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Nature et signification des frontières romaines

sous la direction de

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EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND ROMAN IMPERIALISM

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Summary. - Prehistorians have recently made a number of attempts to produce a grand theory, which might describe a single process, or set of processes, lying behind both social change in later European prehistory and the expansion of the Roman empire. Current thinking on Roman imperialism, and in particular on its economic dimensions, however, together with recent work on late La Tène societies and economies, poses considerable problems for existing descriptions of this sort of relationship between the Mediterranean basin and its northern continental hinterland, at the end of the last millenium B.C. Europe was not an important procurement zone prior to Roman conquest; Mediterranean imports were not ubiquitous in iron age Europe, let alone essential for social reproduction; and it is no longer possible to sustain the notion that the empire was preceded by a broad band of complex or developed societies, the extent of which determined the ultimate limits of Roman expansion. Until some more convincing grand theory can be formulated, it remains necessary to admit the possibility that Roman conquest represented a sudden discontinuity in the historical trajectory of parts of temperate Europe.

Résumé. - Des préhistoriens ont récemment fait des tentatives pour produire une grande théorie qui pourrait décrire un processus singulier, ou un ensemble de processus, reliant le changement social pendant la préhistoire récente de l'Europe et l'expansion de l'empire romain. Cependant, la réflexion courante sur l'impérialisme romain et, en particulier, sur ses dimensions économiques, ainsi que les récents travaux sur les sociétés et les économies du La Tène final, posent des problèmes considérables pour les actuelles descriptions de cette sorte de relation entre le Bassin méditerranéen et son hinterland continental septentrional, à la fin du dernier millénaire av. J.-C. L'Europe n'était pas une importante zone d'approvisionnement avant la conquête romaine; les importations romaines n'étaient ni omniprésentes dans l'Europe de l'âge du Fer, ni essentielle pour la reproduction sociale; et il n'est plus possible de soutenir l'idée que l'empire a été précédé par une large bande de sociétés complexes ou développées, dont l'étendue a déterminé les limites ultimes de l'expansion romaine. Jusqu'à ce qu'une grande théorie plus convaincante puisse être formulée, il s'avère nécessaire d'admettre la possibilité que la conquête romaine a représenté une discontinuité soudaine dans la trajectoire historique de quelques parties de l'Europe tempérée.

"I believe it is now possible to conclude that a successful permanent Roman occupation was only possible in those regions where the Romans were confronted with a well-organised proto-urban or urban structure, which they could utilise for the supply of their armies and upon which they were able to project gradually their social and administrative system. For its food supply, the Roman army was heavily dependant on pre-existent central places, where local produce was concentrated and where a market economy with long distance trading networks was fully functional."

W. Groenman-van Waateringe (1980)
'Urbanisation and the northwest frontier of the

Roman empire.' in W.S. Hanson and L.J.F. Keppie (eds) *Roman Frontier Studies 1979*, pp. 1041-2

"The limits of empire, therefore, corresponded approximately to the limits of the social development in prehistoric Europe towards early forms of the state and urban patterns of settlement and economy."

T.C. Champion et al. (1984) *Prehistoric Europe*, p. 323

"Core-periphery relations of this kind pervade the rest of history..... With the rise of Rome came a major change of scale both geographically and volumetrically. By the second century AD the core - the Roman empire - had grown so quickly that it had engulfed its periphery without fully integrating it."

B.W. Cunliffe (1988) *Greeks, Roman and Barbarians. Spheres of Interaction*, pp. 2-3

"To understand fully the emergence of the Roman empire would require study of the centre-

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periphery relations in Europe and the Mediterranean area that emerged within the Mediterranean civilisations. Classical Antiquity destroyed the commonwealth of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, but without the 'villain' of Classical Antiquity the rise of Europe would not have taken place."

