

Lecture summaries 1999–2000

Roman Britain as protectorate, political symbol and military training-ground

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The history of Roman Britain is often seen as terms of conquest followed, at least in the south, by a measure of active Romanization leading to local self-government. In the north the task of the army was to secure a viable frontier and to continue to engage hostile barbarians until the end. Over much of Roman Britain the remains of forts and fortresses seemingly support this story of military primacy. It is contended here that the real significance of both parts of the province was rather different. In the south the military events of AD 43 and AD 60 take on a different perspective when viewed from the standpoint of the pro-Roman populations of central southern Britain. Even the concept of the north as the front line of defence against *barbaricum* takes on a new aspect when it is seen to have as much to do with symbolism as with military necessity and with the arts of peace and of just government rather than with warfare. An essential starting point has to be Roman propaganda as displayed in art, from inscriptions and sculpture to coins and gems.

According to Dio, King Berikos (ie Verica) persuaded Claudius to intervene in AD 43. The landings probably took place early in the year at Chichester Harbour, in the Atrebatian kingdom, and resulted in at least 11 tribes accepting immediate alliance with Rome, including part of the Dobunni of Gloucestershire. Roman diplomacy may even now have extended north to the Brigantes and even to Orkney. For the crossing of Ocean together with his largely diplomatic successes Claudius claimed a conquest of Britain.

Most of central southern Britain south of Akeman Street lacks evidence for Roman military occupation. Only the Durotriges in the west and the Trinovantes/Catuvellauni of Essex were subdued by force.

The most successful pro-Roman ruler in the first century was Togidubnus (or Cogidubnus) of the Atrebates, later (perhaps in the reign of Vespasian) accorded the exotic title of ‘Great King in Britain’. His full acceptance of the Roman way of life is illustrated by his great palace at Fishbourne and the varied iconography of the Temple of Sulis at Bath, of which in all likelihood he was the builder. Other client states, including those of the Iceni of Norfolk and the Brigantes in Yorkshire and the Pennines, proved less stable.

The failure of Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes to emulate the achievements of Togidubnus (probably an impossible hope in her rugged and diverse region) led to a change of Roman policy in the north, from succouring her protectorate to active conquest. As former commander of Legio II Augusta in AD 43, Vespasian was already able to share the Claudian boast of conquest; and Flavian governors (down to and including Agricola) presented their northern

campaigns in terms of completing the acquisition of Britain, even considering adding Ireland. The elliptical building at Chester may well have been designed to illustrate these pretensions.

Fort building deep into Scotland shows the reality of troop movement but can neither confirm nor deny the strength of military opposition. While the crown of Tacitus' narrative is the victory at Mons Graupius, I am sceptical as to whether the pitched battle he describes ever took place. At most it may have been no other than a minor skirmish, but even if largely fictional it was of great symbolic value in Rome, as was the fortress at Inchtuthil, though it is hard to see how a fortress so far north could have been supplied in the long term. Nor was it necessary. Northern Britain, and especially Scotland, now assumed a function which it would maintain for well over a century as a military training ground, for campaigning and fort-building in rough country, and as an arena for 'victories'.

While Rome claimed total conquest as her aim in the first century, there was a change in the second expressed aptly in the phrase *diffusis barbaris* on a probably Hadrianic inscription from Jarrow church (RIB 1051). The words, while stating that the fate awaiting barbarians is to be scattered, consigns them to a destiny worse than death in the outer darkness beyond the *Oikoumene*, beyond Roman civilization, beyond Hadrian's Wall. Whatever purpose this monument served, economic and military considerations came second to its symbolism as a line cut through the landscape. The Wall was the rim of the world; Hadrian's Pantheon at Rome and his great library at Athens were at its hub. The redrawing of the frontier under Antoninus Pius along a new line was in a symbolic sense merely a matter of detail, though it did for some decades draw southern Scotland into the Roman world. Coins and, above all, the superb distance slabs from that Wall express the purpose of such a *limes* in terms of current Roman propaganda.

In many ways the summation of Roman policy in Britain can be seen in relation to Severus' campaign. Its prime purpose was to train his sons in warfare and secondarily to provide victories for Rome. Compensation for the lack of a decisive battle on the lines of Mons Graupius (who would now have believed it?) can be seen in the resolute messages on inscriptions, coinage, engraved gems and even stamped cakes. In the event, immediately following Severus' death, Caracalla used his 'victory' to establish his authority.

