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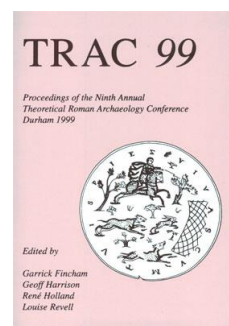
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Taberna Economics

by Ardle Mac Mahon

Introduction

This is speculative and tentative attempt to explore the topic of *taberna* economics in Roman Britain. It is not an endeavour to impose a modern abstract economic system upon antiquity, but to say that an economy did exist, that had rules and regularities of its own that gave it a measure of predictability. These may never be defined but in reality even today there is no universal law of economics. The aim of this paper is to develop a synthetic theory of *taberna* economics based on variations in shop architecture and the use of space. This is not a modern concept, as the magnitude of a dwelling for the Romans was a measure of the relative wealth and status of its occupants. In fact the spaciousness of the buildings of the prosperous attracted the tenacious condemnation of contemporary moralizers such as Cicero (*de Officiis* 1.139; *de Domo* 116), Sallust (*Catilina* 12.3), Seneca (*de Beneficiis* 7.10.5; *Morte Claudii* 114.9) and Seutonius (*Augustus* 72.1; *Caligula* 37.2). The size of an edifice was not an indirect expression of rank but an explicit statement of social status (Wallace-Hadrill 1994: 72). Using this as a matrix, anthropological models from a variety of sources have been used to build a possible hypothetical reconstruction of *taberna* sociology in Roman Britain.

From the very birth of towns in Roman Britain there was an evolution in building types and techniques. The connection between economic prosperity and building activity is a recurrent theme throughout human history, particularly when dwellings are commercial in nature (Delaine 1996: 165). On a very simplistic level, housing demand relates to need and the accommodation for which people are able and willing to pay. It takes no account of social desiderata, or of personal aspirations that cannot be fulfilled due to a lack of capital (Needleman 1965: 18; Roberts 1978: 146).

In reality there are a multitude of factors that can have an influence on the built environment. Houses have been seen as a reflection of the psychological, ecological and ideological processes of the builder and inhabitants or as a manifestation of socio-cultural relationships - symbolizing, mediating or showing social status and differentiation (Bourdieu 1973: 98-110; Rapoport 1977; 1982; Western 1979: 54-61; Toon 1979: 63-66; Lawrence 1982: 104-130; Rodman 1985: 56-72). Despite the absence of literary evidence, and the constraints of archaeology, the focus of any analysis on dwellings, especially *tabernae*, should attempt to emphasize the actual decisions that are made, the choices, negotiations, disagreements and compromises that are involved in the construction and the use of a building. The *taberna* is a part of the much wider social field and the adjudication to build and modify a shop is linked to many social and personal decisions, pragmatic or otherwise. In actuality, there are many forces acting on the built environment that do not actuate the structure itself. Individuals are influenced by their cultural knowledge and frequently act within ethnic obligations. However, there is always an interlocution between cultural rules and actual behaviour that allows both to develop and modify.

The time and effort that is spent constructing or modifying a shop or manufactory is labour that cannot be spent in other ways. The decision to allocate any effort on a building is a choice

between consigning time to the edifice itself, instead of retailing, manufacturing or even relaxing. This is clearly the case in self-help housing where the initial building or subsequent structural modifications are carried out by the actual inhabitants themselves. Similarly, capital spent on building materials or goods traded for fixtures and fittings represent the same allotment decision, but also a choice against other items that could be obtained. Wilk has suggested that the time and effort that has been devoted to construction, the shaping and forming of materials used in the built environment, as well as later modifications to the edifice, represent decisions and choices that are conventionally considered to fall within the realm of consumption and the consumer environment (Wilk 1990: 35). If this is the case, the focus can then be on the actual builders and inhabitants themselves and the process by which they balance various social and economic options.

However, shops cannot be solely seen as a product of consumption. It is apparent from the ancient sources that *tabernae* were a social phenomenon and changes to these buildings indicate possible changes in the manner by which people used their shop-dwellings and engaged in the business and lived together as a community (Faroghi 1987: 12). Thus, changes in architectural fashion may have been accompanied by changes in the social composition of the population of Roman Britain. If this is the case then the type of materials adopted, and the form of assembly of the early shops, reflect not only the social but also the economic standing of the individual within their immediate environment, and that of the wider province within the empire. Housing is, after all, socio-economic rather than a technical utility (Murison & Lea 1979: 145).

