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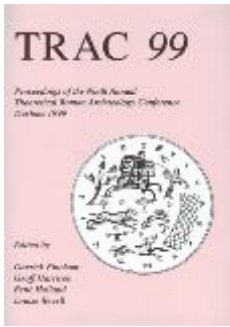

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Romanisation, Status and the Landscape: Extracting a Discrepant Perspective from Survey Data

by Garrick Fincham

Romanisation is a topic which is fraught with difficulty, and cannot be adequately explored in the short space of a single paper. In considering this issue, therefore, rather than attempting an exhaustive discussion of its development as a concept, I will simply note a few thoughts about the nature of Romanisation as a preface to our main discussion.

Firstly, many traditional concepts of Romanisation are one sided (Hingley 1996), and even at its most advanced (Millett 1990a & b), is acculturative. As a model it takes no account of native agency, turning them into passive bystanders to their own assimilation into a hegemonic vision of the Roman Empire (Webster 1996). We can begin to address this problem through the application of post-colonial theory, and particularly the concept of discrepant experience. This branch of theory has developed in the work of Edward Said (1994: 35-50), the idea that there is no normative basis for the way in which we experience our condition, and our perspective is dependant on where we are located within prevailing social discourses.

Mattingly (1997a: 11-15) points out the difficulties with attempting to apply this approach to the ancient world, principally the lack of written texts to inform us about the lives of the opponents of Rome, though he suggests that archaeology provides a text, albeit one which is difficult to read. Alcock (1997) and Mattingly (1997b) offer two case studies informed by this approach, considering provincial landscapes from the perspectives of those who inhabited and worked them, rather than those who ruled them. This produced two opposing pictures of respective landscapes of resistance and opportunity. Mattingly acknowledges the danger of a dualistic approach (1997b: 117), cautioning that by producing generalized interpretations in this way 'we may obscure the 'discrepant experiences' and changing perspectives of Roman imperialism that they encapsulate.' The challenge, then, is to evolve an interpretative framework for the data we possess for the lives of subjugated populations in the Empire which allows us to re-create their 'discrepant experience', and situate them in a discourse with Rome, but to do so in sufficient detail to acknowledge true social complexity in the past. This is not to say that Said's concept could or should be transferred wholesale to Roman Britain. Instead we must use the basic model of 'discrepant experience' to inform a discussion of the unique and historically situated circumstances of natives in Roman Britain, and use it to understand the native input into the ongoing 'colonial negotiation', rather than as a template to create a structuralist model for all imperial encounters. When attempted at the community level, as will be shown here, we begin constructing discourses which function on a scale relevant to the ancient world, and in which the 'symptoms' of what we have hitherto called Romanisation make a different kind of sense, particularly when dealing with manifestations of status by the native elite.

We must begin with an important qualification about acculturative Romanisation, which is that it is constructed as a homogenising process, or as Hingley (1996: 44) terms it an

'assumption of linear progress from simple to complex'. This is a model which we apply to all native communities in the Roman Empire, categorising them as 'more or less' romanised. But in doing so we have in fact reduced the native response to their conquest to little more than positioning them on a spectrum of Romanisation. This distorts our view of lived experience in the Roman Empire by relegating refusal to adopt, for example, high status Roman-style material culture, to the level of an economic failure on the part of the natives, something which they cannot help, but would overcome if only they could. A common suggestion, especially in the fens, is that the area was too poor to acquire the trappings of Romanisation (Hall & Coles 1990: 121). It is this that in part accounts for the lack of villa structures in the region, but this assumes a unified pattern of status display throughout the province, focusing upon architectural forms, and ignores possible non-architectural variants that may function at a local level. What discrepant perspective suggests to us is that although from a 'Roman' standpoint the fens may appear to lack signs of status display, it is possible that status was articulated in ways which, whilst fitting within the framework of the Roman province, non-the-less have left different kinds of archaeological evidence.