The Severans established a *colonia* at York and encouraged the cult of Dea Brigantia as a personification of Britannia Inferior. By contrast, Caledonia remained in propaganda threatening and barbarian down to the end, though in fact relationships between Rome and the tribes of Scotland for the most part relied on diplomacy, as exemplified by finds of gold cross-bow brooches (diplomatic gifts) and the payment of subventions in cash or bullion rather than on active warfare (eg the Severan coin hoard found at Birnie, near Elgin; or the late Roman Traprain Law treasure). The mythic character of the 'northern barbarians' is perhaps shown in the fourth century by the Barbarian Conspiracy, almost certainly largely a rebellion in southern Britain involving the suborning of peoples beyond the frontiers, and the supposed (but improbable) Caledonian victories of Stilicho in Claudian's verse. When in the fifth century the Roman Empire in the West disintegrated, far from north Britain being overwhelmed in the collapse, it was largely forgotten: we can look for sub-Roman continuity here almost better than we can further south.

The conclusion, of course, is that of C P Cavafy in his famous poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians'. The barbarians are simply a necessary myth; the reality of life in the forts of northern Britain was largely one of policing and the provision of training for a military reserve sometimes needed elsewhere where the threat was (on occasion) real. For those a long way away, in southern Britain (see the Rudge Cup) and in Italy, the frontier symbolized the rugged terminus of the hospitable world where Rome eternally triumphed over its enemies.

Science and the passed: the archaeology of excrement

Richard Jones

Edinburgh, 10 April 2000

The introduction of more scientific techniques, notably more objective and systematic methods of collecting small remains from archaeological sediments during excavation and in post-excavation analysis, together with an inter-disciplinary approach to interpretation, enables archaeologists of the 21st century to learn far more from excavations than was possible in previous centuries.

This lecture concentrates on the important role played by techniques developed in the biological sciences for the analysis of ancient assemblages of animal and plant remains. These techniques were pioneered by geologists, notably those interested in animal and plant remains preserved in soft sediments, typically Pleistocene and particularly post-glacial deposits. The introduction of systematic sampling strategies combined with an understanding of depositional processes to the study of archaeological soils and sediments is responsible for important developments in archaeological understanding. Much of this work was undertaken in Britain, mainly in York, London and various sites in Scotland — notably Skara Brae and the Links of Noltland — during the 1970s and at Freswick Links in the early 1980s. Subsequently this approach has migrated to other parts of north-west Europe and is fast becoming the norm, even amongst classical archaeologists.

A fuller appreciation of the range of animal and plant remains in archaeological deposits has enabled the identification of a vast range of human activities, including dyeing, bee-keeping, grain storage, woodworking, food-processing and so forth. Furthermore, the recovery of large and more representative samples of small bones, notably those of birds and fishes, has caused many archaeologists to reassess the importance of these animals in the ancient economies of Britain. Taking evidence from bones, plant remains, arthropods — especially ectoparasites — and parasitic worm ova, even the most sceptical observer is brought to the unsavoury realization that many occupation sites were peopled by individuals with very different standards of personal hygiene and public sanitation from most members of contemporary society. In short, life was squalid by modern standards.

The presence of human, dog and other excrement is attested by coprolites, faecal concretions and faecal deposits which have been identified by the presence of microscopic eggs of common intestinal nematode parasites. Dog coprolites, characterized by their shape and size and distinctive inclusions of bone splinters, are well known on many archaeological sites. Human excrement, identified by the presence of large numbers of eggs of the whipworm (*Trichuris trichinira*) and the large roundworm of man (*Ascaris lumbricoides*) is often less obvious than canine faeces on many sites, but is actually more common (assuming the sites examined to date are typical). Corroborative evidence for the presence of substantial deposits of herbivore dung in the Roman and post-Roman deposits in towns and forts throughout Britain is attested by the detailed analysis of insect death assemblages and plant remains.

Scottish hydro-hotels and the tourist industry in 19th-century Scotland

Alastair Durie

Edinburgh, 8 May 2000

An English tricyclist on a Scottish tour in 1882 commented that in England any imposing detached building was pretty certain to be either a lunatic asylum or a workhouse. In Scotland it was the hydropathic establishment, some of which, notably Peebles and Crieff, are still very much part of the landscape. The modern hydro provides spa treatments and leisure facilities, but not the ‘water-cure’ which was the basis of the early establishments in Scotland, the first of which were started in the later 1840s at Rothesay and Dunoon. Hydropathy was a system of water treatments — douching, bathing and wrapping in a wet sheet — allied to a regime of temperance for all and exercise for those who could benefit. It was evolved on the European mainland by a medically unqualified Austrian ‘peasant’ (as his critics called him) and was a more sympathetic alternative to the contemporary therapies of bleeding and drugging. It attracted some support from within the medical profession — amongst the first hydropaths in Scotland were Doctors East and Paterson — and from a growing clientele with money and time to spare for a period in comfort, either for a ‘cure’ or just a ‘tonic’. Financial backing came from temperance reformers such as David Paten of Tillicoultry and John Davie of Dunfermline, who both put up investment capital and subsidized the visits of church workers and missionaries: the hydros became known for their respectability, being patronized by the ‘unco good of all denominations’ according to one contemporary judgement.

