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14. Immaterial culture: Invisible Peasants and Consumer Subcultures in north-west Britannia

by K. J. Matthews

Introduction

This paper will attempt to interpret the Romano-British archaeology of south Lancashire and Cheshire in the light of recent developments in archaeological theory and will set out to explain why so few sites of the period other than military installations have been located. The region is notoriously lacking in 'native' sites and, where they have been identified, they produce, at best, a shoe-box of pottery (e.g. Nevell 1989:39; Carrington 1993, fiche 1:E9).

It has traditionally been assumed that the region was thinly populated and economically backward (as Shotter 1993:57 has observed), while the invading army is said to have been responsible for opening up the area to settlement (e.g. Kenyon 1991:54). The *aestuaria ac silua* of Tacitus (Agricola 20,2) which are usually located here have been taken to imply that the region was inhospitable and virtually uninhabited, with vast tracts of marshland and uncleared natural forest. However, recent palaeoenvironmental work has shown that the army passed through an open landscape with areas of light woodland and arable fields. Arable fields presuppose farmers; farmers presuppose farms.

This paper presents a deconstruction of the culture-historical models which have monopolised the interpretation of the Roman archaeology of the region (if not Britain generally) by analysing three texts describing Cheshire in the Roman period. By examining the preconceptions of earlier writers, it will be possible to understand why the peasants remain invisible despite a century or more of archaeological effort. Furthermore, by exploring the consumption patterns of the indigenous populations of north-west England from the Iron Age through to the sub-Roman period, we can seek the reasons behind the thinness of the material culture record. In a recursive process similar to Ian Hodder's 'hermeneutic spiral' (1992:213), we can then use this theoretical construct to understand more about the lack of interest shown in the native populations.

The 'canonical texts' of Roman Cheshire

This initial part of the paper analyses three published accounts of the Roman period in Cheshire, both to review the evidence which they have presented and to attempt their deconstruction: Hugh Thompson's 1965 synthesis, *Roman Cheshire*, part of Cheshire Community Council's twelve-volume history of the county and the first full-length treatment of the subject for almost eighty years; Dennis Petch's 1987 contribution to the first volume of the *Victoria History of the County of Chester*; and chapters two and three of Nick Higham's 1993 *The Origins of Cheshire*. These are the only twen-

tieth-century texts to have attempted extended overviews of the county during the first four centuries AD; the sole previous essay of any substance, W. T. Watkin's *Roman Cheshire*, was published in 1886, before the interpretative frameworks for Romano-British archaeology were established in the early part of the twentieth century and is therefore not considered here.

Thompson's 'Roman Cheshire'

Hugh Thompson's book consists of 109 pages of text divided between five chapters. Chapter one, 'Before the Roman Conquest' is a four and a quarter-page description of the topography of the county with barely any consideration of the prehistoric background. Indeed, the prehistoric settlement of the area is dismissed:

Enough has been said to demonstrate that Cheshire was not likely to attract prehistoric man in large numbers; the extensive tracts of forest would deter the settler who might penetrate to the area from the open but more densely populated lands of south-east Britain. To the poor drainage of the prevalent clays would be added the disadvantage of high rainfall. It is not surprising that Bronze Age settlement ... was largely confined to the slopes of the Central Ridge and the Pennines, while the hill-forts known to belong to the Early Iron Age are found only on the Central Ridge. ... all such settlement and movements by land or sea conformed to the natural 'grain' of the country from north to south and vividly reflect prehistoric man's inability to transcend his environment in unfavourable surroundings. It was left to the Romans to drive roads athwart these natural lines, to promote settlement in the valleys, and to exploit the county's natural resources (1965:3-4).

There are important issues here which recur throughout the text: according to Thompson, Cheshire is all but deserted when the Romans arrive; such prehistoric population as existed consists (apparently) entirely of men who 'penetrate'; these same men are also unable to 'transcend [their] environment.' The scene is thus set for the thrusting arrival of yet more men who, having transcended their Mediterranean environment, have crossed the Alps, the English Channel and the West Midlands to arrive in the unpopulated wilderness of the north-west.

