

## 2. Romans

This essay is about the period of British history when it was part of the Roman empire. I will discuss how the empire worked and look briefly at its history, then at the history of the particular province that was Britain. The theme will be Economy, and I will begin with a discussion of what I think is a vitally important historical process to understand: the money system.

Economy is all about how people cooperate to make things and share them out. In the period after the invention of agriculture people probably organised themselves as they had for generations before: in families and small communities, making and collecting most things for themselves and cooperating on special tasks, like building settlements, holding festivals and waging war.

Exchanges between communities: gifts, lending, debt repayments or payments of extortion, could lead to greater productivity through an intercommunity division of tasks. This can evolve into a permanent arrangement called “tribute”, allowing some groups to specialise as warriors, priests and administrators. As they develop what may be called a “state”, with law, writing and institutions of power, we have what many people are happy to call “civilisation”.

States grow and divide, and grow and divide. Power is devolved down the hierarchy to the extremities, and deferred up to the centre, in a process I have called the “power exchange”. The ebb and flow, growth and division may go on indefinitely. In real history however, something came along that started a new dynamic, the invention of money.

### Money

What is money? There are two main ways to answer this question.

The first comes from the book that is often thought of as the foundation of economics as a science. It was called *The Wealth of Nations*, by Adam Smith, and was published in 1776. Smith said that money is a medium of exchange and a store of value.

It's a medium of exchange because you can swap it with something of equivalent value, and it is a store of value because you can put it in your pocket and you will have 100Y of value in your pocket. This is certainly true, but how did it come to exist in the first place?

Smith said that you have to imagine two people trying to exchange something. Imagine, you have a sheep and you want some chickens. The other person has some chickens and they want a sheep. All you have to do is agree how many chickens are worth one sheep and you can do an exchange. This is called “barter”.

Now, you only have to think of this for a moment to realise that this is quite unlikely to happen. The chances of a “double coincidence of wants”: that you want exactly what I've got and I want exactly what you've got, is very, very unlikely. So Smith reasoned that to make exchange happen, you can choose a token of exchange. So if I say that one sheep is worth 1oz of gold, then I can exchange my sheep for gold, and hold on to it until I find someone with chickens for sale.

In this example, gold has become a “common currency”, which has been quite common in history. Money can be thought of as anything made to be a common currency (having no other value). In the form of coins, notes, cheques, or even numbers on a screen, it works as long as we all agree that it does. Recognising the limitations of barter, people who followed Smith's idea generally assumed that significant amounts of trade only really began after the invention of money.

The alternative way of thinking about money was originally put forward in a couple of essays by the British diplomat Alfred Mitchell-Innes and has recently been popularised by the anthropologist David Graeber. This is the idea of money as quantified debt.

Imagine that you do a job for me and I can't pay you right now, so I write on a piece of paper: IOU 100Y. This is what we call it in English: an "I.O.U.". At some time in the future, when I've forgotten about it, you can show me the piece of paper and I'll give you 100Y. Then I'll take the paper and destroy it.

Now imagine if my credit was so reliable that instead of showing it to me, you could exchange it for something else. So someone would say: John always has enough money and always pays his debts, so this IOU is really worth 100Y. Very soon my little piece of paper would become money. This money is really a token of debt, and the numbers on it quantify that debt.

Once the money has been made, and it's in your pocket and its passed to someone else's pocket, then it can be a medium of exchange and a store of value, but it wasn't invented for that purpose. This makes a big difference. For one thing it means that money is not necessarily the difference between trade and no trade.

In a world without money I could, for example, give you an IOU, or find some other way to represent or quantify debt. This idea does not have to assume that significant trade began with the invention of money. You can have quite complex systems of trade based on debt. You can record with something as simple as marks on a stick: last year X gave Y 5 bags of rice, and a chicken. Y is in debt to X by this amount. Next year Y promises to give X one sheep.

