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Roman York, from the Core to the Periphery: an Introduction to the Big Picture

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Introduction

Amongst the objectives of the 2012 World Class Heritage conference was a review of some of the principal research themes in York's archaeology in terms both of what had been achieved since the publication of the *York Development and Archaeology Study* in 1991 (the 'Ove Arup Report') and of what might be achieved in years to come.

As far as the Roman period is concerned, one of the more important developments of the last twenty years may be found in the new opportunities for research into the relationship between, on the one hand, the fortress and principal civilian settlements, north-east and south-west of the Ouse, - 'the core' – and, on the other hand, the surrounding region, in particular a hinterland zone within *c.* 3-4 km of the city centre, roughly between the inner and outer ring roads – 'the periphery'. This development represents one of the more successful outcomes from the list of recommended projects in the Ove Arup report, amongst which was 'The Hinterland Survey' (Project 7, p.33). Furthermore, it responds to the essay in the Technical Appendix to the Arup report in which Steve Roskams stresses that it is crucial to study York in its regional context if we are to understand it in relation to an 'analysis of Roman imperialism' (see also Roskams 1999). The use of the term 'imperialism' here gives a political edge to a historical process more often known as 'Romanisation' for which, in Britain, material culture is the principal evidence in respect of agriculture, religion, society, technology, the arts and so forth.

If one looks back fifty years to the publication in 1962 of *Eburacum*, the Roman section of the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments in England (RCHME) inventory of York (RCHMY1), one of the more striking aspects is how little was then known about the immediate hinterland. The limit of the inventory was the then City boundary, which defined a slightly more restricted area than the outer ring road, but the Vale of York just outside it was also largely unexplored. The vast majority of the sites and artefacts catalogued in *Eboracum* came, first of all, from the fortress and from the civilian town south-west of the Ouse - the 'colonia' – within its presumed defences corresponding to the medieval walls, and, secondly, from the cemeteries, from which material had been largely gathered on an ad hoc basis during developments of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century suburbs. *Eboracum* records only a limited number of finds from outside the fortress and town defences and beyond the cemeteries, except in a zone immediately outside the fortress referred to as the '*canabae'* which, RCHME tells us in a delightful turn of phrase: 'housed the motley crowd of tradesmen and purveyors wont to gather about any large military force'. However, since *Eburacum* the data base for the Roman period within the hinterland has gradually grown, especially in the last twenty years as this paper will outline below.

Equally important for the study of the relationship between core and periphery has been the continuing investigation of the core since *Eburacum*. In the years before Arup (but often published, at least in part, subsequently) this involved the excavation in the legionary fortress of the headquarters basilica and adjoining barracks at York Minster (Philips and Heywood