K. Randsborg (1990) *The First Millenium A.D. in Europe and the Mediterranean*, p. 185.

Does it matter that the Romans conquered temperate Europe? At one level it certainly does, as the conquests of Caesar and his successors, around the turn of the millenium, marked the end of European prehistory as we know it. The post-conquest world is studied by different specialists, often trained in different traditions, sometimes working in different university departments. Perhaps this does not matter for many areas of research, but this division of the European past between disciplines has certainly obstructed our understanding of many phenomena. The most obvious case is the Roman conquest itself, its origins, its limits and its significance. Did Roman conquest mark a decisive break, an intervention that diverted the course of social developments in Europe, perhaps permanently? Or was Roman rule just a facade, behind which most of the inhabitants of Europe continued on an independent course from prehistory to the middle ages (Reece, 1990)?

This paper is about the search for a grand theory of Roman imperialism in iron age Europe. Romanists and prehistorians have both written a great deal on the subject, but the results have tended to be one-sided. Romanists take ancient authors' portrayal of prehistoric Europeans as "barbarian" to be unproblematic and accord iron age societies a passive, although not pacific, role in the conquest. Prehistorians traditionally accepted the notion that prehistory ended abruptly, but increasingly have come to take a rather different view, that the Roman empire was in some sense the product of longer term dynamics within European society. That case has rarely been argued in full, but is based on a series of attempts to bridge the inter-disciplinary divide and to write accounts that unify the history and archaeology of the Mediterranean basin and of temperate Europe at the end of the last millenium BC. These accounts present the Roman conquest as just one phase in a steadily intensifying relationship between European and Mediterranean societies, which can be traced back for hundreds of years (and perhaps for millenia). The quotations at the beginning of this paper illustrate some of the ways in which this relationship has been envisaged.

It is important to be clear what is at issue: contacts certainly existed between Europe and the Mediterranean during the iron age, as before, as may be demonstrated by distribution maps of Mediterranean artefacts and by literary accounts of "Celtic" mercenaries. At issue is the significance of those contacts. Likewise, it is beyond question that the nature of iron age societies played a major role in determining what sort of societies - Romano-British, Gallo-Roman, etc. - succeeded them. What is at issue is whether Europe and the Mediterranean formed a unity in any meaningful sense before the conquest. By

a unity, I mean a group of societies united by a single configuration of social power in such a way that major social and cultural developments in one region were to some extent determined and constrained by developments in the other. My formulation is deliberately vague. This is the sort of unity sometimes described as a world system or a cluster of peer-polities, but I don't want to impose a particular structure of dominance and dependency on this case. In essence, Europe and the Mediterranean formed a unity to the extent that neither can be fully understood without reference to the other.

The vision of such a grand theory has undeniable attractions. Nevertheless, I shall argue in this paper that the accounts from which I have quoted above, cannot stand in the form in which they have been presented. In particular, I will argue that developments in *both* Roman history *and* in the archaeology of the late La Tène, over the last decade or so, have made the "grand theories" currently on offer a good deal less attractive. It does not follow that *no* grand theory is possible. Nonetheless, at present it remains equally possible to argue that iron age Europe and the Mediterranean basin are better understood as two separate worlds, following independent trajectories, until their forcible unification by Roman arms. Ancient history and European prehistory are, more unproblematically, two separate worlds. Any attempt to provide critical accounts of the current state of research on both Roman imperialism and on late prehistoric society is thus fraught with peril. But this interdisciplinary project provides a suitable forum for making the attempt, as a preliminary to discussing the implications of this research for the grand theories currently on offer.

