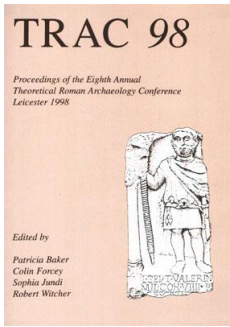

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Poverty or Power?
The native response to Roman rule in the Fenland

by Garrick Fincham

Introduction – Romanization and post-colonial theory

This paper is concerned primarily with the implications of discrepant experience, for our interpretation of the evidence for Romano-British settlement in the East Anglian Fens. Discrepant experience encourages us to consider the perspective of the conquered, as well as the conqueror. Therefore, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of the contentious issue of 'Romanization', as an understanding of what we mean by the term is central to any exploration of relations between different groups within the empire. The approach of Millett (1990) had been superseded, and Romanization can no longer be seen as a purely acculturative process (Webster 1996a:11). Yet, in an environment where the concept of discrepant discourse (Said 1993:35–50) has undermined fatally any concept of the Roman Empire as a unified experiential whole, and in which we are retreating from the comfortable absolutes that we have created in the past (Mattingly 1997a:11), attempting to define a widespread and generalised process of any kind sits uncomfortably with approaches which seek to emphasise difference and variability across the empire and within individual provinces and local communities (Terrenato 1998:24).

To try to redefine Romanization then, is to fall into the same trap of trying to find a prefabricated, simplified, and general set of rules to think about complex cultural interaction in many different situations: in effect to universalise the *process* of Romanization. To do so is to maintain a Rome centred, hegemonic view, in which Roman culture is given an overarching power to subsume and dominate native cultures. Such universalism fails to 'acknowledge or value [native] cultural difference' (Ashcroft *et al.* 1998:235). This, of course, leaves no room for the consideration of the uniqueness of the experience of individual communities subject to Roman imperial domination, but reduces those communities, no matter where they are in space or time, to identical units, their domination to be measured by identical criterion. A Roman pot, therefore, becomes an absolute indicator on a meta-scale of Roman imperial domination, and thus we have eradicated 'context' from any consideration of 'Romanization'. The presence (or absence) of Samian, for example, as an absolute indicator of Romanization (or non-Romanization), is to deny something which, on the smaller scale of an individual excavation, all archaeologists accept, that *context* is vital to understanding material culture. Once we begin to examine the individual contexts in which 'Romanizing forces' are playing themselves out, we must abandon any universal definition of Romanization, and move in a new direction in which we accept that 'Romanized' cultures deserve individual interpretations. Alcock (1997) and Mattingly (1997b) working in Greece and North Africa respectively have worked along these lines, characterising the regions that they have studied as landscapes of resistance, or opportunity. Whilst acknowledging that these landscapes are created within the system of empire, by terming them 'landscapes of imperialism' (Mattingly 1997a:11), the terms resistance or opportunity are empowering ones for the native, in that the landscape is primarily characterised by the contribution of native agency to their own condition. Thus, looking at my own data, the settlement pattern of the Fens is not simply the product of Roman colonisation. As agents acting upon their own condition, we must allow the native population of the Fens input into the process which created the landscape in which they lived. It may be characterised as a landscape of resistance or opportunity (both implying the exercise of native will), but the natives are not merely passive individuals in varying states of acculturation.

Deconstruction

The full title of the Royal Geographical Society publication *The Fenland in Roman Times, studies in a major area of peasant colonization* (Phillips 1970) encapsulates many of the elements of what has since become the orthodox view of the Roman period in the Fens, and is a clear starting point for any deconstruction. Phillips' use of the word 'peasant' has particularly intriguing connotations. This area is difficult, as no wholly value neutral term exists to refer to a subject population in the Roman Empire, and this difficulty has serious ramifications for our understanding of their experience (see Webster 1996b). *Peasant* in particular implies an inferior populace with a low standard of material culture (when compared to an idealised Roman norm), and in the manner of Webster's (1996b:111) discourse of the 'timeless primitive' abandons them to a steady state of being for which there is no history. The word *native*, although not without its difficulties (Ashcroft *et al.* 1998: 158–9) seems at present as good, or at least no worse, than any other, and is the term adopted here.

