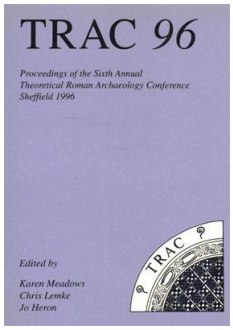

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18. "Roman" Urban Form and Culture Difference

by S. Clarke and D. J. Robinson

Introduction – Identifying Difference

When dismissing the claims of Panopeus, a little town in central Greece, to be called a *polis*, Pausanias, a later Greek writer, gave almost a 'checklist' definition of what a settlement should posses in artistic-architectural terms in order to be regarded as a city. According to this definition Panopeus could not be considered as a city because it had "no government buildings, no theatre, no agora, no water conducted to a fountain, and [it is] where the people live in hovels like mountain cabins on the edge of a ravine" (10.4.1). Unfortunately, this monument-centred notion of the Classical city, defined solely in terms of its public buildings and the impressive dwellings of the elite, has been reinforced by the 'big digs' of Classical archaeology's past. These excavations always targeted the impressive monuments in central areas of cities at the expense of the more humble and mundane dwellings on their periphery (e.g. Sabratha – Kendrick 1986). This highly reductionist perspective has been faithfully handed down into contemporary archaeological literature (e.g. Owens 1991). Indeed it has been proposed that the ancient city may be reduced to one, or possibly two contrasting Weberian 'ideal types'; the 'consumer city' (cf. Finley 1985; Jongman 1988) and/or the 'producer city' (cf. Maiuri 1960; Moeller 1976).

The similarity of monumental public architecture across the Empire represents the participation in a form of Empire wide cultural identity. This apparent architectural homogeneity, however, effectively masks some very real social and economic differences between cities. For example, the Romano-British forum-basilica complex, usually planned and executed as a single unit, was a far cry from the organic development of the Pompeian forum with its six centuries of growth. The difference between the two types of fora could possibly be explained in terms of the implantation of a specifically Roman architectural form *de novo* in Britannia. Yet more surprisingly Romano-British fora were also rather different from those of Gaul (figure 1), which usually have a far more prominent role for religious activity (Blagg 1980; Millett 1990:72). This strongly suggests that the facade of Roman institutions were being subtly modified to accommodate the local social reality. Thus it is possible to hypothesise that the development of urban society in Britannia involved, not a simple translation of a Roman form onto an indigenous landscape, but a dynamic cultural negotiation between the forces for change and those for stasis and the creation of a specifically local identity which was expressed in architecture (cf. Richardson this volume).

Whilst acknowledging the individuality of Classical cities, if urban archaeology is not to degenerate into the mere cataloguing of data it must attempt to identify patterns and develop generalising urban models (cf. Dyson 1993). However, the tendency to gloss over differences has gone too far. This paper proposes to look beyond the superficially similar monumental architecture of Roman