There are still difficulties in quantifying debt this way. Let's say, a bag of rice is one mark on the stick, and a chicken is 3, and a sheep is 6. So 5 bags of rice and a chicken, is 8 marks on the stick. And Y gives a sheep, so that's  $8-6=2$ . So, Y owes X 2 something: 2 units of debt, 2 bits of value. We have the physical thing that represent these units, the marks on the stick. From here it is only a small step to having something you can carry around and exchange.

If Smith's speculation about the origin of money is right we would expect to see very little economic development before the use of money, and societies perhaps using barter, or more likely, hardly exchanging anything. In fact, we know that there were many sophisticated societies that didn't have money. There is also very little evidence of societies that either barter or don't exchange. Every human society has exchange, and in the absence of money, the norm is to record debts, either physically or in memory.

### **The evolution of cities**

As the division of tasks and productivity increase, the focal point of exchange becomes a city. The communities around slip into a relationship of debt. The city survives on maintaining this sense of debt, for example, by organising armies and borders for defence from invasion. To cancel the debt is a revolution. How many times might this have happened? How many times might revolutions have broken defences and allowed invaders in? Most such events would leave no historical trace.

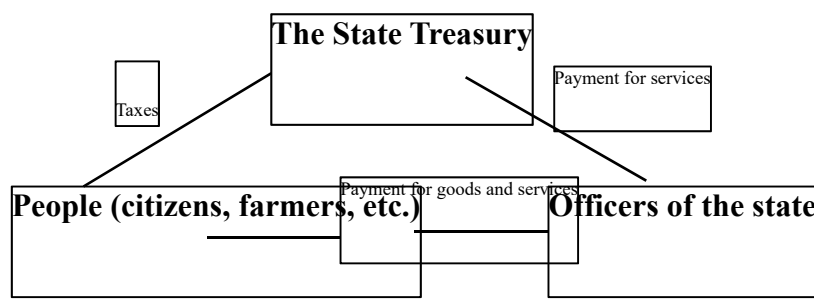
Around 1200-1150 b.c.e., many cities in the Eastern Mediterranean were abandoned or destroyed. Cultures, with long histories of stories, ceremonies and written records of state, were interrupted for at least two centuries. Perhaps it was revolution, invasion, climate change, or some combination. The precise reason is not agreed amongst historians, but there is a strong association with the southward migration of people from around the Black Sea.

The Hittite empire, in what is now Turkey, and the Second Babylonian empire of Mesopotamia, both ended. The Egyptian empire survived but lost a lot of territory. The Egyptians recorded that their Kingdom was saved from the Sea Peoples by the heroic Pharaoh Ramesses III, whose reign was approximately 1186-1155 b.c.e..

Over the following centuries, new cities were founded throughout the region, including Rome and Carthage in the West. In the East, the story goes that Croesus, King of Lydia, built a city on a gold mine. As gold became the common currency of the area, he became very rich. During his reign, probably 560-546 b.c.e., he minted coins of electrum, a mix of gold and silver. They are the oldest coins ever found.

Croesus stamped his coins with images of a lion and a cow. Other Kings were stamping their symbols. They gave them to the people they employed, that is to say, the Officers of the state. Then they would be used to buy food and supplies. The Kings stamp, verified to the farmers and traders that they could be used to pay taxes, and exchanged for more things.

The cycle that forms is the money system. It looks like this:



Some of those Officers of the state would be soldiers. In the world of crumbling civilisations and streams of invaders, few would doubt the need for protections. Soldiers, however, can also be used to attack. When they conquered new territory, they would not only take all the gold and silver but the defeated people too. This enslavement would supply a market for labour. More labour means more production and more tax revenue, completing the cycle.

To clarify how this works, consider the soldier giving service to the state. The state is now in debt to him, so the state treasury cuts and stamps coins to give him. The soldier uses the coins to buy things from the citizens and farmers. Thus supplied, his army conquers and expands the reach of the state, bringing in metals for the treasury and slaves for the market. The citizens and farmers use the coins to buy slaves and pay taxes. So some coins are returned to the state to be paid out again, and more can be made from the metals won in conquest. This has been called “a military-coinage-slavery complex”.

