Fractured Britannia: The Twilight of Roman Britain

Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 137

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Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
13-14 Market Square
Bicester
Oxfordshire OX26 6AD
United Kingdom

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80583-245-4
ISBN 978-1-80583-246-1 (e-Pdf)

Cover: Items of dress and coinage dating to late Roman Britain (photos: Birmingham Museums Trust, Essex County Council, Hampshire Cultural Trust, Magdalena Wachnik, The MET Museum, Norfolk County Council, The Salisbury Museum, York Museums Trust)

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my two supervisors John Creighton and Hella Eckardt as well as my PhD Panel Chair Michael Fulford and my two examiners James Gerrard and Gabor Thomas. I'm deeply grateful to John for his invaluable guidance and support throughout the process of refining this thesis. His dedication, patience and expertise have been instrumental in shaping my growth as a researcher, and I truly appreciate his generosity and commitment.

Thank you to all of the specialists who have helped me develop my ideas, provided advice or supplied data since this idea first began. This includes Richard Abdy, Anna Booth, Paul Booth, Julian Bowsher, Hilary Cool, Simon Esmonde Cleary, Nina Crummy, John Cruse, Sam Dumble, the late Bruce Eagles, Diane Eagles, James Gerrard, Stephen Greep, Nick Griffiths, James Harland, Stefanie Hoss, Stuart Laycock, Kevin Leahy, Kris Lockyear, William Manning, Michael Marshall, Sam Moorhead, Quita Mould, Johan Nicolay, Martin Pitts, Richard Reece, Ian Riddler, David Roberts, Nico Roymans, Ruth Shaffrey, Ellen Swift, Marquita Volken, Philippa Walton, David Wigg-Wolf and Barbara Yorke.

I am thankful for all the time Anna Booth, Paul Booth, Ken Dark, Bruce Eagles, Simon Esmonde Cleary, Nick Griffiths, Sam Moorhead, David Roberts and Barbara Yorke have given in particular commenting on various pieces of my work and other publications relating to this wider research.

I want to thank both Paul Booth and David Brear whose help transformed the thesis into this book. Paul proof read this revised version of my thesis and to David's thoughtful input, encouragement and generosity helped bring this book to a broader audience. Similarly, thank you to Danko Josic for his work on preparing this monograph.

The illustrations primarily used here have been produced by Nick Griffiths with thanks to the Winchester Excavation Committee. Part of Nick's work was supported by a Roman Finds Group grant.

Without my family none of this could have happened in the first place. I wish to thank my parents Alison and Chris, as well as Cath and Emma for putting up with all the chats about Romans. Since the thesis which forms the basis of this book was submitted we have had two new arrivals, Chris and Paul, who have shown that sleepless nights and missed deadlines are worth every moment. Finally, without the kindness and generosity of Alan White over the years this PhD would never have come to fruition.

Introduction

This book is an in-depth study of the distribution of coinage and elite items of dress in later and sub-Roman Britain. It builds on previous research on the end of Roman Britain by the author looking at a range of numismatic and artefactual evidence on a regional scale (Henry, 2018b; Henry, 2018a; Henry, 2020b; Henry, 2021a; Henry and Moorhead, 2022) or a national scale (Henry, 2022b; Crummy and Henry, 2024; Henry, 2024c)

The Later Roman world was markedly different from the Principate, as the distinct categories of legionaries and auxilia, and military and civilian, had long since dissolved. Troops were now divided into frontier troops (*limitanei*) and a mobile field army (the *comitatenses*), but identifying them in the archaeological record is notoriously difficult.

Division between military and civilian are problematic too. The military and bureaucracy were merged. Both groups ranked as soldiers and used the same objects to denote their status. Similarly, the local elite, responsible for much of the day-to-day administration of the diocese of Britain, begin to adopt military fashions, leading to an evolution of dress accessories throughout the fourth century.

This book aims to collate and explore the extensive datasets now available, extracting patterns within various forms of material culture associated with soldiers, officials, or high-status local elites, as well as coinage, which reflected the tax system, economic control and engagement with the state. Different denominations performed different roles with gold and silver used for pay and taxation. Base metal coins were used by the rural population as part of the process of converting agricultural surplus into tax. While many of these datasets have been studied in isolation, this study seeks to examine them systematically in combination and make the datasets publicly accessible. It will highlight the value of utilising big data and the opportunities it provides that enables us to engage with the material from a new perspective.

The objects examined serve as key markers of late Roman status and identity. Many remained in use for decades, even when damaged, highlighting their enduring influence. This longevity offers valuable insights into the social and political shifts of the fifth century. The evidence suggests regional variation: while some areas maintained Roman material culture well into the fifth century, others abandoned it as early as AD 375.

