

The economy of roman britain



Britain was an island inhabited by groups of tribal societies called the Celts. These tribes lived through the Iron Age of Britain, until the Roman army, led by General Aulus Plautius began an invasion on the island in AD 43. The Romans called the island Britannia, and today, Britain under the rule of the Roman Empire is called Roman Britain. On the surface, the reason for Rome's invasion was due to their belief that the British were supporting Rome's enemies. However, most historians today assume that the invasion was mainly for economic reasons because Britain had an abundance of mineral resources. Britain had everything from copper to silver to gold. The Romans looked to exploit these resources and turned Britain into a mining ground. Most of the minerals were sent to continental Rome while the Romans sold their valuables such as olive oil, wine, and pottery to the aristocrats of Britain. However, the invasion did not turn out to be totally disadvantageous for Britain as the Romans introduced new technology that developed the island.

The mining industry of Roman Britain was one of the most flourishing economic sectors. Britain had a large quantity of minerals buried underground and had begun to trade with continental Europe even before Rome's takeover. However, their extraction was limited as they did not have advanced technology and always fell short against Hispania, the Spanish, in their competition of exporting minerals such as lead, tin, and gold. All this changed when the Romans took over and introduced their developed technology of hydraulic mining methods. Aqueducts supplied water in order to search for ore veins by washing away soil to expose the bedrock. Then the vein would be attacked by fire, set up next to the rocks.

And when this hot rock was quenched with water, the rocks would crumble easily and the remains were washed away using water. Using this method, many of the mines were first developed by Rome such as the Dolaucothi gold mines in Wales and Mendip lead mines. The number of mines increased as a result and the Romans had many of these mines running at a full shift. The productivity was so high that Britain surpassed Hispania as the leading mining region. In fact, Hispania made an official complaint to the Roman emperor that Britain's production was too high so a limit was placed.

Development of a mining industry was not the only thing that the Roman Empire brought upon Britain. There were developments in agriculture, urbanization and other industries as well. First of all, the Romans encouraged the development of towns because the Celts were tribal people based on small farms. The Romans felt that a form of urban life was needed for sophisticated civilizations and so developed towns in Britain to meet Rome's stature. These towns became the center of commerce and were inhabited by the British aristocrats and Roman army, the two groups most capable of economic activity. The present day cities such as London and Manchester were developed during this time. Connecting these towns were the world-renowned Roman roads. These roads were a great benefit to the economy as movement of commercial goods was made easier and faster, increasing the amount of trade. Another thing that the Romans used as a tool for Romanization was villas. Today, people generally know villas as country estates of wealthy people. However, villa means "farm" in Latin and thus, villas were centers of agriculture built in Roman style. These villas were run by the local elites and built within ten miles of major towns in order to make

economic doings easier. Of the products that improved Britain” s economy, cattle, grain, and even hunting dogs raised from these farms were exported to the continent. The villas also contained storehouses and industrial buildings for pottery and iron tools. Most of these goods were unsophisticated and therefore were only sold in domestic markets.

The role of Britain was primarily to provide resources for the Roman Empire but they did import goods from the main continent as well. Most of the imports were Roman luxury goods such as olive oil, wine, jewelry, and pottery. These goods were mainly for the British aristocrats who wanted to sophisticate themselves. Exposing them to Roman luxury goods was the main key to a successful Romanization of Britain because elites had the power to affect ordinary people. Furthermore, the imports were provided for the 40, 000 Roman soldiers stationed in Britain. It was essential that these soldiers felt at home and were taken well care of due to the important role they played in Romanizing Britain.

Rome” s influence on the British economy was truly immense as even the unconquered areas of northern Britain were following the economic system of Rome. Even when the Roman reign ended in AD 410, much of the island” s economy was based on the developments made by Rome. The influence of the Roman Empire was a great asset to the British and even today the footmarks of Rome are left in Britain as seen through London and Manchester.