ROMAN YORKSHIRE: PEOPLE, CULTURE, LANDSCAPE

By Patrick Ottaway. Published 2013 by The Blackthorn Press

Chapter 1
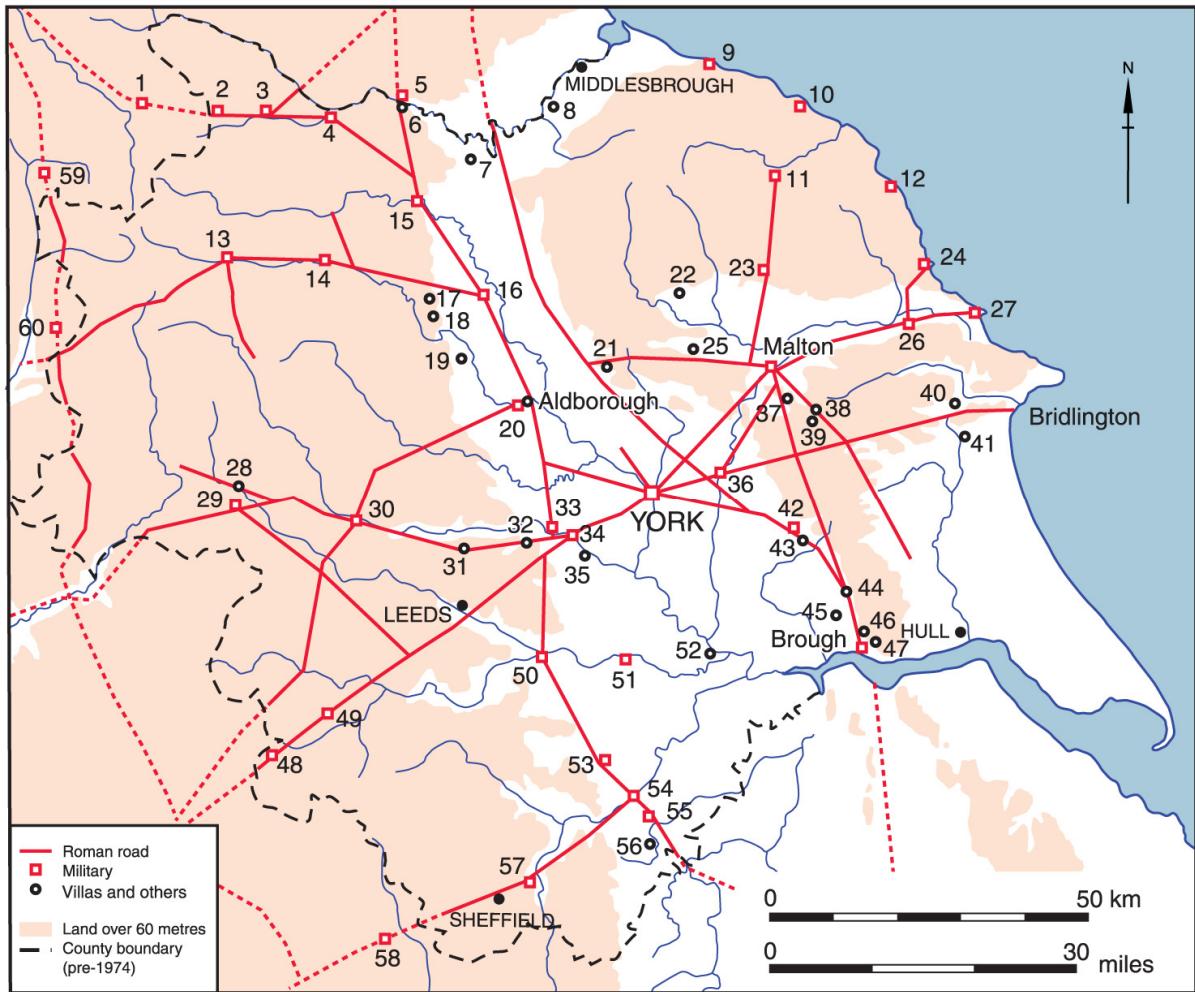
Introduction to Roman Yorkshire

