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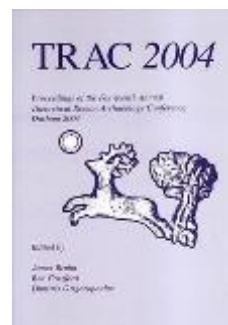
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The economy of Roman Britain: representation and historiography

Kevin Greene

Introduction

This paper was inspired by the publication of Michael Fulford's chapter on 'Economic structures' in *A Companion to Roman Britain* (Todd 2004), which offered the first summary of his view of the Romano-British economy for more than a decade. The earliest of Fulford's many thoughtful studies of economic aspects of Roman Britain had arisen from his doctoral study of the New Forest pottery industry, while those that followed in the 1980s benefited from experience of Mediterranean ceramics at Carthage and his long-term excavations at the Roman city of Silchester. In 1989 he published a reflection upon the significance of evidence recovered since the 1960s, accompanied in 1991 by a complementary survey of Britain's regional and long-distance trade.

In 2003 I gave a conference paper about metaphors used by writers such as Rostovtzeff and Finley in their explanations of the Roman economy (Greene forthcoming), and published a study of narrative emplotment in the interpretation of Romano-British pottery in 2002. Since preparation of these papers had led me to reread an account of the economy of Roman Britain published by R.G. Collingwood in 1937 (in volume 3 in Tenney Frank's five-volume *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*) it was inevitable that I should compare it with Fulford's new statement. Wide reading of Collingwood's non-archaeological writing emphasised the importance of his philosophical views in the formation of his concept of history:

The present alone is actual: the past and the future are ideal and nothing but ideal. It is necessary to insist upon this because our habit of 'spatializing' time, or figuring it to ourselves in terms of space, leads us to imagine that the past and future exist... This is simply an illusion, though a tenacious one; and it is necessary to eradicate it with great care before one begins to realize the true problem of history. For we commonly suppose, in our more illogical and slipshod moments, that the past still exists and lies somewhere concealed behind us, and that by using appropriate instruments and methods we can discover it and investigate its nature...

(Collingwood 1926, cited in van der Dussen 1993: 364)

Acquaintance with more recent views of history that insist upon its 'linguistic turn' (a term 'used by advocates and critics alike to describe the shift in historical explanation toward an emphasis on the role of language in creating historical meaning' (Munslow 2000: 151)) has led me to concur with Collingwood's opinion that the past exists only in its representation in the present. For this reason it is essential to understand not only what is being said now, but how it is said, by whom, and why. This position enhances the value of detailed historiographical analysis of explanatory paradigms or metaphors in archaeological publications, whether written long ago, for example Gordon Childe's *Neolithic Revolution* (Greene 1999) or relatively recently, for example Neanderthal replacement in Europe (Clark 2001).

Conventional historiography involves analysis of the theoretical or philosophical outlook of an author, set within a biographical framework. R.G. Collingwood engaged in philosophy (e.g. 1933) and history (1946) as well as Roman archaeology (1930), and outlined his intellectual

development in an autobiography (1939). Collingwood's writing has been reprinted with commentaries (van der Dussen 1993) and supplemented by lecture notes and unfinished drafts (Dray and van der Dussen 1999), while several collections of papers exploring the legacy of his work have been published (e.g. Boucher *et al.* 1995). R.G. Collingwood's family background and academic career clearly had a significant impact on his archaeological work, and the same is presumably true of Michael Fulford. How can this depth of understanding be gained about archaeologists working and publishing now? Unlike many contemporary academics, Fulford does not have a detailed CV on Reading University's Internet pages but he does have an entry in the 2004 edition of *Who's Who*. However, before scrutinising Collingwood and Fulford I want to tease out an intellectual thread running through Romano-British studies that helps to explain the prominent role of pottery in studies of the economy. Two earlier writers are significant in this context – John Ruskin, and R.G. Collingwood's father, William.

Industry, craft production and the nature of society

Amidst many other activities John Ruskin (1819–1900) devoted considerable time to recording the architecture of Venice by means of detailed drawings, watercolours and photography, in advance of the destruction of original features by insensitive reconstruction. In later life he withdrew to Cumbria and continued his prodigious output of writing on art, society and economics, frequently speaking out against the social and environmental damage wreaked by the Industrial Revolution. Reading Ruskin today provokes mixed reactions – at one moment irritation at this stuffy Victorian, at the next sympathy with his profoundly ethical attitude to economic relations. Ruskin encouraged the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers, whose paintings frequently incorporate idealised representations of medieval society, architecture and crafts (Fagence Cooper 2003: 14–18). This brotherhood included figures prominent in the Arts and Crafts movement such as William Morris (1893). Ruskin and Morris shared a vision of the nobility of crafts in preindustrial society, and their economic philosophy contrasted starkly with Victorian industrial capitalism; both men believed that the Middle Ages were a period of freedom and creativity for ordinary workers.