In attempting to explain *tabernae*-economics and the inter-relationships between different markets, it soon becomes clear that complicated theories are involved and that the information available is unlikely to be sufficient for these suppositions to be adequately tested. If this hypothesis is to work one very general assumption must be made and this is that all the dwellings studied provided equivalent accommodation for their occupants (Needleman 1965: 15 & 47). The results gained by this rather sweeping analyses are far from ideal but are certainly more representative of the social and economic activities of these settlements in Roman Britain than public architecture or any one single building.

The foundation of Roman Britain

The settlement and re-settlement of Britain after the invasion might have meant that towns were regarded as a source of new and 'easy money' by retailers and artisans. This would have attracted natives, such as those from the old Dobunnic *oppidum* at Bagendon (Faulkner 1998: 377), as well as people from other parts of the empire, especially entrepreneurs and those with little financial backing, hoping to succeed in the recently established towns. Modern settlement patterns in developed and developing countries, indicate that people generally move for economic reasons (Gilbert & Gugler 1982: 52). People frequently migrate to development and the movement of individuals from the countryside to towns is part of what urbanization is about (Holsenberg 1985: 89). It appears that young adults nearly always predominate when migration is the search for better economic opportunities. They are usually unmarried and have less at stake in their original habitat than their elders. They often lack control over resources, land in particular, and wield little influence in local affairs. For these very factors they enjoy an advantage in that they are not just physically strong but that they are more adaptable to the different demands of the new environment.

Migration for professional reasons is important. The more skilled and specialized workers may have come from far afield, whereas labourers and the unskilled tended to be more local.

People on the move bring wealth, culture and trade to the places they encounter and this was very important in the establishment of Roman Britain (Healey & Madani-Pour 1993: 90). Inter-urban migration from other Roman towns on the continent to Britain may have been underestimated and this stepwise migration probably affected 'middle-class' persons such as shopkeepers and merchants more than any other class as is evident from epigraphic evidence.

It is apparent from Tacitus that the aim of the provincial governor Agricola was to culturally Romanize the native aristocracy and this would in turn disseminate through the rest of the population (*Agricola* 21) (For reference to the debate on this passage from Tacitus see Blagg 1980: 27-42; Blagg, & King 1984; Grew & Hobley 1985: 35-36; Frere 1987; Millett 1990: 69). However, there must have been limitations to how far the aristocracy could have affected this change, as they are thought to have continued to live and invest in their country estates (Applebaum 1966: 99; Bowen & Fowler 1966: 53; Walthew 1975: 189-205; Hingley 1989: 21-2). The process of Romanization was probably made further amenable by providing the advantages of urbanization such as temples and piazzas, but more importantly road systems, *insulae* and services. *Tabernae* set up by continental entrepreneurs may have had a far greater impetus on this evolution than is appreciated.

Initial Development

Although there is little evidence for ownership or even how land was distributed in these new settlements, the first priority for any individual was to presumably obtain suitable land to build upon. Even if the land was initially allocated by some arbitrary lottery system, in subsequent periods, property could only be procured by capital. If the buyer is starting out in life a substantial part, if not all, of their resources for building would be depleted by land purchase (Anzorena 1993: 59).

The very first *tabernae* of Roman Britain were simply built, when compared to the more ostentatious civic structures, and were constructed of wattle-and-daub. The best known example of this is the earliest phase of the *tabernae* of *insula* xiv at Verulamium excavated by Frere (1972). Furthermore, the actual phasing of construction techniques of buildings in Roman London is better understood due the in-depth study of recent reports (Perring, Roskams & Allen 1991). During this time the progressive development of housing would have been most obvious. This is simply the construction of a housing unit by stages, assigning higher priority initially to securing tenure and services and a lower priority to walls and roofs (Ward 1982: 239). In other words, what were needed in Roman Britain were utilitarian buildings that were inexpensive and less permanent (Wacher 1966: 79). This is especially true of commercial buildings where any delay due to construction would have meant a loss of income and potential customers to competitors (Hodges 1972: 527; Perring, Roskams, & Allen 1991: 81).