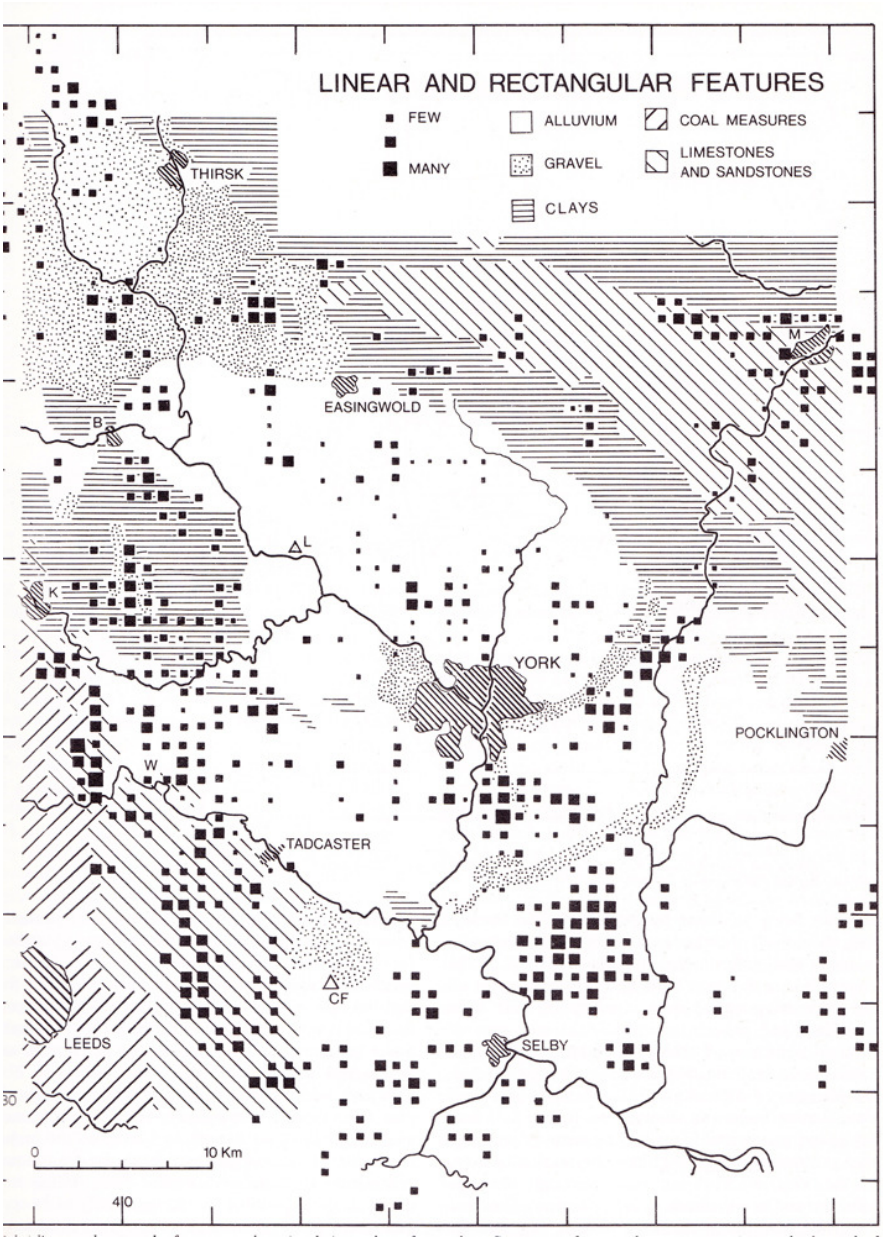
1995), buildings at 9 Blake Street (Hall 1997), small sites on and adjacent to the defences (Ottaway 1996), and of part of the baths in Swinegate (1989-90). Immediately outside the fortress – the '*canabae*' – notable projects included Coney Street (granaries: Hall 1986) and 16-22 Coppergate (structures and cemetery: Hall et al. 2011). Within the civilian town, south-west of the Ouse we may note excavation of houses on Bishophill and a street at Skeldergate (Ramm 1976a; Carver et al. 1978; Wenham and Hall 1987), and of timber buildings at Tanner Row (1983). Excavations concluded immediately before the Arup report was published took place at Wellington Row (1987-90: main approach road and structures) and Queen's Hotel (1989: bath house) (Ottaway 2004, 94-7, 110). Immediately outside the town south-west of the Ouse part of a large house was excavated at Clementhorpe (Brinklow and Donaghey 1986).

Outside the city an important development in the region was the establishment in the early 1970s of field teams with a county-wide brief in what were then West Yorkshire and Humberside. This led to a new focus being placed on research into the rural landscapes and settlements of the Roman period. Critical in supporting this research, and in informing the wide-ranging surveys of the two counties, was aerial photography (Loughlin and Miller 1979; Faull and Moorhouse 1981). As far as York itself was concerned, an important landmark in prompting the city's archaeologists to start looking outwards to the hinterland and region beyond was the review of aerial photography data for the Vale of York published by Peter Addyman in 1984. This brought together extensive cropmark evidence for settlement in late prehistory and the Roman period. For the first time, it was clearly shown that there was a considerable native population to greet the Ninth Legion when it arrived at what would become *Eboracum* in AD71.