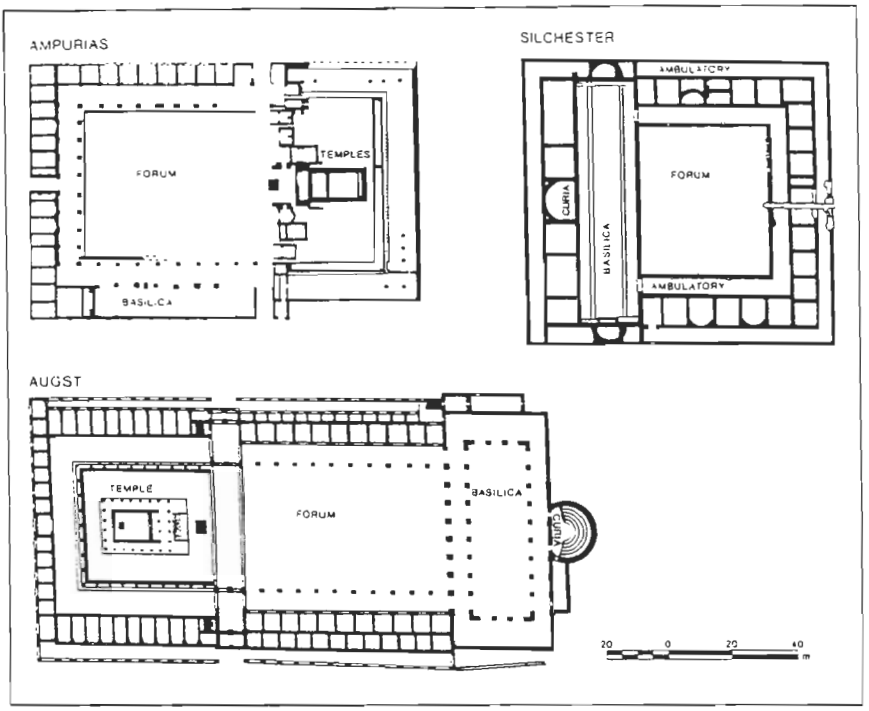

Figure 1. Comparative plans of fora, after Millett 1990

period cities and instead to consider their social composition. After all, the city is a social product and represents the social choices and relationships of the particular urban society that constructed them (cf. Laurence 1994:19; Raper 1977:191). A consideration of the social structure of a city may be undertaken from the study of all of its dwellings.

The comparison of the social structures of different cities around the empire has seldom been undertaken, instead there exists a rather naive belief that the social structure of one ancient city is very much like that of another. Again this is the result of an over-reliance on the ideal types. The model of the 'consumer city' necessitates a certain social and political structure existing within a city. For example, there were *decuriones* in the *colonia* of Pompeii (e.g. CIL IV, 499) and in Glevum, Britannia (RIB 161). This could suggest that both cities had similar political and hence social structures and that both cities were dominated by a traditional Roman landholding elite. However, can we really accept that the British magistrates processed to the forum every day in order to debate matters of law, as we are led to believe their Pompeian counterparts did, or was the decurional title merely a reflection of status within the provincial city? This paper seeks to question the assumption that the cities of the empire were all socially and politically similar through a comparison of the social structures of Pompeii, perhaps the most archetypal Roman city, with the two best documented Romano-British cities, Silchester and Caerwent. Using an ideal type model all three may be economically interpreted as being classic Finley 'consumer cities', and as such they *must* be socially similar, regardless of the cultural, geographical and temporal difference between them. However, as the above discussion of monumental public architecture highlighted, is it not also possible that

there was a form of cultural negotiation which led to the creation of a specifically Romano-British urban social structure?

Silchester and Caerwent

Silchester and Caerwent represent the closest Britain has to complete city-scapes. However, in other respects these are far from ideal examples for study. Firstly, they were mainly excavated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when investigation and recording were haphazard to say the least (Silchester – Fox 1892, 1895; Fox and St John-Hope 1890, 1893, 1894 & 1901; St John-Hope and Fox 1900; St John-Hope 1903, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1909, 1910; Caerwent – Martin *et al* 1901; Ashby 1905; Ashby *et al* 1903, 1905, 1909, 1910 & 1911; Ashby & Litt 1906, 1907). Secondly, and most significant for our purposes, the less substantial structures may well have been missed in significant numbers (Bates 1983:134–5), which could result in the under-representation of timber buildings. Consequently it must be accepted that the documented structures are only a sample of the domestic hierarchy.

Domestic architecture is culturally communicative (cf. Gottdiener & Lagopoulos 1986; Robinson 1997; Wallace-Hadrill 1994), that is, it possesses the ability to indicate the owner's (or occupier's) social standing within the community. Romano-Italic authors, such as Cicero and Vitruvius state that men need housing equal to their status. They advised members of the urban elite to possess homes with large amounts of reception space in order to carry out the necessities of social and political life (Cicero *de officiis* 1.138–9; Vitruvius *de architectura* 6.5). Consequently, for the Roman world we can postulate that the size of a dwelling is roughly proportional to the status of its owner or occupier. This is not to suggest, however, that property values were the same throughout the empire and that a decurion's house in Silchester would be the same as one in Pompeii. What is suggested is that if Pompeii and the Romano-British cities were socially similar, there would be a comparable distribution of large and small dwellings.

The social hierarchy of the urban community may be plotted as a histogram in two ways (figure 2): as the number of buildings in various size groups (a technique which over emphasises the importance of the smallest buildings); or as the roofed area of each size group. Both techniques illustrate that Silchester and Caerwent possessed very similar property size range profiles (figures 2 and 3). In other words, the social make up of the two cities would appear to have been closely comparable.

Additionally, at both Silchester and Caerwent an estimated fifteen percent of the walled areas were given over to domestic roofed space. The roofed area of houses is only a very approximate indication of the number of inhabitants. Furthermore, there will not necessarily have been a constant relationship between roofed area and household population across all social classes. Nevertheless, this does suggest that the two sites had similar population densities.

