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### ROMANO-BRITISH PEOPLE AND THE LANGUAGE OF SOCIOLOGY

*Summary: Despite the vast amount of work and the huge database for Roman Britain, the people of the province remain very difficult to discern. There are many reasons for this, but one is that we have not yet learned to look behind the disjecta membra of archaeology in order to understand the structure and nature of society, and how the Roman Conquest may have impacted upon it. The language of sociology offers scope for thought, especially when combined with examples drawn from historically documented societies in later periods. Whilst models drawn from the classical world are important, attention also needs to be focused on the local, and on the factors that determined the shape of people's lives and influenced their daily activities. Not all these are archaeologically detectable, nevertheless an appreciation of their existence is an important pre-requisite in attempting explanations of patterns in the data.*

*'The self image of some historians makes it appear as if they are concerned in their work exclusively with individuals without figurations, with people wholly independent of others. The self image of many sociologists makes it appear as if they are concerned exclusively with figurations without individuals, societies or 'systems' wholly independent of individual people. ... both approaches, and the self images underlying them, lead their practitioners astray. On closer examination we find that both disciplines are merely directing their attention to different strata or levels of one and the same historical process'. (Elias, *The Court Society*, Oxford 1983).*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25-30 years Romano-British archaeology has witnessed a huge increase in archived and published data to the extent that it becomes easy to lose sight of either the big picture, or more fundamental issues about what went on in the first half millennium AD (Cunliffe 1984, 176; James 2002, 35; Woolf 2004, 419). Amidst this plethora of research and publication Romanists have begun to enlarge their horizons and recognize ways in which their views of the past can be broadened. Whilst other disciplines cannot solve archaeological problems, they can sometimes offer useful insights into aspects of life under Roman occupation as well as issues of adaptation (Slofstra 1983; Bartel 1985; Bloemers 1990; Jones 1997; Grahame 1998; Alston 1999; Haynes 1999; Hurst 1999; Millett 1999; Barrett 2001; Hill 2001). Romanization continues to be a dominant theme with many discussions focusing on artefacts and architecture much as Haverfield was arguing nearly a century ago (1915). Whilst few would disagree with the idea that the spread of 'Roman' values, material culture and ways of doing things, infected the extremely diverse societies around the Mediterranean world and beyond from the third or second centuries BC on, some now believe that Romanization is an outdated concept and that scholars should focus on other questions such as what we mean by 'Roman culture', or how we measure identities (Freeman 1993; Woolf 1997; Laurence and Berry 1998; Mattingly 2004). To Reece, 'romanization' was never more than a superficial veneer (Reece 1988, 1-14).

In Roman Britain communities and individuals are difficult to see. Amongst the most widely studied is that of the Roman army, but here scholars have largely concentrated on categorizing artefacts and buildings because, with the exception of the Vindolanda archive, and to a much lesser extent, that from Carlisle, we simply lack the kind of records preserved elsewhere in the Empire. Closer attention is needed to understand the way in which intramural space was used in forts, especially those occupied for long periods. There is no question that forts were military installations, but they became rather more than that, and the sooner we start seeing them as settlements with similar basic needs as other non-military settlements, the better (Haynes 1999; James 2002, 39-40).

Using inscriptions on stone, such as altars and tombstones, it is also sometimes possible to see individuals in Roman Britain, but the lapidary data-base is very heavily biased towards military personnel whilst the civilian element is scarcely represented (Birley 1979, 14). A lot of this relates to men, much of the evidence for women being pretty uninformative, as Lindsay Allason-Jones has told us (Allason-Jones 1999), and any idea that we can attempt to calculate population numbers from the epigraphic database is fantasy. The evidence is too little, too lacking in detail, too one-sided and for many areas simply non-existent.

Most people were not commemorated in any shape or form and remain totally unknown to history. There is the occasional graffito or stamp on a surprisingly wide range of objects including brooches, rings, leather shoes, pottery vessels, and even querns, but the majority record personal names only preserving no other details. Very occasionally, as with some

writing tablets, we get a glimpse of humanity. Utterly delightful, if startling in its unexpectedness, is the birthday invitation in one of the Vindolanda texts, or the graphic request for more underpants (Bowman and Thomas 1994, nos. 291; 316; 343; 346).