'In the abundance and variety of its Roman antiquities, Yorkshire stands second to no other county' Frank and Harriet Wragg Elgee (1933)

The Yorkshire region

A Roman army first entered what we now know as Yorkshire in about the year AD 48, according to the Roman author Cornelius Tacitus (*Annals* XII, 32). This was some five years after the invasion of Britain itself ordered by the Emperor Claudius. The soldiers' first task in the region was to assist in the suppression of a rebellion against a Roman ally, Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes, a native people who occupied most of northern England. The Roman army returned to the north in about the years 51-2, once again to support Cartimandua who was, Tacitus tells us, now under attack by her former consort, a man named Venutius (*Annals* XII, 40). In 69 a further dispute between Cartimandua and Venutius, for which Tacitus is again the (only) source, may have provided a pretext for the Roman army to begin the conquest of the whole of northern Britain (*Histories* III, 45). England south of Hadrian's Wall, including Yorkshire, was to remain part of the Roman Empire for about 340 years.

The region which is the principal subject of this book is Yorkshire as it was defined before local government reorganisation in 1974. There was no political entity corresponding to the county in Roman times. It was, according to the second century Greek geographer Ptolemy, split between the Brigantes and the Parisi, a people who lived in what is now (after a brief period as Humberside) the East Riding. The county of Yorkshire with its three parts – the ridings - is first known to history in the late Anglo-Saxon era some 600 years after Britain had ceased to be part of the Roman Empire. One might be forgiven, therefore, for asking whether it is legitimate to write a history of Roman Yorkshire other than to satisfy the requirements of a series in which most of the other volumes are concerned with periods when the county name had real meaning.

There are probably two main reasons for an answer in the affirmative. The first is that regional studies of Roman Britain are useful because they allow a clearer look at particular problems and themes than is usually possible in studies of the province of *Britannia* as a whole. There is such a vast amount of data, especially archaeological, for the study of Roman Britain that a province-wide account can only treat regional issues superficially. Secondly, if Roman Britain is to be divided up, then the historic county of Yorkshire is as good as any other region of comparable size – c. 1.5 million hectares – for study because it includes such a great variety of landscape types and environmental conditions. There are the relatively dry and temperate lowlands of the Vale of York and Holderness at one extreme and the wetter, colder uplands of the Pennines and North York Moors at the other. It is, to some extent at least, as a result of this diversity that not only military sites, but more or less the whole spectrum of traditionally recognised types of Roman settlement in Britain, from native farmsteads and villas to towns, can be found in the region. Yorkshire therefore provides us with an excellent opportunity to examine the relationship between, on the one hand, landscape and environment and, on the other, settlements and their cultural, economic and social characteristics.

Illus. 1.1 Roman places in the Yorkshire region (military sites, towns, villas and other major settlements) Key: 1, Brough under Stainmore (Cumbria); 2, Rey Cross; 3, Bowes; 4, Carkin Moor; 5, Piercebridge (Co. Durham); 6, Manfield (Holme House); 7, Dalton on Tees; 8, Ingleby Barwick; 9, Huntcliff; 10, Goldsborough; 11, Lease Rigg; 12, Ravenscar; 13, Bainbridge; 14, Wensley; 15, Catterick; 16, Healam Bridge; 17, Snape; 18, Well; 19, Castle Dykes, North Stainley; 20, Roecliffe; 21, Oulston; 22, Beadlam; 23, Cawthorn; 24, Scarborough; 25, Hovingham; 26, Filey; 27, Kirk Sink, Gargrave; 28, Elslack; 29, Ilkley; 30, Adel; 31, Dalton Parlours; 32, Newton Kyme; 33, Tadcaster; 34, Kirkby Wharfe; 35, Stamford Bridge; 36, Langton; 37, Wharram-le-Street; 38, Wharram Grange and Wharram Percy; 39, Rudston; 40, Staxton; 41, Harpham; 42, Hayton; 43, Shiptonthorpe; 44, North and South Newbald; 45, North and South Cave; 46, Brantingham; 47, Welton Wold; 48, Castleshaw; 49, Slack; 50, Castleford; 51, Roall Manor Farm; 52, Drax; 53, Burghwallis; 54, Doncaster; 55, Rossington Bridge; 56, Stancil; 57, Templeborough; 58, Brough-on-Noe (Derbys.); 59, Over Burrow Bridge (Cumbria); 60, Burrow in Lonsdale (Lancs.)