At the level of society in general, there are significant consequences of this system. Firstly, communities that once fed themselves are now obliged to pay taxes. So they must make something they can sell. This brings more and more people into the money system, expanding the division of tasks and raising productivity.

Secondly, as the system is fuelled from the metals and slaves won in conquest, the state that does this most efficiently will expand faster than its neighbours. States will expand to become empires. Efficiency however, is fragile. Money may leak out of the system, for example, if people beyond the reach of the state, who pay no taxes, can supply things cheaper. That's one way that the supply of the metals that define a currency might be interrupted.

Thirdly, because people can survive by selling their labour for coins, many new professions can be created. This results in more independent salesmen, teachers, artists, etc. At the same time, the bonds of family, community and tribe are no longer vital for survival, and may weaken. People may find themselves separated physically and emotionally from their families and some psychological needs can be neglected. The money system is the perfect environment for the spread of scepticism and loneliness, and the appeal of cults.

Fourthly and finally, the money system mixes together people of all different races and religions. In good times, ideas and cultural forms can spread, producing cosmopolitanism and creativity. In bad times, the proximity of alien ideas in foreign tongues can produce sectarianism and rivalry. Money systems can bring in foreigners, typically as slaves, whose presence may be a source of conflict should the system fail.

## Rome

Let's do a thought experiment: Try to imagine you are part of a community, that is to say, a few interconnected families, on the outlying shores of the Greek world. You decide to journey north and west to make a new settlement, just the way your ancestors had. You keep trading contacts with the people you left behind, but you gradually develop your own money and your own connections, especially with the people even further north and west.

To govern your settlement you have an assembly, which you call a *comitia*. It is not an assembly of individuals, but of clans, or extended families, which you call *curia*. So you might call this the *comitia curiate*. The elders of the clans do all the talking and associate with each other. They are what you might call a "clique" or more positively, an "elite" called the *patricians*.

You decide, mainly for military and diplomatic purposes, that you need a leader, so your assembly elects one. But you don't really know how to control this leader, so he uses his power to gather more wealth and more power. To begin with it may be difficult to remove him, later it becomes impossible (by legal means). He becomes a King and tries to establish a dynasty.

The patricians form an advisory body to the King called the *senate*. Now they not only dominate the assembly of the clans but have a more direct influence over the King. They use their power and influence to increase their wealth. Over time, especially as new arrivals come and the settlement expands into a town, a clear separation develops between this aristocracy and the people, who are called *plebeians*.

This thought experiment describes the process by which the city of Rome evolved, from its founding, in 735 b.c.e., to the decisive events of 509 b.c.e.. In this time, the Royalty of Rome married into the families of local tribal leaders, and acquired large areas of land populated by non-Romans: the Etruscans to the North and Latins to the South. As the Royal family expanded its domain across the Italian peninsula, they came into conflict with the interests of the patricians and plebeians.

This rare moment of common cause led to the revolution of 509 b.c.e., in which the patricians and plebeians removed a King they called a tyrant. Various forms of assemblies and tribunes to represent the plebeians developed. In practice however, as Rome's wealth expanded, the biggest share was taken by the aristocracy, who ruled the city through the Senate.

From 396 b.c.e., Rome had a paid standing army. This was organised into legions with a strong sense of military discipline. Each had their own flag, or standard, and a chain of command leading up to a Commander, accountable to Generals appointed by the Senate. A legion had about 5,000

trained soldiers, and 5,000 “auxiliaries”, who would fight if necessary, but were there mainly for practical support. The Roman Generals were, as far as we know, the first to work out that an army works best if half of it is looking after the other half. This is how they won battle after battle and built impressive encampments, linking them with long, straight roads.

