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Review Articles

An Insular Obsession

By MICHAEL FULFORD

An Imperial Possession. Britain in the Roman Empire, 54 BC–AD 409. By D. Mattingly. Penguin: Allen Lane, London, 2006. Pp. xvi + 622, illus. Price: £30.00. ISBN 978 0 713 99063 8.

Each year adds numerous new books, articles, and chapters to the archaeology and history of Roman Britain, the majority represented by the reporting of archaeological excavations and associated finds. Since the publication of Richmond's *Roman Britain* for the Pelican History of England by Penguin Books in 1955, the subject has changed almost beyond recognition and even since the first edition of Frere's landmark *Britannia* in 1967, some 40 years ago, there have been very substantial contributions to knowledge covering all fields of the subject. Aside from archaeological discoveries one should single out the various publications of the military documents from Vindolanda on the northern frontier, as, collectively, a most significant and fundamentally important addition to the written sources of Roman Britain. It has become a major challenge to keep up with the British literature, never mind the Continental context, where Romano-British studies so often falter, and where discoveries are also being made at a comparable and challenging rate.

Leaving out their succeeding, revised editions, the last group of major surveys of Roman Britain occurred a generation ago in 1981 with the publication of Salway's *Roman Britain* for The Oxford History of England and Todd's *Roman Britain 55 BC–AD 400* for The Fontana History of England. What characterised these syntheses was their conformity with an emphasis on political and military history, beginning with the Late Iron Age and Caesar's invasions, and finishing with the end of Roman administrative ties with Britain at the beginning of the fifth century and the subsequent loss of a recognisably 'Roman' identity. It is, perhaps, this historical narrative which represents the least changed aspect of Roman Britain. With everything else there has been remarkable development through the acquisition of new knowledge and new ways of thinking about the nature of life in Roman Britain. In many ways Richmond's approach in 1955 was very original, almost prescient in terms of the current state of knowledge, with more or less equal weighting given to 'Military History', 'Town and Urban Centres', 'The Countryside', 'Economics', and 'Religious Cults'. Whereas the last four themes accounted for about two-thirds of the contents, in *Britannia* the equivalent figure is about 25 per cent, and in The Oxford *Roman Britain* it is about 30 per cent. In The Fontana *Roman Britain* the political and chronological narrative dominates, but it integrates within it the other themes of town, countryside, etc.

Whereas surveys of the kind outlined above attempted to say something about most aspects of Roman Britain, a second kind of synthesis had also developed following on from Haverfield's pioneering study, *The Romanization of Britain*, first published in 1906. This characterisation of the way the Roman administration and occupation had changed life in Britain, as reflected through language, material culture, religion, etc., became a theme which was incorporated to a greater or lesser extent in subsequent syntheses, e.g. the chapter on 'The Romanisation of Britain' in Frere's *Britannia*. At the same time it developed as a subject in its own right, as in Rivet's *Town and Country in Roman Britain* (1958), which was a brilliant complement to Richmond's *Roman Britain* for Penguin. Between these surveys and *An Imperial Possession*, Millett's *The Romanization of Britain* was published in 1990. Not claiming to be a history of Roman Britain, this study was the first to privilege the archaeological record and to treat in book form the subject of 'romanization' since Haverfield. It is a social archaeology of Roman Britain focusing on the character and pattern of Late Iron Age societies and their 'élites', their relationships

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with Rome, and the development of their successor organisations, the *civitates*. The book does follow a historical trajectory, but the military and political history of conquest, frontier development, later Roman political developments, etc. are subjugated to social and economic themes. According to the index Hadrian's Wall is mentioned on five pages; the Antonine Wall not at all.

As long as people have the concept of 'Roman Britain' in their heads, there will always be, as for Anglo-Saxon England, a demand to explore the subject in single-book form. In many respects this is not fair given that we are talking of a time-span of some five hundred years, equivalent of treating the period from the Reformation to the end of the twentieth century in one book! Elsewhere, we have become used to dividing treatments of the Roman Empire into 'early' and 'late', so why not for Roman Britain, too, not least given the huge explosion of information of the last few decades? Should the approach be thematic like Haverfield or Richmond, or a mixture of the historical and thematic like Frere or Salway?