William Gershom Collingwood (1854–1932) abandoned an academic teaching post and moved to Cumbria to become Ruskin's secretary. Both men had a deep sense of history and both were skilled watercolourists; they also possessed a desire to write for the public as well as for intellectuals. Collingwood's *Northumbrian crosses of the pre-Norman age* (1927) combined first-hand study, recording, illustration and historical interpretation reminiscent of Ruskin's work in Venice. His classical knowledge was enhanced by helping to translate *The economist of Xenophon* (written in the early fourth century B.C.) in order to popularise an expression of economic thought which Ruskin admired as much as that contained in the New Testament (Wedderburn and Collingwood 1876: xxxix–xli).

Until his early teens Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943) was educated at home by his father in the company of two sisters who were accomplished artists. He must have been very aware of Ruskin, even beyond his death in 1900. Robin's education and intellectual development culminated in his becoming Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, and we are fortunate to have a concise and highly readable autobiography (1939) – surely the only work by a philosopher to contain a chapter entitled 'Roman Britain'. Collingwood's writing about the economy of Roman Britain will be explored further below; it is important to stress that he shared the breadth of interests – artistic, intellectual and social –

that characterised his father William, and Ruskin. He drew all of the illustrations for his handbook to *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1930) himself, as well as carrying out recording and drawing for the future *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (Collingwood and Wright 1965). Like Ruskin he lectured widely and effectively, and wrote about art and political concerns (as well as philosophy and archaeology) in academic and popular contexts. Thus a common thread of philosophical, historical, artistic and practical concerns can be traced from John Ruskin through William Collingwood to Robin.

Michael Gordon Fulford (1948–) has written more about the economy of Roman Britain than any writer since Collingwood. Like most Roman archaeologists of his generation, he has never made an explicit statement of his theoretical standpoint, and we have no autobiography or critical evaluation of his intellectual development and publications. Our early careers followed parallel paths in the 1970s, when we both worked on doctoral theses on Roman fine wares, but since then Fulford has risen through the ranks at Reading University from lecturer to Reader, Professor, Dean and Pro-Vice-Chancellor. He has also been an active participant in national bodies such as English Heritage, became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1994, and chaired the Archaeology Panel for the 2001 HEFCE Research Assessment Exercise. Holding senior academic posts and chairing the RAE panel are not socially or politically neutral activities, and the biography of *homo academicus* in Britain invites the same kind of scrutiny as in France (Bourdieu 1988).

Who's Who reveals little or nothing about Michael Fulford's family and early influences, apart from an education in Oxford at St Edward's School and his father's rank of Commander in the Royal Navy. The intellectual environment and potential role models in the Department of Archaeology at University of Southampton (where he was awarded a BA in 1970 and PhD in 1975) are well known, however. It was built up by Barry Cunliffe and Colin Renfrew, who both went on to Oxbridge chairs and became senior figures in the British archaeological establishment. David Peacock was (and remains) particularly influential in drawing economic conclusions about Roman ceramics from a combination of scientific analysis and ethnoarchaeology.

Collingwood and Fulford on the economy of Roman Britain

I believe it to be reasonable to look closely at the writing of Fulford and Collingwood to see whether their careers have influenced their representation of the economy and society of Roman Britain. Fulford began his 1989 survey with these optimistic words:

Our understanding of the economy of Roman Britain has surged so far ahead over the last ten to fifteen years that it has become practicable to attempt a synthesis for the first time. This is due to a number of factors, the first of which has been a general rise in interest in the economic affairs of the Roman world. This has had a particular value for our assessment of the British situation, for it has not only generated models which can be tested against the British evidence, but it has also offered a central perspective on ideas developed in isolation on the basis of British data alone.

(Fulford 1989: 175)

In 1991, he made these opening observations:

This contribution is concerned with setting out the evidence for economic relations between Britain and the rest of the empire, rather than within Britain. Archaeology provides our most important source because, though partial through the differential survival of artefacts, it is considerably richer than the limited – and virtually finite – written sources of the period. ... The chief limitations of archaeological evidence include, on the one hand, the relationship of what survives in the archaeological record with what was originally traded and, on the other, the comprehension of the systems responsible for the movement of goods. Written evidence may be more useful here, but there is insufficient to attempt to characterise the period as a whole.