Despite the destruction of Rome by Celts from the North in 390 b.c.e., the intact legions drove them back north. With a strong money system supplying them, Roman armies came to dominate the Italian peninsula over the following 45 years. Between 246-146 b.c.e., the race to control the Western Mediterranean climaxed in three wars with the powerful, money-rich city of Carthage. Rome won, and its prize was access to the whole of Western Europe.

One tactic was to make local allies and support alliances of weak Kings against strong ones. When the moment was right, they would drive out the strong King. In return for allowing some degree of local independence, local chiefs would be told to name the Emperor as their heir. So by a combination of inheritance and opportune invasion the empire expanded.

Conquest gave Rome's wealthiest aristocrats access to metals and slaves and the opportunity to buy the loyalty of legions. The first real sign of the new power relations came when General Marius, around 107 b.c.e., opened the legions to recruits from all classes, and used his popularity with the plebeians to seize power. He was defeated by General Sulla, who restored the power of the Senate. The events however, demonstrated that having an empire meant bigger armies and richer Generals.

Another effect of conquest worth mentioning was the high supply and low cost of slaves. As they became cheaper and expendable they were more and more used in blood sports, such as gladiatorial combat and fighting with exotic, wild animals. This led to revolts. The most famous and longest lasting of which was the one led by Spartacus in 73 b.c.e..

## **The Roman conquest**

Julius Caesar, the first known Roman to set foot on the island and record it, said that the Britons were culturally similar to the Gauls. He wrote a lot about the Gauls (of what is now France) and made his fortune conquering them. About their social hierarchy, he said:

“In the whole of Gaul there are only 2 classes of men who count for anything and are considered: for the common people are like slaves: they can do nothing on their own account and are never consulted. Most of them, crushed either by debts or taxes or the injustices of more powerful men, have handed themselves over into the servitude of nobles who have assumed the same rights over them as masters have over slaves. The other two classes are the druids and the equites [knights]. The former preside over religious matters, see to public and private sacrifices and expound doctrines..[the latter are responsible for military affairs].”

Caesar was probably exaggerating how uncivilised, or “barbarous”, the locals were to help justify his rule and treatment of them. Nevertheless, he does advocate objectivity in recording and understanding conquered peoples. His account of the Britons' class structure: of priests, warriors and farmers, is probably true. It is difficult to know how truthful the contemporary great historian, Diodorus Siculus, was being when he said:

“Despite the fact that their wives are beautiful, the Celts have very little to do with them, but instead abandon themselves to a strange passion for other men. They usually sleep on the ground on skins of wild animals and tumble around with a bedfellow on either side. And what is strangest of all is that, without any thought for a natural sense of modesty, they carelessly surrender their virginity to other men. Far from finding anything shameful in all this, they feel insulted if anyone refuses the

favours they offer.”

Caesar held two provinces of Celts: Gaul and Belgica. One rebellious tribe, the Catuvelauni, led by Cassivelaunus, fled Belgica to Britain in 75 b.c.e.. They travelled up the Thames valley and settled on its northern side. There was plenty of iron, tin, lead and silver in Britain, and the locals sold animal skins, slaves and hunting-dogs into the empire. Potential conquerors could see opportunities in metals and taxes.

In 55 b.c.e., Caesar stepped on to the shores of Southern Britain, but within a year, was distracted by power games in Rome. He marched on the capital, and like Marius before him, used the support of the plebeians against the Senate to seize power. Soon after, he was assassinated by a conspiracy of Senators. His nephew and chosen successor, Augustus, declared himself Emperor. This time the power of the loyal Generals was irresistible and the Empire's first dynasty was established.

Over the following decades, not only did the Catuveluani of Britain stop paying tribute to Rome, but they started to make their own coins. They took territory from and forced the submission of Rome's allies. From the Roman point of view, there was the danger of a rival state developing. In 40 c.e., the emperor Caligula, prepared an invasion force on the coast, but in a bizarre, theatrical moment, had his soldiers collect shells and return to barracks. No one is quite sure why, but it was not completely out of character.

