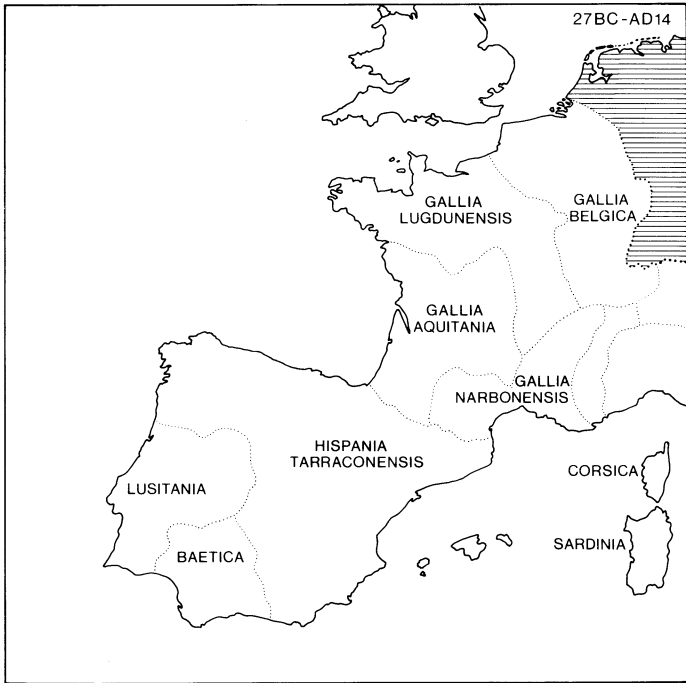
Imperialism and economic exploitation

As Hopkins (1978) has pointed out, this influx of wealth led to the evolution of a society in the centre of the Empire which was uniquely reliant upon territorial expansion. This is not to say that the motivation for expansion was economic but simply that, whilst successful, 'the ever increasing need for warfare in the acquisition of personal riches, glory and clients amongst a competitive élite . . . was bound to produce an Empire' (Garnsey and Whittaker 1978, 5). This is a vital point because, as Badian has stressed, the deliberately expansionist interpretation of Roman imperialism is difficult to substantiate (1968). This remains true despite Harris' argument that personal wealth accumulation was a motive in expansion (1979). Although there is undoubted truth in Harris' view, we must not overlook the important distinction between the drive behind the expansion of the Empire and a primarily economic motivation. Whilst the élite in Rome undoubtedly benefited from the expansion, which fed upon itself, neither the administrative structures, nor the rather piecemeal and halting development of territorial acquisition, are consistent with a systematic and conscious expansion motivated by economic gain. The nature of the exploitation within the conquered territories has important consequences for our understanding of the processes of expansion itself.

The mode of exploitation of the overseas territories can be seen as developing through three broad stages up to the period of Britain's incorporation. First, at the height of the Republic, it was apparently largely *ad hoc* and indirect. According to Badian (1968), after the initial prizes from conquest had been taken, a deeply embedded set of social conventions acted as a disincentive to economic excesses for the personal enrichment of the élite. This reflects a tradition whereby the conqueror became the patron and protector of the conquered. This attitude is also related to that which became normal in Roman society, where to be respectable wealth could not be based on anything but the land (Finley 1973, 41–3). This initial phase was followed by one of less restrained exploitation, although this was not organized systematically, but was rather the result of disorganized and perhaps haphazard individual opportunism. There is little doubt that tax farmers (*publicani*) and provincial administrators milked the overseas territories very heavily. The scale of individual exploitation of provincial office became fundamental to the fortunes amassed by the members of the élite who were involved in provincial government. Indeed, it was said of provincial



1 The growth and provincial organization of the Western Roman Empire up to AD 14.



governors in the first century BC that they had to make three fortunes from the exploitation of their province, one to recoup their election expenses, the second to bribe the jury at their trial for misgovernment and the third to provide for them thereafter (Crawford 1978, 172). Despite the scale of this exploitation, there was no apparent drive to organize it systematically or to develop the provinces in a way that might have stimulated economic growth. Individual enterprise thus seems not to have resulted in the economic development of the provinces. Indeed if we are to believe some sources, the scale of the expropriations may have been so heavy as to be severely detrimental to the territories.

The third phase of exploitation follows the Augustan settlement which reformed the organization of the provinces (Miller 1935, 400ff) and limited the excesses of provincial exploitation by the élite for their own benefit. The rôle of the *publicani* was curtailed and most taxation was now collected, and thus presumably exploited, locally and through the municipalities (Jones 1974; Mann 1985a, 21). Since the cities were essentially the preserve of the native élites (Garnsey and Saller 1987), the exploitation of taxation was circumscribed by self-regulation and the benefits of tax farming may be assumed to have accrued locally. This seems to have acted as an indirect stimulus to economic growth and civic developments at the provincial rather than the imperial level (Millett in press (b)). The shift in administrative system from Republic to Empire may thus have diminished the centrally exploitative rôle of the imperial system, with consequent benefits for the provinces. The resultant economic disadvantages for Italy may have as much to do with her relative decline in wealth as the effects of her economic dependence on slaves (Hopkins 1978).

