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Cover Page Footnote

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Emmer Waves of Grain:
The Economics of Romanization in Rural and Suburban Gaul

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Abstract

Following the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean basin, a period of cultural change swept across much of Western Europe as native communities began to rapidly adopt many elements of the Greco-Roman way of life. For centuries, historians have puzzled over why this cultural revolution, commonly termed “Romanization,” took hold with such apparent vigor, often pointing to the enthusiasm of a small body of local elites for explanation. The present paper seeks to outline a model in which agency is instead assigned to the common people of the ancient world and investigates how this model might be used to interpret the process of cultural change as it occurred in rural and suburban Gaul. By carefully examining and considering how the appearance of new crops, new technologies, new patterns of land ownership, and new opportunities for investment impacted indigenous individuals, this paper adds an important voice to a conversation that has heretofore focused primarily on a narrow urban aristocracy, bringing to light the crucial perspective of the ordinary people who were often both the most hapless victims and the greatest champions of Roman imperialism.

Keywords: Romanization, Roman West, Ancient Agriculture, Economic History

In the decades after Julius Caesar's conquest during the final century BCE, the Gallic countryside remained largely impoverished. Indeed, burdened alternately by the depredations of civil war and the "unending demand for taxes," which sparked a number of large-scale rebellions, much of the region seems to have become mired in the "low equilibrium trap" described by Walter Scheidel—that is, the persistent inability of a community to accrue wealth sufficient to develop capital (55). Yet, by the end of the first century CE, much of the land in what is today southern and northeastern France had begun to explode in value thanks to the introduction of more productive crops and agricultural techniques, with the close proximity of the burgeoning urban centers of the province and legionary fortresses along the border providing additional benefits.

While these developments certainly would have brought the greatest windfall to those of status, their impact would in no way have been limited to the Roman or provincial elite. Indeed small farms, owned and operated by peasant farmers, occupied much of the Gallic countryside during the first century CE and any such changes produced by the Roman conquest and the advent of a new imperial government would naturally have had a corresponding effect not only on the livelihood of these individuals, but also on their relationship with the imperial power by which they were ruled and the process of cultural change more generally.¹ That the common people of the provinces—including, but not limited to, these small landowners—were conscious of imperial policy and its impact, at least in the broadest terms, and moreover that this awareness constituted a fundamental consideration in their decision to either reject or adopt specific elements of Roman culture thus does not seem entirely unlikely.

¹ See Woolf on the demographics of the Gallic countryside ("Becoming Roman" 142-7).

However, such a model is at odds with traditional understandings of Romanization which have tended to emphasize instead the agency of the native aristocracy in this process. After all, local elites were the primary beneficiaries of this period of cultural change, at least on the provincial end and, according to scholars like Ramsay MacMullen, by cooperating with the central government and adopting traditionally Roman styles, it was they who stood to gain the most in terms of wealth, privilege, and most importantly, prestige among the ruling classes (74). From the time of Caesar's campaigns, men like Gaius Valerius Troucillus and Diviacus, early members of the Gallo-Roman elite who occupied a liminal space between these two very different cultures, often acted as translators and intermediaries between them and received the favor of the Roman aristocracy in return, with all the power and privilege that this conferred both in Rome and in the provinces. According to the traditional model, this power and privilege quickly became the object of the elite competition which had long played an important role in Celtic society, though under Roman domination it came to be articulated through the construction of temples and the sponsorship of games rather than conquest. Eventually, whether through the trickle-down effect of this competition, a genuine interest in elite imitation, or a recognition of some superiority inherent in Roman modes of cultural expression, the influence of Romanization began to take a firm hold among the sub- and non-elite as well. The result was the almost complete transformation, or at least creolization, of indigenous culture in the imperial provinces, the effects of which remain plainly visible in the language, customs, and legal codes of the Western world today.