Furthermore, pre-1974 Yorkshire has a certain geographical integrity being defined by clear natural boundaries on almost all sides. To the north is the River Tees, to the east lies the North Sea coast which runs south to the Humber Estuary, a cultural and political, as well as physical boundary from prehistoric times to the present day. In the immediate pre-Roman period, for example, the Humber divided the Parisi from the Corieltauvi of Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, a division confirmed in Roman arrangements for local government after the conquest. On the west side of Yorkshire the former county boundary is at one point no more than 15km from the Irish Sea, but for the most part it corresponded to the Pennine watershed from which rivers like the Swale and the Aire flow east into Yorkshire and others, like the Ribble, flow west into Lancashire.

Yorkshire in the Roman world

How should we regard the role and significance of our region in Roman Britain and in the Roman world as a whole? Roman Britain is often portrayed as a remote place, an outpost on the periphery of an empire the centre of which lay if not exactly on the banks of the Tiber then certainly in the Mediterranean littoral. Seen in this way Roman Britain becomes rather like a distant possession of the British empire – a Solomon Islands or a St Helena – somehow inherently backward and unsophisticated, if not barbarous, merely by virtue of its physical distance from the mother country. An inevitable inference drawn from this way of looking at Roman Britain is that its history must be one of things done *to* the Britons *by* the Romans – a historical process of Romanisation, making Britons into Romans, revealed by changes in material culture: buildings, roads, pottery, metalwork and so forth.

It cannot be denied, of course, that the impact of the Roman Empire on Britain was substantial, although much greater in some areas than others. One can readily contrast south central and south-eastern Britain with lands north of the Humber which in respect of, for example, towns and villas remained underdeveloped. However, the process of change in the Roman period, a process with which this book is very much concerned, can no longer be seen as involving the imposition of a pre-existing template of 'Romanity, or 'Romanness' on the Britons which takes no account either of differences in the Britons themselves and their particular environmental and geographical circumstances, or of the diversity of the Roman empire as a whole.

One good reason why we can look at the relationship between Roman and native in a way that gives the latter a voice, barely audible before the mid-twentieth century, is that since then archaeologists have begun to discover evidence for the native population of Roman Britain on a scale never previously thought possible. This will be discussed in more detail later in the book, but suffice it to say here that where once it seems to have been assumed that the unsophisticated Britons had left little trace, new techniques of prospection, survey and excavation give us their settlements and material culture allowing them to make their own distinctive contribution to the history of the period.

For most people in Roman Britain, whether in Yorkshire or elsewhere, their farmsteads, fields, pastures and woodlands were at the centre of the known world. In an era of poor communications very few people would have travelled, at least on a regular basis, more than a day's walk or, for the fortunate, a day's ride from home. Only a small elite in the military, governmental or commercial ranks of Roman society would have had much conception of how

their own patch related to the rest of Britain, let alone the Roman Empire as a whole. Having said this, in the Yorkshire region, as in others, the Romans encountered people with a vibrant and resilient culture, if at a less advanced level of development than their own, people who were equal to making some sort of choice about what they did and did not like from what the Roman Empire had to offer. We should therefore consider the process of change after AD 69 in our region within the context of the interaction between Roman and native which created a culture peculiar to its region – one more variation on the theme of what it meant to be Roman.

It will be clear from the references cited in this volume that there are documentary sources of evidence for Britain surviving from the Roman period and some which bear in particular on the north, but, as I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, they are very limited in the topics they cover. The principal body of evidence for the story of Roman Yorkshire is archaeological and so in contrast to other volumes in the History of Yorkshire series this volume must of necessity deal less with personalities and politics, and more with such themes as settlement, society, economy, religion and burial customs. First of all, however, we must look at what the landscape of the region looked like in the Roman period and what natural resources were available for its management and exploitation.