

Roman Britain

A consideration of the process of Romanization
in Britain for A level students



What was Roman Britain?

To understand Roman Britain it is necessary to look at both the incoming imperial Roman society, and also the populous, talented and wealthy native British societies which the Romans encountered on arrival.

Britain before the conquest

The view from Britain

The story of Romanization, often in the past seen as the coming of civilization to Britain, can alternatively be seen as the military imposition of a new fashionable culture, of change rather than necessarily improvement or progress. The Romans are credited with bringing city living, literacy and economic development to Britain. The Romans certainly saw it that way! However, archaeology has been able to give the Britons a voice, of sorts. It has shown that the Britons were actually more sophisticated, and that the Roman conquest brought fewer real innovations, than we previously thought.

Towns before Rome

For example, the Romans did not introduce urban life to Britain; they did bring Classical urbanism to the island, but the Britons, like the Gauls, were already developing “pro-cities” before the invasion, sprawling agglomerations of industrial, religious and governmental activities. These were partly, but not wholly, inspired by urban developments in Iron Age and Roman Gaul. A number of the most important developed into the major cities of the Roman province, and subsequently of medieval England.

Colchester is the best known example, and there were others at Verulamium (St. Albans), Silchester and elsewhere.

Illiterate or non-literate?

Likewise, while the Britons were probably largely non-literate, this may have been because they did not need or want writing for most purposes (and like the Gallic Druids, may have banned it from use for religious matters). As they came to develop more centralised institutions at the end of the Iron Age, so they introduced coins; it is likely that they were using writing for administration, as the Gauls did before Caesar.

Art, culture, and cultural choice

That the British tribes were talented peoples is shown by the brilliant technical and artistic quality of many of the things they made, particularly in metalwork. This suggests that the reason they did not develop, for example, monumental architecture to compare with Greece and Rome was not ignorance, but in part cultural choice. They expended artistic effort on portable artefacts (jewellery, weapons, wheeled vehicles), not static ones like temples. They did indeed create massive works of engineering, but these were usually in perishable timber, or earthworks such as the great hillfort of Maiden Castle, Dorset. Our culture often chooses inappropriately to compare these unfavourably with the architecture of Greece and Rome.

A productive landscape ...

Contrary to widespread popular assumption, there was no revolution in agriculture when the Romans arrived. There were changes, and farming in general intensified, probably as bigger markets developed, but generally

native farming practices continued, much as before. This is not surprising, as several staples of Italian farming will not grow in Britain (the olive, or the fig; although the Romans did introduce vines with limited success). In any case, British farmers had 4000 years of practical experience of the local ecology behind them when the Romans appeared.

... and a populous landscape

The productivity of the land is attested in Roman texts referring to British agricultural exports, and shown archaeologically by the huge numbers of late Iron Age and early Roman farmstead sites now known from field survey and excavation. There were many thousands of these settlements, representing a population approaching several million by the Roman conquest, far more than was thought a few decades ago, and similar to the population at the time of the Domesday Book.

Iron Age Britons: "backward" or "advanced"?

Indeed, it now seems that among the major reasons the Romans were interested in Britain were its agricultural productivity, and the fairly complex forms of social organization of the southern tribes with which they were in contact. They may have depicted them as backward, but in fact realised that many of these British tribes or proto-states were already sufficiently like the Romans to make it feasible to turn them into successful provincial Roman societies. (The Romans invaded territory but politically they thought of conquering peoples.)

Britain under the Romans

Celts

In antiquity, the term “Celtic” was only used of continental peoples, especially the Gauls of France. The British and the Irish were regarded as similar, but not the same. The label was only applied to insular peoples in the 18th century, initially because scholars recognised that Gauls, Irish, Britons and others all spoke similar tongues, which the linguists decided to call “Celtic”. This linguistic term soon became used as an ethnic one by historians. The label “Celtic” can be misleading, as it implies uniformity, whereas the peoples so labelled varied enormously.

Boudicca and resistance to Roman rule

The Icenian revolt was a cataclysmic but unusual event in Rome’s Northern provinces, triggered by localised extremes of brutality and administrative incompetence. However the fact that there were not more such catastrophes shows that Roman methods of government were usually successful in pacifying the conquered and reconciling them to their new status.