Roman Imperialism

Why then did the Roman state expand? Klaus Randsborg (1990) has recently suggested that "theories relating to the expansion of the empire are considerably fewer [than those on its decline and fall], probably because the academic western world views expansion, economic profit and social development as natural." Whether or not this is the case, it is true that a substantial consensus exists among ancient historians on the origins of Roman imperialism. Harris' (1979) book *War and Imperialism* argued that Romans of every social status were warlike, valuing martial virtue and the booty acquired by warfare. Competition within the Republican aristocracy for prestige and booty was the motor behind Roman expansion through a series of ever more extensive wars of conquest, culminating in the conquests of Pompey in the East and of Caesar and Augustus in temperate Europe. Less agreement exists on Roman imperialism under the empire, but a new consensus seems to be emerging that Rome never stopped fighting aggressive wars, even if expansion did slow down, and doubts about its value emerged (Whittaker 1989, 29, Isaac 1990, 19-53, Brunt 1990, Woolf 1993). Perhaps the commonest explanation for

this deceleration links the slowing of expansion to the end of political pluralism: emperors had less to gain, and more to lose, from imperialist ventures, than did the competing aristocrats of the Republic.

Ancient historians thus tend to discuss both the origins and the end of Roman imperialism as a product of the internal structures of Roman society. In fact, as John North pointed out in 1981, in a review of Harris' book, many accounts of Roman imperialism explain expansion primarily in terms of the conscious motives of Roman elite members. Despite North's call for more work on "the expansion bearing structures in Roman society and organization", the imperialism debate has continued to be pre-occupied with issues such as the relative capacity of generals on the ground, and the Senate or emperors in Rome, to direct policy (eg. Millar 1982, Dyson 1985, 177-9, Richardson 1986, 177-8). While these arguments contribute to a critique of Luttwak's (1976) influential thesis that Roman expansion and defence were controlled by a "Grand Strategy", the debate remains at the level of Roman motivations and ideology. Arguably, an adequate explanation of Roman expansion, and of its limits, would have to go beyond looking at Roman institutions to take more account of the world into which Rome expanded and the societies which she came to dominate. This might involve comparisons between Rome and other powers to explain their failure as well as Rome's success. Elite motivations are probably the wrong place to look since many, perhaps most, ancient and prehistoric societies were characterised by militaristic ideologies and expansionist aspirations, but few rivalled the success of the Roman aristocracy in realising them. Modern accounts do not compare, in this respect, with that of Polybius, who argued that Roman institutions, in which he included military systems, education and values, as well as political structure, were superior to those of surrounding powers. Polybius' notion of Mediterranean unification deriving from competition between rival political and social systems might also point us to some longer term trends in the Mediterranean basin over the last millenium BC. City states dominated many regions of the Mediterranean by the eighth century, had been organised into loose hegemonies by the fifth century and incorporated into empires by the third century BC. Roman conquest can be seen as the culmination of these processes of political centralisation, which broadly correlate with the development of a Mediterranean wide city network and the growth of the Mediterranean economy.

Economic expansion, however, is one area in which recent debates have contributed greatly to our understanding of Roman imperialism (eg. Finley, 1978, Garnsey and Whittaker, 1978). The economics of ancient Mediterranean imperialisms followed one of two patterns. The first consisted of the expropriation of land, movable booty and slaves in the immediate aftermath of successful campaigns. The second consisted of imposing regular burdens on the conquered, burdens consisting of tribute in coin or kind and of a variety of obligations, largely military. These two strategies may be thought of as the economic logics of conquest states and of tributary

empires respectively, and the importance of tribute certainly increased relative to that of conquest in the course of the evolution of the Roman empire (Woolf 1990, 48-50, Richardson 1991). But most ancient imperialisms combined elements of both and saw both expropriation and the imposition of regular burdens as the natural prerogatives of those who wielded power (*hegemone* or *imperium*) over others. The net result of this style of imperialism, as perfected by Rome, was the steady accumulation of resources by the Roman elite, resources that included not just bullion, mines and land but also the military forces of the Mediterranean basin. Drawn together by an organisational structure better characterised as patrimonial than as bureaucratic, the human and military resources of the Mediterranean were the economic reward of the exercise of Roman military power.