In modern Britain, even with good communications, and powerfully homogenising cultural influences like national television stations and chain stores, no one would claim that we have a homogenous society. In an ancient empire, with communications which were incomparably slower, and which comprised many different sub groups, all with their own pre-conquest identities, many local pre-conquest identities will have been preserved, each one acting as the basis for a different localised perspective. If different area's of the Empire, or even of a single province had different pre-conquest attitudes and traditions, the impact of Roman imperialism will have been nuanced and different in different places, mediated by the cultures over which the authorities were exercising control. Thus pre-conquest traditions are crucial to understanding the unique and discrepant experiences of empire, and key to locating the subordinate population in a discourse with their conquerors. By reaching such a position we give the subordinate population of the empire a place in history, but in so doing we must reject the vision of the Roman Empire as a hegemonic entity, and actively recognise the true variation of conditions in which conquered peoples found themselves.

Clearly the interaction between Roman and native is too complex to enable us to create a satisfactory general theory. Instead, we must approach the problem on a regional basis, asking what such contact meant on the ground, community by community, and being subtle enough to realise that each experience is different and unique. In a world where communication was much slower than it is today, the scale of experience, what native individuals with the power of agency would define as 'their world', will be that much smaller than it is today. In considering native experience, therefore, we must work at the scale of native lives. But if we are to develop such an approach we must begin by establishing a working hypothesis to identify 'communities'. Depending on the scale of our work, these communities may be of varying sizes - a region, a town and its hinterland, a village or farm, or perhaps a more broadly based ethnic group. The important factor is that that unit should have *historical* relevance, in some sense it should be a community of the past. My own work in Roman Fenland is regional in scale, the data principally provided by field survey, and it is in such a framework that I shall develop this approach.

The initial challenge is to identify 'sub regional' landscapes within which the lived experience of the empire might be detected through archaeology. It is argued above that an important factor in shaping Roman landscapes is pre-Roman activity, and so to begin any analysis of the post-conquest period, we must consider the Late Iron Age. This is not a new

approach in itself, and many studies, begin with the Late Iron Age as a prelude to the Roman Conquest, (e.g. Dark 1997, Millett 1990b, Salway 1981). Taking Millett (1990b: 9-39) as an example, he uses the pre-Roman social structures of Britain to understand the pattern of the conquest, not the pattern of life after it. However, elements of Late Pre-Roman Iron Age society which survived the transition to Roman rule can provide us with a clue to where cultural groupings lay under that rule. A hint of such continuity can be found in the correlation between portable wealth and architectural elaboration (see Fig. 1).