(Fulford 1991: 35)

By 2004 a slight change of tone is evident in the initial sentence:

Any attempt to understand the economic life of Roman Britain must acknowledge at the outset the severe constraints imposed by the lack of relevant source material.

(Fulford 2004: 309)

After several explanatory paragraphs about the deficiencies of documentary evidence and the limitations of the archaeological record, Fulford then begins to sound more optimistic:

In the light of these cautionary remarks, the study of the economic life of Roman Britain may seem a hopeless pursuit, but in reality, despite the unpromising nature of the source material, there is much that can be established and used to contribute to a number of key debates. Foremost among these is the question of the population, upon which all economic activity in the province was founded, followed by the exploitation of natural resources and the development of manufacturing activity and craft specialization.

(Fulford 2004: 310)

The sequence of topics in his 2004 publication is not indicated by subheadings, but I hope that I have represented them accurately (the numbering is mine):

1. problems of evidence (documentary and material)
2. population
3. agriculture/food production and trade
4. proxy evidence, especially pottery
5. metals, stone and timber
6. manufacture and trade
7. coinage
8. contrast between early and late periods
9. end of the economy

For comparison, in 1937 Collingwood provided a series of ten chapter headings within which to organise his 118-page survey (I have preserved the original numbering):

- I: land and population
- II: public finances
- III: communications
- IV: mining and minerals

- V: public buildings and works
- VI: money
- VII: education and professions
- VIII: agriculture
- IX: industry
- X: commerce

It is interesting that Collingwood does not dwell upon problems of evidence. I presume that he expected his readers to do their own reading about his philosophy and general approach to history, and to draw their own conclusions about the nature of material and documentary evidence and its interpretation. This adds interest to Tenney Frank's curious observation about Collingwood's chapter in his brief preface to volume 3 of the *Economic Survey*:

This volume contains the economic survey of four western provinces [Britain, Spain, Sicily, Gaul]. Professor R. G. Collingwood of Oxford University has generously undertaken to organize the casual and refractory materials of Roman Britain. It will be observed that in order to extract as much material as possible from the archaeological data available, he has adopted a somewhat unusual plan.

(Frank 1937)

Perhaps Frank was comparing Collingwood's chapter to the account of Roman Spain, which follows a clear historical sequence – intervention, conquest, transition, early empire and later empire. Fulford's 1989 paper has a sequence of chronological section headings, and the shorter 1991 discussion of regional and long-distance trade is also set out chronologically. The 2004 overview breaks this pattern by approaching the subject in a more thematic manner closely resembling that of Collingwood. A significant difference is that Fulford had less need to discuss urban or rural settlement patterns because Todd had commissioned separate chapters about these topics. Collingwood's inclusion of education and professions is interesting in the light of late twentieth-century preoccupations with the link between literacy, educational achievement and economic development; he may have been influenced by Ruskin's belief in the importance of literacy and education amongst the working classes.

Who speaks for Roman Britain?

The archaeology of Roman Britain is regarded by many as a 'comfortable' research area; it does not set undergraduates pulses racing to the same extent as the phenomenology of henge monuments. However, TRAC conference volumes reveal the introduction of many novel topics and approaches into Romano-British archaeology, primarily by people early in their careers. There is a gulf between the concerns of TRAC and 'establishment' publications such as *Britannia* or Todd's *Companion to Roman Britain*. When I analysed the first 25 years of *Britannia* some years ago I found that the coverage of economic matters was uneven from year to year but showed no trend of increase or decrease (Fig. 1). Fig. 2 shows the range of topics; 'economics' is conspicuously absent, leaving readers of *Britannia* to make their own interpretations from the indirect evidence of artefacts, investigations of villas, etc. TRAC publications are similar in general but different in detail (Fig. 3); economic matters occupy a similar amount of space as in *Britannia* but there are explicit discussions of economics and specific issues such as consumerism (Table 4).

