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ATTITUDES TO ROMAN IMPERIALISM

Richard Hingley

It is argued that Romano-British studies have been influenced by the existence and organisation of Britain's own empire. A positive conception of Roman imperialism is still current and this indicates that many Romanists have yet to escape from moral precepts derived from our own imperial past. In recent years a number of authors have criticised the use of pro-imperialist models, but reviews of models outlined by members of the post-imperial generations should be equally critical. One influential model outlines the nature of the Roman Empire as a gigantic 'common market': it will be argued that the Common Market/European Community also forms an inappropriate model for the study of the Roman Empire.

During the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference at Newcastle I presented two papers: one concerned with the nature of past studies of Roman Britain in the context of British society, and the other with the organisation of household space in Iron Age and Roman Britain. Both papers have been published recently (Hingley 1990; 1991) and I do not intend to repeat any of that discussion in detail in this volume. Instead, this paper provides an extension of some ideas expressed in the *Scottish Archaeological Review* paper (ibid.) and forms part of an ongoing debate concerning the motivation behind Roman imperialism (see Hingley 1982; 1991; Millett 1990a; 1990b).

In *SAR* I argue that research directives in the study of Roman Britain have been biased by the parallel which has been drawn between the Roman Empire and the British Empire. This has led to a conception of the motivation behind the creation and maintenance of the Roman Empire as positive. In other words, it has often appeared that the motivation behind expansion and conquest was a moral obligation to bring civilisation to barbarian societies on the periphery of the Roman world; a motivation akin

to the so-called 'white-man's burden' (Hingley 1991).

In my article the works of a number of authors who wrote about the Roman Empire during the first three decades of this century are reviewed (including Haverfield, Stobart and Nilsson) and it is argued that much work of this date derives from a positive conception of imperialism. This positive attitude survived the end of Britain's own empire and the establishment of the Commonwealth, forming the basis of most modern accounts of the archaeology and history of the Roman province of Britain (Jones and Miles 1979; Hingley 1991). That this concept of the motivation of the Romans remains dominant in the minds of some scholars is evident from Professor Thomas's suggestion that the approach I adopted in my book *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (Hingley 1989) invites us to 'share in a communal, retrospective guilt not just for the British Empire . . . but . . . for the *Roman* imperial presence; and for drawing entirely valid parallels between the advances towards civilisation that both such imperial ventures brought about' (Thomas 1990, 184).

This is obviously an emotive topic for some academics. Freeman's critique of my SAR paper (Freeman 1991) is more lengthy and complex, but also appears to contain a number of misconceptions which I will attempt to correct elsewhere. In recent years, however, a number of authors of 'the post-imperial generation' (Millett 1990a, xv) have attempted to acknowledge and take account of a perceived bias in research perspectives. Several Dutch scholars have been particularly involved in this process and some British authors have, in Millett's words, attempted to remove the debate from 'one based on a prevailing pro-imperialist attitude to another which takes a more neutral view of the available evidence' (1990b, 37).

To what extent are these supposedly post-imperial accounts actually neutral? It will be argued in this paper that the positive view of Roman imperialism is still dominant among British archaeologists and ancient historians in the 1990s.

Millett has quoted the work of Badian (1968) and has argued that, after the initial prizes of conquest had been taken, a deeply embedded set of social conventions acted to dissuade the Roman elite from excessive economic exploitation of provincial populations. This, it is argued, reflects a tradition whereby the conqueror became patron and protector of the conquered (Millett 1990a, 3). Wealth and prestige were gained by the Roman elite through the ownership and exploitation of land rather than by the amassing of wealth through trade.

It is necessary to be critical when utilising ancient written sources in order to assess the motivation of the Roman Empire's elite. Garnsey and Saller have argued that the degree to which this elite were involved in trade and industry has been underestimated. On the basis of diverse, mainly non-literary, sources it would appear that individual aristocrats were owners of large warehouses, brickyards and pottery works. It is also known that the elite was the source of loan-capital invested in shipping and other activities (Garnsey and Saller 1987, 8; see also the thorough recent survey of 'capitalism' in the Roman world by Love 1991). Indeed the elite of the British Empire generally avoided direct involvement in industry and trade. That the elite in both empires kept trade and exchange at arm's length does not however indicate its failure to exploit economic possibilities.

It is necessary therefore to be critical of all existing interpretive models that are used in the study of Roman imperialism and to acknowledge the economic and political motivation behind all acts of imperialism.

Other approaches to Roman imperialism have been developed in recent years, but if we do not adopt a critical perspective to these, we may stray into the operation of models that are just as inappropriate as the British Empire. For instance Mann, in his discussion of the stability of the Roman Empire, utilises an idea derived from A. M. H. Jones (1966, 311) that the empire was a gigantic 'common market', in which a balance of interests existed between the state, the producers, the middlemen traders and the contractors (Mann 1986, 278). This model appears to bear the particular stamp of later twentieth-century studies. It is important to remember that the Roman Empire was not established or maintained as a free-trade institution. Indeed many areas were only incorporated and controlled by force, and many barriers existed to trade and exchange; for instance the state's control of grain and minerals and the control of markets within the Empire by the state and the elite (MacMullen 1970, 333-4). In addition one wonders about the degree of influence of certain producers within the empire; is the concept of the balance of interests really useful in this context?

Any model which is based on the concept of a balance of interests will never produce a realistic picture for the political and economic context of Britain within the Roman Empire. I would argue the need for a critical perspective on the motivation behind imperialism, leading to an analysis of the relationship between different elite groups in certain areas of the Empire and also the relation between the elite and the producers within and between particular *civitates* in Britain. It is only through the use of this

type of critical perspective that British scholars will escape from the mental constraints imposed by their recent past and present and be able to construct a coherent Roman archaeology.

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