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Title of extract: **The Case for the Dark Ages**

Name of Author: **Faulkner, N.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Debating Late Antiquity in Britain AD 300 – 700 Collins, R. and Gerrard, J.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Archaeopress**

Pages scanned: **5 - 12**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Conceptualising the Celts CYCS7020**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning: **E. L. Harris**

Date authorised: 11.09.12

Moodle/Powerpoint

2: The Case for the Dark Ages

Neil Faulkner

What constitutes a 'period' in archaeology? We all know that dividing the past into discrete periods is arbitrary but necessary. The past is an unbroken sequence of processes, but to study it we must cut it into manageable lengths of time. Knowing where to cut is always a problem, however. Usually we choose a time of transition, either a major change in material culture (an archaeological distinction) or in political authority (an historical one). Ideally, the two coincide, as, in the case of Britain in the first century AD, when the Roman Conquest is associated with clear and substantial (though not necessarily immediate) changes in archaeological evidence. Decisions about when a period starts and ends therefore reflect our interpretations of important transitions; they are partly a matter of academic convenience, but also statements about the significance we attach to perceived change in the past. Whatever their utilitarian purpose, in other words, archaeological periods are inescapably theory-laden.

To advocate a new period – a new way of dividing up past time – is to open up a debate. Have we misunderstood one of the great epochs of the past? Have we placed emphasis on superficial changes and ignored events of deeper significance? Do we achieve better understanding if we place the dividing lines in different places? If the answers are 'yes', and we adopt a new period, we have a paradigm shift: a change in the theoretical framework for understanding a specific chunk of past time. This is where I begin my discussion of the concept 'Late Antiquity'. Many scholars accept the usefulness of a time period extending from c.AD 250/300 to 600/800 (various start and end dates have been suggested). It brings together specialists who have traditionally approached one of history's great transitions – the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire – from different starting-points. But there is more to the concept 'Late Antiquity' than a breaking down of sub-disciplinary barriers to facilitate scholarly debate; it implies an interpretation of the past which, to use the ugly jargon of currently fashionable theory, 'deconstructs' the process of decline and fall – an interpretation, that is, that denies the reality of the transition.

'Rather than emphasising the divisions and the breaks,' explains leading ancient historian Averil Cameron (1993a: 192), 'both the eastern and western empires can be seen as belonging to the longer history of Europe and the Mediterranean. This kind of approach has the advantage of taking our minds away for a while from the over-debated question of the end of classical antiquity and enabling us instead to look at issues like settlement, climate, exchange and political organisation over a much longer period.' Continuity and evolution are the dominant themes of Cameron's two syntheses on 'Late Antiquity', *The Later Roman Empire, AD 284-430* (1993a), and *The*

Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395-600 (1993b). The view of the past she presents is an updated version of the old Whig interpretation of history, which sees the past as a seamless process of gradual change (if not actually of something called 'progress'), largely or wholly devoid of decisive clashes and revolutionary breaks.

Several archaeologists have applied this paradigm to British evidence, notably Ken Dark in two related studies, *Civitas to Kingdom: British political continuity, 300-800* (1994), and *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (2000). Dark (2000: 230) believes that Britain was a veritable model of Late Antique *Romanitas*:

Rather than being the area of the former Roman West in which Late Roman culture was most entirely swept away in the fifth century, and in which exceptional curiously archaic local cultures flourished, quite the opposite would seem to be true. It was within the mainstream, but was the only part of the West in which the descendants of Roman citizens lived under their own rule, with their own Romano-Christian culture and in recognisably Late Roman political units, into the sixth century.

Dark's interpretation has been influential, spawning a second generation of scholarship in the same vein. Anthea Harris (2003), for instance, has recently argued that fifth and sixth-century Britain was subsumed within a Byzantine global supremacy, that it was part of a 'Late Antique' Byzantine commonwealth, and that contemporaries thought in terms of a Byzantine *oikoumene*, a Romano-Christian zone of 'civilised' peoples centred on Constantinople. This, she feels, was decisive in determining cultural identities in the West, where 'a continued sense of *Romanitas* amongst sub-Roman populations' meant that people still regarded themselves as inhabitants of the Roman Empire.