However, the second chapter, 'The Roman Conquest and Occupation', begins with the statement that "In view of the sparsity of the native population, it may seem absurd to talk about the Roman conquest of Cheshire" (1965:6). The infinitely superior and more numerous Romans simply marched in. We are then presented with two and a half pages describing the conquest of lowland Britain, derived largely from Roman writers with twentieth-century hypotheses added as if fact. In Cheshire, "the sparse native population was largely confined to the high ridge of sandstone running from Malpas in the south to Helsby in the north" (1965:7). Note the 'confinement' of the few natives. Worse, "their equipment [was] too slight to withstand a Roman army" (1965:9). They may have been male, but they were not real men.

In this land of wimps, *Deva* was founded at the 'obvious site' of Chester (1965:9). No explanations are attempted for the location of the fortress, as there was apparently no choice. Four pages follow of *Deva's* history. This seems to have consisted largely of external events potentially involving the legion (the building of Hadrian's Wall, the usurpation of Clodius Albinus, a supposed barbarian invasion of 296 and the wars of 368-9). Holt, Heronbridge and Saltney are then considered. Holt is described in a page, while Heronbridge and Saltney merit half a page each. Saltney is dismissed as having "buildings of a rather flimsy character ... a distinct tendency to become waterlogged ...

[and a] population [which] may have engaged in crop growing, despite the apparent unsuitability of the soil ... [it was a] small community" (1965:16). We then have 'other Roman sites' for almost four pages, consisting of Meols and nucleated sites at Middlewich, Northwich and Wilderspool. Earlier writers are said to have "claimed the existence of Roman settlements elsewhere in the county, e.g. Nantwich, but the evidence is not compelling" (1965:19).

Heronbridge eventually merits more substantial treatment (1965:60–65), after a lengthy description of archaeological discoveries at Chester and Holt. Once again it is an overwhelmingly masculine place, having been an '*industrial site*', and there are dark hints that it may have been military, or at least under military organisation. Saltney gets a further paragraph which it is instructive to reproduce in full:

The site at Saltney has already been described in as much detail as the evidence will allow and no amplification is possible. The only point requiring emphasis is the fairly high proportion of late third- and fourth-century pottery recovered from the site which indicates that the occupation continued as late probably as that of the fortress itself. The curious feature of this area, and also of the sites at Holt and Heronbridge, is the extent to which the inhabitants were prepared to tolerate the heavy clay subsoil which must have made living distinctly uncomfortable in times of heavy rain. No doubt the proximity of the legionary fortress, and the protection and facilities which it afforded, were sufficient to offset this disadvantage (1965:65).

Very little of the site was revealed during the construction work which led to its discovery, so the limits of the settlement at Saltney were not evident and it is not even possible to be certain that the two tiny areas where Roman stratigraphy was exposed were part of the same settlement. There is no reason to suppose that the soils here were any less workable than over much of Cheshire, where arable cultivation can be inferred from palaeoenvironmental evidence (Schoenwetter 1982:11) and was undoubtedly carried out during the Middle Ages. Perhaps the implication is that the inhabitants were sliding about on the mud, being incapable of laying paths, yards and roads. Note, too, that it is entirely dependent upon not just *Deva* in general, but the legionary fortress (men!) specifically. The possibility that Chester might have been at least partly dependent upon settlements like this for food, for instance, is not even explored.

The only rural places discussed by Hugh Thompson are the enclosure at Halton Brow ("of a temporary nature ... and conceivably of military origin") and finds from Hilbre Island, Bache ("the site is close to the legionary fortress and may not have had an independent existence"), Ashton, Kelsall, Kingswood, and Eaton-by-Tarporley (1965:102). This is a poor showing for a whole county and gives the impression that little was going on in the countryside; although a calculation is made of how much grain could be stored in the three excavated granaries at Chester (unsurprisingly, "[they] could have supplied the whole garrison ..." (1965:39)) no consideration is made of where the grain might have come from. At no point is an overview of 'Roman Cheshire' attempted, and the heavy dependence on Chester to provide the details for an historical account is very telling.

Without wishing to labour the point, the main thrust of Hugh Thompson's work is male-centred and views the prehistoric and Roman past largely in terms of military activity. It is easy to laugh at such attitudes today, but they are not surprising for a work written in the early 1960s, when explanations of culture change were almost entirely dependent on a military or colonialist model. It also makes Cheshire thoroughly Roman, in a Latin-speaking way. With no significant native

population at the time of the conquest, it is essentially a *tabula rasa* onto which recognisably Roman forms of settlement are placed without opposition.