Interpretation of aerial photographic evidence was limited by a lack of dating. In order to address this, an important field project took place in the early 1980s under the direction of Rick Jones of the University of Bradford on a large complex of cropmarks on a 'sand island' at Naburn, just south of the ring road (Jones 1988; 1990). The excavation studied a group of ditched enclosures and roundhouses of Iron Age origin of which the former continued in use into the Roman period, although the latter were apparently abandoned before the Conquest.

Archaeology and Planning

Although archaeologists may not always be comfortable in accepting that academic research is often driven by present-day political decisions, it is undoubtedly the case that the archaeology of York has benefited from the statement of government policy in *Planning Policy Guidance Note 16* (PPG16) published in 1990 and restated in 2010 by *Planning Policy Statement 5* (PPS5) and in 2012 by the National Planning Policy Framework. The Arup Report may be seen as a local response to PPG16 and implementation of its recommendations led to a great increase, year on year, of archaeological investigations in the city. In 1996 the creation of the York unitary authority led to a number of local villages being brought under the control of the City of York Council which has applied its archaeology and planning policies to them also. This has had the effect of revealing a new archaeological resource for all periods of the past, most notably perhaps the Roman, in locations previously blank on the distribution maps.



Illus 1. Linear and rectangular features in relation to surface geology mapped from aerial photography evidence. Some of the gaps may be caused by the need to avoid RAF and other air control zones such as those around Church Fenton (CF) and Linton (L) airfields. From Addyman 1984, fig 2; © York Archaeological Trust

The Archaeology of Roman York since Arup

Although research in the immediate hinterland has assumed a new prominence since Arup, we must not overlook further remarkable and important work in the core areas of Roman York. In the fortress there were excavations in advance of the York Minster Library extension (Garner-Lahire 2000), whilst numerous small scale excavations and watching briefs have produced new evidence for defences, streets, barracks and other structures. Likewise, in the civilian settlement south-west of the Ouse there have been important small scale excavations, for example at Kenning's Garage, Micklegate (Tyler 2000) and the Old Station (in 2011), and a steady flow of watching briefs. In the *canabae* archaeologists returned to a site on Nessgate previously excavated in 1959 (RCHMY1, 59-61; MAP 2005a). In the cemeteries there have,

for the first time, been excavations conducted to modern standards to supplement the data in *Eburacum.* Work has largely taken place south-west of the Ouse, for example in Blossom Street (Ottaway 2011, 297-308), Moss Street (Toop 2008) and Driffield Terrace (Ottaway 2005; Hunter-Mann 2006), the last named being in a burial zone for a highly unusual group of male execution victims.

This brings me to the principal aim of this paper which is to highlight the contribution to knowledge which has emerged from the hinterland since Arup. New evidence relevant to the early history of Roman York, to set alongside that from Naburn, has come, for example, from a late Iron Age settlement at Rawcliffe Moor (1996), immediately north of the ring road, where roundhouses and ditched enclosures were found. Of particular importance, however, for setting the scene for the Roman Conquest has been the work at Heslington East (described below and by Neal in this document).

New Roman military sites in the hinterland are represented by two camps – one excavated in its entirety - at Huntington South Moor, north-east of the city (Johnson 2005). As far as Roman settlement is concerned, there have been investigations in almost every part of the zone defined by the outer ring road. A review of 'extra-mural' sites in the '*canabae'* and hinterland excavated largely in the 1990s and early twenty-first century by York Archaeological Trust (YAT) and others was published by the author of this paper in 2011. Amongst the more significant sites in the hinterland, perhaps, are those in Dringhouses, now a suburb south-west of the city, for example at 'The Starting Gate' which revealed remains of buildings facing the main approach to York (McComish 2006). Evidence is now beginning to stack up to show that Dringhouses was a small Roman roadside settlement similar to others in the region (Ottaway 2011, 341-63). Also important are two sites in Fulford, south of the city, at Germany Beck (MAP 1996) and St Oswald's School (MAP 2005b) where evidence for land division was found along with important assemblages of pottery and, at St Oswald's, a remarkable group of coin moulds.