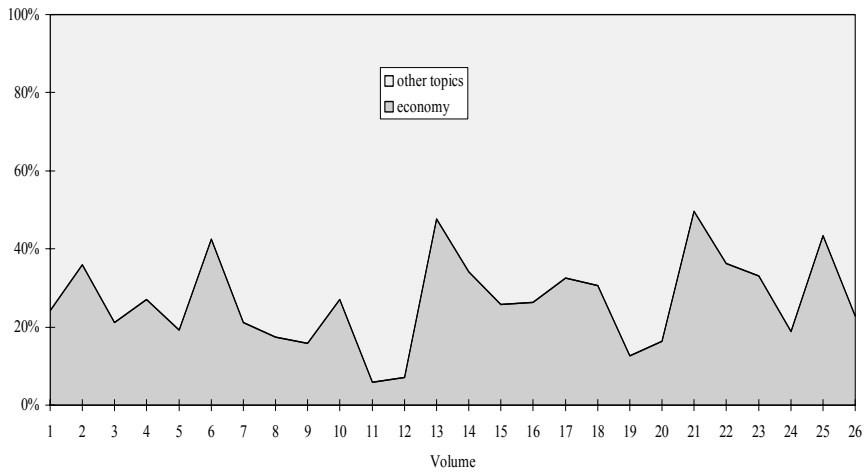


Figure 1: coverage of economic matters, measured in percentage of pages, in Britannia 1970-95.

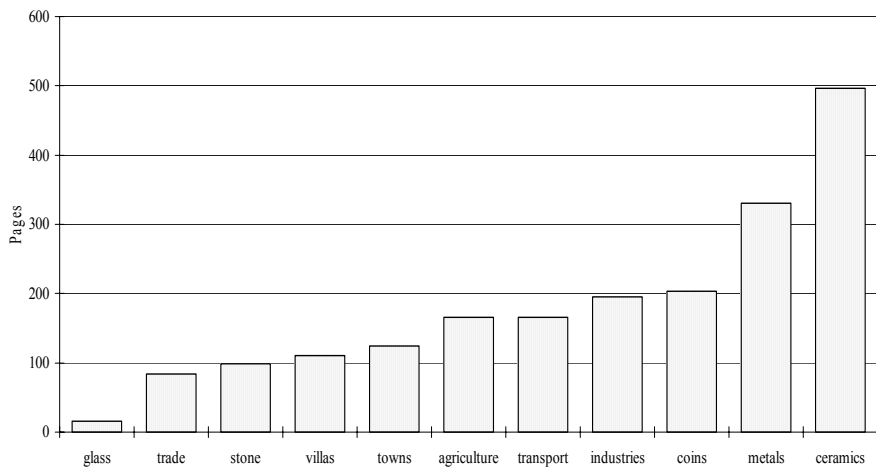


Figure 2: categorisation of economic topics in Britannia 1970-95.

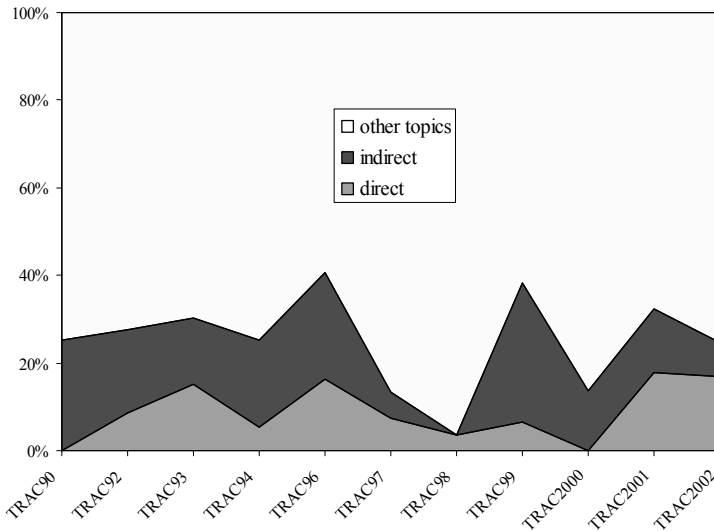


Figure 3: coverage of economic matters, measured in numbers of pages, in TRAC volumes.