The most obvious way to investigate people is through their burials, but the number found and investigated, let alone published, is not large as has been pointed out (Roberts and Cox 2003, 107-63). Skeletal remains undoubtedly have much to tell us about such matters as diet, disease and epidemiology not to mention other important questions such as the extent to which communities may have been reliant on small gene pools, or else were being infiltrated by immigrants.

To Birley, the reason why the people of Roman Britain are an unknown entity is very largely down to a lack of information from textual sources, especially concerning population size (Birley 1979, 13-14). The very documents that facilitate such penetrating insights into life elsewhere or in other periods, such as the letters of the younger Pliny, or the Pyrenean peasantry of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century (Le Roy Ladurie 1978) to quote just two examples, are simply not there, and in the eyes of some scholars this means that 'any generalizations' about Romano-British people 'will rightly be viewed with deep suspicion' (Birley *op. cit.*, 14).

This is an argument of despair leaving people consigned to generic entities – 'natives', 'villa owners', 'women', 'farmers', the 'urban population' and so on. People have become artefactualized, reduced to an amorphous mass in much the way Elias bemoans in the quotation at the head of this paper. Can we get beyond the artefacts and building foundations, and if so, how? Theoretical models offer little hope at present simply because the work required to produce them has not taken place. Indeed, the inability of archaeologists to develop a social theory, despite the growing links between it and sister disciplines, has been acknowledged on more than one occasion, as has the lack of linkage between data and explanation (Yoffee and Sherratt 1993, 8). This is particularly true of Romano-British archaeology which is guilty as charged of being obsessed with 'systems wholly independent of people', as Elias warns in the opening quotation. The need to link data and explanation is also a point reinforced by Barrett who argues the need to expand and change the direction of our thinking (2001, 141-2). Others have argued in similar fashion, but the challenges thrown down in terms of seeking ways to investigate the poor, communities or family groups for example, or of Cunliffe's plea for someone to 'open a window or two' and develop new conceptual models, have not been taken up (Cunliffe 1984; Hingley 1989, 1-12; Scott 1990, 953-6). As Hingley says with regard to much of the post-Haverfield and post-Collingwood and Myres generation of studies, 'each new synthesis on the history and archaeology of Roman Britain, or on the archaeology of any one aspect of the province represents, in effect, a new edition of the work it replaces' (*ibid.*, 2-3).

## SOCIOLOGY

The first sentences in a relatively recent volume of essays on sociology, includes the following: 'It is impossible to even begin to think about *people* without immediately encountering 'social divisions''. 'The categories we use, even those like 'older', 'female', 'fit', or 'white'...are actually sociological labels'. (Payne 2000, 1). Payne goes on to say that 'the origins of the definitions we use; the ways in which separation between one category and another have been created...all these are sociological. "Age', 'gender', 'health', 'ethnicity', and 'class' and so on are the 'social divisions' that shape society" (ibid.). Of course, much of the debate about these divisions applies to later industrial societies and is clearly inappropriate to the ancient world. Nevertheless, the point is clear. Sociology and archaeology deal with people and social structures and this, as Sherratt has observed, represents a significant convergence of interests (Sherratt 1992).

Some of the issues that arise are so well known that simply to state them might appear platitudinous. One such is the ageing process: childhood, adulthood, old age. According to the late Norbert Elias, one of the most significant sociological thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, everything that people do is pre-conditioned by attitudes, role models and circumstances in childhood, as well as the prevailing attitudes of the day and the people with whom they interact (Mennell and Goudsblom 1998, 65). Growing up is itself a process of socialisation, one that enables individuals to learn the norms that society accepts and during which a sense of identity is formed.