Mediterranean imperialism, or at least the patrimonial imperialism of Rome, can be contrasted with more recent imperialisms aimed in part at facilitating commercial expansion, whether in search of new markets, new resources or both. Roman merchants existed of course, but were hardly the main beneficiaries let alone the promoters of expansion. Their activities were not restricted to within the empire, and some were better conducted outside. It was illegal, for example, to enslave free individuals within the empire, and commerce with societies with non-Roman value systems opened up the possibility of mutually beneficial exchange, whether slaves for wine in the West, or gold for spices in the East. But the vast majority of Roman trade probably took place within the empire, servicing the growing cities and the armies. The temptation to exaggerate the importance of trade beyond the frontiers, simply because it is highly visible archaeologically, must be resisted (Fulford, 1989). But in some sense it makes little difference whether or not Roman merchants had an interest in Roman expansion, since they had little if any influence on imperial policy making. The Roman economy was run by the state and by powerful aristocrats for whom money lending, public contracts and most of all land, were far more significant than commerce or retail trade, and whose dominance of the economy prevented the emergence of a politically powerful bourgeoisie. Roman expansion similarly reflected the interests of that elite, not of those primarily or solely involved in commerce. The point is not that Roman imperialism had no economic dimension, but rather that Roman expansion had its *own* economic logic, quite distinct from that of mercantile capitalism and that logic was based on expropriation and tribute, not on international commerce (Woolf, 1990).

This brief survey confirms Randsborg's view that we still lack a satisfactory analysis of Roman expansion (as opposed to accounts of the militaristic and imperialistic ideology of the Roman elite). All the same, it is possible to see how such an account might be developed, while work on the economic dimensions of Roman expansion has allowed ancient historians to draw important contrasts between Roman and later imperialisms. Earlier accounts that presented Roman

Knights as a mercantile and financial bourgeoisie, taking trade before the flag, and providing pretexts and motives for military imperialism after the fashion of the British in India, can be seen to be anachronistic and at odds with the nature and long term dynamics of ancient Mediterranean imperialism.

Iron Age Society

It is time to turn to recent work on the European iron age. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the extent to which views of late prehistoric society have changed, is to begin with a summary of the period provided by Tim Champion and his collaborators in their textbook *Prehistoric Europe* (1984: 297):

In the final phases of the Iron Age, before the expansion of the Roman empire northwards in the first century BC, major changes are apparent in the economy and society of temperate Europe from central France to the Black Sea. The settlement pattern was transformed by the growth of large sites which functioned as towns, and new centres of industrial production distributed standardised wares over larger distances. At the same time, political power was becoming increasingly centralised and early forms of the state had emerged. Coinage was introduced, initially for political purposes, though later it facilitated commercial exchange. Thus, even before the Roman conquest, large parts of 'barbarian' Europe were occupied by literate societies with a high degree of social, economic and political development.

That paragraph might serve as a solemn warning to anyone ever tempted to write a synthesis of European prehistory. The picture presented by Champion is the most elegant expression of views shared, until very recently, by the vast majority of those working on late iron age society (cf. Bradley, 1984). The late La Tène was widely held to have undergone some sort of "social revolution" involving urbanization, industrialisation, state formation, and the invention of the market and writing. But in the last decade serious doubts have been raised about almost every component of that account of late La Tène Europe, and it has become increasingly clear that whatever their interpretation, these phenomena do not comprise a "package" with a clear distribution in space and time.

The strongest case for a late La Tène revolution was that made by Daphne Nash in a series of publications on the iron age of central France (Nash 1976, 1978a, 1978b, 1981), but her work can be closely paralleled by the work of many others writing at around the same time (eg. Crumley 1974, Haselgrove 1982, Roymans 1983, Cunliffe, 1988). Nash argued that a group of societies bordering the Roman province of Transalpine, were transformed by increased levels of contact with the classical world into archaic states ruled by Republican governments. These polities might be characterised archaeologically by settlement hierarchies, within which capitals and secondary towns might be distinguished, and numismatically by new kinds of coinages, the standardisation and distribution of which suggested

state control, and the denominations of which suggested a degree of monetarisation of small change. Contacts between the classical world and this area were indicated partly by a series of classical texts and partly by the evidence of imported wine amphorae and Campanian ware.