That the two sites should show such striking similarities was unexpected as historically they are usually portrayed as contrasting in character. Silchester was the epitome of native acceptance of *Romanitas*, adopting an urban form while still part of a client kingdom, and blossoming into a medium sized centre of Classical culture (sic). Caerwent in contrast became the capital of the Siluries relatively late in the Roman period, after a long and bitter resistance (Wacher 1976:375–6). Hence, it was amongst the smallest of the Romano-British 'public' towns. Furthermore, it remained on the edge of the civilian zone, close to the legionary base at Caerleon, which is often seen as having had a profound influence on its social and architectural development (cf. de la Bedoyere 1991:147, figure 115). The similarity between these two sites does not prove that all Romano-British cities were

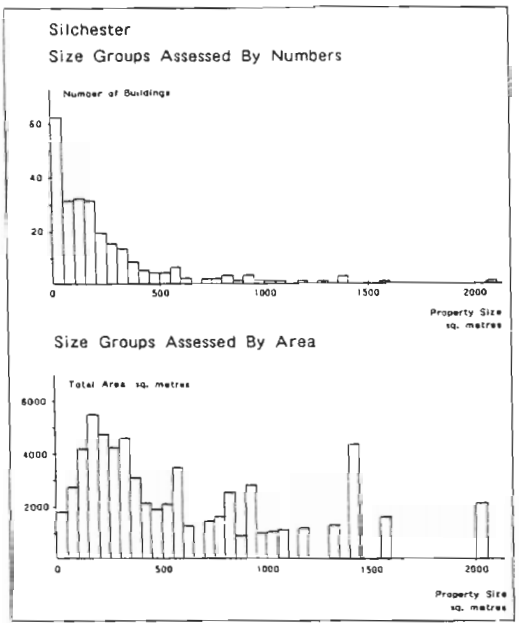

Figure 2. Silchester size groups

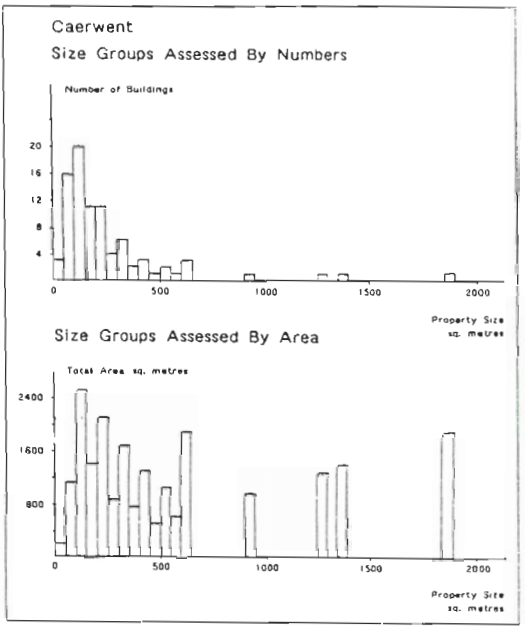

Figure 3. Caerwent size groups

the same, but it does suggest that there was a specifically Romano-British cultural reaction to urbanisation.

Pompeii

Though 'cleared' rather than 'excavated', the site of Pompeii provides virtually ideal conditions for the large-scale examination of urban social topography (Robinson 1997). About two thirds of the site has been cleared and even though much of this was done before, or at least without, modern recording, today's ground plans (van der Poel 1984, 1986) make it a relatively easy task to identify individual properties and calculate their roofed area. In addition, due to the nature of the site's destruction, the city plan we are presented with genuinely represents a single phase of occupation.

Analysis of Pompeii suggests that this city was characterised by a very different form of urbanism from that which developed in Britain. Pompeii, for example, was much more compact than the 'garden cities' of Britannia (even if a significant number of timber buildings have been missed at the latter). It must, therefore, have had a far denser population, with c. forty percent of the walled area having been occupied by private roofed space. This is an important typological difference in its own right and deserves some explanation. It also has important implications for assessing the relative size of urban populations. It would seem likely that even though Pompeii's walled area of sixty-six hectares was only sixty-five percent larger than Silchester's at forty hectares, its population was in the order of four or five times greater. It also seems to have had a rather different property size profile (figure 4). The range of building sizes was broadly comparable with the British examples. There was a numerically small urban elite, resident in large and imposing residences and abundant smaller

