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

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CONCLUSIONS

This work has investigated the development of urbanism in the North-Western provinces and examined the nature, characteristics and shapes that settlement systems could take during the first 250 years of the imperial period. Its purpose is to contribute to the debate on urbanization as a result of, and as a driving force behind, the changes brought by Roman imperialism and of the internal, socio-economic and political processes that existed within indigenous societies which triggered the process of settlement nucleation. No existing publication examines this cluster of problems from the large-scale perspective adopted in this thesis.

In order to arrive at a more or less reliable reconstruction of urban patterns and settlement patterns large amounts of sources have been consulted, including literary texts, epigraphic corpora, monographs concerning monuments and architectural buildings, archaeological reports and publications focusing on individual towns, regions, or a particular type of settlements (e.g. colonies, secondary agglomerations, vici or villas). To prepare the ground for an analysis of the urban configurations of and settlement systems of the first-to-third centuries AD, an updated review and discussion was given of the transition from pre-Roman to Roman times and of the process of political integration of the annexed provinces. The most important conclusion which emerged from this survey was that these processes were far from uniform across the huge study area covered by my investigations. On the basis of this assessment it was decided to combine a macro-scale approach with at least some micro-scale analyses. The mere observation of large-scale patterns – however interesting they may be – would have obscured the important role that micro-regional physiography, topography, history, socio-economic and political aspects played in the development and evolution of settlement patterns.

The principal aim of this work was to reconstruct the "urban systems" of the north-western provinces of the Roman empire and to explain why they looked the way they did. What, at first sight, may appear to be a relatively simple task is actually very complicated. First of all, before we can even begin to investigate urban systems, we have to define what the word "urban" means. In this thesis a three-fold definition was employed, meaning that a settlement could be characterized as "urban" when they met at least *one* of the following conditions: 1. they enjoyed a certain degree of administrative autonomy, 2. they had the appearance of a town (for example, they were relatively extensive - i.e. larger than 10ha - and had traces of permanent occupation), 3. they fulfilled "urban" or "central-place" functions (i.e. they provided a number of services and activities to the population living in the city and in its territory, such as administration, religious services, commercial functions etc.).

If we were to focus exclusively on the first criterion, we would only consider those settlements that enjoyed some levels of self-governance (i.e. "self-governing cities"). In order to reconstruct and analyse the urban hierarchies of the study area from this angle, epigraphic corpora as well as a vast amount of bibliography - mostly written by French, German, and Italian scholars - were consulted in order to establish the validity of juridical statuses which have been ascribed to various types of agglomerations. This task was complicated by the fact that often claims advanced by previous scholars were not substantiated by any material evidence. After a critical assessment of the epigraphic evidence, it was decided to tackle this

topic from a provincial perspective. Part of the justification for this approach stems from the fact that the moment at which various provinces were incorporated within the Empire appears to have had a strong impact on the legal statuses of the cities in these provinces. For example, in Narbonensis, the Caesarean/Augustan policy of granting settlements the status of honorary colonies meant that this province had a much larger number of these settlements than other provinces. Military considerations and geography were major factors in the establishment of Roman veteran colonies. Settling groups of retired soldiers was seen as an effective way of preventing or quelling revolts. For this reason, such colonies are to be found primarily in proximity to a frontier, or in strategic points within the transport system which had a fundamental importance in respect to military supplies.

If we use an exclusively juridical definition of "cities", the "urban" systems of the north-western provinces was composed of very few settlements: no more than 84 cities in Gaul, 5 in Germania Inferior, and 21 in Britain. As a general rule, these were the most monumentalized places and some of the earliest to be monumentalized. Their role as '*vitrines de romanité'* is suggested by their early development. Their size, their geographical distribution and their public monuments (many of which were erected at an early date) reflect their initial role as administrative centres (which sometimes faded away with the passing of time – as was probably the case for the cities of southern Aquitania). Their monumentality also shows they were important 'theatres' where the local elite and the Roman authorities displayed their wealth, influence, and power.