Whilst the sites referred to in the previous paragraph may be significant in their own right, many others were not until they were considered within a synthesis of the development of Roman settlement as a whole in the hinterland which presents a picture much greater than the sum of its constituent parts. Moreover, this synthesis allows us to begin to slot the York area into a wider picture of the region in the Roman period and make connections with research elsewhere in the Vale of York. For example, just beyond the ring road, but still within the York local authority area, at Wheldrake, south-east of the city, an important Roman sequence of ditched enclosures accompanied by burials has been excavated (Robinson 2009). Furthermore, aerial photography continues to provide new information on enclosed landscapes of late Iron Age and Roman date in and around the York villages, for example, at Elvington and Naburn (Horne 2003).

Heslington East

The most ambitious archaeological field project ever undertaken outside York's urban core but within the outer ring road took place in 2008 - 2011 at Heslington East in advance of the construction of the new university campus. From the point of view of studying the interaction between the core areas and the immediate periphery of Roman York - between Roman and Briton - the data from Heslington East will become a very important resource. A further introduction to the project by Cath Neal may be found below, but what follows is a very brief summary of the late prehistoric and Roman period archaeology as it is understood before the research on the excavated materials is completed. At the time of writing (October 2011) assessment reports of work on the western part of the site are available in the City Sites and Monuments Record (Antoni et al. 2009); reports on work elsewhere are in preparation.

Illus 2. Heslington East, excavations by On Site Archaeology beginning on the northern link road (February 2011), looking west

The site is located immediately east of Heslington village and extends over *c.*100ha. It occupies a south-facing slope on the morainic ridge which runs roughly east - west across the Vale of York and is cut by the River Ouse at York. At Kimberlow Hill, in the north-east corner of the site, is a local high point at *c.* 32m OD. The Quaternary geology of the site is boulder clay overlain in places by sands and gravels; running along the slope is a spring line. The site has clearly been favourable for settlement and agriculture since the Bronze Age and the excavations have shown how the landscape has been managed for over 4000 years.

In the mid-late Iron Age ditched enclosures in a lattice pattern, similar in character to those found in other parts of the region, were established on the lower-lying ground in the western half of the site. In places there were smaller enclosures containing groups of roundhouses, represented primarily by shallow penannular gullies. As at Naburn, the enclosures may have survived into the beginning of the Roman period, but the ditches had silted up by the early second century. On higher ground in the eastern half of the site there were more ditched enclosures, but here they appear to have been largely, if not exclusively, Roman, for the most part of the late third – early fourth centuries. They surrounded a multi-phase farmstead which had a building with a hypocaust marking it out as a cut above the usual rural establishment in the region. Another remarkable feature, found adjacent to a small group of human inhumations, was the solid clay and cobble base of a possible funerary monument which may have been constructed of blocks of millstone grit found reused in other features. Water was drawn from a series of wells including a very fine stone-lined example some 3m deep. Heslington East has produced large assemblages of hand-made Iron Age / Roman pottery and of characteristic Roman wares. There is also a substantial assemblage of animal bones whilst waterlogged deposits from the wells and on the spring line will provide a wide range of environmental and economic data.

Themes of Interaction

As a result of research in both the core and periphery of Roman York patterns are beginning to emerge which appear to tell us about the developing relationship between the two. Initially this was a relationship between the Roman army and the native population, but subsequently between both the military and civilian populations in the core and those in the hinterland. What follows is a series of three period sketches to illustrate this point dealing with the period from AD 71 to the early third century.

Period 1: 71 – 120

Before AD71 there was apparently little to set the York area apart from its region in terms of settlement character, agricultural regime and material culture. One may ask, therefore, how York became such an important place in Roman Britain following the decision by Petilius Cerialis to build a fortress at a strategically crucial point dominating north–south and east-west routes? Furthermore, to what extent and in what way did York's development also depend on the character of its relationship with its region?

