

Roman Archaeology: Cities and Settlement under the Empire (Prof. A. Wilson)
Lectures in Michaelmas and Hilary Terms

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In exploring the development of towns and their related territories in the first three centuries AD, this course provides an introduction to Roman urbanism and the lively modern debate over how it worked and whom it served. The study of the physical design of the city, its public and private buildings, and its infrastructure, along with the objects of trade and manufacture, is placed in the broader context of the types and patterns of rural settlement, agricultural production, transport and communications. This allows various themes to be investigated, including what it meant to live in a Roman town, and in its countryside, and what contributed to the remarkable prosperity of urban centres before the widespread retrenchment of the third century.

Those taking the course will become familiar with the physical character of Roman cities based on selected representative sites (primarily Corinth, Carthage, Caesarea Maritima, Palmyra, Lepcis Magna, Verulamium [St Albans] and Calleva Atrebatum [Silchester]) and with major landscape studies in Italy, Greece and North Africa. Particular attention is paid to problems and biases in assessing the character of the physical evidence; and in testing theoretical models against hard data. Evidence from written sources will be incorporated where appropriate, but an ability to read ancient languages is not required.

Learning outcomes

Primary learning outcomes are:

- to understand the nature and development of Roman urbanism through the material remains;
- to understand the methods and techniques used to investigate Roman landscapes and human settlement within them;
- to understand the debate over the nature of the Roman economy and to be able to assess critically the contribution that archaeology is able to make to this debate.

Secondary learning outcomes are:

- to be able to identify and interpret the physical evidence for Roman urban and rural settlements.

Transferable skills

The transferable skills taught by the course include the critical distillation of reasoned and well presented arguments from a large body of disparate evidence.

LECTURES – 16 in Michaelmas Term, 8 in Hilary Term

Roman Archaeology: Cities and Settlements under the Empire. I. Settlement themes

Prof. Andrew Wilson

This lecture course is one of two series running in parallel in Michaelmas Term (the other is Roman Archaeology: Cities and Settlements under the Empire. II: Urban Case Studies). The course covers questions and themes on rural settlement, trade and economy, and city-countryside relations. Primarily intended for third- and fourth-year Greats students, second-year CAAH students, third-year Arch and Anth students, and graduates in Classical Archaeology and in Ancient History, though all others are welcome.

Roman Archaeology: Cities and Settlements under the Empire. II. Case studies

Prof. Andrew Wilson

This is the second of two series running in parallel in Michaelmas Term (the other is Roman Archaeology: Cities and Settlements under the Empire I: Settlement themes). This course provides an introduction to Roman cities, how they were laid out, what they looked like, how they functioned and what it was like to live in them. A general introduction on town planning is followed by case studies of different cities from across the whole of the Roman Empire, and a final lecture on the economic role of Roman cities. Primarily intended for third- and fourth-year Greats students, second-year CAAH students, third-year Arch and Anth students, and graduates in Classical Archaeology and in Ancient History, though all others are welcome.

Lecture Schedule, Michaelmas 2025

Mondays, Institute of Archaeology Lecture Room.

Themes at 12.00; Case studies at 14:00.

Week	Theme	Case Study
1	Roman urbanism	Town planning
2	Euergetism	Lepcis Magna
3	Hydraulic Engineering	Carthage
4	Cities of the dead	Corinth
5	Rural settlement	Caesarea Maritima
6	Villages in North Africa	Palmyra
7	Small towns and villas	Silchester and Verulamium
8	The army and frontiers	Urban economies

Note: Lectures are an integral part of the examined syllabus and attendance at all of them is strongly recommended.

A further lecture course helps support the Cities and Settlements paper with relevant material:

The Archaeology of the Roman Economy (HT 2026, Mondays)

Prof. Andrew Wilson

This course explores new approaches to the study of the Roman economy, using archaeological evidence to address historical questions about economic growth, technological development, capital investment, the state as an economic actor, and production, trade and the role of cities. It is aimed primarily at undergraduate students in classical archaeology and/or ancient history, taking the option “Roman archaeology: Cities and Settlements under the Empire”, and at Classical Archaeology masters students taking the courses on “The Archaeology of the Roman Economy” and “Roman Urban Systems”, and any of the Roman period papers; but it should also be of interest to students at all levels in archaeology and ancient history more generally, and indeed to those in economic history. All are welcome.

While the undergraduate paper “Roman archaeology: Cities and Settlements under the Empire” is not in itself a study of the Roman Economy, a number of its themes have economic aspects. For those students, this lecture series provides some additional support on subjects that bear on the city’s role in production and consumption, its economic relations with the countryside, and its role in trade, to allow students to situate their knowledge of these issues within the current vigorous debate over the nature, structure and scale of the ancient economy.

Week 1: Approaches to the Roman economy

(Historiography of the subject: Rostovtzeff; Finley; Hopkins; archaeology and the debate over the Roman economy; current approaches and future agendas)

Week 2: Environment, climate and disease

(The ancient environment; environmental change; the energy budget and climate; climate proxies and reconstruction of climate change; plagues; relationship between climate and disease?)

Week 3: The archaeology of economic institutions

(Can archaeology help with New Institutional Economics? Markets and law enforcement; property rights and centuriation; the annona; state intervention in the market)

Week 4: Roman technology: the possibilities and limits for preindustrial growth

(Economic growth and technology; irrigation schemes; mechanical irrigation techniques; the development of water power; technology and capital formation)

Week 5: Developments in maritime trade

(Counting shipwrecks; packing technologies, amphorae and barrels; technological improvements in ship design and construction; harbour technology; la grande commerce maritime vs. coastal tramping; transport and trading costs)

Week 6: Indo-Roman trade and the state

(State interest in external trade; transport infrastructure; scale and value of Roman trade with India; customs revenue; protection and security)

Week 7: Before the pin factory: division of labour and mass production
(Adam Smith; ancient texts on division of labour; archaeology of division of labour; manufactories; mass production; large-scale production of glass, sarcophagi and olive oil; mechanisation and milling)

Week 8: Mining, metal supply, and the supply of money
(Metal supply; gold and silver mines; hydraulic mining of gold; fineness of the gold coinage; debasement of the silver coinage over time; mining, coinage and the state budget)

SUGGESTED TUTORIAL TOPICS

Tutorials for this paper should focus on some of the key themes presented in the lecture case studies. The course falls into two parts: in the first, the concentration is on civic life and urban development, and in the second, on the role of cities within a larger settlement hierarchy of farms, villas and villages, and within empire-wide trading networks. A major aim is to understand changes over time, and similarities and differences between different parts of the empire. Suggested key themes are:

- The impact of Rome and the development of cities.
- Euergetism and the role of elites in urban development.
- Leisure and entertainment in the ancient city
- Urban religion.
- Urban living conditions (housing, water supply, sanitation and hygiene).
- The contribution of field survey techniques to our understanding of rural settlement and landscapes in the Roman world.
- Settlement hierarchies and the role of the village and the villa.
- Long-distance trade.
- Urban manufacturing and production.
- Economic models of the Roman city.