However, as Bekker-Nielsen observed almost 30 years ago, the "official cities" of Roman Gaul and Britain were often separated by very large distances. This implies not only that many of these cities controlled very extensive territories, but also that a large proportion of the "rural" population must have lived outside the areas from which these administrative centres could be reached within two or three hours. If the "urban" systems of the north-western provinces only relied on these few centres, we would have to conclude that these provinces had completely dysfunctional market-systems in terms of the needs of the vast majority of the rural population and that there must have been very little economic integration at a regional level. Thus, while an analysis of "urban" hierarchies in the north-western provinces from a purely juridical perspective certainly provides interesting insights into processes of political integration and municipalization, such an approach provides us only with a partial glimpse of "urbanism" and cannot result in a convincing interpretation of the settlement systems of these provinces as a whole.

In order to overcome the limitations of a purely juridical approach, "town-like" secondary agglomerations (definition 2) and other places that fulfilled "urban" functions (definition 3) must be included into the picture. Against this background chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis present large amounts of data relating to the size of "town-like" settlements which are likely to have performed at least some "urban" functions and to the presence of monumental buildings in these "secondary" settlements, on the assumption that the existence of monumental buildings in agglomerations which were not "official cities" tells us something about the functions which such settlements performed for the inhabitants of the surrounding areas.

Using this wide-ranging approach more than 500 "town-like" settlements and minor central places could be identified. In addition, evidence for the presence of more than 1,000 monumental buildings or other "urban" features (such as street grids) was collected. In 400 cases the sizes of these "town-like" settlements or central places could be established with a reasonable degree of confidence. Based on this large amount of data it proved possible to identify several factors that appear to have had a huge role in the development of settlement systems. These factors include a. The influence of the *limes*; b. The settlement strategy of the Roman authorities, which encouraged the new semi-autonomous centres and their elites to provide local communities with public areas and buildings where they could fulfill their newly acquired rights and obligations and where loyalty to Rome could be advertised; c. Military considerations, ranging from the foundation of veteran colonies to host the surplus of soldiers after the end of the civil wars to a conscious policy aimed at strengthening the Roman grip on a potentially hostile environment; d. The impact of supply routes (e.g. military supply lines with cities being separated by a distance which could be covered in a single day); e. The presence of natural resources such as mines or quarries that facilitated the accumulation of wealth which could be invested in the construction of opulent public buildings or private dwellings; f. The availability or non-availability of good agricultural land; g. The existence of pre-Roman (including Greek) settlements; g. Access and control of roads and waterways (i.e. road junctions, waterway crossings, transportation bottlenecks such as a mountain passes etc.). Generally speaking, the more factors interacted with each other, the denser the network of the settlement could become.

As has already been explained, the heterogeneity of the provinces covered by this thesis would have made a mere macroscopic approach unduly superficial and would have made it impossible to explain reconstructed patterns of "urbanism" and settlement. Therefore a small series of regional "urban systems" were subjected to closer analysis. In at least some cases the spatial distribution of various types of central places which can be observed in Roman times appears to have continued pre-Roman patterns, strongly suggesting that we are dealing with a form of "path dependence".

The pre-Roman central places that have been identified in certain areas (e.g. in central and north-west Gaul and in Britain) often were far more than simple "villages"[775]. In the existing literature the power that certain pre-Roman communities were able to establish over very extensive territories and the efficient systems through which they controlled and exploited these territories are often overlooked. A close study of the available evidence reveals that several pre-Roman communities reached a considerable level of regional economic integration which found expression in complex and highly hierarchical settlement systems. For example, in the Late Iron Age the Bituriges were able to thrive thanks to the effective exploitation of multiple sub-regions and "*paysages économiques"* within their territory. In the case of the Bituriges Cubi, the network of *oppida* that developed in pre-Roman times persisted in Roman times (in slightly altered form), perhaps because it was determined political and economic relationships very similar to those which had existed in the Iron Age.

[775] A word used by Woolf in his book Becoming Roman (Woolf 1998).

The persistence of groups of elite burials (tumuli) in rural areas is a clear sign of the power that certain aristocratic families retained over the countryside and its agricultural and mineral resources. While local aristocracies were gradually integrated into the Roman political system, gaining access to Roman citizenship by holding civic magistracies, the geographical dispersion of these elites and their uninterrupted power in rural areas helps to explain why so many "secondary agglomerations" (especially in Gaul) hosted opulent and prestigious monuments in the first and second centuries AD.

However, while in the case of the *civitas* of the Bituriges Cubi, integration within the Roman empire occurred without any major disruptions, in other regions the process involved drastic changes. The establishment of veteran colonies (e.g. in Narbonensis) and the presence of the Roman army (e.g. in Germania Inferior and along the Hadrian Wall) had a huge impact on regional settlements. In the process the economy of these regions became highly affected. In frontier regions, such as Germania Inferior and Britain, the establishment of forts resulted not only in an increase in nucleated settlements but also in an increase in economic output (especially in husbandry).