Petch's 'The Roman Period'

At 121 pages, Dennis Petch's chapter in the *Victoria County History* is the longest twentieth-century account of Roman Cheshire. The last eight and a half pages consist of a "gazetteer of Romano-British finds on minor sites", a concept which is not explained and whose value is thus limited: it is certainly not an exhaustive list of the find-spots of Romano-British material from the county. The remainder of the chapter is divided into the Roman occupation (three pages), the legionary fortress at Chester (forty-six pages), the status of Roman Chester (one page), the extramural area at Chester (three pages for military remains, eighteen for civilian remains), settlements outside Chester (twenty-nine and a half pages), communications (seven pages) and industries (seven pages).

The introductory section attempts to place Cheshire into a prehistoric political setting; Petch suggests that Ptolemy's listing of *Ἀθονα, Λεγίων κ' Νικεφορος* (*Deua, Legio XX Victrix*) as a *πολις* ('*polis*', town) of the *Cornovii* reflects its Iron Age affinities, a claim which recent scholarship dismisses (Rivet & Smith 1979:121). Nor is there any problem about Ptolemy's use of the term *πολις* to refer to Chester, despite Petch's worries: it does not mean 'town' in a Classical sense, but 'named place of dense habitation' and Ptolemy uses it indiscriminately for towns, forts and marching-camps (Rivet & Smith 1979:105). In fact, this initial section is not about the Roman occupation as such, since the account tries to detail the paths of invasion and is thus more about the Roman conquest.

The pages on Chester consist of a straightforward description of the various elements of the fortress and their individual histories, including the defences and internal structures. One page discusses the status of Chester, which is left unresolved. Three pages follow describing the official buildings outside the fortress: the amphitheatre and a probable *mansio*. Eighteen pages are then spent on a description of the civilian settlement around the fortress and twenty-six pages on settlements outside Chester.

Three and a half pages suffice for a discussion of the countryside. At the outset we are warned that:

Other finds from Roman Cheshire consist almost exclusively of scattered items without associated structure. ... it appears that the presence of a military garrison in northern England had a depressing effect on the countryside, except near the forts or fortresses of the garrison, a low level of romanization being attained by the native population (1987:212).

This contrasts with the earlier view, which ascribed the clearance of woodland in the north to the supposed stimulus provided by the army. Petch is also uncertain about our abilities to determine "whether a site like Ashton-by-Tarvin represents a romanized farm-house or a 'native' village" on the basis of the finds alone.

With these provisos, he identifies an area east of Chester, bounded by the road to Wilderspool to the north and the road to Northwich to the south, in which concentrations of finds have been noted and even structures reported. He mentions the villa at Eaton-by-Tarporley (reported in greater detail in his section on Other Settlements), the excavated remains of a yard or track at Lower Green

(Beeston Castle) and a reassessment of the enclosure at Halton Brow as a farming community. Apart from these, "the hinterland [of every major settlement] appears largely deserted" (1987:214).

Petch's account is heavily dependent upon finds and it reads like a catalogue at times, except where he makes observations about the concentrations and absences of material. At no point are issues about the economic implications of apparently deserted areas of countryside raised and the relation between the military garrison and the local population is dismissed in the section on the conquest: "The rulers of Cheshire were probably among the kings and chieftains who submitted to Claudius and entered into treaty relations with Rome" (1987:117). Although not entirely deserted, it is the presence of the military which prevents the opening-up of the countryside, conjectured to be heavily wooded although "the only published evidence appears to contradict that view" (1987:212). The natives are believed to have remained in a state of barbarism, not benefiting from romanizing material culture, and are therefore by implication of little or no historical importance.

Petch's work is in many ways comparable to Watkin's (1886) work: in both cases there is an emphasis on the lengthy description of archaeological discoveries, heavily dominated by Chester. Considerable effort is taken to understand the military context of the fortress at Chester by both writers, and its communications with other (predominantly military) sites are explored in some detail. Neither attempts an explanation of the contexts of individual finds from rural areas, but Petch does comment on their patterning. Unlike Thompson's model, which has a virtually unpopulated region into which romanized forts and (secondarily) settlements are planted, Petch admits to the existence of a population, but it remains lurking in the shadows of small-scale woodland clearances, barely detectable because it has little or no material culture.