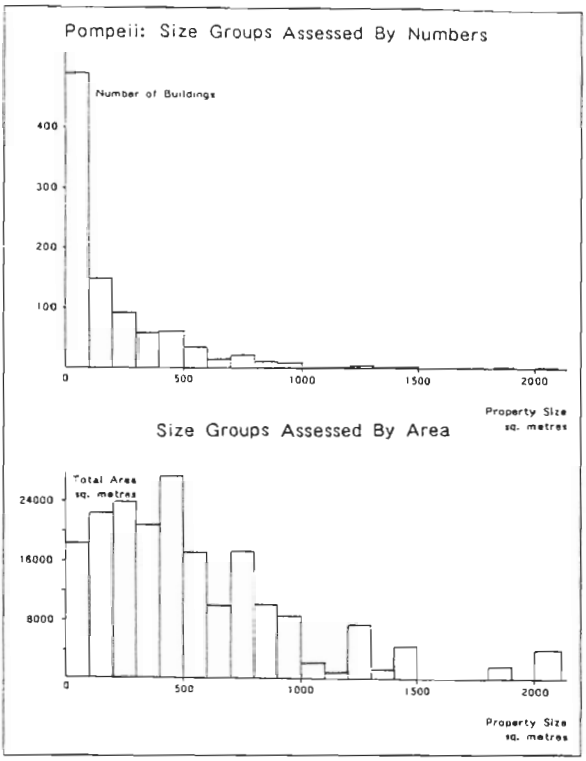

Figure 4. Pompeii size groups

properties of their social inferiors. However, at Pompeii there was a significantly higher proportion of medium sized properties (see table 1). While it would be wrong to suggest that this represents a *middle class* (see below), it does perhaps suggest that Pompeii's society was less polarised between very large and very small households.

Social Structure

In order to move beyond the simple statement that the size range of Pompeii's private buildings were different from those of Silchester and Caerwent, it is necessary to consider the character of these buildings and equate them (if only loosely) with social class.

The domestic architecture of Silchester and Caerwent can essentially be split into two types (see figure 5). The smallest structures were typically free standing 'strip' buildings, set with their long axis perpendicular to the nearest streets. Often these were closely associated with a furnace or other industrial activity and it is reasonable to argue that their occupants were predominantly artisans and

Property Size	Pompeii	Silchester	Caerwent
0 to 400 m2	43.5 %	50.75 %	47.0 %
400 to 800 m2	36.0 %	21.0 %	23.5 %
800 to 2000 m2	20.5 %	28.25 %	29.5 %

Table 1. Proportion of domestic roofed space occupied by small, medium & large properties

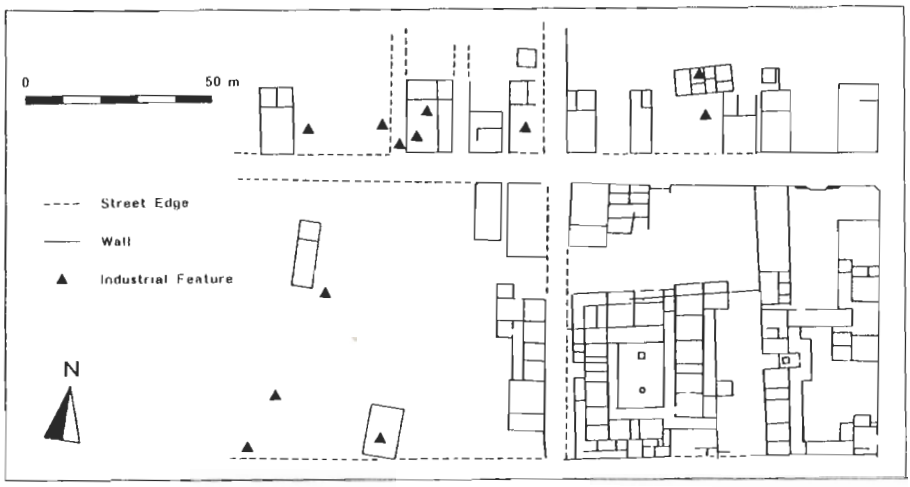

Figure 5. Silchester Insulae IX, X, XII and XIV, after Boon 1974

traders. The larger buildings at Silchester and Caerwent were less obviously involved with industrial activity. These were overwhelmingly oriented for the maximum visual impact from the street. Architecturally they are very similar to rural villas (Walthew 1975:189), making it difficult to avoid the conclusion that villas and town houses accommodated essentially the same land owning class. While it is quite possible that these rich households derived profit from the activities of the strip buildings, for example, through land rent, the spatial separation between landed wealth and commerce is marked.