It has often been observed that regional "urban systems" can be part of a larger system, which is also characterized by a hierarchical structure. Starting from this premise many scholars have tried to assess levels of economic integration by examining the spatial properties of settlement systems of large geographical areas or by focusing on the shapes of rank-size graphs representing the distribution of the settlements of such large systems through various size brackets. In the case of Gaul there is often a sense that this part of the empire (with the exception of Narbonensis) was sparsely urbanized and economically under-developed. However, the rank-size graphs that can be drawn on the basis of archaeological data relating to settlement size turn out to be of limited use in this regard. It has often been suggested, for instance, a concave rank-size graph might point to limited economic integration. However, some of the evidence discussed in this thesis suggests the opposite. For example, the case studies dealing with the Western Pyrenees and the *civitas* of Luteva show how effectively plains and mountains interacted in Roman times. In both regions the agglomerations established at the foot of the mountains functioned as a bridges between the two different spaces.[776]

If we take a look at the urban system of Gaulish provinces (using a broad definition of "urban" which allows for the existence of "town-like" settlements outside the "official cities") almost 90% of the components of this system were small or medium-sized cities (10-60 ha). Such cities and "town-like" places could easily be sustained by their territories. Only 9% of all settlements which were "urban" to at least some degree were large cities (> 60 ha). The relatively few cities which belonged to this category lay along the main urban and transport corridors and were nodal points within the urban system. These unusually large centres attracted the wealthiest members of the regional elite (and their money). Yet even most of these cities could probably be sustained by the agricultural resources located of their immediate catchment areas (with a radius of 15 km). Finally, only 3% of the urban network consisted of extremely large cities that cannot not have been sustained but their own hinterlands. These

[776] In the case of Luteva, the level of integration would decrease in Medieval times.

exceptional cities must have been depended on external sources of income (including income from estates which were located in other parts of Gaul or even in other parts of the empire).[777] Of this tiny group of Lyon, Narbo, Burdigala and Reims were the provincial capitals of Gallia Lugdunensis, Narbonensis, Aquitania, and Belgica respectively, and this role implies that they were at the top of the urban hierarchy. It must be conceded, however, that the surviving evidence does not allow us to assess the economic implications of having this elevated status.

The regional and supra-regional "urban systems" of the north-western provinces were certainly bound together by economic interactions, but it remains very difficult to assess what this interdependence actually implies in terms of the geographical distribution of economic activities, specializations, and functions. While the regional "urban systems" of Roman Gaul were dominated by the four large cities just referred to, the urban system of Germania Inferior system was dominated more or less to the same degree by the provincial capital (Cologne) and by the large cities of Xanten, Castra Vetera and Atuatuca. In Britain the urban system seems to have been dominated by the provincial capital Londinium, although centres which had a connection with the military sphere also seem to have played an important role.

Although progress has been made, many questions concerning the complexity of the urban systems of the north-western provinces and levels of interaction among cities remain unresolved at this stage. Aside from the data inadequacies which archaeologists and historians have to live with, the conceptual vagueness of many publications and a regrettable lack of recent large-scale research programmes mean that only fragmentary descriptions of the "urban systems" of these areas can be provided. In addition, general statements about levels of economic integration or interaction tell us very little of what was going in individual cities. Additional research would help to overcome at least some these limitations. For example, an in-depth analysis of the internal structure of Roman towns compared to their predecessors, as well as research into the social and economic composition of the populations of these towns might well shed new light on functional changes which took place during the transition from pre-Roman to early-imperial times. Another promising line of inquiry would be a cross-period comparison, for example between the cities and "town-like" settlements of Roman Gaul and the urban system of medieval or early modern France. Finally, in view of the large amounts of new data on the rural settlements of the north-western provinces made available by various recent research projects, it seems a safe bet that a more detailed exploration of relationships between town and country will shed new light on the role of various types of "urban" settlements within their regional contexts.

[777] For example, the amphitheatre in Lyon was built by a citizen of the civitas of the Santones (together with his son and nephew) who was a priest of the federal cult of the Three Gauls in Lyon. For elite income from rural estates situated in the territories of neighbouring cities see Chapter 4.