Higham's 'The Origins of Cheshire'

Nick Higham devotes a little over thirty-five pages to the Roman period in his account of pre-Norman Cheshire. These pages are divided between two chapters. One chapter with thirty-one pages on Colonialism and Community, the Romans in the north-west Midlands, and the first four pages of the chapter *The Aftermath of Empire*. It is a work which "seeks to examine the evolution of Cheshire ... [and] which focuses on the study of territories" (1987:xv). This sounds like a work which will give us a consideration of rural settlement patterns, settlement hierarchies and perhaps even of agricultural and social organisation.

Chapter two begins with the obligatory assessment of tribal identity and territory: this occupies six pages. He then considers the relation of Chester to the administration of the rest of the future county area over four pages. There then follow five pages describing the hinterland of Chester. The bulk of the chapter is occupied by a consideration of communications, settlement and land use, taking up fourteen pages.

True to his word, his first section considers the tribal boundaries between the Cornovii and their neighbours, principally the Ordovices. He concludes that the medieval border between England and Wales might be close to this line, allowing Ptolemy's attribution of *Mediolanum* (Whitchurch) to the Ordovices to stand, following a slight adjustment to the exact course. With a curious mixing of anatomical metaphors he considers the enclosures of the Mid Cheshire Ridge "to have been the backbone of only a narrow finger of Cornovian territory at the Roman conquest, defined to the west by the Dee and to the east by an unlocated boundary with the Lutudarenses" (1993:35). Here he unwittingly gives away a major weakness in the analysis of early boundaries and territories: we have

no evidence whatsoever for the existence of a native polity called the Lutudarenses. The name is his own abstraction from the name of the centre of the Derbyshire lead mining district, given in the Ravenna Cosmography as *Lutudaron* and attested on lead pigs as the *metalli Lutudarfensjes*, the “Lutudarian” mines. The name **Lutudaro* is Celtic, meaning ‘muddy/marshy place’ (Rivet & Smith 1979:404), and it is difficult to see how this type of place-name might have become incorporated into the name of a pre-Roman tribal group for which no independent evidence exists.

In the next section Higham considers the Roman invasion. In his version of events, contrasting with Thompson’s, “Chester was ... not an inevitable choice of fort [sic] site” (1993:37). His conclusion is that as Chester is both at the lowest crossing-point of the Dee and an ideal port site (until the end of the Middle Ages, at least), it was a convenient base, although not a military prerequisite and inconvenient for communications other than maritime. He never really gets to grips with its relation to the rest of the county, despite his observation that it was the largest regional centre in the north-west Midlands. Apart from the occasional military commander, people are absent from this speculative account of boundaries and territories.

In seeking to define the extent of the *prata legionis* or *territorium* of the fortress at Chester, he observes that the civilian settlements at Heronbridge and Saltney were in a different Hundred from Chester at the time of the Domesday survey in 1085 and conjectures that this arrangement was ancient. He is otherwise candid in his attempt at definition: “Elsewhere the extent of the *prata* is little more than guesswork” (1993:43). From page fifty-two onwards, Higham becomes more interested in the rural area. He suggests that the Eaton-by-Tarporley villa might have been “the home of an indigenous aristocratic family who had abandoned their ancestral hillfort for a Romanized residence still within the core of their own kin-based system of patronage and exploitation” (1993:52). He compares the location of the settlement at Lower Green, Beeston Castle, with the villa, suggesting that here, too, the native aristocracy moved down from their hilltop residence on the crag to a more romanized way of life at its foot. It is hardly necessary to point out that there is no evidence for the long-term elite occupation of hilltop enclosures in pre-conquest Cheshire.

Higham then moves on to consider why Romano-British peasants are all but invisible in Cheshire, the central theme of this paper. He suggests that this is due in part to “problems of identification of their settlements caused by modern agricultural practices. It may also reflect widespread reliance on other types of settlement [than enclosures]... Another of the problems of locating such sites is the small number of artefacts they produce” (1993:56–7), all of which are important observations which allow us to shift our focus on to the question. However, he concludes that the region remained peripheral within the Roman province and was heavily dependent on the state (both civilian and military officials) for access to markets, so patterns of rural settlement would not necessarily have been similar to those elsewhere in Britain.

Chapter three begins with an assessment of the state of Britain after more than three centuries of Roman rule. In terms reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher, Higham claims that the Empire “fostered a culture of dependency” (1993:60) which the peripheral position of Cheshire only accentuated. We thus have a civilian population remote from the centres of power at both *civitas* and provincial level, lacking at least durable material wealth and thus invisible to the archaeologist except in privileged conditions, and which was utterly dominated by the more romanized nucleated settlements and forts. Moreover, the local population remained incapable of constructing any kind of identity through the use of a material culture from which it was essentially excluded.

