

NEW VISIONS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE OF ROMAN BRITAIN

VOLUME 2:

THE RURAL ECONOMY OF ROMAN BRITAIN

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THE RURAL ECONOMY OF
ROMAN BRITAIN

BY

Martyn Allen, Lisa Lodwick, Tom Brindle, Michael Fulford
and Alexander Smith

With contributions by
John Allen, Paul Bidwell, Stephen Rippon and Jane Timby

Series Editors

Michael Fulford and Neil Holbrook

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Back Cover illustration: Artist's reconstruction of stages of grain harvesting, based on actual
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PREFACE

The Rural Economy of Roman Britain draws on data from the same excavated settlements that provided the resource for Volume 1 of *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain*, in addition to data from selected defended towns, which were not available for inclusion within Volume 1. These data

– over a million fields – are available through *The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain: an online resource* (revised 2016): <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/romangl/>

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Michael Fulford, University of Reading
Neil Holbrook, Cotswold Archaeology
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SUMMARY

The first volume of *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain* was devoted to a study of the rural settlements of Roman England and Wales and their constituent buildings. This second volume builds upon this work, considering the rural economy of Roman Britain through the lenses of the principal occupations of agriculture and rural industry. For the first time, the wealth of faunal and archaeobotanical data have been drawn together alongside material culture and structural evidence to provide a social context for rural production and consumption, and an understanding of how resources moved across the province to feed and support military and civil populations.

Arable and pastoral farming lay at the heart of the economy of Roman Britain. The variability of farming regimes has been demonstrated through a number of case studies, exploring the diversification and scale of production. These patterns in part derived from existing Iron Age traditions, but also from differing economic adaptations to incorporation into the Roman Empire. There is evidence within certain regions of central and southern Britain for a move towards more extensive cereal production, large-scale processing and greater technological innovation (including corndryers and mills) over time, which is likely to have been governed by the need for increased efficiency in, and control of, agricultural production. This included a shift towards spelt wheat and cattle-dominated agriculture, with lower labour inputs per unit but higher outputs per area. The overall implications of this research are that it was not the commercial market that was the principal driving force behind this expansion, but rather the demands of the state.

Although Roman Britain was first and foremost an agricultural society, there were clearly many different rural craftworking and industrial activities undertaken on a variety of different scales that contributed towards the provincial economy. The evidence for metalworking, construction industries, ceramic, textile and salt production, and a variety of other different crafts, has been assessed using the mass of mainly developer-funded excavation data, much of which contribute towards a picture of increasing economic diversification and centralisation in certain parts of the Roman province. Alongside this diversification came an increase in the use of coinage within certain rural settlements in much of central and southern Britain, seemingly stimulated in part by traffic across the road network that encouraged the development of roadside settlements to service it. It does, however, seem unlikely that the rural population were ever 'fully monetised', but instead there is likely to have been a number of methods of exchange.

Analysis of material culture has suggested that many of the basic resources from the agricultural heartlands of the province were probably being transported to the northern frontier from the Flavian period onwards and also across the Channel to the continent by the third and fourth centuries A.D. This would have undoubtedly contributed towards a stagnation of Roman Britain, correlating with a declining rural population and a lack of new towns and roadside settlements. Furthermore, once the economic network linking farmsteads, villas, nucleated settlements, towns and military sites broke down in the fifth century A.D., many of the agricultural and industrial strategies employed in the provincial heartlands would have rapidly become unsustainable.

RÉSUMÉ

Le premier volume des *Nouvelles Visions des peuplements de la Bretagne romaine* était consacré à une étude des habitats ruraux de la Bretagne et du pays de Galles à l'époque romaine et des bâtiments les constituant. Ce second ouvrage se propose de compléter ces travaux initiaux, en considérant l'économie rurale de la Bretagne romaine sous l'angle des occupations principales de l'agriculture et de l'industrie rurale. Pour la première fois, la richesse des données paléobotaniques et de la faune ainsi que le mobilier culturel et les restes structurels ont été rassemblés afin de fournir un contexte social de la production et de la consommation rurales, et une meilleure connaissance de la façon dont étaient transportées les ressources au sein de la province pour nourrir et subvenir aux besoins des populations militaires et civiles.