So, how does *An Imperial Possession* rise to the challenge? First, it is not a 'History of England', but follows the model of 'The Short Oxford History of the British Isles', *The Roman Era* (2002), in its geographical coverage bringing in 'Free Britannia', Ireland and Scotland 'Beyond the Frontiers', in a short chapter (14). This reminds us that about half the British Isles either were never, or, in the case of Lowland Scotland, only briefly, an imperial possession. More importantly, however, the scope of the book, while addressing political and military history, rather subordinates the chronological framework in favour of the thematic, particularly in placing a significant emphasis on what, up to now, has been termed 'romanization'. So, after the Introduction, the focus is on the three, broad types of community which Mattingly sees as constituting Roman Britain: 'The Military Community', 'The Civil Communities', and the 'Rural Communities'. It concludes with a short section on 'Comparative Perspectives and Concluding Thoughts' and a bibliographical essay of similar length.

M. sets out his rationale for this approach in his introductory chapter (particularly 11–18), where he is at pains to reject the 'romanization' of Haverfield and the development of that approach by subsequent writers as a useful model for understanding social change and diversity in Roman Britain. He finds the model is 'unilateral, unidirectional and progressive'; the question of cultural identity is reduced to 'a simple binary opposition: Roman and native' (14). In focusing on indigenous 'élites', rather than the newcomers, the '1990s model of Romanization is simply the flip side of the early twentieth-century one — both focus almost exclusively on the élite group in society' (15). For M. 'a key argument is that there was no stereotypical "Life in Roman Britain"', and, in seeking an explanatory model for the social variability he finds, he is 'drawn to the concept of "discrepant experience" in post-colonial research on modern imperialism. We may understand this to mean the co-existence of very different perceptions of history, culture, and relationships between colonizer and colonised.' (17). In the absence of relevant written sources, M. identifies 'discrepant identities' in the material culture and so gives birth to his three broad identity groups which make up the core of the book. M. seeks to demonstrate the existence of 'discrepant identities and of discrepant experiences' (18). The adjective 'discrepant' is derived from the Latin *discrepare*, to be discordant, so giving its primary meaning as 'exhibiting difference, dissimilarity, or lack of agreement; discordant, inconsistent' (*OED*). So why not use words like 'different' and 'difference', for that, indeed, is what the book successfully describes in respect of M.'s three community groups? Fortunately the word 'discrepant' more or less disappears for the rest of the book as the evidence is set out in successive chapters. It re-emerges in the final section in the title of ch. 16 'Different Economies, Discrepant Identities', which soon becomes 'Different Economies and Different Communities' on p. 503. Interestingly, M. speculates that the areas, like the Cotswolds, which were richly Romanised (old language!) represented 'landscapes of opportunity', while areas relatively poor in Roman material culture can be characterised as 'landscapes of resistance' (522–3). This idea resonates of other binary oppositions 'Roman' and 'native', 'civil' and 'military', 'lowland' and 'highland' which M. attacks in his introduction on p. 16. Nevertheless, the idea merits further exploration because there is still much to explain about the reasons for this marked diversity and distinct, regional identities. Is, for example, a lack of Roman material culture sufficient to justify a characterisation of a region as resistant to Rome in the absence of other, e.g. written sources?

Yet, there is no doubt that the book does bring out the fact of the extraordinary diversity in the expression of material culture across Britain during the Roman period, which is the archaeological expression of the range and variation of identity through time and space, but this is only bringing us up to date with a persistent theme in the study of Roman Britain. As long ago as the early 1970s Keith Branigan and

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Duckworth recognised the diversity of Roman Britain merited its own series 'The Peoples of Roman Britain' with their starting point being a named tribal group as the subject of each book.

If one doubts whether M. really has given us a new explanatory model to replace 'romanization' (with all its evolving interpretive baggage), there can be no question about the huge success he has achieved in bringing together a vast amount of new information and placing it against a wider background of the larger Roman world. Whether the thematic as opposed to the chronological approach works well is less clear. It is certainly difficult to get a sense of Britain across the board at any given moment: military, urban, rural, economy, etc. Nevertheless, and without hesitation, this is definitely the book of its generation which will take its place alongside the great syntheses of Roman Britain.

University of Reading

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