While Higham’s treatment of Cheshire avoids the military-centred approach of all earlier writers, his self-imposed limitations still leave an impression of an almost unpopulated region. This is

in large measure a result of his interest in abstract concepts of territoriality and boundaries. He does not explore the social reality of the territories he defines as this is not central to his thesis, nor does he discuss the material culture of the period in any depth.

Summary

In thirty years it is possible to detect a shift in the terms of reference for an account of Roman Cheshire which parallels a change in archaeological interpretation generally. In the 1960s the early history of the region was constructed almost entirely in relation to its military occupation, presented as an unquestionably Good Thing, in the terms of *1066 and All That* (Sellar & Yeatman 1975:10); the existence of anything but the most feeble and thinly-spread native population was not even considered as an option. Much of Thompson's book is taken up with the straightforward description of archaeological discoveries of military remains. The issue of provisioning large numbers of troops ought to have raised questions about the viability of agriculture close to the military establishments, but did not. Moreover, this reliance on military affairs gives a chronological bias to the first century or so of the Roman occupation: it is difficult to recognise from Thompson's work that Cheshire had effectively been demilitarised by the early second century.

By the 1980s, large amounts of data were available about the rural areas. They consisted almost entirely of find-spots of artefacts, but Petch attempted no theorisation of the implications of the information. His account is still dominated by lengthy descriptions of discoveries, and interpretation remains strictly historically oriented, with the emphasis on externally-attested events to provide the historical framework. This essentially follows the account of Thompson, but although a rural population is now allowed to have existed, the data which demonstrate its presence are treated as if completely intractable. The key players remain the military, operating against a murky, ill-defined background of 'native occupation', resulting in the same chronological bias as found in the earlier work. Questions of interaction are not considered, or are regarded as either peripheral or unanswerable.

Higham's book marks a radical departure from the earlier accounts and presents something of a model of Romano-British rural settlement. It is not fully explored, probably because it was the development, not the functioning, of land units on which he chose to focus. It is also highly impersonal, and the actors remain firmly in the background; this time they are not the Roman military, but the local landowners and their tenant peasant farmers. It is assumed that the effect of the new administration was limited in its impact on the organisation of the countryside and that, apart from the *prata legionis* around Chester, the old divisions of territory remained under the same landlords. However, this assumption is not tested and there is little discussion of excavated material.

None of the twentieth-century accounts of north-west Britannia has made a thorough synthesis of the data: on the one hand, we have the culture-historical approaches of Thompson and Petch which begin with a model derived from literary sources and then catalogue archaeological material within that framework, and on the other, we have the landscape historical approach of Higham which almost dispenses with material culture but which still depends utterly on the same framework. It ought to be clear by this point that the culture-historical model has completely failed to provide either an adequate description or analysis of the Roman period in the north-west. In order to begin to construct one, it is necessary to return to the archaeological evidence and to pose questions which it alone can answer. These questions all revolve around the subject of material culture.

Material culture and its consumption: a model

Although archaeologists have generally defined their area of interest as being primarily material culture, they have only rarely attempted to explain it in social terms. A large part of archaeologists' time has been (and continues to be) spent cataloguing and classifying the raw data of dry and dusty artefacts; occasional syntheses then establish the processes of production and distribution, but only recently has there been an interest in the consumption of material culture (Miller 1994; Ferris 1995) which offers us an insight into its role in human life. This came about as a result of the influence of Anglo-American sociology in the 1980s, when consumption began to be studied as an important social phenomenon, particularly during the economic boom years of the Thatcher and Reagan-Bush administrations in the UK and USA, when consumer spending reached previously unimagined heights.

Most analyses have regarded the so-called 'rise of consumerism' as a recent phenomenon, and one which transcends and thus breaks down the bounds of the class systems which have been used in recent centuries to identify the status of individuals and their social roles (Giddens 1993:238). Recent sociological interpretations of consumption have suggested that the 'post-modern' people of the capitalist West construct their identities in terms of the goods they consume (Bocock 1993:108). This is believed to mark a major change from 'modern' and historical societies, in which identity is thought to be embedded in socio-economic status.