This process is always undertaken with other people who might include parents, extended family groups, siblings as well as others unrelated by blood. Thus, right from the outset a range of dependencies is formed. As individuals progress from infancy to childhood and through to adulthood and old age, the nature of the dependencies changes, some falling away to be replaced by others. They are, as it were, the mortar that binds people together and enables society to function. The issue of dependence is one that has occupied the thoughts of sociologists from the days of Marx and Durkheim onwards, but it is also one of the key underlying principles of Elias's work (Mennell and Goudsblom 1998, 39; Goudsblom 1977, 6-8).

Not all sociologists have subscribed to this view but Norbert Elias, whose work was based on a monumental study of civilized life and manners in medieval Europe, drew attention to the point that 'people' do not, indeed cannot, exist independently of others, but always act in relation to others. Individuals, he argued, may determine their own fate up to a point but this always has a wider social context. Recently, John Barrett has challenged this idea, maintaining that individuals are as much creators of the conditions in which they subsist as the group is (Barrett 2001, 148 *et seq.*).

Whilst not seeking to impose a sociological model on Romano-British archaeology, we need to remember that many individuals in Britain during, say, the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, were almost certainly a product of farmers working within a framework of custom and practice that had evolved over generations. That custom and practice will itself have been formed within a wider framework imposed partly by the constraints of topography, climate and soil capability, and partly by farmers' ability to exploit it within the limits of available technology.

The Romano-British farmer was not alone. He existed within a social framework, the community or group, a subject that has been at the heart of works by many sociologists and archaeologists, Tönnies, Marx and Childe, for example. One such framework was the tribe, but what do we mean and understand by this word? The conventional tribal picture we have for Britain is derived very largely from Ptolemy but this is hardly complete or definitive. Indeed, as we can see in the case of the changing political framework along the Rhine during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, it may well have been rather fluid, and there were probably many polities of which we have no knowledge whatsoever. Had it not been for the chance discovery of two inscriptions the entity known as the Carvetii would be wholly unknown.

The word 'community' is, in fact, a generic term that carries a wide variety of meanings and not all sociologists approve of it precisely because it is ambiguous. Some sociologists may dislike the word (Baumann 1996, 14 *et seq*; Payne 1994), but for archaeologists, whose datasets are somewhat different and certainly broader, community remains a useful term indicating, for example, any number of people engaged with one another on a face-to-face basis; people acting together in a coordinated way in the pursuit of shared goals; a number of people interacting with one another according to established patterns. It is easy to envisage early societies, perhaps nucleated settlements or those on a large private estate, the inhabitants of a *vicus*, in these terms, such communities acquiring a greater sense of three-dimensional reality in later periods for which there are surviving texts illustrating ways in which institutions such as hundredal moots or manorial courts worked.

## APPLICATIONS FOR ROMANO-BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGY

Such issues help to enlarge horizons and open up different ways of thinking about societies in Roman Britain. They lay stress on the idea that notwithstanding the military superiority of the Romans and their organisational abilities, the conquest and subsequent absorption of Mediterranean goods and practices was a complex process involving disruption to existing patterns of behaviour and structure. There was a need for adjustment and adaptation in both the short and long term by local communities. Not everything about the conquest can be viewed in positive terms. Clearly, some facets of Mediterranean 'culture' were welcomed, as witness the rapid adoption across much of the country of new ceramic types; mortaria

and amphorae are good examples with implications for diet and food preparation practices; rectilinear multi-roomed architectural forms as opposed to the ubiquitous round-house is another, but negative consequences must also have flowed. Amongst those we can envisage are stresses and attitudinal differences within kinship groups and the creation of social divisions or the emergence of new identities. In the south-east many people may have identified themselves with Roman-ness very early on, but elsewhere, as in Brigantian territory and despite its early client status, this idea took time to become established. In some areas it may never have been accepted.