The clientele was loyal, returning year after year, happy to spend their time, as Dickson McCunn’s wife did at the East Neuk Hydropathic (John Buchan, *Huntingtower*), in endless discussion of ‘ailments, ministers, sudden deaths and the intricate genealogies of her class’. McCunn himself, it has to be said, ‘rancorously hated hydropathics’ — their food, the baths and the endless small talk.

But whereas the first hydros had been small, adapted mansion houses, the later 1870s was to see a proliferation of much larger, purpose-built, lavish buildings with two or three bedrooms, as at Moffat, Dunblane, Shandon and Callander. This expansion — with no less than 12 projected to come into operation between 1878 and 1882 — was underpinned by limited liability legislation which made it easier to raise capital, and an increasing shift in the focus of the hydros. They were less and less centres of cure, and more and more places for rest and recreation; it was the lady entertainer rather than the resident doctor who was the centre of hydro life. Visitors displaced patients; the seriously ill and inebriates turned away. That this was a successful formula was confirmed after the crisis of the early 1880s when, after the over-expansion of the previous years, many of the new hydropathic companies became insolvent. New entrepreneurs, of whom Andrew Philip of the Cockburn Hotel was one, moved in to acquire the properties at bargain-basement prices. Oban was abandoned, Morningside sold as a school, but the rest kept going through depression, downturn and fire, to remain an important part of the business of health in Scotland.

The Billown Neolithic Landscape Project, Isle of Man: changing perceptions of the western seaways in early prehistory

Timothy Darvill

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The Isle of Man is well known for its wealth of upstanding Neolithic monuments, but it is now more than 50 years since Gerhard Bersu's major campaigns of investigation and much has changed in that time. The focus of this presentation is the programme of field surveys and excavations at the Billown quarry site on the southern plain of the island. These began in 1995 and are due for completion in 2002. Combining the need for rescue excavation in advance of quarrying, research into the Neolithic period, and opportunities for training and participation by students and the public alike, this project is rather unusual in its scope and is run in association with Manx National Heritage.

Two general themes underpin the way the work is carried out. First is the idea of 'landscape' as a way of approaching the archaeological material at a series of spatial scales, all of which relate to the way in which communities constructed the spaces in which they lived and worked. The second is the idea of 'interaction', and again this is conceived at a number of scales, the largest of which builds on Sir Cyril Fox's idea of the western seaways as a corridor for social interaction and exchange. Since the Isle of Man is situated in the middle of the Irish Sea there are many opportunities to explore the question of interaction in a broad compass which includes potential connections with Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales and, perhaps further still, with Brittany and northern France.

Nothing was visible on the surface at the Billown quarry site prior to excavation, the potential of the site having been established by finds from fieldwalking in the 1970s. With more than a hectare now excavated it is clear, however, that this hilltop is simply part of a much more extensive set of monuments and settlement patterns. Much of this has been explored through geophysical survey, which works extremely well in this part of the island.

The earliest activity dates to the fifth and sixth millennia BC, not too long after the island was first colonized. Pits were being dug from soon after 5000 BC, and these appear to represent periodic visits to the site. A large tree may have provided the focus for this activity, also perhaps natural collapse structures that created hollows. The digging of pits and shafts continued through the fifth and fourth millennia, but by 4000 BC the use of the site had extended to include the construction of a large D-shaped enclosure. This went through several phases of remodelling and change, latterly being associated with a large, quartz, standing stone and a northern entrance aligned on the locally prominent hill of South Barrule. Most of the pits and shafts lay outside the main enclosure, perhaps in a small annexe. Numerous flint arrowheads and the regular deposition of quartz pebbles suggest links between this site and comparable structures in the midlands and south-west of England. The Billown enclosure is, however, one of the most northerly and westerly in Britain or Ireland. Contemporary monuments include long barrows and passage graves.

In the third millennium BC the island became more isolated and developed an indigenous Ronaldsway Culture. Shaft building and pit digging continued, as too the occasional remodelling of the enclosure. The range of structures represented was expanded, however, with the addition of a group of earthfast jars, a small henge, and a long mound. Quartz remained significant and

allowed the use of the site to be linked with natural outcrops, a stone circle, and coastal deposits of beach pebbles.

As a result of these investigations a preliminary model of the use of space can be proposed in which there is settlement on the coast, ceremonial sites characterized by periodic visits inland, and a sacred area on the high ground beyond. These spatial zones can be linked to possible cosmological referencing of the sky, the ground, and the earth beneath. The western seaways provided a super-highway for the distribution of people and ideas, variously serving to bond or isolate communities at different times.