This mistaken deduction derives from the privileged position which traditional Marxian analysis accords socio-economic status. Sociologists have ignored the ethnoarchaeological work which has shown how 'pre-modern' or 'traditional' societies also use material culture as the principal method of constructing and reinforcing individuality, irrespective of socio-economic status. Examples of these unfamiliar consumption patterns range from the use of facial make-up in New Guinea (Strathern 1979) to the choice of spear-head type in Kenya (Larick 1985:218). The assumption that style is an expression of collective identity (e.g. Sackett 1977:371), which is still common among archaeologists, has been shown to be wrong in general, and only under specific conditions do collective styles represent social identification (Wiessner 1984:226). Even then, the collectivity is restricted to a subcultural set on the social margins (Matthews 1995:589).

The consumption of romanizing material culture can be added to this model of the construction of individual identity as an element of hegemonic discourse. The term hegemony is best understood in Gramsci's definition as the establishment of a cultural authority over the mass of the population. Indeed, it is useful to regard the entire process of romanization, insofar as it involved the adoption of 'foreign' elements of material culture belonging to the cultural élite, as hegemonic discourse, via a process of emulation (Ferris 1995:137). In colonial situations, material culture contributes either to the acceptance or the rejection of the cultural hegemony of the ruling élite.

The ethnographic example of colonial Angola, for instance, shows how acceptance of some of the Portuguese colonists' material culture — particularly of tobacco and alcohol — did not lead to the wholesale adoption of other elements, such as money, towns or even the wheel (Birmingham 1979:31). The reasons for this seem to be the inappropriateness of much Portuguese material culture to the local situation, the way in which Angola was maintained as a market rather than being exploited for economic development and the adaptation of Angolan society along purely local lines to the changed economic situation.

This provides an interesting analogy to explain the process of acculturation in Late Iron Age and Roman Britain by shifting attention away from the colonial power to the indigenous population.

Additionally, it allows an understanding of the differences between what are usually seen as the 'military' and 'civilian' districts of Roman Britain. Iain Ferris (1995:136) has already noted four different zones of consumption, in which cosmopolitan, military, indigenous and *vicanus*-centred patterns can be recognised. These are not geographically determined, but apply to what we can only regard as subcultures, self-identifying subsets of society. In the south, pre-conquest social change had led to an appropriation of romanizing material culture as a mark of élite dominance which the colonial power was able to exploit (Trow 1990:114; Willis 1995:145) and which led to the rapid induction of southern élites into the cosmopolitan subculture. Romanization was merely an extension of the material culture of the existing indigenous cultural hegemony over the mass of the population.

In the north, such pre-conquest influences were virtually absent and the widespread adoption of romanizing material culture was probably avoided because that material culture was too closely identified with the invaders to be attractive to the rural population in this area. It was the *vicani* who not only negotiated the space between the cosmopolitan and military élite cultures and indigenous forms but who, at the same time, failed to provide an emulative role model for the indigenous population. Where land ownership remained under the control of the military, the native aristocracies were excluded from sharing in the consumption of cosmopolitan material culture. It is also probable that the 'international style' of material culture (if it can legitimately be termed as such) was of no interest to the northern élites since they were not excluded from the social transactions which would have brought them into contact with these desirable goods but, nevertheless, chose not to acquire them. In towns such as *Luguualium* (Carlisle) and *Deva* (Chester) they participated in the consumption of cosmopolitan material culture but, significantly, failed to take it back in large quantities to their rural estates.

It has been thought likely that the indigenous populations of the north were socially peripheral to the life of the province. Even the aristocracies could have been denied the opportunities for entry into the European élites, which were evidently open to the population of the south, not as an act of deliberate policy but because of the presence of few towns in the region (Ferris 1995:138). In the south, towns became natural foci for the pre-Roman élites who were now in control of local government (Millett 1990:82). In lacking a central place to display their wealth, in other words, to engage in conspicuous consumption, the northern élites chose not to procure the materials which would mark them out as members of the international set, probably because it had no meaning to their social inferiors.

Instead, they may have concentrated their acquisition of status not from consumer goods but from social networks, perhaps via systems of patronage, livestock control and so on. However, it is probably highly significant that this is not incompatible with Roman aristocratic patronage systems, allowing the native élites to share in a moral rather than material hegemony. A lack of material romanization is therefore not necessarily proof of a lack of cultural romanization. In other words, the northern élites may have been able to regard themselves as true Romans not through the consumption of romanizing material culture, which they eschewed, but through their archaeologically invisible social practices.