Effect of Romanization on Celtic Britain

This was highly variable. Much of Caledonia (Scotland) was far outside the province, and hardly touched, while further south the presence of a large army and a new road network, Romanized towns and expanding trade affected many people profoundly. Yet even within the province, in many districts the lifestyle of ordinary farming families was little changed beyond the arrival of Roman-style pots, brooches and coins; perhaps the growth of

markets for their produce; and the imposition of new taxes! The province of Britannia was not so much "Rome-in-Britain" as "Britons interpreting Rome". This is because Roman Britain was largely built by Britons, not incomers, of whom there were relatively few. Most of the incomers were soldiers, of a huge variety of ethnic backgrounds – not many were Italians. There was very little settlement by immigrant civilians, except for the presence of the army and fairly small concentrations of incomers, mostly at centres like London and Bath. Modern estimates suggest that incomers were outnumbered by native Britons by at least twenty to one – but of course this minority was a politically, militarily and culturally dominant ruling elite. The result of the interaction of the two groups was an interesting cultural hybrid, not simply Britons adopting Roman ways, but a story of adaptation and the development of a distinctive Romano-British culture.

Copying, reinterpreting, adapting

At least in the Midlands and the South, under imperial encouragement (or duress), the native British tribal aristocracies aspired to become culturally Roman, and to become legally Roman by winning the citizenship through service to the government in civil administration or the army. The models of Roman life they had to work from were: the (largely provincial) army; the early military colonies it founded, at Colchester, Gloucester, and Lincoln; plus the new trading boom-town of London. These models themselves drew heavily on prototypes in Roman France and the Rhineland. Consequently, Romano-British towns and villas, for example, were British reinterpretations of Gallo-Roman adaptations of Italian ideas. Romano-British aristocratic and town life and culture were therefore very different

from those in Italy. However, the widespread idea that they were culturally inferior to the latter is a modern value-judgement, itself ultimately inspired by the surviving writings of Roman aristocrats like Cicero and Caesar, which underpin Western conceptions of what 'civilization' is. We have been influenced by the Roman senatorial nobility's own superior self-image and attitudes to 'barbarians'.

Romanization: a mixed picture

It is also important to remember that most of the population appears to have become Romanized only to a limited degree; continuity from the pre-Roman past was also very important. The majority remained in poor rural communities, using a perfectly effective pre-Roman farming technology, and living in Iron Age style houses. They almost certainly still spoke Celtic dialects. These people were just as much Roman Britons as were the few percent who lived in villas or towns; and from early in the third century they were all legally Roman citizens. In many parts of the province, especially in those areas which would one day become Wales and Northern England, Romanized life was not even very well established among the aristocracy.

Here, in the areas permanently under the eye of the army, the older pre-Roman tribal lifestyle continued with relatively little change. Roman Britain, then, was a varied patchwork of societies, some still largely "Celtic", others to varying degrees hybrids of Roman and indigenous traditions. Among the latter, a largely native aristocratic class developed a local form of Roman culture (just as was happening in most other provinces); the bulk of the population continued to live much as their ancestors had done. At the top, much of Romano-British society looked fairly Roman, but seen

from the bottom up, even in the most Romanized areas it still looked fairly “Celtic”, as language and much of the old tribal structure survived, the latter to form the framework of Roman administration.

A dynamic society

There were also important changes through time. It took generations to build up the Romanized infrastructure of roads towns, etc., and for Roman culture to disseminate widely and deeply. For example, most of the “palatial” villas (never more than a few dozen) date to the fourth century, late in the occupation. On the other hand the army, which on its arrival was a centre of Roman culture, albeit provincial Roman culture, underwent a profound change; it literally went native as it switched to local recruitment. In the third and fourth century, most Roman soldiers in Britain were British-born, not foreigners.

Everyday life

Most Roman Britons lived in the countryside, so the normal daily round for most people was farming, planting and ploughing, storing and processing crops, managing woodlands, tending flocks and herds, butchering, maybe tanning, spinning, weaving, basketmaking, perhaps potting or smelting and smithing. We know less than we would like even of life in towns, since no Roman town in Britain is preserved like Pompeii; everything is far more fragmentary, and we lack the many inscriptions and other writings which tell us so much about Roman town life on the continent. In addition, if only because the weather and the people were different, Colchester, say, would have felt very different from Roman Naples, just as any two cities feel different today.

Houses

Many textbooks imply that everyone lived in townhouses or villas. In fact, most people continued to live in Iron Age-style round houses of timber and thatch which could be sturdy and quite warm and comfortable. Most villas actually lacked hypocausts (“central heating”), bath-houses or mosaics. They were not necessarily a big advance in comfort, but did represent the yearning of the wealthy to be Roman. Truly luxurious villas with baths and mosaics were always the exception; in fact most belong to the last century of Roman rule.