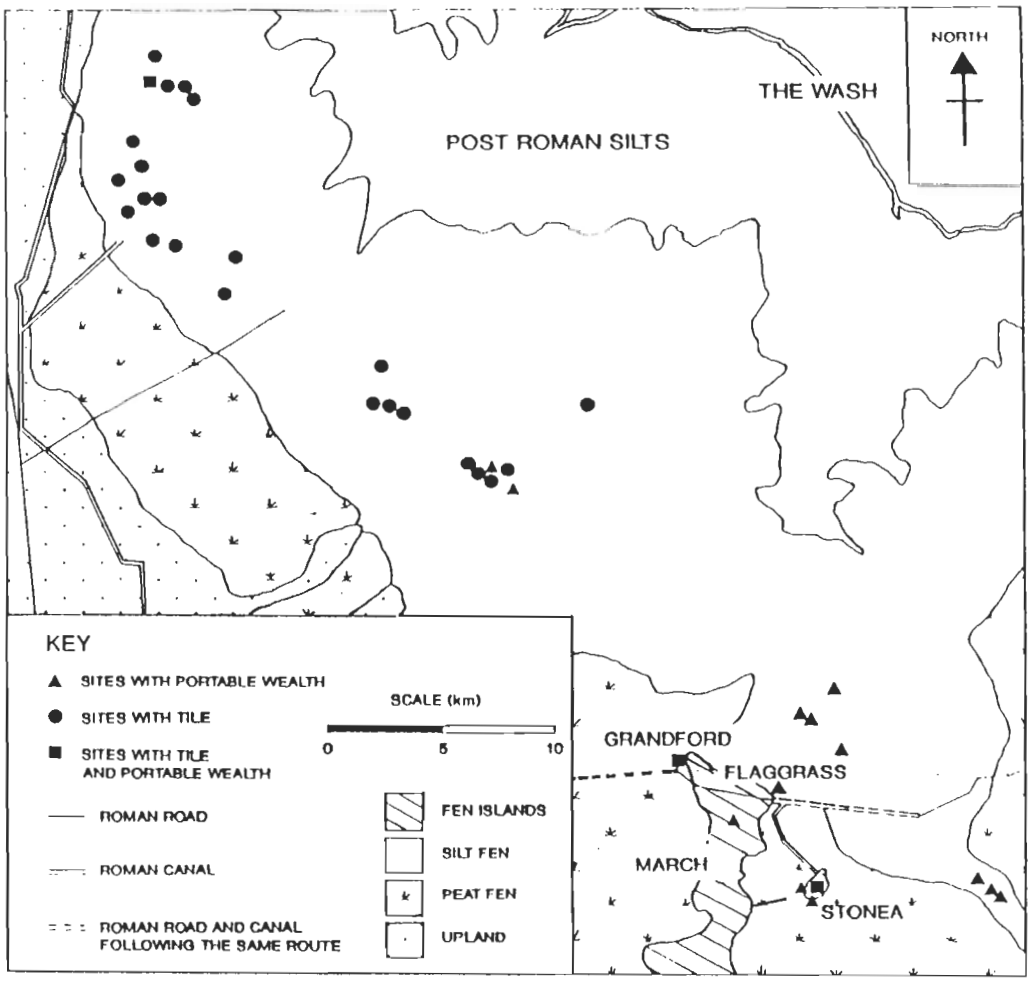

Figure 1 Distribution of portable wealth and Roman roof tile in the fens. Note the almost totally exclusive distribution patterns. Sites mentioned in text are labelled.

Indicating personal prestige is an important element in establishing identity, because the local display of status is a method of communication between native elites and subordinate native populations. The Roman Empire ruled through these elites, and in the Millett model they form a community of interest with Rome (Millett 1990a), the display of status is a language to

communicate power. All sides must understand that language, if power is to be communicated effectively and social relations are to be reproduced. Thus, although in a post conquest culture we may expect to see some elements of *Romanitas* embedded in the display of status, we must also expect, if we are seeking a level of elite continuity, some element of continuity in status display, ensuring that it is intelligible to those of different perspectives and experiences. If we envisage a language of power between Roman, Native and Native Elite, that power display may be 'Romanised' but at some level it must be informed by the native tradition to make it intelligible to those it sought to control, and to legitimise their power in the eyes of the subordinate population by reference to the pre-conquest past.

Past interpretations of the Roman Fens have focused upon the idea that a landscape was created on a fresh slate, laid out unproblematically in the interests of the Empire. But this is no longer sustainable for the central fen area, where a late Iron Age nucleus of activity, centred on Stonea Camp, has become increasingly understood in recent years (Jackson and Potter 1997: 676-677, Hall and Coles 1994: 92-104). This being the case, we have to account for pre Roman social structures in any discussion, and to allow for the discrepant perspective of those who lived in a central fen context. Looking at the contrasting distribution of prestige objects and architectural elaboration, we see that portable wealth (defined broadly to include coinage, and bronze, pewter or precious metal artefacts) is concentrated in precisely the area that contains this Iron Age nucleus, but is found only rarely elsewhere in the fens. Conversely, architectural elaboration, which in the fens is usually on the basic level of putting a tiled roof on a building instead of a thatched one, is confined to the silt fens. The general architectural tradition of the region is of relatively insubstantial thatched structures, with clay sill walls, topped with wattle and daub, sometimes with a timber framework (Salway 1970: 7). The occurrence of roof tile on such sites therefore represents a considerable break from an otherwise ephemeral style of construction. It is true that the quantities are often very small, but in an area as devoid as the fens of substantial building material, we may expect thorough robbing of sites,

In the central fens we do find buildings with tiled roofs but these structures are often built of stone as well, and represent an extreme form of architectural elaboration not seen elsewhere in the fens. As a group, we might consider these sites as 'the official' landscape, as they are locations which for a variety of reasons appear to stand outside the native settlement pattern, but are deeply implicated with the official presence in the region. In this category we might consider sites such as Grandford, a roadside settlement well connected to the regional communications network, and Stonea Grange, a stone built tower with very definite extra regional architectural affinities (Jackson and Potter 1997: 679). Flaggrass, north east of March, may also be part of this 'official' landscape, identified as a possible 'emporium' site (Potter 1981: 118). Although not architecturally elaborate, it is large, and occupies a position at a canal and road junction which would link it firmly with the Roman infrastructure of the area. A possible criticism of this approach is that sites which do not fit easily into the 'native' central fen landscape are simply relegated to the construct of an 'official landscape', which becomes simply a collection of 'awkward' sites. However, the differences between these official sites and the rest of the settlement pattern are marked. Firstly, as a group, the sites of the official landscape are often of extremely high status in Fenland terms. We see no *spectrum* of status display, but rather a large number of sites with no architectural elaboration, and a handful of sites which are elaborated to a great degree. Stonea is a good example of this. At Grandford the settlement was based around a probable Neronian fort, and it is one of the only Fenland sites with a significant quantity of early coins, possibly linked to this military presence (Potter 1981: 126). Flaggrass, north east of March, may also be part of this 'semi' official landscape, as a