TRAC	Direct Topics	pages	Indirect Topics	pages
1990		0	(Agriculture in Italy); HOARDING PEWTER ; (technology)	47
1992	CONSUMERISM; ECONOMY/SPACE	16	FINDS ASSEMBLAGES; POTTERY	36
1993	(Slavery); coinage	32	ARCHITECTURE; POPULATION	32
1994	FOOD	8	SITE FINDS; HOARDS	30
1996	(ARSW pottery); POTTERY/TRADE; FOOD	28	PEASANTS; SAMIAN WARE ; (urbanism)	42
1997	(ARSW pottery)	13	IRON AGE/ROMAN GIFT GIVING	10
1998	RURAL POVERTY	6		0
1999	SHOPS	9	SITE FINDS; LANDSCAPE; SHIPPING; CATTLE ; (food)	45
2000		0	Colonial material culture; FOOD	23
2001	Pottery ; (consumerism)	22	FOOD; MATERIAL CULTURE	18
2002	VILLAS ; (late Roman economy)	29	(Material culture)	13

Table 1: categorisation of economic topics in TRAC volumes. Key: **ENTIRELY ABOUT BRITAIN**; **Partly about Britain**; (General/non-British)

The social construction of knowledge is a familiar concept in fields such as the history of science or technology, where studies of current practice conducted along anthropological lines accompany theoretical analyses of the past (Greene 2004: 157–60). Analysis of the professional backgrounds of contributors to recent volumes of TRAC, *Britannia* and Todd's *Companion* (Fig. 4) reveals that the *Companion* contains chapters by a large number of professors, 'Heads' or 'Directors'. *Britannia* is less 'prof-heavy', but both publications differ significantly from TRAC 2002. Examination of the sex of authors is also revealing (Fig. 5); TRAC contained twice as many pages of contributions by women as *Britannia*, although the *Companion* fared slightly better.

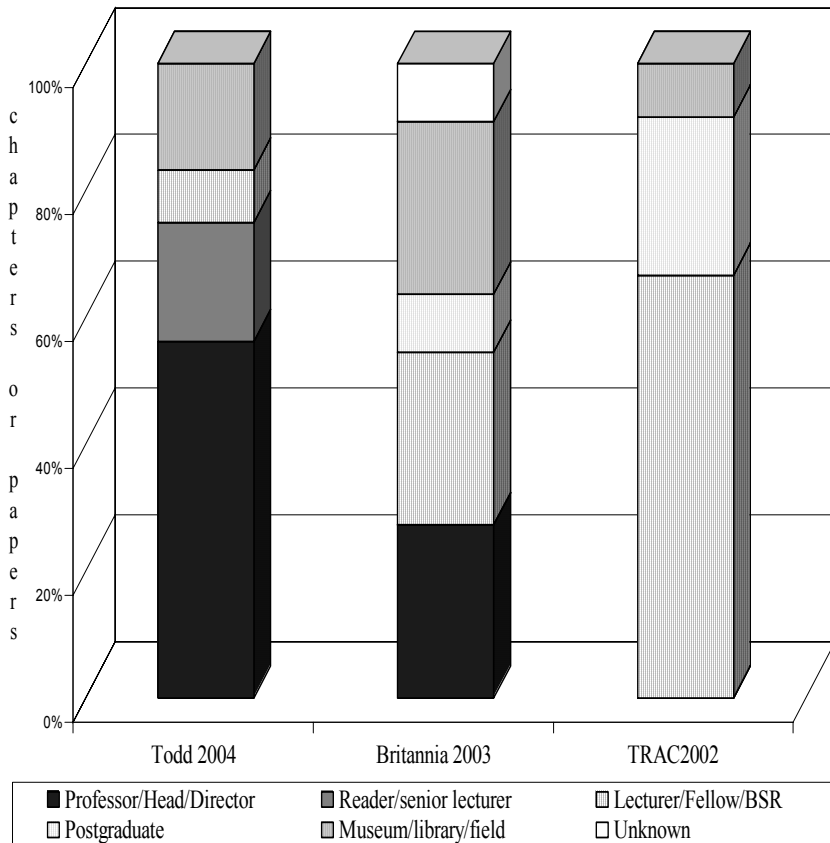


Figure 4: the professional backgrounds of contributors to TRAC 2002, *Britannia* 2003 and Todd's *Companion* to Roman Britain (2004).