Placing capital into any single property is a risky business especially when it is impossible to determine future incomes, or the development value of the site in the far or even immediate future (Guy 1994: 50). Serious private building by individuals is generally produced by societies where there is an atmosphere of stability or economic dynamics because any large scale investment requires confidence (Farmer 1993: 159). As a consequence there would have been little incentive, at least initially, in making any serious investment in building during such an unstable economic period even if resources were available (Perring, Roskams, & Allen 1991: 86).

Often the *taberna* that appeared to be the poorest materially are the best socially. The very initial buildings of Roman Britain may seem to be inferior to later structures but they were in

fact supportive of their inhabitants. There may be virtually no housing expenses at all and a low income could be spent on the most important thing of all, food. Any balance could then be saved towards a future more permanent house. The householders and shopkeepers may be young and optimistic about their future prospects. Barring accidents and major depressions in the economy, both of which were quite possible, it is very likely that the occupants will improve their social and economic condition. Of all people in society, artisans were habitually exposed to the possibility and were more prone to physical deformity and disability from the effects of their craft. This is especially the case in such occupation as metalworking (Burford 1972: 72). The *taberna*-owners needed to save as much of their income as possible in order to take advantage of opportunities as they arose and eventually invest in a more substantial home. This would in turn provide a substantial degree of security against the risks of an accident, economic depression or political upheaval and ultimately security in their old age.

Therefore, the initial strategy was probably to minimise housing expenditure and the physical quality of the shelter was secondary. Almost any form of simple structure will suffice so long as the health of the individual or their family is not unduly threatened. Far from being oppressive these less substantial dwellings provided admirable support for their inhabitants. Thus, these structures act as a vehicle for the realization of their expectations (Turner 1976: 51-9, 79, 82).

Development

Even if cheap materials were used in construction to save money, the cost of maintenance probably turned out to be more expensive than the initial expenditure on construction, and these early shop-dwellings were demolished rather than maintained (Abiodun 1976: 346). There seems then to have been a progressive development in building techniques from post-built walls to timber-frame work filled with wattle-and-daub to mud brick (Perring, Roskams, & Allen 1991: 67-84). Reconstructions attest to the greater solidity, economy and insulation properties of this form of construction (Audouze & Büchenschütz 1989: 45). In other cases, instead of wattle, mud-brick evolved as an infill for the timber-frames or for mass walling. Earth, as a building material is an extremely versatile fabric, the qualities of which were well known to the builders. The development in building techniques was accompanied by the construction of mosaics, tessellated pavements, heated rooms, bathhouses and the use of more elaborate painted wall-plaster. These are all indications of the adoption of Roman standards but more importantly emphasise the advancement of wealth and higher status (Hingley 1989: 31).

Basic needs are essential if any group of people are to survive but once these are met people begin to seek security, safety and stability (Juzak, Newmark & Sodden 1979: 102-3). The majority if not all, of the resources invested in a single *taberna* would be those possessed and controlled by the individual shop-owners themselves, and the economies of the *tabernae* would depend on the users' resourcefulness. The level of building will vary by time and place. It will be determined by prevailing income levels, the cost of building materials and their availability, and technical organization (Harris 1991: 4).

As the economy continued to develop, some of the increase in income would be spent on consumer goods but most of it will be invested in the *taberna* (Netting & Wilk 1984: 3; Wilk 1990: 37). There may be a crisis of allocation that can be resolved in many ways other than spending on houses but the investment of surplus cash into the *taberna* and fixtures is extremely pragmatic. It is a demonstration that income is not going to be wasted on superfluous items, but will be spent instead on permanent improvements that the whole household can use

for many years to come and which will add materially to the family's assets. While many problems can be solved by investing in the shop or workshop, the building at the same time may have been the only secure place to invest capital.

The essential characteristic of any building is that it provides a service beyond the period in which the dwelling is built or purchased (Needleman 1965: 45). The householder's determination to invest their time, effort, skills and resources in their building and surroundings depends on the satisfaction they can expect and the usefulness of their housing (Turner 1976: 89). Thus it is not just current income which will be of concern, but the permanent income (Charles 1977: 19). As incomes rise, so too will demand for housing.