Alongside these administrative processes, there was undoubtedly much exploitation through the trade between Rome and the provinces, as shown for instance by the trade in amphora-borne commodities like wine (Carandini and Panella 1981, fig. 29.1). Some of this was exchange demonstrably embedded within the social and political system: the supply of grain to Rome as a prop to the political stability of the City is an outstanding example. The supply of goods like olive oil and wine to the frontier armies also represents a similar large-scale system dependent on motives more complex than free trade. In other cases, like the extraordinary movements of bulk commodities through the western Mediterranean, we suspect a combination of economically motivated trade with exchange resulting from a more complex pattern of land ownership and social obligation. These patterns develop in such a way as to demonstrate that the system was not simply a function of unbridled economic forces. These movements of wealth were thus part of the social and political web which connected the heartland to the provinces in a series of complementary flows (Hopkins 1980; table 6.2).

This background makes it difficult to equate the Roman Empire with any simple world system of exploitation like those recently discussed by Hingley (1981) and Roskams (1986). Such models, derived from Wallerstein's view of a World System, require us to view the Empire as a system which was designed to facilitate economic domination, through flows of both taxes and trade which benefited the centre. This system, it is suggested, was structured administratively and economically to optimize the productive benefit of the Empire to Rome.

This model has some limited use in relation to the late Republic when, as we have seen, there was a period of unbridled although unsystematic exploitation of the conquered territories. Such, however, was not the norm in the Roman world and was significantly curtailed by the Augustan administrative system, which was a re-establishment of the traditional values of the Republic. It is perhaps significant that this period of excessive individualistic enterprise does not seem to have resulted in the growth of the provincial economies that might be envisaged in Wallerstein's model (Roskams 1986).

When one examines the flows of taxes and trade during the Principate, the movement within the Empire seems to have been outward to the provinces rather than inwards to Italy. In this the army acted as the principal mechanism, with the core provinces (excluding Italy, which was largely exempt from taxation) (Miller 1935, 430) providing the bulk of the cash for their pay, which represented the largest single item of state expenditure. This outflow of funds from the core towards the periphery was to some extent mitigated primarily by trade, which returned some of the cash to the core (Hopkins 1980) and perhaps also by the removal of raw materials, particularly bullion, from the provinces (table 6.2). This was of course combined with the once-for-all expropriations of native wealth at the time of conquest, although this is unlikely to have outweighed the longer-term flows in the opposite direction. The nature of the pattern as presently understood cannot be interpreted in terms of any system of world domination based on a conscious economic motivation; such a system is an anachronism based on contemporary views of modern, capitalist imperialism.

Roman imperialism had much more to do with personal power struggles within the oligarchy at the core and this has major ramifications for the structure which comprises the Empire. Its system was far less centralized in administration than is often supposed (Garnsey and Saller 1987), and in essence relied on circumscribed local autonomy with the cities as the fundamental unit. This worked in the interests of the Roman élite, who were not burdened with the expense of directly administering the lands which they controlled. This tradition developed from both desire and necessity in the Republic (Badian 1968). The necessities were, first, that the Roman élite was too small to directly control each incorporated society, and secondly, the scale of territory was so large that the logistics of direct government were probably impossible, even if conceivable, in a pre-industrial era (Millar 1982). Government through the cities was comparatively easy to apply in the territories of the Eastern Empire and the Mediterranean littoral, where there was some tradition of municipal organization going back to the foundation of cities in the period of Greek and Punic colonization in the seventh–sixth centuries BC. In areas without a tradition of *poleis*-type urbanism, the pre-existing tribes were treated as *civitates*, or city states, by Rome. This gave them the same functions within the administration as the Greek cities. Whilst it is clear that they differed both in their territorial extent and in the details of their organization, the Roman system was sufficiently robust to have incorporated them quite satisfactorily into the same administrative framework (Mann 1965). This system meant that Rome governed through the established local élites, whether formerly magistrates or tribal aristocrats, who consequently identified their interests with those of Rome.

The net effect of this was an early imperial system of loosely decentralized administration which allowed overall control by Rome while leaving the low-level administration in the hands of the traditional aristocracies. This enabled most areas brought under Roman control to be run without a significant military presence and with a light burden on the conquerors. The corollary of this low input was that the material gain to Rome was negligible by the standards of modern imperialism. Rome's Empire was thus an empire of individual and collective political prestige for the conquerors rather than one of continuing economic benefit. Furthermore, its character was that of a federation of diverse peoples under Rome, rather than a monolithic and uniformly centralized block.

We can draw these strands together to see Roman imperialism as an extension of the competitive structure of the élite in Rome itself. Expansion was not planned in relation to any grand strategy, and was executed piecemeal. Similarly, the advantages accruing from this expansion were not systematically organized and their exploitation was circumscribed because of the moral and ethical constraints of Roman society. These constraints did break down in the late Republic, but the Augustan administrative system deflected any emergence of systematic economic imperialism. This was an indirect result of the formalization of a system of provincial administration which left power in the hands of the local peoples through their own municipalities, thereby removing any necessity for a large central bureaucracy. This administrative structure defused any tendency towards a centralized imperial economy. It did, however, establish within the Empire both a flow of wealth between the core and periphery, and the potential for economic growth in the municipalities which controlled local taxation. In this way the devices of administrative convenience within the militaristic system had become the dominant structuring principles of the Empire when Britain came within her orbit.