While it is clear that the majority of the rural population of Lancashire and Cheshire in the Roman period did not take part in the conspicuous consumption of mass-produced 'romanized' material culture, the small quantities in which it is found shows that people had access to markets at which such goods could be obtained. This perhaps sets them apart from the remainder of the north (a modern

geographical construct); our analysis needs to focus on a small area, to the west of the southern Pennines. The common assumption that its rural populations were too 'poor' to purchase this material culture in large quantities begs a number of questions and is not an adequate explanation. Although a socially-embedded form of exchange would prevent non-élites from participating in the consumption of a cosmopolitan style shunned by the élites, the social form of exchange is not actually of great importance in determining levels of poverty, if these be defined in terms of economic activity (Rush 1995:145).

The small quantities of romanizing material culture recovered from rural sites in the region should be seen as anomalous, not in terms of their low numbers, but in terms of their very presence; mass-produced romanizing goods represent a tiny proportion of the total material culture available to the inhabitants of every farm in north-west Britannia. In many ways this is directly comparable with the occurrence of various exotic items in the pre-Roman Iron Age of the region, such as the Corieltauvian coins from Halton Castle and Marton or the Coriosolite and Carthaginian coins from Meols (Matthews 1996:19). Once these imports are removed from the Iron Age assemblage of the region, there is virtually nothing left, a pattern which is repeated if we remove mass-produced pottery from Romano-British rural assemblages.

What remains, after this theoretical exercise, is the typical consumption pattern of the peasants of north-west *Britannia*. All social humans are consumers in one way or another, and when we find that the material culture record is empty for a particular group or period, this can only mean that the consumer products in which all the complexities of social relations were embedded, were of a type not to survive in the archaeological record. However, the record is not completely empty, which has implications for the status of romanizing material culture.

A bland statement on this level appears innocuous, but is in fact revolutionary. By looking at social phenomena from the other end, from the point of view of the consumer, it becomes obvious that the archaeological record is subject not only to a preservation and sample bias (which few archaeologists would now dispute) but also to a bias which is situated deep within capitalism. In other words, when archaeologists do not find large amounts of the types of consumer goods which they value highly, they scream "poverty". This argument may appear extreme and silly: it is! But it is the argument used day in, day out by the archaeological profession to account for the observed variability in the material culture record. If archaeologists have failed to theorise material culture, they are nevertheless hung up on the idea that durable material culture equals wealth, which it obviously does not except under specific historically-situated contexts.

Conclusion

We should look at north-west *Britannia* as a border area, not between Roman provinces, but between areas with distinct traditions of consumption in the Roman period. This is especially clear in Cheshire, which falls between two cultures: it was neither 'northern' in the sense of being under permanent or even medium-term military occupation, except at Chester, nor was it 'southern' in the sense of being dominated by urban centres. We are forced to recognise its liminal position in Roman Britain and the nature of the Mersey valley as a significant boundary. The *canabae* of *Deva* were the closest approach of the international élites to the native population. Although a significant proportion of the permanent population possibly regarded itself as *vicani* in the strict sense of people living in a self-governing community, there would have been others who understood themselves to have been cos-

mopolitan city-dwellers. It is therefore in the *canabae* that we must seek evidence for the social transactions between these two groups and evidence for their convergence or tensions.

Lancashire, on the other hand, was entirely within the military sphere. Its garrisons remained in place throughout the Roman period and their *vici* were the focal points for those who chose to identify with the material hegemony of the military. These places are not qualitatively different from the *vici* of Hadrian's Wall or the other parts of northern Britain where military occupation was long-term. Where Lancashire stands out, though, is in the paucity of the evidence for the dense rural settlement seen on the Cumbrian plain or in Northumberland. This argues for a distinctive pattern of consumption similar to that we can observe in Cheshire, suggesting the basic cultural unity of what, in twentieth-century television terms, is known as 'Granada land'.

In the countryside of north-west *Britannia*, the use of romanizing material culture was limited to privileged locations. It was exotic, highly curated, as the bizarrely repaired black-burnished sherds from Beeston (Carrington 1993, fiche 1:E9) demonstrate, presumably therefore, highly valued by its owners. Our previous assumption that it was of no interest to local populations is at least partially wrong. This does not sound like anti-hegemonic discourse: indeed, it suggests that romanizing material culture was sought-after and a source of prestige to some sections of society. This is adequately demonstrated by the fact that it is not widely found. The repair of what should have been utilitarian wares using rivets, which does not allow them to fulfil their intended functions such as cooking, shows that this was not their main use. It is best explained in terms of display, probably in interactions with peers.