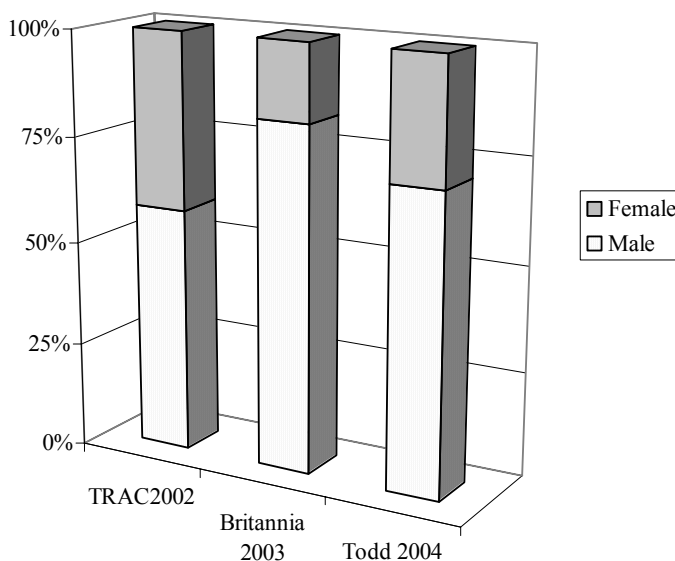


Figure 5: male and female contributors to TRAC 2002, Britannia 2003 and Todd's Companion to Roman Britain (2004)

Although the original mission of TRAC envisaged by Eleanor Scott has been maintained, worries remain about the voices speaking for the archaeology of Roman Britain (Scott 1993; 1998):

I suppose I would define exercises, documents and sets of criteria such as the RAE as being like an apparently sound computer program corrupted by an invisible virus. The apparently neutral RAE and the fellowship rules and criteria for academic promotions and the criteria for sabbatical leave and interview formats and questions etc. – they are all infested with the underlying assumption that what is normative is male.

(Scott 1998: 144)

Why pay attention to pottery?

The interdependence of large and small and indeed of rural settlement in the 'lowland zone' can be seen if we examine the evidence for marketing. *Our most useful tool for gaining insight here is pottery... We may extrapolate from this pattern of interlocking, regionally produced pottery to suggest a similar pattern in the distribution of agricultural produce and other goods (merchants did not only travel in pottery).*

(Fulford 1989: 196; my emphasis)

We have already seen, in the context of trying to understand the extent to which foodstuffs moved in or out of Britain, that a range of imported goods dominated Roman material culture in Britain in the first and second centuries. Although the economics of production and distribution would have suggested that there was scope for the more local manufacture of

many of the goods imported into Britain, this was slow to happen. *Pottery, with its ubiquity and its durability, may serve as a good model for the development of indigenous industries of all kinds.*

(Fulford 2004: 320–1; my emphasis)

Why does pottery play such an important role in studies of the economy of Roman Britain? Acceptance of the notion that knowledge is socially constructed leads to the implication that the status of ceramic evidence has been acquired through a process that may respond to historiographical analysis. Following the success of the Great Exhibition in 1851, the future Victoria and Albert Museum was established in South Kensington in 1857 ‘to assemble a splendid collection of objects representing the application of fine arts to manufacture’ (according to its first director: Chilvers 2004: 736). The range of models for emulation encompassed time-honoured classical items from Greece, Rome or Renaissance Italy as well as newly fashionable Gothic items from medieval Europe. Conceptual space was opened up for the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers and the Arts and Crafts movement. One product of the latter movement, Heywood Sumner, excavated Roman pottery kilns in the New Forest, and published reports including beautiful drawings not only of pottery and kilns but people working in idyllic woodland settings (1927: 44). Many examples of New Forest pottery were added to the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, giving them a cachet of aesthetic respectability perpetuated by *Roman Pottery*, an attractive illustrated book published in 1955 by Robert Charleston, a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum and noted connoisseur of ceramics and glass from more recent periods. The high regard for Romano-British pottery at the Victoria and Albert Museum stands in stark contrast to its perception at the British Museum, where J.B. Walters decried its lack of sophistication and decline from the high standards of its Greek forebears (1905: 430).

John Ruskin was ideologically inclined to support small-scale craft production on economic and social grounds, in addition to possessing great sensitivity to art, design and its moral dimensions. Although he shared an idealised Pre-Raphaelite/Arts and Crafts image of the medieval period, Ruskin’s knowledge of Xenophon and instances of Christian altruism in New Testament parables also gave him an awareness of Greek and Roman economics. Thus, his high regard for the moral virtues of precapitalist economics and preindustrial crafts could be carried forward by Ruskin’s successors into Roman history and archaeology, along with the practice of recording craft products such as brooches and pottery by first-hand drawings. R.G. Collingwood, having gained archaeological inspiration from Francis Haverfield, then encouraged the young Mortimer Wheeler’s research-oriented approach to excavation (despite resistance from the archaeological establishment – 1939: 126). Collingwood also worked with Eric Birley and Ian Richmond on Hadrian’s Wall, where pottery took on particular importance as a chronological indicator; his devotion to Haverfield will have reinforced an interest in ceramics (Wallace 1990: 82–3).