While the development of much more rigorous archaeological standards and practices over the course of the twentieth century has certainly aided historians in developing a far more comprehensive understanding of the process of Romanization than was previously possible, certain faults in the traditional model described above, upon which much current scholarship is

based, still represent a significant deficiency in the literature. In general, the model has failed to adequately account for and incorporate evidence of resistance to Roman rule and the use of force in response; it has presupposed a remarkably rapid transformation of Celtic elite value systems; and—perhaps most significantly—it has downplayed substantially the agency of the sub- and non-elite, representing them, in the words of Simon James, as “at best...a passive herd” (199). In reality, the common people of the ancient world, mainly those who were directly engaged in productive labor, represented some ninety percent of the population and roughly two thirds of the empire’s annual income, with the “middling” echelons of society making up perhaps another nine or ten percent of the population and twenty percent of its annual income (Scheidel and Friesen 62). While the wealthiest citizens no doubt did play an outsize role in the Romanization of the Western provinces, providing the financial backing behind its most visible manifestations, to almost wholly ascribe the responsibility for this immense cultural upheaval to so narrow a stratum of society is to overlook a number of crucial components in this process. By examining the experience of Romanization in terms of the economic concerns of the common people, the present paper attempts to address some of these shortfalls. Though the economic dimensions of Romanization have long been ignored in favor of the social, they provide a unique and illuminating perspective on the subject, offering a much clearer understanding of the often sudden shifts from eager assent to violent rebellion and back again, the extraordinarily swift transformation of patronage networks, and the place of the sub- and non-elite within this process, rehabilitating the role of these groups in a way that is much more consistent with the recent interpretations of social strata in the ancient world offered by Emmanuel Mayer and Fergus Millar.²

² Mayer, in an extensive study of funerary and domestic art and iconography, has developed a convincing argument that though upper-class tastes did exert a strong influence upon those of the sub-elite, the visual expressions of the latter were surprisingly independent in form and function, operating within “distinct if overlapping lifeworlds.” Millar

Though perhaps not quite as culturally productive or influential as the major urban centers of the province, with their grand amphitheaters and opulent *fora*, the rural communities of Roman Gaul still played a vital role in the creation of Rome's Mediterranean empire, in both the cultural and the political sense. It was in the countryside that the vast majority of the region's inhabitants resided, where much of the food consumed by the legions massed along Rome's border with "barbarian" Germany was cultivated, and from whence a great deal of the wealth that ornamented the imperial cities was ultimately extracted (Hopkins 101). Without some sort of buy-in to the Roman social and economic sphere on the part of a significant proportion of its rural and suburban subjects, the empire of the Caesars would hardly have been tenable.

Yet surprisingly, even by the late first century CE, the rural landscape itself bore relatively few marks of change. To be sure, strong evidence does exist for the Roman practice of cadastration—the regularization of land division—around the southern cities of Narbonensis, which suffered from extensive land seizure in order to accommodate the settlement of veterans, and highly regularized settlement patterns also seem to have been imposed upon the Rhine valley for the same reason, but by and large patterns of land-tenure remained much the same as they had for centuries (Piganiol 152-9). Family groups occupied field systems made up of more-or-less rectangular plots measuring roughly 20 to 45 meters in dimension, separated by raised boundaries of accumulated sand or stone of up to a meter in height. Altogether these plots may have had a footprint as small as three or four hectares, or as great as seventy (Kooistra and Maas 2319). While it was not uncommon for the occupants of these plots to own the land upon which they lived and worked, it is likely that many were farmed by dependent tenants who were effectively bound to

offers a very convincing interpretation of Late Republican democracy, and Roman political institutions more generally, which stresses the power of the non-elite, particularly that of a very broad "middle class."

their acreage—the *coloni* who had grown out of a Celtic tradition known as *Tir Cyfrif* and who would eventually develop into the medieval hereditary peasantry (Wightman 596f.).