In the case of kinship groups, unlike 21<sup>st</sup> century western ideas of what constitutes a family, the work of social anthropologists teaches us that in present day third-world and ancient societies such groups often symbolise much more complex social webs (Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1967, 1-85). This was also the case in ancient times. When Tacitus described Germanic society he laid particular emphasis on the role of kin groups and, whilst acknowledging the importance of biological relationships between children and parents, he also noted that kinship ties were drawn more widely than is the case today (Tacitus, *Germania* 18-20). The arrival of the Romans is unlikely to have been accomplished without creating stresses within many kin groups, perhaps creating social divisions leading to a greater reliance on smaller, perhaps household, groupings. The events surrounding Cartimandua or Boudica are simply two that we know about (Tacitus, *Annals* XIV, 31, 33; *Histories* III, 45), but how many lesser incidents were there, and how were they dealt with? Could the community have been galvanized into action on such occasions if not by kings or queens, or the courts, the significance of which in Germany is again mentioned by Tacitus (*Germania* 11-12).

Kin groups have another and wider relevance to society as Charles-Edwards argued in an important paper published over thirty years ago in respect of land divisions (Charles-Edwards 1972). He argued that in Anglo-Saxon England the widespread use of the unit of land measurement known as the hide, may be a reflection of an older method of land assessment. The hide is defined in one of the law codes promulgated by Ine, king of the West Saxons (AD 688-726). It was land required by a freeman to sustain his immediate conjugal family, and the amount held, together with the manner of its acquisition, determined the relationship of the holder to taxes and services or renders due to his lord (Charles-Edwards 1972; 1979). However, historians have also argued that the creation and imposition of the hide was beyond the administrative resources that Ine had at his disposal, in which case we may legitimately infer that that some of the clauses in Ine's law codes are codified versions of earlier, perhaps even archaic, practices. Charles-Edwards concluded that these could be of Germanic and Celtic origin (Charles-Edwards 1972, 5). In short, the system of land divisions and the nature of kindreds in the seventh and eighth centuries AD may have something to tell us about society in Roman Britain, if not the pre-Roman Iron Age.

Another issue for Roman Britain concerns relationships between individuals. Doubtless many relationships were at the level of friendship and in Anglo-Saxon England, as in Ireland or Iron Age Germany, it could be bought by the giving of gifts, a slave, a cow, jewellery and so on. Friendship was a valued asset. If, during Anglo-Saxon times, someone successfully sought to acquire a plot of land, his position became subservient to the vendor who effectively became his 'lord' thereby making him liable for renders and or other obligations (Campbell 2000, 228-34; Charles-Edwards 1979). It was this relationship, that of lord and bondsman, rather than that of the kin, that was dominant.

We have no specific evidence for the basis of land holdings or the lord and bondsman relationships in Roman Britain, but a structure comparable with that elsewhere in the Empire whereby power rested with those that controlled property and the means of production, legal processes, or whose occupation gave them access to those who could pull strings, may be envisaged for much of the province (Garnsey and Saller 1996, 109 *et seq.*). The bulk of the population were at the level of peasantry, that is to say farmers, freedmen, tenants - *coloni* in other words, and slaves. This too is an issue, as Taylor has pointed out (Taylor 2005). He has commented that the definition of slavery tends to be very narrowly drawn noting that 'archaeologists have a strong tendency to minimize evidence ... concerning slaves' (Taylor 2005, 229). This is possible, but being tied whether to land or lord is a form of slavery widely acknowledged by historians of the post-Roman and medieval centuries. The earliest direct references to slaves in Britain, leaving Strabo aside, is in the law codes of Ethelbert of Kent perhaps dating to AD 602-3 (Whitelock 1955, 357 *et seq.*), and that of the servile or unfree peasant performing labour services and rendering dues in kind to the lord is a consistent feature of post-Roman centuries.

Theoretically, the legal distinction between free and unfree may appear to be clear cut, as seems to be the case in the Anglo-Saxon law codes, but in practice it might be different and the two may not have been distinguishable. Officials working in Carolingia frequently became confused about distinctions between the free and unfree because of a confused terminology drawn from a variety of Roman and Germanic traditions (Bloch 1967, 255-74). In other words legal distinctions and terminologies could vary from area to area depending entirely on local traditions.