The torch of Romano-British pottery studies was passed by Birley to John Gillam in the North, and by Wheeler to Sheppard Frere and many other participants in excavations at Verulamium in the South. Gillam’s primary concern with typology and chronology was broadened to questions of army supply just as a new generation of students was beginning research (1973). Swan, Fulford, Young, and others (including me) were influenced by the New Archaeology, albeit indirectly, although none adopted its mathematical geographical techniques to the same extent as Ian Hodder. I believe that our hands-on approach to pottery, and sense of its role as a proxy for socioeconomic factors, owed more to Ruskin and

Collingwood than to Lewis Binford. The choice of pottery as a subject for doctoral theses by students in the 1970s was underpinned by confidence in its suitability as a career route into universities, national museums, or state archaeology. It required authority and sanction from our supervisors – many of whom, for example Manning and Cunliffe, had been trained by Frere at Verulamium in the Wheeler tradition – as well as support from referees engaged by the Department for Education and Science, which awarded postgraduate studentships. Today, as then, new researchers may either seek approval through conformity, or follow a more risky career strategy by embracing approaches sanctioned by an alternative establishment, such as prehistoric archaeology, anthropology or cultural studies. The next RAE panel may reward or penalise a shift from empirical observation to social theory in Romano-British studies; the careers of many TRAC contributors will be affected by short-term political factors of this kind.

Collingwood, Fulford and the language of Romano-British economics

Since language is neither objective nor neutral, vocabulary and organising structures may reveal much about a writer. The remainder of this paper will seek indicators of ideology in the writing of R.G. Collingwood and Michael Fulford by selecting quotations that illustrate some similarities and contrasts in the use of metaphors, binary oppositions, expressions of British distinctiveness, Arts and Crafts Romanticism, and economic rationalism.

Metaphors

Collingwood 1937
On the whole, the evidence suggests a definite rise in the population of the country districts during the later part of the Roman period; whether this rise was greater or smaller than the simultaneous fall in the towns, it would be idle to guess. To certain economic aspects of this double change I shall return later; for the present it is enough to point out that it represents, as it were, a second or rural wave of prosperity culminating after the first or urban wave had ebbed. (13)
Fulford 2004
If Britain had remained a backwater in the fourth century, economically independent of the Continent, a greater continuity might have been expected. ... The decision to close the prefecture in Trier in the 390s and move the centre of power to Arles was surely a very considerable blow for British landowners. (324)
Comment
Collingwood’s non-judgemental tidal metaphor is a verbal version of the kind of graphic representation of economics that was becoming more common in the 1930s. Although Fulford’s pejorative watery metaphor evokes stagnation, it gives the impression of a situation preferable to the one which resulted in ‘a very considerable blow’. In the political atmosphere of the 1990s-early 2000s it resonates with fears about the effect on Britain of decisions made in Europe.

Binary oppositions

Collingwood 1937
The quantity and quality of imports in the first and early second century is so striking that the historian is tempted to regard that as the great age of Romano-British civilization; but the fact is that Britain was at that time a barbarian country with a superficial veneer of alien civilization upon the upper strata of its society; and it was not until the rise of the villa-system that a solid fabric of prosperity came into being, which was able to play its part among the productive forces of Imperial wealth. (113)
Fulford 2004
The late third and fourth century provides a complete contrast to the earlier period. ... it is precisely in the first half of the fourth century that the British countryside exhibits the greatest opulence; towns too appear to flourish. ...the rural wealth of late Roman Britain owes much to systems of patronage of Imperial inspiration exploiting the relatively peaceful conditions of the island to feed its Continental forces and civil service. (324)
Comment
Collingwood and Fulford both use evidence of imports and exports to support an early/late contrast. However, Collingwood's metaphor of a veneer being replaced by solid fabric is positive and progressive, while Fulford's image of patronage and exploitation sounds considerably less attractive.

British distinctiveness

Collingwood 1937
The interesting facts about [the flourishing villa system], for our present purpose, are two. First, that any part of the Empire could enjoy such prosperity, at a time of widespread distress, is curious, and suggests either that Britain was in some way peculiarly favoured by fortune during this period or that in the country districts of the provinces generally the distress was not so serious as the literary sources (which refer mainly to the towns) lead us to believe. (83–4)
Fulford 2004
We are left, then, in some uncertainty of the scale and frequency of the movement of foodstuffs in and out of Britain in the late Roman period, but we have to be reminded that our understanding has to be set into a context where late Roman Britain in both town and country shows greater evidence of material prosperity than at any other time. (316–17)
Comment
Collingwood and Fulford both emphasise the contrast between the well-being of Britain and its troubled neighbouring provinces during the late Empire. Is this an unconscious retrospective analogy for the different patterns of peace and economic growth in postmedieval Europe that allowed the Industrial Revolution to begin in Britain? On a wider scale, European distinctiveness in prehistory and history has been presented as a precondition of modern economic dominance (Childe 1952; Jones 1987).