Changes in agricultural practice itself, on the other hand, were somewhat more substantial. Across Western European field systems, the Early Imperial period is associated with a sharp increase in productivity. For example, as Michel Reddé has observed, in south-central Gaul free-threshing (or naked) varieties of wheat, such as common wheat, rapidly replaced hulled species like einkorn and emmer in the decades following the Roman conquest (143). The former tend to be characterized by much higher yields, greater crop densities, enclosure within a husk that does not require significant effort to remove and, if Pliny the Elder is any indication, were also widely regarded as the highest-quality source of flour during the Roman period (18.20). To the North, where the cooler climate prevented widespread cultivation of free-threshing wheat, other adjustments resulted in much higher productivity rates even for hulled species (Kooistra and Maas 2318-28). For instance, the increase in pollen concentrations in the topsoil of Dutch field systems at this time indicates that burning was no longer common practice and thus that fallow periods tended to be much shorter. Similarly, the observation that the arable topsoil contained much finer elements suggests that the land was tilled more intensively than in earlier periods. And, in addition, the higher organic matter content in the soil of the period is consistent with the import of topsoil or litter from outside of the field system in a manner similar to that of *plaggen* manuring. Throughout the Western Empire, new tools and implements became increasingly popular as well— notably the two-hand scythe, the mower's anvil, the hoe-rake, the turf-cutter, the mattock, the iron rake, fork, and spade, and the Gallo-Roman reaper, all of which significantly increased the maximum potential labor output of an individual (Applebaum 73-4; White 634-47).

While it is true that the origins of some of these trends may be found in the Late Iron Age, there can be little doubt that the Roman conquest accelerated these processes. The tax burden of the military campaigns in Germany must have been immense, particularly given the disastrous defeats suffered by Lollius and Varus in 16 BCE and 9 CE respectively, and the adverse effects of this can only have been amplified by the destruction wrought by Caesar's conquest in the preceding decades. Levies and censuses anticipating or coming in the wake of operations across the Rhine seem to have repeatedly sparked outrage and revolts, an unsurprising result given that, as Keith Hopkins points out, an effective tax rate of even ten percent would have proven incredibly onerous for cultivators who paid little or nothing in taxes before the Roman conquest and had previously consumed the majority of their harvest themselves (Hopkins 101-4). On the other hand, in his *Panegyric to Trajan* Pliny the Younger provides an indication that a not insignificant portion of the grain collected by the state was bought fairly and openly, at prices that one can assume must have been rather competitive given the sharp increase in demand induced by the deployment of the Roman legions along the Rhine, if not also the apparent shortages in the grain supply during the early first century (29.3-5). The influx of new buyers in the form of soldiers, camp followers, and veterans (not all of whom would have settled on self-sufficient plots in the countryside), not to mention the new urban markets opened by integration within the empire, doubtless provided additional incentives to increase productive capacity.

With farmers assured that any costs, personal or economic, associated with modifying their practices so as to augment their surplus could be recouped, distinctly Roman crops, tools, and techniques appear to have been readily adopted. For instance, spelt, which composed perhaps the largest portion of the Roman diet, while certainly common in northern Gaul during the pre-Roman period, exploded in popularity following the conquest (Schamuhn and Zerl 243). Given that the

rising temperatures of the Roman Warm Period would have been expected to instead produce a widespread *decline* in the prevalence of hulled varieties of wheat, it would seem that this occurred as a response to a changing consumer base rather than a practical necessity (Bianchi and McCave 515-7). Meanwhile, patterns of land tenure remained largely unchanged because there existed relatively little economic incentive to favor the Roman model. Long thought to be one of the most potent instruments of Romanization, the census, by necessitating the registration of land in terms of personal ownership, only served to affirm the autonomy of independent smallholders and strengthen the entrenched position of the Celtic landlords, who now received formal recognition of possessions which they did not physically occupy (Ramsay 281; Millet 125-6; Drinkwater 171). When it did occur, transformation of the landscape was often limited in scope, as when poor harvests or heavy taxes forced small farmers into dependency upon absentee landlords, or came at the hands of the state, as in the case of the settlement of veterans. The Celtic field systems themselves had a productive capacity that was just as great as—if not greater than—that of Roman systems, and so they endured, if only for the fact that there was little profit in the cost of change.