L'agriculture et les terres à vocation pastorale sont au cœur de l'économie de la Bretagne romaine. Un certain nombre d'études de cas ont permis de démontrer la nature changeante des régimes fermiers, en explorant la diversification et l'échelle de la production. Ces tendances procédaient en partie de traditions remontant à l'âge du fer mais aussi d'adaptations économiques distinctes pour intégrer l'Empire romain. Dans certaines régions de la Bretagne centrale et méridionale, des témoignages attestent d'un passage, au fil du temps, à une production céréalière plus étendue, à un traitement à grande échelle et à une plus grande innovation technologique (dont les meules à grains et les moulins). Cette transition s'explique sûrement par le besoin d'une plus grande efficacité et d'un contrôle de la production agricole. Ceci s'est caractérisé par une mutation vers la culture de l'épeautre et par une agriculture dominée par l'élevage de bovins, donnant lieu à une réduction des apports de travail par individu mais à des rendements par secteur plus élevés. Globalement, ce que nous apprenons de cette recherche est que la force motrice à l'origine de cette expansion n'était pas le commerce, mais plutôt les exigences fédérales.

Bien que d'abord et avant tout une société agricole, la Bretagne romaine comptait indéniablement de nombreuses activités artisanales rurales et industrielles distinctes réalisées à des échelles variables et qui contribuaient à l'économie de la province. Les artefacts attestant le travail du métal, les industries de la construction, la céramique, la production de textile et de sel, ainsi qu'une série d'autres métiers artisanaux ont été recensés grâce à la pléthore de données de fouilles issues essentiellement de l'archéologie préventive. Elles contribuent, en majorité, à illustrer la diversification et la centralisation économiques croissantes que l'on constate dans certaines zones de la province romaine. A cette diversification se greffe une augmentation de l'usage de la monnaie dans certains habitats ruraux d'une large zone de la Bretagne centrale et méridionale, apparemment stimulée en partie par le trafic sur son réseau routier. Ce dernier dynamisait, à son tour, le développement des habitats en bordure de route qui le desservait. Il semble improbable, toutefois, que la population rurale ait jamais été « complètement monétisée », mais plutôt qu'un certain nombre de méthodes d'échange aient existé.

L'analyse des vestiges culturels suggère qu'à partir de la période flavienne le transport de beaucoup des ressources de base provenant des terres agricoles de la province s'opérait vraisemblablement vers la limite septentrionale mais aussi outre-Manche en direction du continent dès les III^e et IV^e siècles apr. J.-C. Ce phénomène aura certainement contribué à la stagnation de la Bretagne romaine, que l'on peut mettre en corrélation avec une population rurale en déclin et le manque de villes nouvelles et de nouveaux habitats en bordure de voies. En outre, après l'effondrement au Ve siècle apr. J.-C. du réseau économique qui reliait les fermes, les villas, les habitats nucléés, les villes et les sites militaires, maintes stratégies agricoles et industrielles employées dans les terres provinciales seraient rapidement devenues non viables.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der erste Band der *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain* war der Untersuchung der ländlichen Siedlungen sowie der zugehörigen Gebäude des römischen Englands und Wales gewidmet. Der zweite Band baut auf diesem auf und legt, unter Berücksichtigung der ländlichen Wirtschaft des römischen Britanniens, den Fokus auf Ackerbau und ländliche Industrie. Zum ersten Mal wurde der reichhaltige Datenbestand von Fauna und Archäobotanik kombiniert und zusammen mit der materiellen Kultur und strukturellen Erkenntnissen untersucht. Dies half einen sozialen Kontext für ländliche Produktion und Verbrauch herzustellen und ein Verständnis zu entwickeln, wie Ressourcen innerhalb der Provinz bewegt wurden, um das Militär und die Zivilbevölkerung zu versorgen und zu unterstützen.