One way of looking at this in the early Roman period is through how the Ninth Legion addressed the problem of supply. Although difficult to date archaeologically, the construction of the major approach roads probably took place early in the Conquest period (RCHMY1, 1-3; Brinklow 1986, Ottaway 2011). These roads had a military purpose, but would also have opened up the countryside. As a result some commodities, such as timber and stone for construction, would have been readily found locally. However, if nothing suitable was available from local sources, as in the case of pottery, it could be made on site or imported from outside the region as in the cases of pottery (fine tableware), glass, certain foodstuffs and wine. As far as sourcing materials locally is concerned, one option open to the army was, as elsewhere in the empire, to take over a tract of land– a '*prata*' or '*territorium*' - and manage it directly (Mason 1988; RCHMY1, xxxiv – xxxv). Herman Ramm (1976b; 1980) suggested that such a tract existed west of York as a result of identifying evidence for Roman land management based on a network of new roads. Whether this can be sustained or not, it will probably be difficult to determine the full extent of any *territorium* for York. However, we can look with greater confidence at the question of the army's relationship with the hinterland on the basis of material culture.

Within the core zone early pottery assemblages are principally composed of Ebor Ware, made locally (Monaghan 1997), or imported South Gaulish Samian – up to 26% in the late first century assemblage at 9 Blake Street (Monaghan 1993). There is also, admittedly in fairly small quantities, glass, coinage and other metalwork of the early Roman period (Cool 1995). The artefacts may be set alongside the biological evidence, notably from a substantial late first – early second century burnt grain deposit from the Coney Street warehouse (Kenward and Williams 1979). This contained spelt wheat, barley and rye. The rye is not thought to be local origin, and there were also seeds of weeds throughout the deposit which did not grow in the York region. The whole consignment may therefore have been imported indicating that even in basic foodstuffs the legion did not, initially, rely solely on the locality.

Within the ring road zone, outside the core, early Roman artefactual evidence is principally pottery. At Naburn there was no early Roman pottery and this was also the case at Germany Beck, Fulford (Evans 2005). Very little has been reported in assessment of the larger assemblages from Heslington East. Whether pottery can stand in for other, less durable commodities we do not know, but pre- Hadrianic coinage and early Roman metalwork remain almost unknown on hinterland sites.

In brief, we are starting to get a picture of a phase in which interaction between Roman and native may have been limited - even in food procurement. This prompts such questions about whether the army simply requisitioned what they needed from the native population or whether there was an embryonic mechanism for the *exchange* of commodities? The apparent absence of evidence may suggest that natives were simply not interested in, for example, Roman pottery, with its dishes and flagons which were unnecessary to a way of life which only required cooking pots.

Period 2: c.120-160

After *c.*120 following Hadrian's visit to Britain and establishment of a permanent northern frontier, the core of Roman York began expanding to include settlement in new areas outside the fortress and also on the south-west bank of the Ouse. A new phase of core-periphery interaction appears to have begun which, again, can be identified from pottery. There was a Hadrianic episode of production in the legionary kilns, but production of Ebor Ware also took place at Apple Tree Farm, Heworth, *c.* 3 km north-east of the fortress, probably by local civilians (Lawton 1992-93; Swan 2002, 47-55). Imports of Central Gaulish samian are found more widely in the core than South Gaulish which was confined largely to fortress sites (Ottaway 2011, Table 6). In the periphery at Naburn not only did Roman pottery arrive in the early second century, but it was a full suite including samian, Ebor Ware, amphorae and mortaria. This also seems to the case at Germany Beck and Heslington East. In addition, the latter has produced a small quantity of coinage of the mid-second century as have sites in Dringhouses. In brief, we may now be seeing the development of exchange mechanisms between core and periphery, perhaps in some way related to the removal of direct military control of the region and the inclusion of the York area within the self-governing *civitas* of the Brigantes.

Period 3: c.160-220

In *c.* 160 the Sixth Legion returned to York from the northern frontier in strength and started rebuilding in the fortress. The consequent stimulus to the local economy from the army was probably a factor in the growth and prosperity of Roman York as a whole. Between the later Antonine and Severan periods the core civilian settlement at York reached its maximum extent on both banks of the Ouse, assuming an urban character with new streets, terracing and public buildings. Large artefact and ecofact assemblages come from deposits of this period which suggest, *inter alia*, that York's local, regional and interregional trading contacts were greater than hitherto. Pottery assemblages are at their most diverse with imports from outside Britain, largely samian, reaching as much as 40% on some sites (e.g. Wellington Row: Monaghan 1997 – Period 4, 1113-15). Evidence from animal bones and other foodstuffs suggests York not only drew heavily on a zone around the city, but also further afield in the region and beyond in the case of olives, olive oil and wine (O'Connor 1988; Hall and Kenward 1990). Other evidence, in particular from sculpture and epigraphy, suggests a cosmopolitan atmosphere with people and cultural influences arriving in York from all over the Roman world.