possible 'emporium' site (Potter 1981: 118) lying at a nexus in the local communications network (see Fig. 1). Both Grandford and Stonea are demonstrably alien to sites which evolved from LPRIA occupation of the area. Thus we have three landscapes, one of basic architectural elaboration on the silt fens, a native one of 'portable wealth' in the central fens, and one of a high level of architectural elaboration, roads, and market places, superimposed on the pre-existing native presence by the Roman authorities.

Can we make any deductions about *interaction?* The official landscape was 'superimposed' upon the central fen 'native' landscape, the 'native core' clearly attracting substantial Roman activity in the period immediately after the conquest, with roads, canals, and a fort at Grandford. I have argued elsewhere (Fincham 1999: 46-51) that the famous tower at Stonea, a striking visual symbol in a flat landscape was a concrete symbol of Roman power and dominance, presiding over the pre-existing Iron Age nucleus. This presupposes some Late Iron Age social survival, something that I would suggest we see in the continued use of portable wealth to display social status, rather than the adoption of Roman symbols of power, based on a more architectural language. Thus in the central fens there is clear space for cultural 'negotiation' between conqueror and conquered.

The silt fens are an area outside the zone of the 'official' and native landscapes of the central fens, and there is less evidence here of Late Iron Age activity. What pre-Roman activity there was, located in the southern Lincolnshire fens, was based upon salt production (Hayes & Lane 1992), and was therefore probably seasonal (Bradley 1975). When this area expanded in the early second century, an element of the silt fen architecture involved the use of tiled roofs. Tile occurs on 24 sites across the silt fen area (see fig. 1), but these represent only a small proportion of the total sites in the area. When we examine the technicalities of constructing a timber framed building with a tiled roof, particularly when the prevailing roofing material is thatch, we quickly see that the decision about how to roof a building was not a casual choice, but was fundamental to the structure of building, and to the cost of construction. To construct a building which will support a thatched roof does not require straight timber - the framing of the structure can be irregular, and this may result in the irregularly spaced wall posts encountered when excavating 'low status structure' (Charles 1982). But to put a tiled roof on a building, not only requires access to tile, but to straighter, and thus more expensive timber. A change of roofing material from thatch to tile, results in an entirely different (and more expensive) structure which stands outside the mainstream architectural tradition of the silt fens. As is clear from fig. 1 there is almost no portable wealth in the silt fen area, and very few 'substantial' buildings in the traditional sense of a stone built structure. But this does not mean that the landscape was socially uniform, or that there was no attempt to display status. In the light of the unusual nature of the tiled roofed buildings of the silt fens, and the extra consumption of wealth required to construct them (as opposed to normal fen style buildings), I would suggest that status in the silt fens was expressed in architectural form. But these are not, 'Roman' buildings; they appear to be low status structures, wattle, or clay walled, adapted to take a tiled roof. But in a landscape of structures constructed from local materials, irregular timber frames and thatched roofs, the local perspective on a more regular structure with a tiled roof may have been that such a building represented architecture of considerable status.

Within the central fens, we can detect the survival of native identity, Roman measures to control that community, and see a social arena in which Roman forms were adopted, but where the native perspective informed behaviour - the display of status through portable wealth. In the silt fens, we see a low level of architectural adaptation, the visible outcome of a colonial negotiation, and the product of a different, and contrasting perspective on status display.

Although this is just a sketch to demonstrate possibilities, even within a limited set of survey data we can see the potential for the consideration of cultural interaction at a sub regional level using the concept of discrepant perspective. It is at this small scale that we can address questions which relate to the native way of life, and the Roman Empire as 'lived experience'.

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