However, the most visible manifestation of this process seems to have emerged in the homes of these farmers rather than in their fields. Alongside the new tools and techniques, which gradually gained currency in the province over the course of the first century, came the Gallo-Roman villa, remarkable for its variety in quality and character: from the Mediterranean-style complexes built around peristyle courts in Narbonne and the hall *villae* of Britain and Belgic Gaul, to the enormous trapezoidal structures of the Somme valley and the irregular patchwork of typologies found in the Berry.³ As Greg Woolf points out, the variety of these structures

³ Percival provides perhaps the most comprehensive overview of Gallo-Roman *villae* by region. For an example of the large, luxurious *villae* of Narbonensis and Aquitaine see that at Montmaurin, as described by Fouet. See Smith for the hall *villae* of northeastern Gaul and Britain, Agache (“La Campagne à l’époque Romaine”) for the *villae* of the Somme, and Leday for those of the Berry.

underscores the fact that “villa landscapes were not imposed in a single moment...but emerged through the gradual adoption of new materials and of new plans” on an individual level, across what seems to have been a rather broad cross-section of society given the range in their sizes (“Becoming Roman” 151). The different forces theorized to have stimulated this villa-building impulse of the late first century are nearly as numerous as the regional typologies themselves, yet surprisingly few have given careful consideration to the economics of the trend.

The advantages offered by the villa were substantial. Indeed, one might imagine a transformation similar to that of the architectural revolution that occurred in Italy during the sixth century BCE, when greater contact with the Eastern Mediterranean led to the replacement of small huts constructed largely of impermanent materials by multi-room orthogonal stone houses. In both cases, new stone and timber structures provided warmth and security—against fire, against marauders, against the elements—in a way that the wattle and daub dwellings of the earlier Iron Age simply could not (Coudart and Pion 62-6). They provided stability and permanence, and a reliable investment for those seeking to convert their surplus into material wealth, especially once imported technological developments began to bear fruit. The proliferation of these more permanent architectural styles freed individuals to devote a much greater portion of their time directly toward productive activities, rather than subsidiary labor, which might otherwise include extensive maintenance and repair of the primary dwelling.

However, there are many who have hypothesized that this process developed in a somewhat less straightforward manner. Elizabeth Colantoni, in perhaps the most influential paper on the Proto-Italic architectural revolution in recent years, has pointed out that although the knowledge of how to construct monumental stone structures seems to have been common in the region for some time beforehand, it did not find its way into the sphere of domestic architecture

until much later (32-3). She has suggested instead that it was only once associated modes of competitive status expression were internalized that the elite could commit fully to so significant an investment, an idea that seems to find equal currency in Greg Woolf's discussion of Gallo-Roman *villae* ("Becoming Roman" 148-57). Like Colantoni, Woolf argues that the architectural syncretization of native and non-native forms that appears on the periphery ought to be explained primarily by the emulation of those modes of aristocratic competition which produced the villa rather than by emulation of the villa itself. While there can be little doubt that there was a major competitive element to villa-building, and moreover that the augmentation of status which ostentation typically produced did itself provide some economic benefit, the fact that many *villae* were much less visible than was once thought, that the architectural features which characterized them were generally adopted piecemeal rather than in a single concerted effort to impress, and that there is considerable variation in terms of the size and sophistication of the dwellings would seem to suggest otherwise (Agache, "La Villa" 46; Leday 201; Woolf, "Becoming Roman" 151-2; Roymans 190).