To move forwards, and begin to write a 'native' history, free from a Romanocentric conceptual framework and, thus, less entangled in modern value judgements, we must also consider the notion of poverty. The Fen farmers, to use classic terminology, failed to 'Romanize', and were poverty stricken (Hall & Coles 1994:121). However, this standpoint is clearly a modern value judgement based upon a reading of Roman material culture, something never clearly defined, as inherently superior to native culture, that is, something never fully justified. 'Poverty' as an archaeological concept reinforces the dis-empowerment of the native and enforces their marginality. A re-reading of the Roman failure fully to acculturate material culture in the Fens is key to our reconstruction of native history.

The foundations of re-construction

The area within the Fenland of which our current knowledge is most complete is the central fen area around the town of March, Cambridgeshire (Figure 1). This area has received extensive survey cover (Phillips 1970; Hall 1987, 1992) and has, by Fenland standards, a high proportion of published excavation data (Jackson & Potter 1997; Potter 1981). It is in this area that a closer look at the archaeological data is most profitable, and in particular it is helpful to examine the complex of sites on the fen island of Stonea (Figure 1).

Evidence has been recovered from this area of a ritual complex, which stretches back to the Neolithic. This was, at least periodically, in use up to the destruction of the Icenian client kingdom, in which, on the basis of the coin data, probably controlled the Central Fens (Jackson & Potter 1997:671–94). Whilst this region may have been marginal in a geographical sense, the scale of this complex argues against any vision of the area as being an uninhabited backwater. Indeed, as a source of a wide range of wetland resources, including salt, the area may well have been perceived as very valuable. The late pre-Roman Iron Age (LPRIA) earthwork at Stonea Camp, an impressive monument positioned in the central Fens, along with increasing evidence of Iron Age occupation in this area as a whole, can leave us in no doubt that activity of considerable intensity was occurring prior to the Roman conquest.

The Central Fens were not a vacant landscape when the Romans arrived. This is not a new suggestion (Hall & Coles 1994:103–4) but with existing structures that needed to be controlled, we are entitled to ask what the effect this Iron Age presence had upon Roman activity. Amongst the first actions of the Roman authorities were the building of a fort at Grandford (Figure 1), long theorised, and now proven by recent aerial photographs (T.W. Potter, pers. comm.), along with the development of a complex communications system consisting of canals and roads (Fincham, forthcoming).

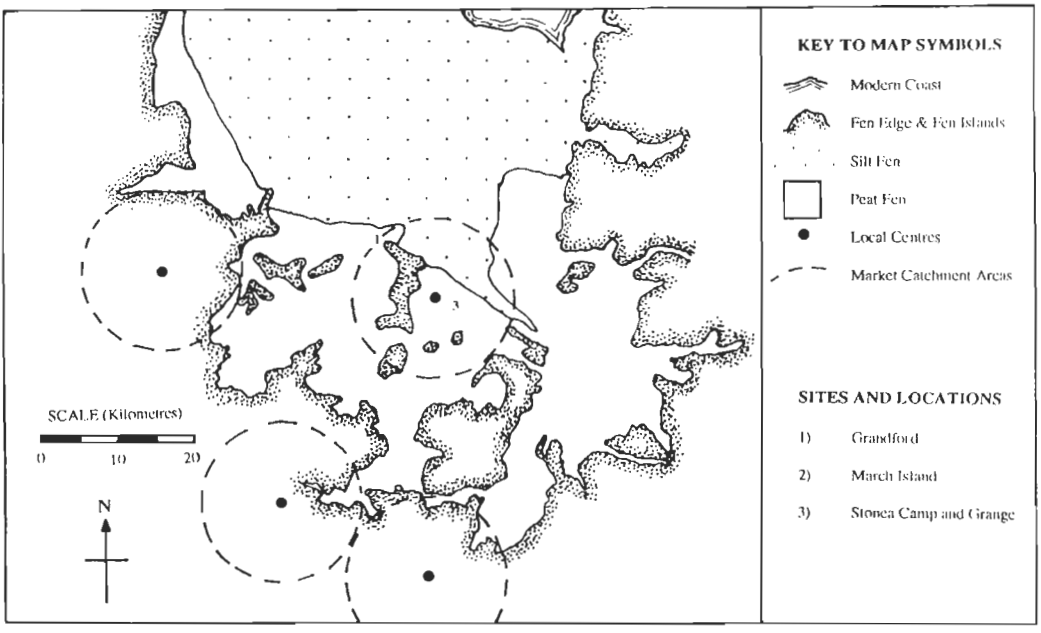

Figure 1 Area map showing the East Anglian Fens, sites mentioned in the text, and the catchment areas of possible local centre market places (After Hall & Coles 1994; Hingley 1989; Phillips 1970).