Although extremely influential at the time, this reconstruction of iron age society is no longer tenable for central Gaul. Objections have been raised on a number of grounds. Ian Ralston (1988) has pointed out that settlement hierarchies differed widely within central France and temperate Europe as a whole, and that it is not possible to define a broad zone of secondary state formation bordering the Roman empire using archaeological criteria alone. The distributions of the "state" coinages do not coincide with the supposed boundaries of the states or tribal territories (Haselgrove 1988); and it is now widely doubted that iron age coins were either money or state-issues in the strict sense, rather than primitive valuables produced by powerful individuals and used as treasure and gifts. Caesar does describe annual magistracies and an assembly in one tribe, the Aedui, but several alternative sociologies of late iron age Gaul can be and have been constructed on the basis of his text (Haselgrove 1987, 108-10). If the picture of a late La Tène social revolution cannot be sustained for this region, where Nash and Crumley were able to apply the most up-to-date historical and anthropological analysis to an unparalleled range of evidence, then *a fortiori* the case fails for other parts of Europe, let alone La Tène Europe as a whole.

But perhaps the most important change brought about in our perception of the late La Tène is an increasing appreciation of the complexity of the chronology involved. The sites termed *oppida* do not appear in many parts of France until a few decades before Caesar's invasion, but begin in eastern France maybe two generations earlier while the large developed sites of central and eastern Europe (in zones furthest from Roman contact) seem earlier still. Gold and silver coinages and imports of Mediterranean wine appear from the third century BC, but not apparently simultaneously across Europe. Literacy seems to appear on coins and graffiti on potsherds only very late indeed. The absolute chronology in this period is very difficult indeed to unravel (Duval et al., 1990), but it is already clear that there was no single and sudden social revolution. Different components of what we regard as the late La Tène cultural package developed at different times and in different parts of Europe. When these cultural innovations spread through Europe, it was through adoption and adaptation by local groups, leading to the familiar patterns of wide interregional differences in hillfort hierarchies, in the precious metals and weight standards used for coinage, and in ceramic decoration. Many regions rejected innovations too: some groups rejected coinage altogether, others made no use of coin legends, while many seem deliberately to have chosen not to use painted pottery or to reject classical imports. It is beginning to look as if the unifying features of the late iron age may turn out to have less

to do with a unified cultural or social system, than with the steady advance of a techno-economic complex comprising agricultural expansion, the increased use of iron and perhaps demographic growth. But if so we should be beware of limiting analysis within the traditional boundaries of La Tène Europe.