The lengthy interval between the introduction of the knowledge, resources, and technology necessary to reproduce Roman-style architectural features and their adoption in domestic structures might also be explained by an interval of equal length between the period of conquest and the period in which escape from the low equilibrium trap finally made provincial villa-building economically viable (Reddé 158). After all, it was not until the Flavian period (69–96 CE), when long-term stability such as might permit significant investment in real estate was achieved, that networks of specialists grew sufficiently large over multiple generations as to reduce labor costs and that the profitability of Gallic agricultural output began to increase with the widespread adoption of Roman practices and better integration with more distant markets (Chevallier 185). It

is worth noting that the appearance of Eastern features in the domestic architecture of the Proto-Italic Iron Age similarly coincided with a series of important changes in the dynamics of trade with the Greek colonies of the south (Torelli 48f.). Regardless, it is clear that despite the expenses associated with the adoption of Roman architectural features, faith that profit would accrue as a result—whether in terms of social status, financial status, or a combination of both—remained widespread. While reproduction of the villa landscape proper was generally limited to the province's wealthier inhabitants, there can be little doubt that the greater availability of roof tiles, masonry, and those with the knowledge and skill to work with them deeply impacted the lives of many in the provincial countryside.

Connecting these haphazard plots of farmland and architectural pastiche, the broad, paved avenues which crisscrossed the Gallic countryside represented one of the most impactful instruments of Romanization. As in Italy, the Roman roads of the provinces were primarily military in form and purpose, designed to quickly and efficiently move large numbers of men and *matériel* to and from strategic locations. While they did often follow earlier routes, they paid little heed to the boundaries and borders that their predecessors had typically respected (Chevallier 132). They might determine the fortune, or even the survival of cities at a whim, as with the settlements of Essalois and Joeuvres which, bypassed by the Via Agrippa, quickly declined and disappeared (Vallat 175-7). Yet for all the doubts they may have had, the creation of a well-maintained, policed, all-weather road network represented an enormous economic opportunity for the people of Gaul and the Western provinces. It enabled farmers and merchants to reach markets near and far with greater speed, greater ease, and greater volumes of wares. It made possible the establishment of new inns and *tabernae* within the small settlements that sprang up around the road-stations and staging-posts along the main trunk-roads (Badan, Brun and Congès 45-50; Poux and Pranyies 37-

40). Larger settlements too, especially those like Lugdunum and Colonia Agrippina, situated atop key nodes in the transportation network, derived immense benefit from the public *viae*—the main arteries of the Roman world—as travelers, merchants, and soldiers alike flocked to them (Drinkwater 130). One might imagine an economic effect similar to that produced by the Interstate Highway System constructed in the United States during the twentieth century, the trillions of dollars in economic benefits of which have been thoroughly studied, though it too was built explicitly for the purpose of national defense (Cox and Love 19).

This is to say nothing of the riverine routes through which the bulk of trade goods in the Western provinces flowed. Though corporations of *nautae*, or “boatmen,” were permitted to operate on the waterways of the empire primarily with a view to ferrying food and supplies to the legions, they often carried consumer goods to sell to the surrounding civilian communities as well (Campbell *passim*). The resultant explosion in the availability of products such as textiles, games, and medical instruments, for which there existed no parallel in the pre-Roman La Tène culture, or which simply could not be produced in pre-Roman Gaul, created something of a consumer revolution in the province (Woolf, “Becoming Roman” 169-205). In some areas, this increased integration with imperial markets may even have led to Roman goods undercutting native production, which required more expensive overland transport, as had occurred in Italy once cheap Egyptian grain began to flood the imperial market (Duncan-Jones *passim*).⁴ Certainly any such price incentivization, encouraging Gallic and Gallo-Roman individuals to purchase Roman goods rather than those produced beyond the frontier, would have been in the interest of the central government, who throughout the first century sought to keep the native communities of Eastern

⁴ The prices given by Peter Temin for Italian wheat may be ignored as his source, Polybius, is far too early for consideration in the present discussion (41).

Gaul isolated from the independent Germanic polities just across the Rhine, lest they should ally against Rome. However much the imperial government may have intervened in this process, it is clear that native Gauls enjoyed the public benefits which these transportation and communication networks provided. Even if there had been concerns that these empire-wide systems allowed Rome to tighten her grip upon the provinces, the fact that they required almost no investment, financial or otherwise, on the part of the subject people and yet still promised enormous economic value must have made the new Roman order seem incredibly attractive.