The size range profile of Pompeian dwellings suggests a city which was far less socially polarised than either Silchester or Caerwent. In terms of a hierarchy of domestic architecture, it has been shown that the houses of Pompeii can effectively be reduced to four types (Robinson 1997), in contrast to the two basic types of Romano-British building. Significantly in Pompeii there was no spatial separation between elite and trade (see figure 6). Shops and workshops not only abut the richest houses, but often actually inter-connect with them. If archaeology means anything, the differences between the physical relationship of the elite and trade properties must be reflected to some degree in social attitudes and economic practice.

The Taboo of Trade

The intimate proximity of elite households to commercial activity in Pompeii suggests that the historically recorded antipathy of the ruling class for 'filthy luca' had, by the first century AD, broken down at least in practice. While Cicero wrote that "trade, if it is on a small scale is to be considered vulgar" (*de officiis* I, xlii, 151), it is increasingly realised that the words and actions of the Roman elite could be complete opposites. The supposed prohibition on elite participation in petty economic activity has been exposed as largely fictional. Recent excavations at the foot of the Palatine Hill in Rome have revealed a mixture of shops in and amongst the dwellings of the senatorial aristocracy (Carandini 1989). The attraction of the Italian elite to commercial activity is not hard to explain. Trade, industry and urban property speculation represented huge opportunities for revenue, with much higher returns than could be obtained from investment in land. Participation in trade had the

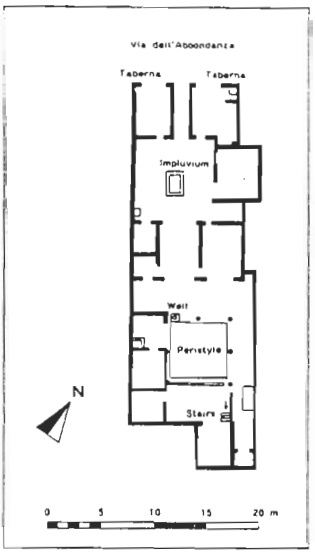

Figure 6. Pompeii Regio I Insula VIII Casa della Statuetta Indiana, after van der Poel 1986

additional advantage that it spread income through times of the year when no agricultural returns were forthcoming (Wallace-Hadrill 1994:121).

The social hierarchy of Italy during the early empire seems to have been rather fluid. The famous dedicatory inscription from the rebuilding of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii (CIL X, 846) clearly illustrates the high levels of social mobility within this society. The inscription celebrates the promotion of Numerius Popidius Celsinus, the son of a freedman, into the decurionate and amply illustrates that families with the origins of their wealth in trade could, given time, elevate themselves to the elite (Mouritsen 1988:123). The natural outcome of this may well be the enlarged middle group present in Pompeii. This is by no means to suggest that a *middle class* of traders with separate interests to those of *upper class* land owners had emerged (*contra* Maiuri 1960:116; Moeller 1976). 'Traders' bought land as a safe investment and to increase their status, while 'land owners' invested in trade in order to maintain their sumptuous lifestyles and political ambitions. Nevertheless, the erosion of the taboo on trade must have had an immense impact on the volume of commercial activity and therefore the potential size of the urban populations.

Romano-British Elite Attitudes

The assertion that elite houses in Romano-British towns were less obviously associated with industry and physically separated from commercial buildings, will no doubt be countered by the observation that the plans of Silchester and Caerwent actually represent the superimposition of both early and late town plans. This is certainly true; the excavation reports of Verulamium (Frere 1972, 1983) and other public towns, where chronological control is more rigorous, indicate that the early urban phase had a far higher proportion of small commercial premises, whilst later towns were dominated by elite town houses. Although this would create rather different size range profiles for the early and late periods, the observation does not challenge the central argument that British cities were different from those of Italy. At no point in their histories would Silchester and Caerwent have had a size range profile (and by implication the social make up) reminiscent of Pompeii. In fact, the addition of temporal information actually strengthens the argument that the British elite had a negative

attitude to trade which was at variance with their Italian equivalent. The widespread relative decline in industrial and commercial activity at major public towns after the mid-second century (Reece 1980:86) was accompanied by increasing 'investment' in richly appointed town houses (Walthew 1975:189). The decline in commercial activity in public towns also coincided with the flourishing of a completely different class of urban settlement, 'small towns' (cf. Burnham & Wacher 1990). These are an extremely variable group of settlements, but many appear to have consisted almost entirely of simple strip buildings and have possessed few, if any, 'villa' style houses or the major public monuments of the elite dominated cities.