Claims like these must, I believe, be rejected. The 'Late Antiquity' paradigm (LAP) seems to me to be theoretically weak, methodologically suspect, and inadequately supported by either archaeological or historical evidence; so much so, in fact, that I suspect it of being an ideologically-driven interpretation whose well-springs lie far outside Early Dark Age studies. My aim in this paper is therefore as follows: a) to analyse the LAP's theoretical and methodological weaknesses; b) to summarise the evidence for fifth and sixth-century Britain; and c) to present an alternative hypothesis which both accommodates the evidence and provides a plausible explanatory framework for the period. (For clarity, throughout the paper, I use inverted commas or the abbreviation LAP when referring to the 'Late Antiquity' paradigm.)

What is wrong with the 'Late Antiquity' paradigm?

My critique of the LAP can be divided into four main areas of disagreement.

1. A theoretical vacuum

In the LAP view, the Western Roman Empire evolved rather than collapsed, and changes in political authority in the fifth century (from the rule of Roman administrators to Germanic kings) should be seen as secondary phenomena liable to obscure important underlying continuities. This argument is an impressionistic one in which terms are not defined and evidence is treated selectively. The LAP offers no definition of the Roman Empire as a social formation. Richard Reece and I have argued elsewhere that without such a definition, anything we choose – like Merovingian Gaul – can be called 'Roman' (Faulkner and Reece 2002). Indeed, in the extract quoted above, when Averil Cameron explains that the LAP allows us 'to look at issues like settlement, climate, exchange and political organisation over a much longer period', she reveals the theoretical vacuum at the heart of the enterprise. Instead of analysing a *specific* social formation, she offers us data collection for its own sake – an empiricism unconstrained by chronological limits or any research agenda. Because the LAP provides no analysis of the Roman Empire's social dynamic, it has no proper definition, chronological or otherwise, of its own subject of study.

2. Selective use of evidence

Equally important to any research programme is a definition of the range of evidence considered relevant to the matter in hand. In this case, if as archaeologists we are claiming things to be 'Roman', we need to define the Roman Empire's archaeological imprint. This, too, is a matter dealt with in detail elsewhere (Faulkner and Reece 2002), so here I shall merely summarise. The key point is the LAP's failure to provide any answer to the question, What counts as Roman? Instead, the paradigm seizes upon random bits and pieces – such as modest quantities of late-fifth-century Mediterranean pottery on a handful of western British sites – tears them from their wider archaeological context, declares them to be 'Roman', and proclaims this as evidence for a 'Late Antique' *oikoumene*. And, in the absence of any prior definition of what constitutes a Roman archaeological imprint, who are we to argue? Let us pursue points 1 and 2 further with an illustrative case-study.

A case-study in theory and method: Roman towns

As soon as we attempt to define our terms, and, on the basis of them, construct empirical tests for hypotheses using quantified evidence, 'Late Antiquity' turns out to be a world of emperors without clothes. Take the example of Roman towns.

Towns were essential features of Roman imperial civilisation for two reasons. First, they were local centres of political authority where tax collection and law enforcement were organised. They were the bolts which fixed the imperial superstructure of administrators and soldiers to its foundation blocks in the land and labour of rural producers dispersed across a hundred thousand villages. Without the towns to hold the two together, the flow of tribute would have dried up and the imperial system shrivelled. Secondly, the towns – with their orderly grids, standardised public-buildings, and grand houses decorated with mosaics, frescoes and classical statuary – were centres of 'Romanisation', uniting the many local elites who governed the empire into a single ruling class with shared cultural identity and uniform social aspirations. Politically and culturally, then, towns were vital to the integrity of empire. They cannot be compared in importance with the more superficial phenomena – such as the use of Latin or a taste for Mediterranean wine – sometimes cited by 'Late Antiquity' theorists as evidence of continuity. Celtic and Anglo-Saxon also became written languages. Some prestige goods were later imported from Scandinavia. Such developments did not turn the world upside down. The decline of the towns, by contrast, represents the passing of an entire political order that depended on them. Therefore, towns must be part of any definition both of what the Roman Empire was and of how we recognise it in archaeological sequences, and, in view of that, we must enquire, How do these essential features of the Roman archaeological imprint fare in the fifth and sixth centuries?