Such an outlook was particularly common among settlements located on or near these routes. Throughout the Gallic countryside enormous barren plots where Celtic hilltop settlements once had sat scarred many hillsides. While provincial governors certainly would have had a vested interest in seeing hill-forts such as Alesia, which nearly bested Caesar in 52 BCE, abandoned in favor of less defensible settlements on the plains below, recent evidence seems to indicate that such shifts, observable across the Celtic West, occurred in a surprisingly organic manner. At Vaison-la-Romaine, Condé-sur-Suippe, and Villeneuve St. Germain, movement toward waterways and roads occurred slowly, over the course of several decades, suggesting that this gradual relocation was undertaken at the individual level, by artisans and shopkeepers, rather than representatives of the central government, though they no doubt provided considerable support (Goudineau 196-203; Haselgrove 252-5). Indeed, there would have been a great deal of economic value in this for all involved, given that merchants were more likely to stop, sell wares, and pay duties when there was need neither to haul their freight up steep cliffs nor to deviate substantially from their route, and customers were most likely to transact business with the first shops they saw from the road. Naturally, it made little sense for individuals to spontaneously abandon their homes

and businesses, but as earlier structures became damaged or obsolete, in economic terms the best option was usually to rebuild in a location nearer these new centers of commercial gravity.

Of course, none of this is to say that an economic lens is the only medium through which the process of Romanization should be viewed and understood. Certainly, as with any event involving so complex a web of factors, the individuals concerned would have been faced with a vast multitude of considerations. On the other hand, the economic determinants of this great social and cultural shift surely ought not to be relegated to the extent that they long have been. Though records from the periphery are somewhat scarce, contemporary sources seem to indicate a fairly nuanced understanding of the issues at hand on the part many, regardless of status. Large-scale rebellions are attested over issues ranging from debt obligations to the integrity of the *res publica*—the republican state—illustrating the commitment of many of the non-elite to an ongoing awareness of and participation in the economic, as well as the social and political, dynamics of the empire (Brunt 531-59; Hegre 160 and *passim*; Yavetz 9-37).

To therefore suggest that the transformation of the countryside, and indeed of the Roman West more broadly, was primarily the outgrowth of near-blind imitation of the ruling classes by the non-elite rather than the product of careful—and oftentimes painful—consideration on the part of those whom it affected most is not only reductive, but also serves to reinforce pernicious narratives of imperial encounter. By ignoring the very real advantages presented by the Roman way of living, and the question of how to utilize them with which the common people often struggled, one necessarily misses out on the full richness of the process of cultural change as well as the anguish that it must have caused. Each time a Gallic native considered planting non-native crops, adopting foreign agricultural implements, or even relocating his dwelling or place of business entirely in the hope of bringing more money home to his family, he was faced with the

difficult choice between sacrificing some part of his cultural identity or forgoing the opportunity to improve the wellbeing of himself and his household. For all the financial benefit that they had to offer, the trappings of the Roman world often came at a personal cost that was just as great.

As a result, economic considerations provided an important limit to the process of Romanization across much of the Roman West. For many, cultural change soon followed as a secondary effect of economic opportunism as, for instance, even smallholders began to learn basic Latin so as to more effectively communicate with the agricultural distributors to whom they sold their “Romanized” crops. Yet just as often, individuals proved unwilling or unable to move beyond that which was all but manifestly profitable, or instead creolized and syncretized the customs of their ancestors with those of the Roman invaders, producing a uniquely “Gallo-Roman” cultural complex (Woolf, “Roman Cultural Revolution” 173-86). The impact of these economic considerations and the limits they imposed thus cannot be understated, for so direct is the line of descent of much of Western culture from the various forms of Roman identity forged during this period that, in many ways, they continue to shape our world today.

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