

Rural settlement economy in Northern Gaul in the Late Empire: an overview and assessment

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The study of Northern Gaul in late antiquity has experienced an important revitalization of its methods and objectives in recent years,¹ and is undoubtedly one of the most dynamic branches of Gallo-Roman archaeology. In less than 15 years, the situation has evolved from a basic summary of the material record of late antiquity in the countryside to an analysis of the transformation of rural settlement, and ultimately to an assessment of the consequences of this transformation on land-use and the rural economy.

The slow pace with which this new data is assimilated and integrated into the history of Gaul is an indication of the extent of the *aggiornamento* realized by archaeologists. The longevity of the thesis of catastrophe in the late-antique Gallic countryside is thus surprising. Clichés such as the “depopulation of the countryside”, “the general abandonment of the rural settlement”, or “the profound impoverishment of the countryside” are still found in some standard syntheses. Rare indeed are the archaeological studies that do not take for their themes ‘the return to the subsistence economy’, ‘autarchy’, ‘the primacy of the large estate’ or ‘the ill-fated development of indirect tenancies’.

Theses in conflict

In France, R. Agache was among the first to propose, on the basis of his research in Picardy, an evolutionary model of rural settlement in the Late Empire. He contended, on numerous occasions, that the “massive destruction” of the second half of the 3rd c. contributed to a re-organization of settlement, a consequence of which was the abandonment of the great majority of the villas on the plateau.² Settlement was now concentrated around centers (big villas, small towns or sanctuaries) situated along roadways, near water sources, along rivers or on easily defensive heights. Building on ideas originally advanced years ago by A. Grenier,³ Agache postulated the massive abandonment of the countryside. But drawing on his aerial survey, Agache introduced a new element: a change in the population pattern and the concentration of settlement around key centers that would eventually become mediaeval villages. Research carried out in the Rhine area⁴ and in the southern Netherlands⁵ arrived at roughly the same conclusion — i.e., a diminution in the number of settlements — despite disagreement on the origin and magnitude of this phenomenon. Both studies, to their credit, traced the stages of the depopulation of rural countryside and defined those successive stages of the decline of settlement. The almost total desertion of the countryside in the early 5th c. and the progressive colonization of the empty landscape by Germanic peoples is now considered an unquestioned reality.

The case for a critical examination of these theses was difficult to make. Paradoxically, archaeologists have not profited much from the revisions made by historians who, for their part, have argued with much conviction for the rehabilitation of late-antique society. The

1 This article is drawn from work published in 1992 by P. Van Ossel, and from a number of subsequent articles cited in the bibliography. It also takes into account some new research undertaken by the authors on the Dioceses of Gaul in the context of a collective program focused on the Ile-de-France and some excavations carried out on the site of Saint-Ouen-du-Breuil in Haute-Normandie.

2 Agache 1978, 1982 and 1983.

3 Grenier 1934.

4 Hinz 1969a; Wightman 1971; Müller-Wille and Oldenstein 1981; Binsfeld 1984a; Gaitzsch 1986, Gechter and Kunow 1986.

5 Willems 1981 and 1986.