If there was a danger of confusion and uncertainty amongst contemporaries in the ancient world, there is also a danger that the uncritical application of sociological concepts to ancient society may be equally confusing. Garnsey and Saller, acknowledging the value of sociology in history, have also specifically warned against the imposition of Marxist-derived 'classes' on to ancient society recommending that the processes by which society operated is a more profitable approach (Garnsey and Saller 1996, 109). During the Roman Empire although a legal distinction was made between the *coloni* – free men tied to the land, and *servi*, - slaves who were the property of their masters, the former was not necessarily disobliged from the same burdens of daily life as afflicted the servile. As the late Professor

Rodney Hilton, quoting Marc Bloch, noted, 'in social life is there any more elusive notion than the free will of the small man' (quoted in Hilton 1975, 61).

Increasingly, regionalism is becoming an acknowledged factor in Romano-British society (Mattingly 2004), but it was also strongly apparent in medieval farming practice where it is testified in a variety of ways, the extent of local estates, for example, or the importance of local custom and practice, the proximity of local markets or the local preferences for arable or livestock. Non-subsistence pursuits also feature prominently such as heavily wooded areas which might favour charcoal burning, or areas where there were local supplies of iron ore or good quality clays for metalworking or potting. In Roman Britain we can also see this in pottery distributions, occurrences of Romano-Celtic temples, the use of altars for dedicatory purposes and building traditions. However, it must also apply to agrarian regimes which were heavily influenced by topography, drainage regimes, soil potential and micro-climate, the differences, benefits and limitations of which would have been keenly appreciated by farmers at the time. Imperial estates probably exploited particular resources in certain regions such as Salisbury Plain, but regional variation is also apparent in the distributions of types of farms and architectural forms employed (Roberts and Wrathmell 2002). The complexity and increasing intensification of land-use patterns extending from deep in prehistory, and especially from the late Iron Age to Middle Saxon times has become ever more apparent in recent years (Hall and Coles 1994; Bradley *et al.* 1994; Everson *et al.* 1991; Fowler 2002), and the intensification of farming practice under Roman occupation has been well demonstrated, as can be seen by the development of the fens around Stonea, Cambridgeshire, or the proliferation of villa estates especially on the limestone belt, or the numbers of small single farmsteads on the Cumbrian Plain (Fowler 2002; Jones and Walker 1983).

Many of the factors outlined above provide fertile ground for sociologists. It is important source material relevant to a consideration of social structures and the ability of indigenous societies to adapt to changing circumstances. They include:

- a long prehistory of land exploitation leading to an acute awareness of land capability and resource potential locally.
- Intensification of land-use.
- The emergence of new settlement types and sizes, including Imperial and private estates, towns and *vici* operating alongside small farming units.
- Greater social differentiation eg farmers, non-food producers, free and unfree, administrators, military and civilian.
- Enhanced importance of existing, and the emergence of new specialist producer areas including lead working (eg the Mendips), ironworking (eg

the Weald); pottery (eg Mancetter-Hartshill); salt production (eg the Lincolnshire fens).

- New metalled roads.
- Variations in availability to imported exotic goods.
- Increasing population.
- An increasing degree of literacy.
- Unwritten 'lore', orally transmitted codes of behaviour.
- Stresses caused by either natural factors (climate) or the demands of incomers such as the Romans.

A key factor is the strength and depth of local knowledge, and custom and practice. Time and again in medieval and later sources we are reminded of the strength of tradition and the essential conservatism of the peasantry. In Ireland, where documentary sources are more plentiful for a society untouched by the Romans, kings and their people, Byrne wrote, 'were rooted in the soil', they were tied by bonds of kinship and their lives were regulated in some degrees by traditions. Here, 'tribal lore and custom was no vague body of lore dependent on the memory of the oldest men. It was jealously preserved in druidical schools by a professional class' (Byrne 2001, 30).