I will answer with reference to two studies, one a general overview, the other my own analysis of British evidence. Here is ancient historian Wolfgang Liebeschuetz (2003: 5) in his newly published study of towns from c.AD 400 to 650:

The change can be summed up as a process of simplification. In many regions the appearance of cities had changed beyond recognition. The built-up areas had shrunk, secular monumental buildings were abandoned or neglected. Churches had replaced temples. Populations in the built-up core were much reduced. In the West probably only a very small number of cities retained a fully urban population profile, that is a propertied class together with a sizeable population of shopkeeper-traders, and a 'proletariat' of unskilled labourers, seasonal workers, and beggars.

The title of the book – a quite deliberate choice, I assume – says it all: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City*. My work on the British towns involved a trawl through excavation data to produce detailed statistical analyses charting the urban histories of 17 major sites. The results have been published and discussed elsewhere (e.g. Faulkner 1996 and 2000a), and I shall do no more here than to restate this simple conclusion: there were no towns in Britain after c.AD 375, because on no site can a

level of activity be demonstrated – whether measured by buildings under construction or buildings still occupied – sufficient to justify the description ‘urban’. It is completely irrelevant to this conclusion that some sites show continuity of activity beyond c.AD 375. To repeat (because in many quarters the message has still not sunk in): there are no sites where a level of activity has been recorded for the late fourth century *sufficient to justify the use of the term ‘town’ to describe them*.

Britain is an extreme case, but Liebeschuetz’s study (and many others; e.g. Rich 1992) has confirmed that sharp urban decline was the Late Roman norm. Nowhere, as far as I am aware, have ‘Late Antiquity’ theorists engaged seriously with this evidence. Some are simply in denial: random examples of late activity on former urban sites are cited as if they constituted effective counter-evidence to set against *the general trend established by quantitative analysis* (e.g. White 2002). Others appear oblivious to the whole issue, as if the decline of the towns were neither here nor there, ‘Late Antique’ civilisation apparently manifesting itself in other, more subtle ways than, say, the construction of urban bath-houses. But if towns, of all things, do not define the Roman Empire – if they are not an essential feature of the Roman archaeological imprint – then what is? There is no clear answer to this question so the LAP constitutes a hypothesis that cannot be tested. With neither a definition of the ‘Late Antique’ social formation, nor a set of archaeological attributes against which we can measure the ‘Late-Antique-ness’ of any specific instance, we are left with nothing but simple assertion.

3. Failures in the analysis and interpretation of evidence

Left floating in this theoretical vacuum, unconstrained by any rules of method, it can be no surprise that evidence is abused. The correct archaeological procedure is to start with basics like settlements, cemeteries and distribution patterns, and to use these to build up a picture of economic life and social structure. These are things archaeology is good at, and they provide the essential framework for more difficult problems like reconstructing political organisation, cultural identities and belief systems. Only then, when archaeology has had the chance to tell its own story, is it legitimate to compare material evidence with that of written sources. Historical context comes towards the end of the process. The LAP fails in every respect. Material is not analysed in context; rather, some evidence is selected and separated. Even this is not analysed in its own terms – as an assemblage – but in relation to an *a priori* model of inherited or imported *Romanitas*. What matters is the degree to which the material corresponds to presumed ‘Roman’ types and reveals links with the ‘Roman’ world – which is why it was selected in the first place. Then, a simplistic equation is made between material culture, social identity and political organisation. Because there are late-fifth-century Mediterranean pots at Tintagel, the local chieftain was a Romanised client of the Byzantine Empire. Form and

content are simply conflated. A style of pottery, a taste for wine, even a conscious aping of ‘Roman’ manners are equated with *actual* social and political structures. There is no critical discussion of how material culture is manipulated to suit changed conditions, how old symbols get recycled, and how ‘traditions’ are constantly invented and re-invented (*vide* Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984). But the LAP view of the past is, anyway, essentially static. The Roman Empire is not viewed as an historical process with a beginning, middle and end; there is no sense of it as something contradictory, dynamic and changeable. Nor, therefore, is *Romanitas* (‘Roman-ness’) seen, as it should be, as a process – as a form of symbolic communication, a negotiation between social actors, and a repertoire of material culture that can be put to varied uses. Roman imperial rule and Roman provincial culture become rigid categories devoid of social content.

