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**The urbanization of the North-Western provinces of the Roman Empire :
a juridical and functional approach to town life in Roman Gaul,
Germania inferior and Britain**

Pellegrino, F.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The study of the urbanization of the North-Western provinces

In 1926 Mikhael Rostovtzeff made the following observation concerning research into processes of urbanization in the early Roman empire:

No less important was the work of the emperors in urbanizing the Empire, that is to say, the Roman provinces of East and West. Many volumes have been written on the municipal organization of the Empire, but none of them has dealt with this problem of urbanization, by which is meant the development of new cities out of former tribes, villages, temples, and so forth. We urgently need a complete list of cities in various provinces, arranged according to the chronological order of their existence as cities”.¹

In the more than ninety years which have passed since the appearance of the first edition of Rostovtzeff's *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, our knowledge of individual cities in the Roman empire has dramatically improved.² In addition, some attempts have been undertaken to synthesize the findings of studies dealing with individual cities into a larger picture.³ In the case of the North-Western provinces, however, existing synthetic studies operate with a purely administrative definition of “city” which results in a very empty “urban” landscape that does not do justice to the multi-layered settlement systems of these areas.

One of the aims of this study is to provide a comprehensive reconstruction of the urban systems of Roman Gaul, Germania Inferior and Roman Britain based on multiple definitions of “city” or “town” some of which make it possible to incorporate into the analysis “town-like” settlements which lacked the juridical status of “city”.⁴

In Britain, France, and all the other modern countries this study is involved with (e.g. *Switzerland*, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands) an extensive secondary literature on various types of settlement exists. In line with the general tendency of historical and archaeological studies many early studies of Roman urbanism dealt with cities which were either *coloniae* or *municipia*. During the second half of the twentieth century other types of settlement, such as *civitas* capitals, forts, fortresses and various types of “secondary settlements” were recognized as fundamental nodes of economic, political and religious life and closely scrutinized. However, very few studies took care to study all types of settlements in the contexts in which they developed or the network through which they were connected. An important aim of this thesis is to fill this gap by combining the extensive literature dealing

¹ Rostovtzeff 1926: 81; 2nd ed. 1957: 83.

² Cf. Auroousseau 1924: 445: “It is an astonishing fact that the greatest interest has centered upon the individual town. Geography is so deeply concerned with the distribution of things that an interest in town distribution seems to be an obvious consideration”.

³ Bowman and Wilson 2011; Hanson 2016.

⁴ This wide-ranging approach to Roman “urbanism” is a general feature of the ERC-funded project “An empire of 2000 cities: urban networks and economic integration in the Roman Empire” which provides the framework for this book.

with individual “urban” settlements with the vast amount of literature which has been focused on “secondary settlements” or rural areas.⁵

While the immense quantity of the secondary literature which has been accumulating during the past 150 years makes it difficult to achieve a comprehensive reconstruction of settlements systems which comprises all agglomerations which displayed at least some “urban” features, this thesis also seeks to push the study of Roman “urbanism” further by trying to account for the shapes of the regional and provincial settlement systems of the North-West provinces. It does so by adopting a variety of perspectives, ranging from diachronic to synchronic and from juridical to functional and relational.

The diachronic perspective takes centre stage in chapters 2 and 3. The most important questions which will be explored in these chapters is “How did the settlement system in the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire develop?”, and “How and why did the Romans modify the existing settlement systems of various parts of North-West Europe after their incorporation in the empire?”. In chapter 2, the object of study will be the pre-Roman landscape. It will be argued that the history of settlement systems certainly had an impact not only on urban morphologies but also on spatial configurations and functional relationships which can be observed in later periods. In other words, ‘history mattered’.