His successor Claudius had a more serious plan, and in 44 c.e., began the invasion that would add Britannia to the empire. This time the Romans attacked the Catuvelauni with four legions and more allies. King Caractacus of the Catuvelauni fought and retreated, and was eventually captured by Rome's allies in the hills of what is now South Wales. It took about four years to conquer the South as far as the Humber. The hilly country of the North would take much longer and in fact, was never satisfactorily completed.

In 61 c.e., the area that is now Norfolk and Suffolk was the land of the Iceni. It was seen as part of the Empire, but actually ruled by the client King Prasutagus. It was not a backwater, but a relatively prosperous coastal area, with thriving trade going across the channel to the continent. It was an important part of Britannia, so when Prasutagus died, the Romans incorporated the territory into the Empire.

Prasutagus's wife was not pleased. You can imagine a Roman envoy and cohort riding into the Iceni capital to make the announcement, and Queen Boudicca and her family telling them that by the Briton's law, the Queen becomes ruler on her husband's death. The story goes that at some point a gang of Romans tied Boudicca to a stake and whipped her, and then raped her daughters.

How often such intimidation tactics had worked for the Romans we don't know, but on this occasion it didn't. Boudicca rallied an army of Iceni, formed an alliance with the Trinovantes and marched on the new Roman capital of London. A local General, Petillius Cerialis, confidently took part of one legion to intercept it. They were destroyed. Colchester, St Albans and finally, London fell. Archaeologists have found a layer of black ash over the early Roman foundation under the city.

Boudicca is now a famous image in Britain of the fearless, warrior Queen. Had her revolt successfully linked up with other rebel tribes, like the Brigantes in the north, or the Ordovices in the west, she may have been able to encircle and defeat the Romans. But perhaps because their communications and supplies were inferior, they were soon broken by Governor Suetonius Paulinus and his remaining three legions.

Interestingly, despite beating the rebellion, Paulinus was replaced as Governor. He was accused of

provoking it in the first place. This shows how the Romans were ruthless in imposing their rule but valued peaceful Empire building above all.

It isn't known for sure (because the Romans didn't keep detailed accounts of their defeats) but it seems likely that rebels in the far north were more successful. By 117 c.e., the Romans had retreated from the land that is now Scotland. Around 122 c.e. they built a wall, later known as Hadrian's Wall, after the Emperor who ordered it. Parts of it still stand today. This moment is important in British history. While, there were still rebellions, invasions and attempts to expand the empire, the intensive military phase turns on the building of the wall into more stability and sustained economic development.

## **Britannia**

A lot of Roman history was recorded by a man called Tacitus. He seems to have been an honest writer and wasn't afraid to point out when the Romans had been cruel, corrupt and had managed things badly. He was, however, the son-in-law of Agricola, the Governor of Britannia. So we can't be completely sure that his account of peaceful and prosperous late 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Britain was accurate.

Nevertheless, archaeological evidence shows that from around this time, more Roman houses, with plastered walls, paint work, and glass in the windows, were replacing the old straw and mud, Celtic round houses. Big houses in the Roman style, called villas, are signs of general prosperity. Several hundred have been found, especially in the South, for example, at Brading on the Isle of Wight.

The money system was the key. Roman aristocrats in their villas would have had many household servants, who they bought as slaves. They may have had roles in the legal system or been local Senators, and made money from administrative jobs and commercial enterprises. Besides mines and plantations, there is archaeological evidence of breweries, textile workshops and warehouses throughout Roman Britain.

As a "free" Roman in Britain, you would most likely be a farmer, and that meant growing something to sell so that you could get the coins for your taxes. To produce enough it would be helpful to have one, a few or several slaves working for you. The more you produced the more profit you could make and the more slaves you could buy. So there was potential for some social climbing, in economic terms at least. From 212 c.e., you also had all of the legal rights of a Roman citizen.