Illus 3. County Hospital, York: late 2nd-century field ditches, looking south-east (see Ottaway 2011, 170). © York Archaeological Trust

Accompanying these developments there is evidence for much more activity in the hinterland than there was in earlier periods. This is of a character which suggests an increasingly close relationship with the core and a closer integration in terms of exchange of commodities and of ideas about such things as building form, tastes in food and burial customs. Buildings of Roman type (rectangular plans and use of stone) were constructed at Dringhouses, *c.* 3km south-west of the centre of York. More striking, however, is that in almost every part of the hinterland sampled archaeologically, the land was divided up by ditches. This was done in some cases (as at Dringhouses) for building plots, in others (immediately outside the core) for burial plots, but for the most part probably to create fields and improve drainage. These ditches may therefore be indicative of a change in the agricultural regime, perhaps an attempt to intensify production to supply the rising population, both military and civilian, in the core. Whether this land division was organised by some central authority or by local landowners is not clear, but this remains an interesting question. As far as material culture in the periphery is concerned, preliminary assessment of the material from Heslington East, for example,

suggests that the site was receiving material largely from a range of local sources, but also small quantities from elsewhere in Britain, including the Nene Valley, and from the Continent, largely samian, but also colour coated wares from Cologne and Trier. All of these non-local wares were presumably redistributed after first arriving at the port of York.

Burials, largely cremations, of the late first – mid second centuries in the York area are few in number and known almost exclusively from cemeteries clearly associated with the Roman core (Jones 1984; Ottaway 2011, 367-8). Another early cremation, probably Hadrianic in date was found at 3km from the city at Ryethorpe Grange Farm (Wenham 1967). In addition, a few crouched inhumations in an Iron Age tradition have been found, for example at Dringhouses (ibid., 363). This near absence of early burials outside the core may reflect a native custom of disposing of the dead which did not involve formal interment. Burials outside the core cemeteries remain scarce throughout the Roman period but it is possible that the local population used these cemeteries for their dead, perhaps believing them more prestigious than the corner of a field on a local farmstead. However, it is striking that alongside over seventy from the core cemeteries, there a number of burials in stone coffins from the hinterland, some of which, at least, are likely to be mid-second – early third century. Excavations at Trentholme Drive (Wenham 1968) and Moss Street (Toop 2008) have produced stone coffins of this period and, moreover, it is evident that this is when the custom of using gypsum to coat or cover the body began. The burials in stone coffins from Heslington (Yorkshire Philos. Soc. 1832), Acomb, Askham Richard, Dringhouses, Middlethorpe, Stockton on the Forest (all in RCHMY1, 106-8) and Naburn (Ottaway 2011, 260) were perhaps those of local estate owners who had adopted one of the indicators of high status current throughout the Roman world. Another such indicator would be the suggested funerary monument at Heslington East.

So here, briefly, are three narratives in embryo, which one would like to think, form the starting point for the sort of project for the future which I think will have much to tell us about Roman York and will also contribute to the debate on the character of Roman rule in Britain more generally. Such a project would show us that whilst York owes its origins to a decision made by a Roman general and then developed a very distinctive character unlike anywhere else in the north, it worked as a place for natives and incomers alike because it developed intimate and complex relations with communities in its immediate hinterland and wider region. The project will benefit from the continuing research on Heslington East, from fieldwork within both core and periphery which will inevitably be led by new development in years to come. As far as the latter is concerned, at time of writing, there is, for example, the prospect of new investigations at Monk's Cross, Huntington in advance of construction of a community stadium and shopping malls: the 'big picture' is already set to get just that bit bigger!

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