

Fractured Britannia- material culture and the end of Roman Britain

Speaker: Richard Henry, Curator of Archaeology Southampton City Council & part time PhD student, Reading University

Introduction:

Richard Henry was researching 'why things went wrong after 400 years of Roman rule in Britain', looking at administrative and military structures, taxation, towns and material culture. In particular, what could material culture tell us about the end of Roman Britain and when did Britain stop being Roman?

He highlighted various views about the end of Roman Britain; whether there was a catastrophic collapse; continuation of some Roman norms through to the 5th and 6th centuries; or a process of transformation in the 4th-6th centuries, with different regional developments and changes in material culture.

Military and Civilian structures:

The state in late Roman Britain focussed on the army, which had to be paid and supplied, a civilian bureaucracy to administer the towns and an effective system of collecting taxes. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, is a key source, providing a snapshot of the upper levels of the army and administration at the turn of the 5th century. There was no single army but three Commands: *Dux Britanniarum*

in the north/Hadrian's Wall area, *Comes Littoris Saxonici* under the Count of the Saxon Shore and *Comes Britanniarum*, a field army.

By the 390s, the Diocese of Britain was divided into four or five provinces but the boundaries are unclear with some sources including Valentia. The key administrative roles were the *Count of Sacred Largesses*, two *Rationales* who dealt with tax and the imperial estates, a Treasury led by a *praepostus* and a state run *fabrica* producing woollen goods. There were various local roles and a *Praetorian Prefect of the Gauls* was responsible for supervising Britain.

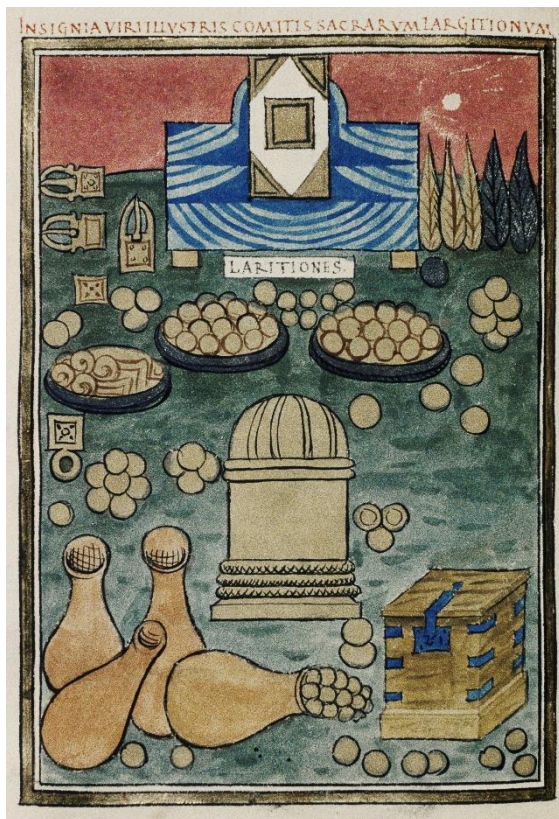


Image: from *Notitia Dignitatum* in the Bodleian Library

Urban centres:

Various sized towns were classified into provincial capitals, county towns, defended small towns and small nucleated settlements. The vast majority of the diocese, however, was rural.

Tax and coinage:

There were four denominations of coins with gold, the highest value, rarely found outside hoards. State servants were paid in coin. Tax was paid in kind or by coin. Copper alloy coins were found regularly across Britain and appear to have been central to tax collection. By 395AD, bronze coins disappeared from all areas north of the Alps.

Material culture:



High status soldiers and officials were recognisable from what they wore. Military staff wore distinctive cloaks with roundels. High status military officers wore belts (including shoulder belts), and they and high status civilians, at this time, wore crossbow brooches. RH queried whether there were regional differences in what people wore, which might show how long the Romans retained power there and whether there could be a case for a transitional period.