The consumption of romanizing material culture by the peasant farmers of the north-west therefore does not fall into the mode which is familiar to most archaeologists of Roman Britain. Instead it is used in small quantities to demonstrate the cosmopolitan tastes of its owner who otherwise has little use for it. Its occurrence marks a major change from Iron Age patterns of consumption, in which durable material culture played no part except, perhaps, in élite contexts. The availability of mass-produced pottery during the Roman period led to its adoption as a display item, but did not lead to a reliance on ceramics for everyday purposes, such as storage, cooking or serving food. It was incorporated into existing structures of display and competition, and after the collapse of the Roman Empire and the failure of the pottery industries in the early fifth century in Britain, the sudden loss of a supply of ceramics had no disastrous effects. The local population simply returned to a completely aceramic existence.

Indeed, we should think of the Roman countryside in the north-west as largely aceramic since the consumption of pottery does not conform to what we usually think of as pottery use. From the beginning of the first millennium BC to the tenth century AD, pottery was not in general use in Lancashire and Cheshire except in a few anomalous places, such as military installations and villas. A pattern of consumption was established in the Late Bronze Age, insofar as it dealt with durable material culture, which endured for almost two millennia. This is the *longue durée* of Braudel writ large: Annaliste history has conceived of the long term as consisting of structures lasting two or three centuries at most, but archaeology allows the definition of even longer and more stable patterns.

Summary

North-west *Britannia* straddled the border between the urban culture of the south and east and the military culture of the north and west. To write its history in military terms, as earlier generations of archaeologists did, marginalises the local population and has not helped us to locate its farms.

The most recent approach, using landscape history, has ignored and misrepresented archaeological data in such a way that it brings us no closer to the farmers. By ignoring the implications of the sparse material culture remains of these people, others have been content to dismiss them as irrelevant to the history of the region. The first half of this paper may have appeared to sneer at earlier accounts: this was not the intention, although there is much fun to be had in deconstruction, hence its appeal. It is, nevertheless, important to understand the biases of previous investigators, since it will help us not to fall into the same traps, though we are no doubt creating others of our own.

It is becoming abundantly clear that the Roman period in the north-west can only be understood through structures of the *longue durée*: an enduring pattern of consumption and cultural affinity which was established in the pre-Roman Iron Age and continued into the sub-Roman period. The archaeological effect of the Roman occupation has been to 'swamp' native patterns almost beyond recognition through the colonial power's use of durable material culture and structures which in-eradicably altered the landscape. The north-western élites neatly avoided this hegemonic discourse by refusing to enter into the new consumption patterns and by remaining stolidly conservative in its tastes.

The cultural hegemony operating throughout the Roman Empire created a cosmopolitan, high culture to which most citizens probably aspired, but layered below that were military and native subcultures. *Vicanus*-centred consumption patterns were a fusion between cosmopolitan, native and military subcultures, so it is difficult to see how we can regard them as a truly separate type. These different patterns can be viewed as layers of information, with cosmopolitan subculture being simply the uppermost and most easily-visible layer.

We are also looking at different and possibly incompatible time scales. The history of Roman Britain is usually written in terms of *événements* and *conjonctures*, to use Braudel's terms (Smith 1992:25), and its archaeology can recognise patterns which lasted only a few decades, if not less, particularly in the first two centuries AD. This does not work for the peasant farmers of the north-west for whom the amount and type of data forces us to write its history as one of the *longue durée*, so that we can deal only with patterns which endured for centuries. The two histories do not mesh. We are not looking at a population which experienced no change — the Roman conquest, for instance, must have been traumatic for those who lived through it — but at one for which processes of rapid change are not recoverable archaeologically because the rapid succession of dramatic events had no repercussions in material culture.

If we are to write the history of the Roman north-west, it has to be on the region's own terms. All too frequently the investigators of its past have been Rome-centred in their views and have either failed to appreciate the specific historical context, placing it in a normative account of the empire in general or of Britain specifically, or have concentrated on the military aspects, with all the chronological distortion that entails. Only by taking a few steps back, by deconstructing the texts of our precursors and by attempting to understand the consumption patterns, the mind-set, of the Romano-British peasant farmers, can we appreciate how much has been missed, how much we still have to learn and, paradoxically, how much information we already possess.

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