Probably as many as half the population were slaves. That meant they had no legal rights, did not have to pay taxes, and did not get paid. It's likely that slave owners achieved some degree of cooperation from their slaves and greater productivity by promising freedom. Many of Rome's successful and talented people were so-called "freedmen", who had in some way earned their status.

Many Roman towns were built across Britain, with standardised square grids, forums and theatres. You can see the pattern in the layout and scattered ruins of several towns today, such as Bath, Lincoln and Chester. You can even see it in the City of London, which despite being continuously lived on and built over many times, retains a semblance of its ancient radiating roads and square perimeter.

Interestingly, historians think that the theatres in Roman Britain, except in London, were hardly, if ever, used. This is probably because Britain is on the edge of the Empire. Few travellers from the continent came, and those that did wouldn't go much further than London. Despite its development, most of Britain would, from a Roman point of view, have seemed poor, rough and probably a little

dangerous. Only London really developed as a typical Roman style cosmopolitan trading town.

In the far North, for example at Hadrian's wall, the writings of soldiers are less complimentary than those of Tacitus. Recently, at a place called Vindolanda, many personal letters, written on pieces of wood, have been found. They show that soldiers were sent there from all over the Empire, including Spain, Gaul and Syria. They often complained about the weather and the poor quality of supplies.

The Roman writer, Parnesius wrote of Hadrian's wall that "No two towers spoke the same tongue or worshipped the same Gods." Perhaps being sent to the furthest, most barren and hostile part of the Empire was not something anyone would want. So the least favoured, least well-connected soldiers ended up there.

After the crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, marked by plagues, inflation and the disruption of trade, these far reaches of the Empire went from unwelcoming to hostile. Under the emperor Diocletian, around 300 c.e., Britannia was divided into two parts: Britannia Superior: the relatively stable and connected South, and Britannia Inferior: the vulnerable, economically dislocated, army-run North. This is a sign that the imperial frontier was weakening.

The cultural, linguistic and religious mix of Hadrian's wall may also be a sign of another significant historical process. Soldiers, torn from their homes and families and forced to mix with foreigners, were exposed to new ideas just when their emotional needs were strongest. The legions were fertile ground for the spread of cults. For example, there are signs that many soldiers worshipped Mithras, probably a very militaristic cult, with no respect for women, slaves or the weak.

A rival to the cult of Mithras called Christianity, had a wider appeal. It grew despite persecution in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and had priests almost everywhere when the repressive Diocletian ruled. He abdicated in 305 c.e., and by the following year his grandson Constantine was Emperor. This was an important moment in the final phase of the Roman Empire in the West.

Constantine gave Christianity official recognition. He built churches and published books. He helped to transform the religion into a dogma that would serve as an oppressive state religion from 380 c.e.. Through most of this time, the Empire was split into two parts, and its West was invaded by Barbarians. In these times, the idea of Rome as representing money, development, military strength and pride, turned into its opposite. It came to represent a religion of brotherhood, simplicity, humility and shame.

Even in these early days, there were signs that the separation of Britain from Europe may be reflected in its attitude to orthodoxy. Perhaps being an island inhibits communication enough for alternative traditions to emerge. Perhaps also, it fosters a distinct sense of identity that encourages the challenging of certain authorities. The British Christian Pelagius, for example, who lived to see the Roman legions leave Britain in 410 c.e., was an early dissident, challenging Augustine of Hippo, one of the most respected thinkers of the new religion.

Making fun of Pelagius, one of Augustine's followers described him as "bull-necked, full-faced, broad-shouldered, corpulent, and slow-moving like a tortoise, weighed down with porridge." Here we have perhaps the earliest surviving description of a British man. He was perhaps Britain's first writer, certainly the oldest recorded to have written on spiritual and philosophical matters. It seems he was a slow, fat, argumentative man.



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