Perhaps the best illustration of changing views of the late iron age is provided by the *oppida*. The notion that certain large hillforts acted as central places in political, economic and social terms, was an important component of many recent interpretations of iron age societies. The *oppida* were widely believed to function as administrative capitals, as centres of elite residence, and as industrial and redistributive centres, and so were (and still are) often described as urban or proto-urban (eg. Cunliffe and Rowley 1976, Collis 1984, Wells 1984, Audouze and Buchsenchutz 1989). The distribution of these iron age "towns" was usually regarded as bounded by the Alps and Pyrenees to the south, by the north European and Hungarian plains to the north and east and by the Atlantic to the west with an overspill into southern Britain. But the entire notion of *oppida* is growing increasingly difficult to sustain. For a start, the sites grouped together in this category differ considerably in size and morphology. The diversity encompassed may be illustrated by comparing the sites of Colchester, Levrux, Manching and Zavist. If all that is meant is a large hillfort used in the last two centuries BC, it seems arbitrary to include some western sites of only 2-10 ha but to exclude much larger sites in Hungary, Roumania, Scotland or the Iberian peninsula, many of which use similar building traditions. Nor is it easy to define *oppida* in functional terms. For *oppida* to be interpreted as central places they must have been clearly differentiated from other sites in terms of the activities that took place in them, but in practice it is difficult to reconstruct settlement systems within which *oppida* monopolised particular roles, except as consumers of energy and resources in their construction. The material assemblages recovered from *oppida* are much the same as those from open settlements like Aulnat or Basel Gasfabrik. Iron working, the consumption of foreign imports and of local finewares seem common to open settlements and *oppida* alike in France. Besides it is not even clear that these sites always formed part of settlement systems: in areas as diverse as the Auvergne, the Berry and the Aisne valley the appearance of *oppida* appears to coincide with an abandonment of other open settlements (Haselgrove, 1990). If a town is the head of a differentiated settlement hierarchy then these sites are not towns so much as nucleated centres reminiscent of the fortified villages of *incastellamento* Italy. Towns are also often characterised by a degree of internal differentiation. But it is difficult to establish clear examples of elite residences, artisanal areas or public buildings in the excavated *oppida*, while Wells' excavations at Kelheim have so far failed to find much difference in the ways in which different areas of the site were used (Wells, 1987). The claims of zoning of activities at Manching do not convince. This is not the place to argue a new interpretation of the *oppida* but the internal plans of sites like

Manching, Villeneuve-St.-Germain and Staré Hradisko do resemble agglomerations of farms much more than towns and it might be worth rejecting the urban model altogether and to start experimenting with European alternatives to urbanism instead (cf. Woolf, 1993a).

The notion of a European alternative is an important one, and one that marks another sea-change in views of the late iron age. A common trend in the archaeology of the late seventies and early eighties was the attempt to trace, in iron age Europe, a recapitulation of trends already known from elsewhere, or to detect familiar social structures in the archaeology. Pre-industrial towns, archaic states, embedded economies and the like were seen as appropriate tools for interpreting the European past, even when no social evolutionary framework was explicitly invoked (cf. Gibson and Geselowitz, 1988). This tendency to "familiarise" the iron age, to look for similarities at the expense of what was unique or particular to Europe in this period, has been trenchantly criticised by J.D. Hill (1989). But this emphasis has shifted. Whereas a decade ago, iron age archaeology was preoccupied with the search for signs of increasing complexity and with attempts to determine just how much of the familiar infrastructure of civilised society was in place before the Romans arrived, now there is much more concern to look at regional and even local sequences and at unfamiliar aspects of the iron age, such as ritual.

No new consensus has emerged about iron age society in general, but I suggest that any new account will have to reconcile the considerable social power displayed by iron age societies with the low level of inter-site differentiation and specialisation, and will also have to explain how common technological and cultural repertoires were manifested in very different ways in different regions. At the risk of oversimplification, I suggest a contrast might be usefully made between the Mediterranean, where scarce resources were organised by large, stable socio-political structures and Europe, where plentiful resources were organised by small-scale, unstable structures. But whether or not this formulation is accepted, it seems clear that we can no longer regard iron age societies, either as far behind their Mediterranean contemporaries in social evolutionary terms, or as almost level with them. For better or worse, iron age Europe was following its own separate line of development at the point of Roman conquest.

Grand Theory

To some extent the arguments in the first and second sections of the paper have run in parallel. Both in the case of Roman imperialism and in that of iron age society, previous certainties have been shaken in the last decade. Although new consensuses have not emerged in either field, current thinking has tended towards attempts to isolate what was distinctive about each: how, that is, Roman imperialism may be distinguished from other kinds of imperialism and how late prehistoric society in Europe may be

distinguished from late prehistoric societies elsewhere and in other periods. These developments seem to me very much to be welcomed, but do pose problems for current attempts to produce unified accounts of the relationship between Europe and the Mediterranean world in the *longue durée*.