The importance of housing in the economy should not be measured solely in terms of economic resources devoted to accommodation. Housing was expensive and it would not be unusual to expect that housing would account for a high proportion of the total stock of a country's wealth (Charles 1977: 33; Ramirez, Fiori, Harms, & Mathéy 1992: 136). Changes in the rate of building can have a powerful effect on demands in the rest of the economy. A building programme that is overly ambitious can initiate an inflated rise in prices, and fluctuations in building can initiate, or reinforce, wider business cycles (Needleman 1965: 13).

Land and its provision, or lack of it, has historically been a factor in conflicts (Edwards 1979: 84). The existence of these narrow frontages in towns is conceivably one of the clearest indications of the great value placed on property size. Perhaps a situation existed in Roman Britain, as it did in the rest of the Empire, that the value and scarcity of town property would increase the closer to the town centre and markets. As a result the cost of building would have been dictated by location and competition with others. This would mean that shop frontages were small, as it was far less expensive to construct a shop in this way. The disadvantage of this would have been compensated by the similar lengths of all the other *taberna* frontages, at least initially.

The first reaction to higher land prices was presumably to make more intensive use of the existing *tabernae*. Sophisticated house plans do not appear in the early stages of the urban settlements (Walthew 1975: 192). The rectangular shape and greater life-span of the timber-frame made it easier to add rooms to the *taberna* ground-plan. An increase in the length of a *taberna* did not involve a corresponding increase in its breadth. Again the importance of space is apparent in the way in which shops were extended to the rear. The addition of appendages to the rear of premises was a common practice, and one that can be seen in many towns. In London during the Flavian period, increasing social ambition is well illustrated by the inclusion of reception quarters and mosaics where previously the strip-building seemed entirely functional in character (Perring 1987: 150). This custom can be observed most of the towns of Roman Britain such as Colchester, Verulamium, Silchester, Cirencester and Wroxeter (Wacher 1995: 112-377). Caerwent is perhaps the clearest example of this with extensions to the rear of premises. (Wacher 1995: 388-389) This pattern can be seen in many of the buildings lining the main east to west street such as House XVIIIIn, XIXn, XXn (Ashby, Hudd, & King, 1910: pp. 7-20) XV, XVI, XVIII, XX (Ashby, Hudd, & King, 1911: 421-438). This emphasises, at the same time individuality, but also the growth of personal prosperity (Wilk 1984: 218, 238; 1990: 36-37).

There are several reasons for an increase in land values. The first of these is an increase in population that creates an extra need for land (MacLennan 1987: 29). The change in demographic factors could be associated with, and possibly triggered by, income movements and social change (Needleman 1965: 148). Another factor is location, as any retailer will naturally wish to be as close as possible to their market and customers.

From the very earliest periods, but certainly as the Roman settlement developed, it is clear that *tabernae* often varied greatly in size and equipment. This suggests that not all the small merchants were equally successful, nor all artisans equally in demand. Clearly this is an indication of a 'free-market economy' where some proprietors prospered more than others. It would appear that competition was fierce among them, or simply that the better craftsmen, or those that gave better value prevailed over those that were mediocre or extravagant (Deiss 1985: 117). The clearest indication of this is not only the extension of premises to the rear but also the procurement of neighbouring property.

This can be seen during the later buildings of Caerwent, Cirencester and Wroxeter (Ashby, Hudd & King 1910: 7-11, 17-20; 1911: 421-427; Wachter 1962: 11; 1995: 318-9 & 371; Holbrook 1998: 189-211). At Wroxeter, *insula* viii, site VI three *tabernae* were eventually amalgamated into a more substantial building. The method of incorporation was interesting. The original alley-ways between the shops were converted into corridors and rooms were inserted into the area where the lane met the front portico. The back rooms had *opus signinum* floors, a possible mosaic and at least one room was given a hypocaust. There was also a small bath suite and latrine that was flushed by water from an aqueduct inserted in the far south-west of the building (Bushe-Fox 1916: 4-20; Wachter 1995: 371; Walthew 1975: 191-2; Crickmore 1984: 66, 81). As a consequence of these purchases the shopkeeper was able to make a comfortable-sized home. The simplest explanation for these developments is that one owner was more prosperous than their neighbours, and had bought out the less successful establishments and extended their own property across the site. The motive behind such expansion in Roman Britain was to provide a more extensive, comfortable and luxurious dwelling for the owner. On account of this, it may be presumed that many town houses began their life as shops and workshops, some retaining their original connection with commercial premises even after their enlargement. Possible examples of this occurrence can be seen in Colchester Building 20, Lion Walk and Building 113, Culver Street, and in Building xxviii.1, at Verulamium. (Crummy 1984: 62; Wachter 1974: 282-3; 1989: 113; 1995: 125). This occurrence may also have interesting implications for the primary development of similar dwellings in other parts of the empire especially Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Stone