It is apparent that Roman Pompeii was a synthesis of both the public and industrial urban forms and that both spheres of activity were under the domination of the Pompeian urban elite (Robinson 1997; Wallace-Hadrill 1994:121). Such a situation is not apparent from the Romano-British evidence, indeed, the largest commercial towns and most important pottery industries appear to have been located close to tribal boundaries, well away from the cities of the landed elite and the main villa concentrations (Clarke 1993:56–9; Hodder 1972). It may thus be possible to hypothesise that in Britain, whilst the major 'public' urban centres represented an important market which should have stimulated economic activity, elite attitudes provided a significant constraint on the commercial development of the city. The apparent stand off between labour and capital may, to some extent, explain the limited success of British urban centres which were generally small and which ultimately failed to survive into the post Roman period, unlike many of their Italian counterparts. It can thus be concluded that although there was commercial activity in Romano-British towns, only the elite could mobilise the kind of funds needed to expand production significantly, but they did not seem inclined to do so.

Conclusion

The analysis of private buildings at the Romano-British cities of Silchester and Caerwent has suggested that socially they were remarkably similar. They were built to a similar density and their buildings were architecturally of comparable types, with similar proportions of different sized households. In contrast the architectural fabric of these two cities differed markedly from Pompeii. In particular, Pompeii was more densely occupied, household sizes seem to have been less polarised between rich and poor and there does not seem to have been the spatial separation of commercial and elite property. By implication it seems likely that British and Italian cities enjoyed rather different socio-economic conditions.

Just as the boundaries of the Romano-British *civitates* probably corresponded closely with former tribal boundaries, the social structures of the British cities may well represent, in large part, the continuation of the pre-existing indigenous social hierarchy (Clarke 1996). The cities of Roman Britain represent a uniquely Romano-British cultural response to the introduction of urban life. In the early phase of urban activity, monumental public architecture was adopted to symbolise the participation of the community in a 'global' Roman culture. However, the differences between the forum-basilica complexes of Gaul and Britannia illustrate that the move to monumental public architecture was the result of negotiation between indigenous and 'Roman' cultures, not the 'cloning' of distinctly Italic urban society. Romano-British elite culture seems to have rejected the accumulation of capital through trade and the industrial development of the city.

In Pompeii, however, the quest for money appears to have been a pre-occupation even for the pinnacle of the social elite. For example, Gnaeus Allieus Nigidius Maius, a member of a long standing aristocratic family, a *duumviratus quinq* (CIL IV, 499) and a munificent patron of the games (CIL IV, 1179) was involved in property speculation (CIL IV, 138) involving the buildings surrounding

his *domus* in the insula Arriana Pollina. It has been suggested that such large Pompeian houses provided the social nexus for their local community. Gnaeus Allieus Nigidius Maius would have effectively controlled his neighbourhood and drawn from it both a large income and political support (Mouritsen 1988:176) through numerous social, political and economic ties (Robinson 1997). Even though identical municipal titles are recorded from Britannia (RIB 161), British cities never resembled the social mixture of Pompeii. Consequently, it must be hypothesised that in the Romano-British city the power and domination of the elite was not expressed through the classic Roman patronage network. This was spatially represented in Pompeii by the close proximity of the dwellings of the elite to their poorer, subservient neighbours. In the city of later Roman Britain social control was not defined by the management of a large urban voting population, as was the case in first century AD Italy. Rather, power was concentrated in the hands of a few aristocrats and was symbolised through residence in the late city by large imposing elite mansions which characterised the urban landscape. This may well represent the continuation of a pre-existing indigenous social structure (cf. Clarke 1996) rather than the development of a cloned Italian political system.

Pausanias would have recognised in Pompeii, Silchester and Caerwent all of the essential characteristics of a Roman city (10.4.1). Yet as has been shown, the Romano-British city was fundamentally different from its Italian counterpart in social, political and economic terms. Such a situation was the result of cultural negotiation and led to the development of a specifically Romano-British urban form. In a similar way the interaction between Roman and indigenous Samnite would have led to the creation of a specifically Romano-Italic Pompeii in the years after the Social War and the deduction of the Roman colony. Consequently it must be accepted that there can not be one definitive ideal type Roman city. Regional cultural attitudes slowly evolving over time would have created a mosaic of explicitly Roman, but subtly different cities across the empire.

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