In the early second century AD a further feature was inserted into this core area. A planned settlement not far removed from Stonea Camp (Figure 1). This site at Stonea Grange also boasted a market place, a temple, possibly dedicated to Minerva, and a large stone tower (Jackson & Potter 1997:684). This last structure, built of imported stone, and containing a great amount of window glass, has been claimed as the administrative headquarters of the Fens, the possible base of a centurion with administrative authority (Jackson & Potter 1997:686). Other scholars have cast doubt upon the centrality of the Stonea site to the administrative infrastructure of the region (Mackreth 1996:234), but the unusual nature of the structure in the context of the Fens, must make it a strong candidate for an 'official' site of some nature. It is certainly true that the material culture of the site is not what we might expect of such a centre. Although there are artefacts such as amphora and glass bottles, quantities are low compared with other sites for which a similar status is claimed (Jackson & Potter 1997:685), though this need not dent (in fact, it may enhance) the 'official' interpretation of the site, as I shall later argue. The building and the temple were demolished around AD 220 but the settlement continued, lasting even beyond the end of the Roman presence in the area.

Several reasons for the decommissioning of the official core of the foundation have been advanced: the structure's isolation from main communication routes (Hall 1992:67), poor drainage, and the failure of the natives to take up the running of the centre due to a 'thin sense of *Romanitas*' (Jackson & Potter 1997:690). The latter of these suggestions at least gives some room for native involvement in the failure of Stonea, but paraphrased in language orientated to the Roman centre. We are left with the impression of recalcitrant Fen farmers, refusing to buy into the 'imperial ideal'. But *why* should this overt act of *colonialism*, defined by Said (1993:8), the act of a dominating metropolitan centre 'implanting...settlements upon a distant territory', have failed? Furthermore, what implications did that failure have for Roman *imperialism*, defined again by Said (1993:8) as 'the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre' in the Fens, and how did this effect the lives of the native population?

It may be of significance to this question that the LPRIA site of Stonea Camp appears to have been at its most active during the period of the Icenian client kingdom, at the conclusion of which the site fell out of use (Jackson & Potter 1997:677). The absorption of the Iceni was not easy, or smooth. A wider glance at the Icenian *civitas* reveals that there were fewer villa structures here than in other areas of the South East, few urban centres, and the civitas capital, Venta Icenorum developed at a comparatively late date (Wacher 1995:25). It is, therefore, possible that violent Roman re-occupation of this area after the Boudican revolt had a long lasting impact upon the native experience of empire. However, couching this impact in purely negative economic terms and labelling it 'poverty' allows no positive role to the conquered population in influencing their own condition, and once more ascribes them a passive status. This is an approach, which ignores other possible interpretations of material culture that we label 'poor', and helps to prevent the recovery of a native perspective.

There appears to be little or no status differentiation within rural Fenland settlement, a feature most obvious in the region's lack of villas, and it is this aspect of the settlement pattern that has in part been responsible for the characterisation of the area as poor. We might advance an explanation for this lack of villas based upon the Boudican revolt: that in the aftermath of the rebellion's defeat the native aristocracy suffered most heavily (Jackson & Potter 1997:689). If this were so, there would be no one to construct villas. However, it is unlikely that there was no gradation of status within post-rebellion native society *at all*, and even if we envisage the complete destruction of the native aristocracy (for which, in any case, we have no evidence), we would expect the re-emergence of a native hierarchy over time. Even if this were, as Grahame (1998:7) envisages, not a formal native elite, but in the form of social bonds established between 'agents of Roman power...and those they had conquered', this still constitutes a gradation of status between those natives directly involved in such relationships, and those who were not. Thus, irrespective of the fate of the native hierarchy at the point of conquest, we must conclude that in the post-rebellion Fens, status was being demonstrated in ways that do not show as readily in the archaeological record as an elaborate stone building.