Arts and Crafts Romanticism and economic rationalism

Collingwood 1937
<p>...everywhere industrial products began to show the effects of a blending of Roman and Celtic elements in varying proportions. ... Mass-production thus developed, with its inevitable consequences of cheap and efficient articles and decline in taste. ... Here and there the Celtic artistic spirit reasserted itself, but this was exceptional. The spirit of the age in industry was one of dull and ugly efficiency. (88–9)</p> <p>Sumner has shown (<i>New Forest Pottery Sites</i>) that the New Forest potters lived in temporary huts of slight construction. ... One might hazard the conjecture that these nomadic industrialists were not slaves but free men, peddling the produce of their labour; a wandering woodland life does not permit the supervision that slaves demand. (91)</p>
Fulford 2004
<p>...it is important ... to reflect further on some of the paradoxes and contradictions of the economic evidence. It is difficult not to accept that, although there might have been a theoretical capacity for Britain to be able to sustain such growth with its own resources, the reality was, as we have seen, that there was considerable reliance on overseas food and materials. In these circumstances, it seems paradoxical that a significant proportion of the evidence for this import traffic is consumer goods such as tableware and glass. How were such goods paid for when the Conquest and the establishment of the provincial infrastructure were demanding so much of the province itself? Since distance from the consumer does not seem to have influenced the location of the workshops, we may assume that the cost of transport was subsidized. If this was the case, perhaps the entire supply was subsidized or owned by the State. Such an explanation might account for the supply of Baetican olive oil which, given the possibility of closer sources of supply from the south of Gaul, was evidently economically irrational. (323)</p>
Comment
<p>Collingwood's passage contains a Ruskinian sentiment about the effect of industrialisation upon 'taste', combined with the hope that something more spiritually valuable could be recovered by fostering traditional crafts. The influence of Heywood Sumner is explicit, and contains a rejection of slavery reminiscent of 'Noble Savage' thinking and nineteenth-century social evolutionism.</p> <p>It is bold of Fulford to declare that evidence is contradictory. The sentences that follow reveal a neoclassical equilibrium economic paradigm. Britain is presented as an economic unit – an assumption denied by Collingwood (1925: 35–6). Given the symbolic dimensions of Roman rule and psychological aspects of 'Romanisation', in an economy where patronage played an important role (Whittaker 1985), on what grounds can anything be declared 'economically irrational'?</p>

Conclusion

I hope to have provided evidence for the value of a historiographical approach not just to the writers of the past but to those of the present. Collingwood's Roman Britain was an orderly place containing a hint of Ruskinian idealism; Fulford's is imbued with rather harsh late twentieth-century judgements when its economy fails to operate rationally. It is difficult to avoid seeing reflections of their professional contexts – the detachment permitted by Collingwood's privileged upbringing and Oxford chair, and the *Realpolitik* essential to Fulford's role in institutional and national academic management. My own Roman Britain is a place of uncertainty, devoid of meaning (in the sense of measuring progress, or learning

lessons from the past). However, worries about the impact of global capitalism lead me to be suspicious about explanations of past economic behaviour that appear to reflect or even validate the configuration of the present, whether the triumphant expansion of ‘modern’ humans in Gamble’s *Timewalkers* or the almost accidental circumstances of Britain’s colonial aggregation in Ferguson’s *Empire*, even if that is not their purpose.

I will end by urging the current TRAC generation to bear the implications of postmodern history in mind when writing:

Just as constructionists tell us what the past means through their strategic choice of theory and ideology, so deconstructionists point to their choice of figuration and emplotment *as well as* theory and ideology. This highlights the ontological assumptions made by each individual historian about the nature of causation, agency, intentionality, etc, when they set about substituting history for the past.

(Munslow 2003: 185–6)

... the archaeologist should not translate or read ‘the past’ for others. ... Actively engaged in current issues, the archaeologist contributes to a debate, providing narratives which resonate with contemporary concerns. The archaeologist has to be critical of the ways in which present interests imprint themselves on the way the past is interpreted.

(Hodder 1999: 64)

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