4. Bombs and books

I have argued that the LAP is theoretically vacuous, methodologically sloppy, and unsupported by evidence. My final criticism is directed at its ideological implications. As an archaeological perspective, the LAP is an extreme form of diffusionism, the idea that culture spreads outwards from a single advanced centre, bringing enlightenment and improvement to more backward regions, such that a standard of ‘civilisation’ is established against which each society or polity can be measured (Trigger 1989: 150-155 and *passim*). The implicit diffusionism of the LAP has two aspects. First, because of the inherent superiority of classical civilisation (or so the implication seems to be), the political and military collapse of the Western Roman Empire was not followed by an equivalent cultural collapse. The Church, in particular, played a key role as continuator of *Romanitas* in the former imperial territories; not least, perhaps, in western Britain. Secondly, Byzantium inherited and sustained the classical tradition in the eastern Mediterranean, and from here elevating cultural influences continued to be transmitted to western Europe during the fifth and sixth centuries. Thus, the Dark Ages were not dark at all, for they were illuminated by the brilliance of Byzantium.

Underlying this view is a thoroughly elitist conception of culture. Martin Henig, at least, is refreshingly honest about this. Believing that ‘Roman civilisation was in general a ‘good thing’ and that it neither declined nor fell, only changed’, he is equally clear that it was something for ‘the educated, more or less well-to-do and above all Romanised section of society’ (2002: 19, 153). This boils ‘Late Antique’ diffusionism down to its essence: a preoccupation with the Christianised ‘high culture’ of the Graeco-Roman elite. Roman imperialism, as the bearer of this tradition, becomes an act of benevolence and enlightenment. Instead of a ruthless system of violence to enrich the few, we have a bizarre cross between the United Nations and the National Trust. We have an empire to admire – and emulate.

Diffusionist theories were popular in the early twentieth century – that is, in the heyday of European imperialism. They are popular again now, in the age of Bush and Blair, in a world where economic progress and political justice are seen as gifts of the US army and Texaco, where Christian fundamentalism fuels the self-righteousness of empire-builders, and where the BBC inverts the meaning of language to call war ‘peace-keeping’, conquest ‘liberation’, and resistance ‘terrorism’. The new imperialism has produced a new imperialist history to match. Niall Ferguson leads a group of prominent right-wing historians who are rewriting imperial pasts. In *Empire*, his successful TV series and book, he makes an explicit link between imperialism old and new, and, for him, an essentially beneficent British Empire provides a model for today’s American Empire (2003). Whether they know it or not, advocates of the ‘Late Antiquity’ paradigm are peddling an equally sinister interpretation of the past.

In summary

I would encapsulate the case against the LAP by arguing that it fails these two key tests:

1. When the evidence is viewed *as a whole*, is there a distinctive ‘Late Antique’ archaeological imprint? If not, there is no coherent archaeological culture, and therefore no meaningful archaeological period.
2. Is there a convincing model of the dynamics of the hypothetical ‘Late Antique’ social formation? Can we explain the social action and processes of change indicated by the evidence in terms of a single model embracing the whole of the former Roman Empire? If not, the concept of ‘Late Antiquity’ is meaningless.

A new archaeological imprint

In the second part of this paper, I want to offer my own response to these two tests. My purpose here is two-fold: a) to demonstrate by counter-example the theoretical and methodological hollowness of the LAP; and b) to reject its claims about the character of fifth and sixth-century Britain by presenting an alternative perspective grounded in a more comprehensive analysis of evidence.

Let us begin by comparing two different archaeological imprints, that of Roman Britain, and that of what I shall persist in calling ‘Early Dark Age Britain’ (in the absence of any other term for the fifth and sixth centuries that is not equally loaded with ideological baggage). I present first a list of what I consider to be diagnostically ‘Roman’ material evidence. (It has been published elsewhere (Faulkner and Reece 2002), but I reproduce it here for convenience.) I stress that the list is no more than a suggestion. The crucial point is that without some such archaeological definition of ‘Roman’, discussion of

‘Roman’ continuity in the archaeological record has no basis.

