

The impact of the German frontier on the economic development of the countryside of Roman Gaul

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In a series of studies about settlement density in the Rhine area from protohistoric to modern times, K.-P. Wendt and A. Zimmermann try their hand at the difficult task of evaluating the palaeodemography of a region. Their task is all the more complex because these are times and spaces for which written sources are lacking, as a result of which reasoning relies very broadly on interpretation of the archaeological record.¹ The two researchers also attempt to characterize the density of rural settlements and their spatial distribution.² I shall not dally on the methods employed, which involve quite complex statistics and geomatics³ (anyway, they lie outside my area of scientific competence), and shall take the figures at face value, even if I might question some of them. I shall contemplate the economic impact of population growth on the countryside of Gaul in Imperial times. It is a subject that has often been addressed, but one which I intend to reconsider in the context of a European programme on this issue.⁴ The relationship between population numbers, agricultural yield, gross domestic product and taxation has certainly been one key to our understanding of the Roman economy ever since the model suggested by K. Hopkins.⁵ Here, however, I do not wish to proceed in terms of theory, but intend to review critically the archaeological sources, which, for want of written evidence, are our mainspring for evaluating the key components of economic development on the regional scale of NE Gaul.

Population data

Let us begin with the statistical breakdown of population calculated for the second half of the 2nd c. A.D., as featured in one of the studies published by Wendt.⁶ It is reflected by Table 1. To be entirely meaningful, Table 1 must be accompanied by a graph published in the second study⁷ illustrating the long-term change in population in the Rhineland

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- 1 For the regions along the Rhine, these are essentially data compiled in the various volumes of the *Geschichtlicher Atlas der Rheinlande*, vol. II/2.1-II/2.2 (Neolithic, published in 1997); II/3.1-II/3.4 (Ages of Metal, 1997); III/1-2 (Roman times, 1985); IV/10 (Merovingian times, 2006).
 - 2 The main two papers of interest here are K.-P. Wendt (with A. Zimmermann), "Bevölkerungsdichte und Landnutzung in den germanischen Provinzen des Römischen Reiches im 2. Jahrhundert n. Christus," *Germania* 86.1 (2008) 191-226; K.-P. Wendt *et al.*, "Landschaftsarchäologie III. Untersuchungen zur Bevölkerungsdichte der vorrömischen Eisenzeit, der Merowingerzeit und der späten vorindustriellen Neuzeit an Mittel und Niederrhein," *BerRGK* 91 (2010) 217-338. This research was part of the "RheinLUCIFS" programme financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.
 - 3 They are described by A. Zimmermann *et al.*, "Landschaftsarchäologie II. Überlegungen zu Prinzipien einer Landschaftsarchäologie," *BerRGK* 85 (2004) 37-95.
 - 4 The "Rurland" Programme (Rural Landscape in North-Eastern Roman Gaul), financed by the European Research Council.
 - 5 K. Hopkins, "Taxes and trade in the Roman Empire, 200 BC–AD 400," *JRS* 70 (1980) 101-25, restated and refined in *id.*, "Rome, taxes, rents and trade," *Kodai. J. Ancient History* 6-7 (1995-96) 41-75, in turn republished in W. Scheidel and S. von Reden, *The ancient economy* (New York 2002).
 - 6 Excerpt from Wendt 2008 (*supra* n.2) 219.
 - 7 Wendt *et al.* 2010 (*supra* n.2) 320, fig. 26.