Religion

The Romans brought their state gods to Britain (Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mars, Mercury, etc.) and the imperial cult (worship of the genius, or guardian spirit, of the emperor). This state religion was also political, a way of expressing loyalty to the state, and Britons, like other provincials, will have been expected to comply. Yet it was also Roman tradition to venerate the gods of the conquered, as at Bath, where the invaders worshipped British Sul at her “miraculous” hot spring. They identified her with their own goddess Minerva, a common Roman practice which made native deities intelligible to Romans – and Roman ones intelligible to Britons. Basic similarities of Roman and British religions aided this; both were polytheistic, with gods of places, nature, peoples, war, etc. Many native gods came to be worshipped in Roman style, in masonry temples, forming hybrid “Romano-Celtic” cults. The clash with the Druids is a relatively unusual example of religious intolerance in the Roman world, the other well-known conflicts being with Jews and Christians. Ostensibly, the Romans objected to the Druids because they practised human sacrifice, but

the real reason for the clash was political; the Druids were a supra-tribal order which might co-ordinate and foment rebellion. Besides bringing their own gods, the Romans also brought to Britain many of the gods of other provinces, from the Greek world and the East, including Egyptian Isis, and Christianity.

The end of imperial rule

Britain was cut off from the Empire by Germanic invasions of Gaul in 406/7, and this seems to have led to a remarkably fast and complete collapse, not only of government and institutions, but of the economy and almost all other aspects of provincial life. Towns and villas were falling into ruin within a generation. It can be argued that the Anglo-Saxons, who arrived in numbers some decades later, came into a political and cultural vacuum – although many of the people were apparently still there, farming the landscape, albeit probably in smaller numbers. The idea that all the Eastern Britons fled or were killed by the Saxons is wrong. Neither was there a 'final withdrawal' of Italian legions; the few Roman troops remaining in 406 were Britons.

The legacy of Roman rule

One of the most remarkable facts about Roman Britain was the completeness of its collapse, and the lack of clear direct influence on subsequent centuries, in contrast to, say, France, Italy or Spain. Notably the Celtic dialects and Latin which we think were spoken in Roman Britain were replaced by Germanic dialects. The latter, which became Old English, were hardly influenced by either Celtic or Latin. One important survival was the road network, which formed the skeleton of communications in Britain until the 18th century. But only some of the cities which it linked were truly Roman foundations (London, York); several others had pre-Roman origins, and even their names are of British, not Latin, derivation (e. g. Colchester, Camulodunum, British for stronghold of Camulos [a war god]). Yet, indirectly, Rome had a major impact on British life from the Roman background to the medieval church, the many loan-words reaching English from ecclesiastical Latin and via Norman French to the rediscovery of Roman culture during the Renaissance. It was when the Roman past became a source of inspiration and a subject of curiosity that the search for the lost Roman history of Britain began, during the sixteenth century.

Roman Britain through sites and artefacts

Roman Britain is very largely known from archaeology rather than texts; for many aspects of ancient life, documentary sources remain sparse or non-existent. Roman Britain's rich and well-explored archaeological record is presented at many museums and sites across the country. Here are a few suggestions for England.

Museums

Apart from the British Museum's large collections, other museums with good Iron Age and/or Roman collections include Museum of London; Colchester Castle; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Corinium Museum, Cirencester; York; Archaeology Museum, Hull.

Sites and Museums in combination

Museum of the Iron Age, Andover (with nearby Danebury hillfort); Dorchester Museum and Maiden Castle hillfort, Dorset; Fishbourne Roman Palace, Chichester, Sussex; Roman Baths, Bath; Verulamium Museum, plus Roman theatre, mosaics, hypocaust and city walls, St Albans; Hadrian's Wall, with its various forts and museums (e.g. Newcastle University Museum, Tullie House Museum Carlisle, The forts at South Shields, Chesters, Housesteads and Vindolanda also have museums.)

Further reading

A useful and accessible introduction with colour illustrations is Tim Potter's *Roman Britain* (British Museum Publications 1983), and also the more substantial T. Potter and C. Johns, *Roman Britain* (British Museum Press 1992). There are many other general accounts of Roman Britain. One of the greatest is still Sheppard Frere's *Britannia* (3rd edn., Routledge and Kegan Paul 1987). For a more up-to-date critical account, which takes Frere as its starting point, see Martin Millett's *The Romanization of Britain* (Oxford 1990, paperback 1992). For a discussion of Britain and other "Celtic" lands and their relations with the growing Roman empire, see Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts* (Thames and Hudson 1993), especially chapter VIII. Many aspects of the archaeology of Roman Britain, from towns and mosaics to coins and crafts, are covered by the excellent and cheap booklets in the Shire Archaeology series.