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Observations on Zosimus' British 'Cities'[108] Werner Lütkenhaus writes: In the scanty sources for 'the end of Roman Britain' there is a small clutch of apparent references to continuing city-life. Orosius writes of a certain *municeps* — usually understood as a leading townsman — called Gratian, who was for a short time supported as emperor by the troops on the island.[109] Zosimus refers directly to *poleis*, 'towns' — in Latin, *civitates* — which, after the fall of Constantine III, were successfully defended by their inhabitants against barbarian attack, or were urged by Honorius to resort to self-help.[110] From these references, historians have been ready to draw wide-ranging conclusions, including the observation that there was by now clearly no layer of administration between the central government and the *civitates* of the region (including northern Gaul), and that the cities were the only surviving entities with a chance of preserving what remained of Roman life. It is on the basis of such sources that, Esmonde Cleary, for example, declares: 'the municipalities were the only surviving authority after the ejection of Constantine III's officials.' Chrysos comes to a similar conclusion in his view that 'the ineffective administration of imperial officials was replaced by those of the cities'.[111]

Sadly, closer examination of the sources reveals that they offer no significant information on the North-Western cities. Thus it becomes plain that Orosius' mention of a '*municeps eiusdem insulae*' in no way categorises Gratian as a member of the municipal aristocracy.[112] It is just a circumlocution — carefully chosen, and borrowed from Cicero — for 'an inhabitant of Britain'.[113] Likewise, Zosimus' two references to *poleis* in Britain / northern Gaul cannot automatically be assumed to indicate 'cities'. Let us examine them again:

1. The inhabitants of Britain react to barbarian attacks after the fall of Constantine III by taking up weapons and seeing to their own defence: '*eleutherosan ton epikeimenon barbaron tas poleis*'. This may be translated as 'they freed the cities from the threatening barbarians'.[114]
2. Honorius writes a letter to the 'cities of Britain' ('*pros tas en Bretannia … poleis*'), telling them that they must defend themselves.[115]

In both cases, the translation of *poleis* as 'cities' (i.e. *civitates*) is, at first glance, self-evident. However, the matter is not straightforward since elsewhere, in similar contexts, Zosimus uses the plural of *polis*, 'city', with

[108] I am very grateful to John Drinkwater for his comments on the first draft of this note and for translating the text.
[109] Orosius 7.40.4.
[110] Zosimus 6.5.3; 6.10.2.
[111] Esmonde Cleary 1989, 137; Chrysos 1991, 263. See also Drinkwater 1998, 286; cf. Paschoud 1989, 58, and his reference to Birley 1976, 72–3.
[112] As, mistakenly, for example, Lütkenhaus 1998, 99f. and n. 46; Chrysos 1991, 261.
[113] Cicero, *Brut*. 70 (246); generally *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* 8.9, 1646.81–1647.9. So, correctly, Kulikowski 2000, 332, n. 44.
[114] Zosimus 6.5.3.
[115] Zosimus 6.10.2.

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a wholly different meaning. At 4.3.1 he describes the partition of the Empire between Valentinian and Valens in A.D. 364. He writes that Valentinian gave Valens the East, deciding that he himself would withdraw to Italy and take over Illyria. With regard to the last, Zosimus' words are: '*labonta de tas en Illuriois poleis*'. Though one might well translate these as 'to take over the cities of Illyria', their clear meaning is that Valentinian aimed at taking on the diocese of Illyria, not its individual cities: '*en Illuriois poleis*' is just shorthand for the whole region.[116] Comparable is Zosimus 4.20.6, which concerns Goths fleeing before Huns in A.D. 376. Roman commanders on the Danube sought a decision from Valens as to whether they should allow these people to enter imperial territory. Zosimus' term for these commanders is '*hoi tas epi tou Istrou poleis phrourein tetagmenoi*': 'those charged with protecting the cities on the Danube'. However, it is plain that he had in mind not commanders of individual cities, but the military hierarchy of the whole region.[117]

The same may well be true of Britain, i.e. in the two passages in Book 6 of his 'History', Zosimus has in mind not particular *civitates*, but the entire province. On this basis, the first translates as 'they freed *their land* from barbarians' and the second as 'he wrote a letter to *the Britons*'. In any event, caution must be exercised in drawing any far-reaching conclusions from these passages.

There is, however, a possible objection to this. While in Book 4 Zosimus' source is Eunapius, for Book 6 he uses Olympiodorus, and so it could be argued that his choice of words simply reflects that of his authorities. The force of *poleis* might, therefore, vary from case to case, preventing any generalisation. However, although Zosimus keeps very close to his sources in content, in his writing he displays, both in language and style, a remarkable uniformity. His clear aim was to re-work his sources into a language that was easily understood by his target audience.[118] So, for example, his syntax is uniform throughout his 'History', which makes direct distortion of his terminology by his sources unlikely.[119]

Finally, of course, it goes without saying that rejection of these passages as references to city-life in no way amounts to disproof of the continuing existence of *civitates* in fifth-century Britain and the North-Western Empire. What it does suggest is that solid evidence for this must be sought elsewhere.

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[116] As Paschoud 1979b, 336.

[117] Similarly flowery and hackneyed is Zosimus 1.67.1: Probus assists 'the cities in Germany (*hai en Germaniai poleis*)' harassed by barbarians along the Rhine, i.e. he goes to the aid of the provinces of Germany. Cf. 5.27.2: Zosimus describes Constantine III's take-over of Gaul and Spain as his 'acting as emperor in the cities (*ta basileos en tais poleis pratton*)'.

[118] On the question of Zosimus' intended readership, see Paschoud 1979a, 101, suggesting pagan propaganda directed at relatively humble sections of the population.

[119] On Zosimus' method of re-casting his very different sources in his own uniform style, describing it as *metagraphe* ('re-writing'), and for his total uniformity of syntax, see Paschoud 2000, LXXX–LXXXIf. The list of *notabilia* of Zosimus' accidence given by Mendelssohn in his edition of the text (1887, XXVIII–XXXIII) also shows uniform linguistic usage throughout the work. An instructive example of Zosimus' re-wording of his sources in a straightforward uniform fashion is his description of Constantine III's failure to exploit a victory over barbarians (6.3.2 ['A']). His vocabulary here very closely resembles that which he uses to describe similar events under Trajan Decius, when Decius resolved to deal the barbarians a blow such as from which they would never be able to recover (1.23.1 ['B']). Thus A, *panolethriai diephtheiran* = B, *diaphtheirai panolethriai*; and A, *synagagousin* = B, *synagagontes*. His sources, Eunapius and Olympiodorus respectively, are likely to have employed very different expressions.

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