Further pursuing this diachronic line of inquiry, chapter 3 discusses the history of the integration of the north-western provinces into the Roman Empire and the way the Romans (possibly influenced by local elites) framed the landscape in a way that was convenient for administrative and fiscal purposes. As is generally known, one of the effects of the Roman conquest of North-West Europe was the introduction of a clear distinction between “self-governing cities” and “subordinate settlements”.⁶ Against this background, the following questions may be asked: What impact did the Roman conquest have on the continuity of centres? How do we explain that particular settlements were elevated to self-governing status while other existing settlements were subordinated to these administrative centres? Were Roman decisions regarding the juridical status of settlements taken haphazardly or can at least some basic patterns be discerned? Since archaeological data often do not suffice to trace the bestowal of particular statuses, literary and epigraphic sources will loom larger in my discussion of the self-governing cities of Roman Gaul, Germania Inferior and Britain than in any other chapter.

Maintaining the administrative and juridical focus of the second and third chapters, chapter 4 seeks to deepen our understanding of the impact of settlement status on levels of

⁵ In principle only those “secondary” settlements that were permanently inhabited by people who were involved in secondary or tertiary activities will be taken into account, but in some of the regional studies that will be undertaken in the final chapters the focus will be widened to include a wider range of settlements. This approach is rooted in the conviction that a genuine understanding of a particular settlement system can only be achieved by looking at relationships among all constituent elements of that system.

⁶ In other parts of the empire we occasionally encounter self-governing communities which lacked a recognizably “urban” centre. In the areas covered by this thesis the *civitas* capital of the Frisiavones remains undetected, possibly because it was very small and equipped with very few public buildings (Derks 1998: 70).

monumentality. In what types of settlements do we find prestigious edifices, such as spectacle buildings, *fora*, aqueducts or bath complexes? Is it possible to detect a relationship between the various juridical statuses Roman settlements might have and the array of public buildings which we find in these places? The evidence relating to levels of monumentality makes it possible to draw some conclusions regarding the role of cities as ‘vitrines de *romanité*’ and to assess the influence of concepts such as *urbanitas* and *humanitas* on the morphology of *civitas*-capitals. This chapter fits well within the tradition established by Italian, French, and British scholarship, which underlines the importance *civitas* capitals not only as “centres of power” for dominating and controlling people and resources but as convenient stages for the “manipulation of power” by local elites.

While the general approach used in chapters 2, 3 and 4 focuses on the self-governing cities of the north-western provinces, chapters 5 and 6 widen the study of “urbanism” in these areas by calling attention to the existence of large numbers of settlements which presented a variety of “urban” features, including high levels of monumentality, without ever receiving official urban status. Where were these monumentalized “town-like” places located, and why do we find them only in certain parts of North-West Europe? How did these centres relate to the landscape, to each other and to their hinterlands? And which role, or roles, did “urban centres” of various types play for the rural habitations surrounding them?

One of the greatest challenges of my research was the need to combine macro-scale with micro-scale analysis. A mere observation of large-scale patterns and trends would not suffice to understand the development of the settlement system in the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire. The regional topographical, environmental, socio-economical and historical conditions are too important not to be taken into considerations. Since an exhaustive study of all regional settlement systems of the north-western provinces would require tens of volumes, chapter 5 and 6 will explore these issues by presenting a series of regional case studies. In each case study, the settlement system will be superimposed onto the historic physiognomy of regions and their topography. In line with the relational approach which informs the thesis as a whole the aim is not to describe the individual “urban” settlements, however defined, but rather to understand their roles in the context of the settlement system of entire regions. The complexities and differences that the Western provinces display in terms of the shape, character, and nature of regional settlement hierarchies will be the focus of this chapter.

As will be demonstrated in chapters 5 and 6, adopting a functional and relational approach to “urbanness” has the effect of blurring the neat distinction between “urban” and “rural” which informs many existing studies dealing with the Roman empire. This is not to suggest that the “self-governing cities” which will be studied in chapters 2, 3 and 4 are meaningless objects of inquiry. There can be no doubt, for instance, that settlements which were cities in a juridical sense generally were more monumentalized than other types of agglomerations. Yet it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that studies which focus exclusively on those settlements which were “urban” from an administrative point of view not only provide a very partial picture of “urbanness” in the north-western provinces, thereby making it impossible to achieve a functional understanding of the settlement systems of these parts of the Roman empire.