These patterns can be better understood through the lens of "ethnic boundary change." This term was first coined in 1969 by Fredrik Barth and is better described as the changing boundaries which relate to the wider concept of identity. Crucially, ethnic boundary change does not solely concern the ethnicity of an individual; rather, it refers to the broader, often fluid, processes by which group identities are maintained, negotiated, or transformed over time

In some cases, an endogenous shift occurred, where communities gradually moved away from Roman identities, either by choice or necessity, as imperial structures weakened. In contrast, in other regions, exogenous drift introduced new cultural influences, with communities selectively adopting external practices, whether through contact with incoming groups or evolving local power dynamics. A systematic evaluation of these processes, alongside an analysis of late Roman power structures, provides fresh perspectives on Britain's transformation from an integrated Roman diocese to smaller post-Roman polities. Rather than a sudden rupture, the evidence points to a complex, regionally varied transition shaped by both internal decisions and external pressures.

This study consists of four sections:

Chapters 1-2 introduces the period and the ways in which it has been interpreted. It provides a brief outline of the history of Roman Britain and the key events of the later fourth and fifth centuries. It then evaluates various historical and archaeological interpretations, focusing on the conceptual frameworks used to understand the transition from Roman rule.

A key theoretical approach in this study is ethnic boundary change, which has been viewed as a flexible concept that must be tailored to specific social and historical contexts (Wimmer, 2013). Applying this to late Roman Britain allows for a broader discussion of how different groups navigated the fragmentation of imperial authority, the collapse of the coin using economy and developed new identities (or modified them), political structures. These shifts were not uniform—some regions experienced endogenous change, where communities redefined their identities from within, while others underwent exogenous drift, adopting new strategies and influences from external sources potentially as early as the 370s.

To ground this theoretical framework, Chapter 3 briefly introduces the structures of the late Roman state in the Diocese of Britain. It explores key aspects such as taxation, major urban centres, and rural economies, identifying the principal actors involved in governance and economic administration. This is followed by a critical assessment of how previous studies have utilised similar datasets to interpret the dissolution of Roman power and the emergence of post-Roman polities.

This study seeks to address four key research questions: Can we establish a connection between particular objects and the Roman state? Can we identify different officials? Was Britain fully integrated into the empire at the turn of the fifth century? And how did different regions disengage from the empire?

Chapters 4-6 focus in on material culture, the aims and objects of this study and the methodology. It considers how those linked with the later Roman state used material culture and specific forms of clothing to highlight their status. While textiles survive poorly in Britain, we have an increasing corpus of objects such as crossbow brooches, fittings from the military belt, spurs and penannular brooches which have all been linked with state officials or the military. The concept of identity is crucial to this study as these objects were used by different individuals to project status and various avowed and ascribed identities within the context of the later Roman world.

The core analysis of these later Roman dress accessories occurs in Chapters 7-12. It commences with an evaluation of the methodologies which have been employed to assess a diverse array of artefacts and currency from Roman Britain, and questions about how issues of chronology running into the fifth century have been tackled. The subsequent chapters then deal with each type of material culture in turn: crossbow brooches (Chapter 7), The *cingulum militare* and associated fittings (Chapter 8), spurs (Chapter 9), penannular brooches (Chapter 10) and then coinage (Chapters 11-12). The structure of each is similar, reviewing existing typologies and revising them if necessary; detailing how each of the individual corpora has been collated (each of which represents a considerable enlargements of the datasets currently available); and then a detailed analysis of geographic and site category distributions of each form of material, pulling out key patterning in the data.

Finally, Chapters 13-15 provides the synthesis and the conclusion. The first chapter in this section (Chapter 13) provides an overview, drawing together all the individual analyses of different types of material culture and coinage to provide a chronological and geographic framework for making this mass of data manageable. The second chapter (Chapter 14) delves into the differential use of material on different types of sites (forts, towns, rural etc.) to consider whether material can be associated with specific different roles in Later Roman society, and how this compared to patterns on the continent. The third chapter (Chapter 15) then focuses on the fifth century and how Roman Britain was transformed into the sub-Roman early-medieval world. This considers Roman and fifth century material linked with various incoming Germanic groups, which while problematic is described here in its broadest sense as Anglo-Saxon to enable comparison (Louviot, 2020). The final conclusions summarises some of the key results and also points to various future avenues of research.

The datasets studied in detail will be made freely available on ADS - https://doi.org/10.5284/1106784, https://doi.org/10.5284/1090416 and an interactive map developed by Maploom - https://romanfinds.maploom.com/info