It has been suggested by Hingley (1989:100) that the majority of settlements in the Fens exhibit the characteristics of the 'girdle' pattern, that is to say a pattern in which the settlements surround an area of land, which is held in common. He also suggested that this form of settlement is indicative of the common descent of different elements of the community within those settlements (Hingley 1989:100). Such kin based extended communities are best interpreted as the survival of some aspects of the LPRIA social structure of the Fens into the Roman period. It can be argued, therefore, that what we see is a landscape characterised positively as one which had retained some pre-conquest features, and not a landscape which is characterised negatively by its lack of a certain feature of the normative version of the Romano-British landscape (i.e. the villa). This point is perhaps underlined by the lack of Roman period 'local centres' in the region. Hingley (1989:114) has suggested that in pre-modern agricultural societies there is a practical limit to how far a small farmer can travel to attend a market. He sets this limit at seven to ten kilometres and, although, the exact figure may be debatable, the distribution of such centres in the Fens leaves little doubt that the network of markets as currently understood was not sufficient to service the region (Figure 1). Indeed, the only known market from the Fens proper is located at Stonea, directly in front of the main building and positioned in such a location it is likely to have been heavily regulated. Exchange between settlements cannot have taken place through such 'official channels' across much of the Fens, as these channels never even developed in many places, and local trade must have remained largely informal, and thus difficult, if not impossible, for the Roman authorities to regulate. The physical presence of this market place in the central Fens, precisely the area where a trading network (perhaps centred on Stonea Camp?) must already have existed between LPRIA settlements, may be read as an attempt to symbolically control a pre-existing system, rather than

to create a functioning economic market in a conquered territory. This act of *colonialism* was a key tool of Roman *imperialism*.

Having offered a picture of LPRIA activity in the central Fens as relatively vibrant and resilient in the face of a turbulent incorporation into the Roman Empire, we see a region which fails, or refuses, to adopt many of the material trappings acquired by neighbouring regions in the process we loosely label Romanization. This, together with the nature of settlement at which we have briefly glimpsed, appears to suggest that the Fens as a region did not succumb readily to Roman cultural influence. If we seek to explain this situation through an expression of native identity, we can create a reading of the evidence which allows room for the native population to engage with their condition as active agents, and advance the thesis that the people of the Fens consciously characterised themselves as being in a state of non-violent resistance to the Roman empire. Aspects of the material culture hitherto identified as symptoms of simple poverty may then be seen as pointers towards a vibrant native identity during the Roman occupation, and to an extent, the native response to that occupation. We may term this situation 'a landscape of resistance', a term used by Alcock (1997:105), when considering the 'unsuccessful' province of Greece.

In such a scenario, the very presence of the Stonea tower in this landscape becomes an overt act of imperial symbolism. It was this structure, and its accompanying temple and market, that the Romans constructed in close and obvious proximity to the equivalent LPRIA focus at Stonea Camp. In so doing, the imperial authorities sought to signal their control of administration, economic exchange and religion to natives who were engaged in cultural resistance. The small amounts of imported material at Stonea Grange, rather than weakening the interpretation of the site as an official centre, is rather an indication that the impact of the Stonea complex was as much to do with its simple presence, as with its actual function. The lack of material investment in the running of the site is an indication that although such a proto-urban settlement was implanted upon the central Fens, it was a hollow institution, an attempt to project imperial authority to an uncooperative populace, who in making positive cultural choices, had engaged in resistance to a way of life which was not their own.

Conclusions

To characterise the Fens as a poor area, a backwater in which the natives suffered from a lack of access to Roman material culture, is to present a Romanocentric view, which rests upon a simplistic understanding of cultural interaction and poverty. However, post-colonial theory allows us to construct a rival interpretation, and in doing so we not only take account of the perspective of the native, but also reach a better understanding of how Roman domination was enforced. The benefits of such an approach are to allow us to explore more fully the power relations symbolised by the official 'place' of Stonea Grange.

The image of empire that was projected into the Fens was characterised by the alien structures and institutions, and tainted by the violence that crushed the Boudican revolt. In these circumstances the local understanding of the meaning of 'Empire' was negative, something to be feared and actively resisted, rather than something to be participated in and embraced. In shaping their response to Roman rule the native populace rejected the symbolism and also the substance of Stonea, but accepted, if not a commitment to the imperial ideal, at least the minimum physical demands of imperial exploitation. From the Roman perspective, LPRIA structures were colonised principally to signal imperial domination, rather than to actually control the minutiae of administration, or the market place. Once domination was secure, Stonea became redundant, and the centrepiece of imperial architectural symbolism at Stonea was withdrawn, thus representing the positive conclusion of a 'negotiation between ruler and ruled' (Mattingly 1997a: 10).

In this paper I have tried not simply to deconstruct the colonial archaeology of the Fens, but to begin a reconstruction along post-colonial lines. What is presented here is only a first step in

that reconstruction, little more than a consideration of one site, albeit an important one. But the rise and fall of the Stonea complex, and its implications for Roman imperialism in the region, demonstrate the potential of the Fens as a study in post-colonial archaeology.

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