Ackerbau und Weidewirtschaft waren das ökonomische Herz des römischen Britanniens. Die Variabilität der landwirtschaftlichen Ordnung wurde durch eine Reihe von Fallstudien belegt, welche die Mannigfaltigkeit und den Umfang der Produktion erforschten. Diese Muster entstammen teilweise aus bestehenden eisenzeitlichen Traditionen, aber auch von unterschiedlichen wirtschaftlichen Anpassungen, die das Römische Reich aufgenommen hatte. In einigen Regionen Mittel- und Südbritanniens gibt es Nachweise für Schritte hin zu einer groß angelegten Getreideproduktion und Verarbeitung. Im Zuge dessen kam es zu weitreichenden technologischen Innovationen (einschließlich Trockenöfen und Mühlen), was vermutlich durch die Notwendigkeit einer gesteigerten landwirtschaftlichen Effizienz, sowie die Kontrolle über diese bestimmt wurde. Dies beinhaltete eine Verlagerung hin zur Dominanz von Dinkel und Viehwirtschaft, mit niedrigerem Arbeitsaufwand pro Einheit aber höherer Produktion pro Fläche. Allgemein suggeriert die Forschung, dass kein kommerzieller Hintergedanke die treibende Kraft dieser Ausweitung war, sondern die gesteigerte Nachfrage des Staates.

Obwohl das römische Britannien in erster Linie eine Ackerbau Gesellschaft war, gab es sicher viele

weitere landwirtschaftliche Handwerks- und Industrietätigkeiten, die auf einer Vielzahl von verschiedenen Niveaus durchgeführt wurden, auch diese steuerten zum Wirtschaftsertrag der Provinz bei. Anzeichen für Metallbearbeitung, Bauindustrie, Keramik-, Textil- und Salzproduktion sowie verschiedene andere Handwerke wurden durch eine Datenmasse von überwiegend vom Bauträger finanzierten Ausgrabungen nachgewiesen. Durch die Daten entsteht ein Bild einer zunehmenden wirtschaftlichen Diversifizierung und Zentralisierung in gewissen Teilen der römischen Provinz. Zusammen mit dieser Diversifizierung kam es zu einer Zunahme des Einsatzes von Münzen in bestimmten ländlichen Siedlungen in einem Großteil des zentralen und südlichen Britanniens, die scheinbar zum Teil durch den Verkehr über das Straßennetz gefördert wurden. Diese Zunahme belebte die Entwicklung von Siedlungen entlang des Straßennetzes, die Durchreisende mit Gütern und Dienstleistungen bedienten. Es ist jedoch nicht davon auszugehen, dass die ländliche Bevölkerung jemals ausschließlich Geld als Zahlungsmittel nutzte, sondern vermutlich andere Methoden des Austauschs bestanden haben.

Die Analyse der materiellen Kultur lässt vermuten, dass viele elementare Rohstoffe aus den landwirtschaftlichen Kerngebieten der Provinz vermutlich ab der flavischen Periode bis zur nördlichen Grenze transportiert wurden und durch das 3. und 4. Jahrhundert auch über den Kanal bis zum europäischen Kontinent. Solches hätte zweifelsfrei zu einer Stagnation des römischen Britanniens beigetragen und dem entsprechend mit einer Abnahme der Landbevölkerung und einem Mangel an neuen Städten und Straßensiedlungen. Darüber hinaus, dürften mit dem Zusammenbruch des ökonomischen Netzwerks im 5. Jahrhundert, welches Höfe, Villen, geschlossene Wohnsiedlungen, Städte und militärische Anlagen mit einander verband, auch viele der landwirtschaftlichen und industriellen Strategien, die im Herzen der Provinz angewandt wurden, nicht mehr aufrecht zu erhalten gewesen sein.