Three broad approaches may be distinguished. A first set of views sees Roman expansion as simply the final stage in Mediterranean exploitation of a continental European hinterland. Cunliffe's (1988) recent account of late prehistory in terms of a succession of core-periphery relationships and Nash's (1987) analysis of Roman expansion in *Centre and Periphery in the Ancient World* typify that approach. The emphasis tends to be on Roman procurement of raw materials and especially slaves. Roman economic dominance might generate some changes in neighbouring societies but these changes have only a slight impact on the subsequent history of the system. The second set of approaches is very similar but the structural marxism is much more evident. Approaches like those of Haselgrove (1984) and Hingley (1981) in the early 1980's made much more precise use of concepts like prestige-goods economies and world systems theory. Finally, the rather distinctive but influential approach of Groenman-van Waateringe (1980) approaches the problem from the other end, arguing that Roman expansion was limited by the extent of urbanisation and centralisation in iron age societies. Imperialism thus becomes super-structural, a political unification of an area already unified by a common level of social and economic complexity.

Of course these three approaches may be combined, as Cunliffe (1988) does in *Greeks, Romans and Barbarians* creating a synthesis out of the slave mode of production in Italy, gateway communities in southern Europe, prestige goods economies further north and a barbarian procurement zone. Likewise Roymans (1990) combines not only prestige goods economies and Groenman-van Waateringe's thesis, but also Bintliff's (1984) arguments for the local development of social complexity and Renfrew's (1972, 19-44, 479-504) multiplier effect. Klaus Randsborg's (1990) explanatory framework for events in the first millenium AD is equally eclectic, if less easy to summarise. Combining models that were originally constructed in opposition to each other is a difficult enterprise. Even if resulting synthesis is able to survive the voyage between the Scylla of internal contradiction and the Charybdis of over-determination, its very complexity may sacrifice the main prizes of theoretical analysis, the clarity offered by abstraction, and the potential for comparative study offered by generalisation. For that reason, I have heuristically abstracted, for critical analysis, what seem to me to be the three most important constituents of those approaches, first the idea of Europe as an economic hinterland of the Mediterranean before the Roman conquest, second the idea that late La Tène societies were organised around prestige-goods economies dependant on the supply of Mediterranean imports, and third the thesis that Roman expansion was limited by the extent of late prehistoric social complexity in Europe.

The notion of Europe as in some sense an economic hinterland of the Roman empire prior to conquest, is perhaps the least convincing of these "grand theories" (Woolf forthcoming). It will be apparent that ancient historians' increased understanding of the economics of Roman imperialism raises serious problems for any account of Roman expansion as a natural sequel to Roman trade. Exchange did take place, of course, but in the absence of quantifiable data, it is difficult to know how dependant Romans or barbarians were on each other. We have no information about Roman needs for metals or about the supply of metals or grain in any quantities from beyond the frontier in this period. The trade in slaves is mentioned by some literary sources, but again its importance is hard to gauge. Large scale agricultural slavery was probably restricted to relatively few areas of central Italy, and slaves might also be obtained as human booty, or through slave-breeding or (illegally) by enslaving free children, whether kidnapped, abandoned or sold by their parents. Fortunately, it is not necessary to know the precise scale of exchange in order to reject the notion of trade and conquest being two stages in the same process. As explained above, trade was possible, and sometimes easier, with groups beyond the frontier. Even had Roman traders believed otherwise, they lacked the political muscle to influence Roman policy. The economics of Roman imperialism were based on the expropriation of capital and the imposition of tribute, not on ensuring supplies of raw materials and exclusive access to foreign markets.