Illustration of the slave presenting their master their cloak from the Silistra tomb, by Nick Griffiths

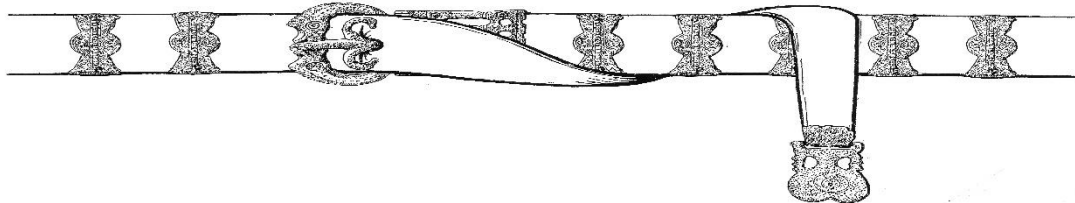
Analysis:

RH has analysed post-350AD material culture finds using spatial distribution and changes over time, broken down by find types and type of urban centres.

Crossbow Brooches: were produced on the continent. There were five main categories with types 1, 2 and 3-4 being more solid and worn on heavier material, while types 5 and 6 were made of light sheet metal and were worn on lighter fabrics.

Analysis of 400 brooches showed Type 1 brooches were found at military sites, especially Hadrian's Wall. Other kinds of site had more of the later types of brooches. Types 3-4 were widespread while Type 6 were only found in the South and parts of East Anglia.

Belts sets: were worn by many different officials and there were many variations (with different styles of buckle, stiffeners and strap ends) which make classification difficult. There were four main belt types, with Types 1 and 2 being earlier and made on both the continent and in Britain, while 3 and 4 were later and continental.



Reconstruction of a Type II Belt set - Illustration by Nick Griffiths

Type 1a belts/buckles were found in urban and nucleated sites around 370/390 while Type 1b were mainly found in the South West, with only a few at military sites. Types 3 and 4 appear rarer with none found in the South West or Wales and few at Hadrian's Wall, leading RH to consider that this was not a major frontier area by the 390s.

Spurs: were divided into two types from the 390s, of which 84 were reviewed. Type C spurs were found in urban centres in the South while Type D were found mainly in more northern areas of the East Coast. Several were found on sites around Ermine Street where there were many late Roman coins. RH thought this might provide evidence of the locations of the field army at the end of the 4th century.

Coins: 500,000 Roman coins have been found at sites in Britain (excluding hoards). RH mapped sites with the highest and lowest 25% of coin loss towards the end of the 4th century. The South and South West appeared to have strong usage at the end of the Roman period as did an area across to the East coast and up to York, until usage stopped everywhere.

Coin clipping increased in this period which some have interpreted as evidence of continuing coin usage. Most coins were being clipped from 388 onwards and as RH found that clipped coins were found in the same proportions everywhere, he concluded that this was done centrally rather than locally.

RH is continuing to compare the distribution of the items to see if patterns emerge. He found evidence of contraction southwards from Hadrian's Wall but the analysis of spurs cut across this to some degree. There was also some

evidence of regional variation, which required further work. RH argued that, as coinage was not being used by 450 and there was an absence of other metal items among grave goods by then, Britain was no longer Roman by 450.

Discussion:

Reasons for the change in the Romans' presence in Britain were raised. These included the Roman army being called back to Rome, (the field army had left by 407 and the Welsh garrison had been recalled before then). It was noted that the Barbarians crossed the Rhine in 406/7 and the Roman administration left Trier (a major centre) in 411, which led to a retraction. The focus was on protecting Italy.

A query was raised as to whether a map of late coin usage could be linked to land usage and geology. RH thought this might be possible. The New Forest and the Weald had no/very few coin finds, suggesting that wealth there was not based on coinage, although most excavations have also been at urban sites.

With thank to Sarah Hanna for use of her notes

Sue Davies 21/03/23