The continued improvement in economic conditions enables a betterment or amelioration in house types and *vice versa* (Anzorena 1993: 60). For the *taberna*-owners with larger or more reliable incomes the final major step was to hire masons and build masonry houses. The main reason for the use of stone in construction was its greater durability. Generally stone is expensive and this characteristic gave it attractions that blinded people to its disadvantages. Stone was not available everywhere. Time and experience were needed to raise stone into a wall and this required skilled craft work and fine adjustment during building not necessitated by timber (Hodges 1972: 524; Ling 1985: 17). In short, stone meant status (Quiney 1995: 36).

Premises were enlarged or improved, and wood was gradually replaced with masonry as capital accumulated in the hands of the successful. The shift to stone was not as dramatic as is often inferred. Timber was still widely used for private building and the use of stone may always have been restricted by expense (Crickmore 1984: 97). Excavations at Cirencester, *insula* V, emphasize the fact that this was not a universal picture as the row of shops opposite the market had been rebuilt at intervals (Wachter 1962: 11; 1995: 318-9 & 371; Holbrook 1998: 189-211). This situation meant that for some time the street was composed of an assortment of both stone and wooden buildings. The initial shops and houses built largely of stone must have

been the prerogative of the successful, and it was not until the third century that all the buildings were constructed in stone.

This increasing preference for masonry construction should not be seen solely as an expression of wealth and a changing attitude to town life, but also a feeling of greater security and permanence on the part of the individual *taberna*-owners (Perring 1987: 168). Whenever humans have sought to secure its most important buildings it has consistently turned to stone. Capital had accumulated sufficiently for it to be invested into more durable edifices which expressed the confidence of the individual in their own ability, and that of their trade but also their faith in the future. There was a steady increase in the stock of stone shops and workshops and these buildings were repaired and remodelled on subsequent occasions. They were a cumulative investment, intended to provide security for the inhabitants and for their valuable goods and equipment. Although the *tabernae* failed to reach such a luxurious level as the fine palace at Fishbourne or that of the larger villas, a tremendous variation in standards is apparent that in a very general way, reflect the status and wealth of the individual owner.

Conclusion

The hypothesis of this paper has been that the economics of *tabernae* in Roman Britain can be examined by a study of the variations in shop architecture and plan. The foundation of the settlements of Roman Britain would have been a time of great instability, but it would equally have been a period of immense economic potential, especially for the enterprising entrepreneur. Upward mobility depends more on access to better income, security and education than it does on place of residence. Thus it is the economic and social development of the individuals that are reflected by these dwellings and not *vice versa*. These newly founded towns and buildings not only illustrated the new power structure, but also the voluntary acceptance of this model by the urban population as they exercised functions relevant to the inhabitants of the rest of the empire. The change from simple timber and clay buildings to dwellings of a more sophisticated design, and the eventual adoption of stone represents the continual and increasing investment in *tabernae* and towns. It further demonstrates a change in the character and attitude towards town life as it indicates a greater degree of confidence, permanence and stability that was not reflected in the earliest dwellings. The development of the *taberna* represents an emphasis on the individual entrepreneur and an increase in their own economic security and social stability. In conclusion, the *taberna* can be seen as a vehicle for the realization of the expectations of the retailers and artisans of Roman Britain. Despite this the vast majority of even the owners of *tabernae*, who were both skilled entrepreneurs and workers, did not rise to high society.

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So dorn dona dhubhfuilibh. Glaine ár gcroi, neart ar ngeag agus beart de réir ár mbriathar.

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