Explanations based on prestige-goods economies are in general much more rigorous theoretically. At their best, they are based on a clear structural-marxist conception of society and social change. We may disagree with the premises, but if we accept them, these accounts are coherent. One way of assessing them is to consider the entire theoretical framework of world systems theory and its applicability to the ancient world (eg. Woolf, 1990). But in this instance, I shall focus on the central issue of the role played by Mediterranean imports in late La Tène society. Two possibilities present themselves. One is that Mediterranean imports operated as prestige-goods. Local elites restricted access to them by controlling contact with the outside world and used them, whether in display, as gifts or through redistribution, to assert and maintain their dominance. A breakdown in the supply of these goods might result in the collapse of political hierarchies and the relocation of power within a region. The other possibility is that these imports were luxuries, highly desirable goods, but no more essential to the maintenance of the social order than was, for example, the supply of Chinese and Indian spices to the power of Roman emperors. Either possibility may be supported by ethnographic analogies, and so the status of any exotic import as a prestige-good must be argued, generally from the uses we may infer from its archaeological contexts, and (circumstantially) from correlating variations in supply and distribution in time and space with evidence for the rise and fall and geographical extent of social structures indicated by settlement hierarchies

and rich graves. The empirical difficulties facing any such demonstration should not be underestimated.

As long as the late La Tène was conceived as a period characterised by a "social revolution" roughly correlated with the appearance of large numbers of Mediterranean manufactures in temperate Europe, the case for secondary state formation promoted by trade or for prestige goods systems seemed quite strong. But that picture has been considerably weakened by the realisation that there was no sudden social revolution. Mediterranean imports have in any case a fairly restricted distribution. The earliest "oppida" appear in regions which never received Mediterranean goods in significant quantities, while the earliest wine amphorae precede oppida in parts of western and central France by more than a century. Mediterranean imports seem to be given a variety of uses in iron age contexts, but look increasingly more like luxuries and less like prestige-goods (Fitzpatrick, 1989). The picture seems reinforced by comparison with the variable reception given to Roman imports by societies bordering Rome in the imperial period (Fulford, 1985). Prestige-goods economies may have played a part in the middle iron age, but they no longer seem appropriate for explaining the late La Tène (Woolf forthcoming).

Finally we come to the notion that Roman expansion was limited by a division between a developed band of states and more primitive societies to the north. Groenman-van Waateringe's (1980) original thesis cannot stand in the form in which it was proposed since it is no longer possible to assume that hillforts represent towns or indicate societies centralised enough to produce or amass a surplus. It is certainly much less easy to argue now that northern Europe was uniformly less socially complex than the area to its south. The thesis that social complexity decreased with distance from the Roman empire looks a good deal less secure following Ralston's (1988) work on central France or Parker-Pearson's (1989) on Denmark. If by social complexity we mean the resources and organisational skills necessary to construct oppida it is difficult to explain why Czechoslovakia or Denmark remained outside the empire. In practice it is not possible to find the line of the future Roman frontier foreshadowed in the archaeology of late La Tène Europe. Instead, like other frontiers, it bisected an area of more or less uniform culture (Whittaker, 1989, 34-8). Much depends, of course, on the extent to which the Roman army really was dependant for supplies on the pre-existing infra-structure and levels of agricultural production in the immediate vicinity of its bases. Strong arguments can be advanced to the effect that Rome was able to set up supply routes that could provision armies from a distance (eg. Fulford, 1992). If so, La Tène Europe looks increasingly less like the ancestor of one third of the Roman empire, and more like a previous tenant.

This has been a brief assessment of an important debate. It seems that the more we learn about iron age Europe and the more precisely we characterise Roman expansion, the more the Roman conquest

appears as a discontinuity in the relationship between Europe and the Mediterranean world. The research trajectories of both disciplines over the last decade have made a rapprochement more difficult rather than less. I hope I have also indicated that there is less consensus in both fields than there was a decade or more ago, and I have also tried to indicate some of the ways in which these debates might develop. The demonstration that existing "grand theories" do not work, does not imply that no unified theory might be possible, but I have my doubts. Perhaps the most we can say is that no satisfactory grand theory is currently on offer and it is not at all clear that one is possible. As Barry Cunliffe (1988: 201) put it, concluding his much more optimistic study of the same issue: "The approach is invigorating, but it is also humbling, showing how little we yet know of even the fundamental issues of early European history."

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