That is not to say that custom and practice could not change. It could and did, especially at the level of leadership. Allegiances at tribal level might be fluid, as is apparent on the Rhine frontier, but also in Ireland and England with the emergence of the church and the increasing power and authority of kings. But, Elias's point, that dependencies, or figurations as he called it, are in a state of constant flux, goes beyond this. What he meant was the network of ties that bind individuals together from babyhood to old age, and the social linkages that lubricate and facilitate daily life, subsistence strategies, exchange mechanisms, ambitions and emotions (Mennell and Goudsblom 1998, 39; Goudsblom 1977, 6-8). Figurations, change through time, a process known as sociogenesis. Using the graphic analogy of a dance to illustrate his point, Elias noted that whether a minuet, a tango or a rock 'n roll jive, the dance consists of a number of interdependent moves (Elias 2000, 482-3). Without the dependence there is no dance. Society is much the same. Individuals exist and operate on a day-to-day basis but always in relation to others and guided by their upbringing, but the social structures (the type of dance), may be subject to change brought about by a variety of both internal factors, such as strong locally-based personalities, external pressures such as invasion and wars, economic and other opportunities. These, in turn, can lead to different alliances with stronger sections emerging as dominant entities

ultimately ending in the formation of states (Elias 2000, 481-3). The factors that might come into play in changing figurations below the leadership or political level are, therefore, more subtle, and not necessarily detectable archaeologically. Some of the interdependencies that may be appropriate to Roman Britain are set out in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

**Factors contributing to interdependencies in pre-medieval communities**

Family	kin groups
	blood ties
	marriage ties
	inheritance
	occupation
Land management	Woodland
	livestock
	ploughing
	harvest
	boundary maintenance
	reclamation
Leadership	basis of loyalties
	communal service
	the host
	defence construction
	dues

	taxes, tithes, tribute
Social values	ritual and royal/priestly authority
	council/husting/moot
	communal action
	scale of criminality – minor theft to murder
Social differentiation	specialist and non-specialist
	free and unfree

Certainly, Elias's definitions (1974, xv-xx) of what constitutes simpler, undifferentiated societies, factors such as the idea that the 'division of labour' concept was undeveloped, or the tendency to act communally in matters of livestock management or defence, for example, merit more detailed consideration (McCarthy 2005).

## DISCUSSION

With these in mind it becomes clear that in the remote province of Britain, society must have been very diverse and complex with many attributes reflecting local factors whilst others were imposed by, or absorbed from 'incomers'. Table 1 may be taken as a broad framework within which much of society functioned and gives particular emphasis to local factors. Unless we were to posit major population movements resulting from the Roman advance, something for which there is currently no archaeological or literary evidence, it is fair to suggest that some attitudes, customs and practices of that society were the product of many generations beforehand. The complication is that these practices were overlaid by a range of others imposed from outside. Amongst these can be cited governance administered through a bureaucracy vested in the largely autonomous town councils; an enhanced but locally variable ethnic mix made up of military and administrative personnel and traders drawn from many parts of the Empire; authority vested in the military who were particularly prominent in the north after the first century AD; a society of patronage manifest in the towns and villas of Kent, Sussex, Hertfordshire or Gloucestershire, for

example, but less so in Lancashire, Cumbria or Gwynedd; new or improved technologies (eg masonry); the development of coinage as an exchange mechanism; opportunities for economic development and for personal advancement. One of the consequences of this, and one facilitated by the road-building programme, might have been greater movement of personnel, ideas, information and goods around the province.

Archaeology provides ample evidence of these points but the language, and the nature of the questions adopted by sociologists and sister disciplines, allow us to build linkages between data and explanation, to enquire further as to how Romano-British society was made up, and what its constituent elements comprised? What driving forces lay behind the changes and adjustments? What was the pace of change, and to what extent did it impact on subsequent settlement and land-use patterns, or the emergence of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The idea that we can take lessons from the social sciences is, of course, nothing new. The underlying social-anthropological trend of theoretical archaeology in the last forty years has been to use other disciplines extensively to provide insights into past behaviour. Clearly, whilst it would be unwise to take the lessons of Marx and others and project them back to Romano-British populations, nevertheless we can examine the language of sociologists, and look at the nature of their questions in order to gain an alternative view as to how we might explain events and patterns in the archaeological record. Why not? Historians have been doing just that for decades as witness those in the *Annales* school including, but not only, Marc Bloch, Henri Pirenne and Fernand Braudel, all of whom worked closely with sociologists in the early part of the twentieth century.

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