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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**

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

This monograph investigates the development of urbanism in the North-Western Roman provinces (i.e. nowadays France, Britain, Belgium, and Netherlands), the main foci being on the nature, characteristics, and shapes that settlement systems took during the first 250 years of the imperial period. In view of the ambiguous nature of the term “urban”, three complementary definitions and approaches are used, based on juridical, morphological and functional criteria (chapter 1). This means that the scope of the research undertaken in this book extends beyond the study of the “official” Roman cities (i.e. centres which enjoyed some level of self-governance and which are known from ancient literary and epigraphic sources), comprising all settlements which have yielded evidence of monumental architecture and/or of extensive non-agricultural activities.

The principal aims of this work are to reconstruct the “urban systems” of the study area in Roman times and to explain why these systems looked the way they did. In order to establish the degree of continuity or discontinuity between pre-Roman and Roman forms of “urbanism”, it was deemed necessary to delineate the broad contours of the settlement systems of the Late Iron Age (chapter 2). In most cases the spatial distribution of cities and town-like central places which can be observed in Roman times appears to have been resembled pre-Roman patterns, strongly suggesting that we are dealing with a form of “path dependence”. This was the case, for example, in central and north-western France and south-eastern England, where various long-term changes – i.e. climatic improvement, population growth and rural expansion – which had occurred between the fourth and third centuries BC had laid the basis for the formation of the large communities and their territories on which the Roman urban system was superimposed. However, in other regions the process of integration caused major disruptions. For example, 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.

The pre-Roman legacy also appears to have influenced not only the overall shapes of the urban systems of the north-western provinces, but also the density of ‘official’ cities and their juridical status (chapter 3). For example, the pre-Roman landscape in Gallia Narbonensis was highly fragmented. Many important, indigenous centres lay relatively close to one another, and 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. In contrast, the other hand, in Central France for example, pre-Roman communities had vast territories which were organized around ‘*civitas*-capitals’. These areas contained large numbers of subordinate settlements. These region-specific patterns persisted after the Roman conquest.

In the last three chapters, various aspects of the urban hierarchies of the Roman period are investigated. Chapter 4 looks at the distribution and monumentalisation of the “official towns” (i.e. the self-governing cities) and discusses to what extent their size, geographical their distribution and their levels of monumentality reflect their role as administrative centers.

The high degree of standardization of the forms of civic buildings across these cities can be understood as reflecting a longing for an illusory uniformity in a vast and heterogeneous empire. At the same time these large-scale expenditure on public buildings broadcasts the membership of local elites of a regional elite with an established canon of public architecture.

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. The evidence relating to these systems suggests that, on a general and abstract level, at least two different types of settlement hierarchy can be discerned.

Some regions, such as central France, had multi-layered settlement systems comprising a variety of higher-order and lower-order centers. At the top of these settlement hierarchies we find the administrative capital – the headquarters of civic and political institutions and usually the place where those members of the elite who aspired to civic magistracies had to reside (or at least had to own a house). The second tier consisted of “town-like” secondary agglomerations which provided a smaller number of services compared to the capital but still had extensive and (at times) more specialised functions. They could, for example, be home to public baths or to sanctuaries and religious festivals of supra-regional significance. The fact that these “town-like” agglomerations often display a significant level of monumental architecture (intended to convey civic pride and prestige) indicates strong elite connections with rural areas. This durable and robust relationship is likely to have its roots in the polycentric societies and settlement systems of the pre-Roman period.

The second type of regional settlement system is characterized by a very large capital and very small subordinate settlements with almost no intermediate urban settlements. Such a pattern is found in the *civitas* of Nemausus. Geography alone cannot explain this pattern which occurs in areas with very different climates, soils, topographies and degrees of accessibility. It is much more likely that again the pre-Roman settlement pattern and its subsequent evolution were major factors in shaping the settlement hierarchy of early-imperial times.

All these regional systems were, in turn, part of a larger system, which was also characterized by a hierarchical structure. The regional urban system of Roman Gaul seems to have been dominated by four large cities, Lyon, Narbo, Burdigala, and Reims, which were the provincial capitals of Gallia Lugdunensis, Narbonensis, Aquitania, and Belgica respectively. The urban system of Germania Inferior 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 was clearly dominated by the provincial capital Londinium, although centers which had a connection with the military sphere also seem to have played an important role. These regional and supra-regional “urban systems” 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.