1. A cultural assemblage that is broadly uniform from Britain to Syria between the first and fourth centuries AD – for example, Roman army buildings and equipment, the design of forum-basilica complexes and other monumental urban buildings, and similar representations of a well-defined pantheon of deities.
2. Evidence for a long-distance communications network defined by ports, canals, roads, bridges, *mansiones*, and *mutationes*.
3. Numerous high-status settlements present – administrative towns, small towns, forts, and villas.
4. Evidence for centralised authority, planning and regulation in the layout and ordering of settlements – for example, regular street-grids not encroached upon by private buildings, water-supply by aqueduct, and drainage and rubbish-disposal systems.
5. Many public buildings with much monumental architecture and artistic embellishment – such as forum-basilica complexes, baths, amphitheatres, theatres, temples, *mansiones*, and arches.
6. Much use of mortared masonry – notably, in public buildings, town-houses, barracks, villas, and walls around forts and towns.
7. Evidence for mass production and long-distance distribution of a wide range of artefacts – such as Roman imperial coinage, fast-wheel-thrown and high-fired pottery, and oil and wine transported in amphorae.
8. Evidence for a range of luxury crafts reflecting Graeco-Roman Mediterranean taste – fresco painting, floor mosaics, and naturalistic statuary in bronze and stone.
9. A repertoire of art and architecture rooted in Graeco-Roman Mediterranean culture – for instance, naturalistic representation of form, the use of straight lines and right angles in settlement layout and building design, and the use of standard decorative motifs like Corinthian capitals on sculpture, floral swags on fresco, and guilloche borders on mosaic.

Now compare this imprint with what follows in the Early Dark Ages. Here is a new list summarising the archaeological evidence for western Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries – amounting, in my view, to a diagnostically ‘Early Dark Age’ imprint for this region.

1. Fortified secular elite sites – e.g. hilltop enclosures, including reused hillforts, coastal promontory forts, and reused Roman walled settlements.

2. Ecclesiastical sites – cemeteries, churches, monasteries – mostly new foundations, but some continuing or reusing Roman sites.

3. Small coastal trading sites – promontory forts with harbours or beaches, and ‘sand-dune’ sites.

4. Small farms, often enclosed, sometimes reusing high-status Roman sites, sometimes continuing low-status Roman sites, sometimes new foundations.

5. Vernacular architecture includes small round-houses (in stone), small rectangular halls (in stone or timber), and some larger rectangular halls with aisles and partitions (in timber).

6. Small and impoverished local assemblages include domestic pottery, brooches, knives, bracelets, combs, and pins. Some residual Roman material still in use – e.g. fineware pots repaired with lead rivets. High-status artefacts include penannular brooches with decorated terminals and hanging-bowls with decorated escutcheons.

7. Imports of luxury goods from the Byzantine East and Frankish Gaul at some sites.

8. High-status inscribed memorial stones.

The contrast between the two imprints is one of the sharpest in the British archaeological sequence. Moreover, there is no basis for regarding this as anything other than reliable evidence for an equally sharp contrast between two past worlds of social experience. It is to this that we must now turn.

A new world order

How is the Roman Empire to be defined as a social formation? What was its structure and dynamic? What sort of world system is represented by a ‘Roman’ archaeological imprint? My definition (also published elsewhere and repeated here for convenience; 2002) comprises three main elements:

1. Rome was an ancient military imperialism, a system of robbery with violence, in which inflows of wealth through successful war enriched and empowered the Roman state and those who controlled it. This struggle for plunder was driven forwards by military competition – that is, by the need to accumulate military resources to wage war a) against rival states on Rome’s borders, b) within the highly fractious Roman elite, and c) against attempted revolts from below among the subject classes of the empire.

2. The Roman Empire constituted a ‘military supply’ economy, in which state tax collection and arms expenditure, oiled by state supply of coin (the ‘tax-pay cycle’), pump-primed the entire economy. This created a

powerful two-tier economy. A primary economy of local subsistence production continued, but it was overlain by a secondary economy of production, exchange and distribution through regional, provincial and imperial marketing networks.

3. Rome was at root a traditional agricultural society, and its two heaviest foundation-blocks were land and labour. Maintaining the infrastructures of empire and civilization – soldiers, forts, towns, villas, ‘the world of taste’ – depended upon effective elite control over the countryside, exploitation of peasant labour, and accumulation of agricultural surpluses.

This system was highly unstable. For half a millennium it was aggressive, predatory and expansionist. In this period it seized control of virtually all the developed agricultural land in the Mediterranean and Europe. But it then came up against two insuperable barriers. In central Europe and in the far north and west of the continent, most land was unploughed and remained a relative wilderness. The population was sparse and impoverished, and its exploitation did not yield the surpluses necessary to support an infrastructure of forts, towns and villas. Empire and ‘civilisation’ was restricted to the ploughlands. Secondly, in the East, the Romans faced a rival imperialism powerful enough to block eastward expansion. The wealth of Mesopotamia’s ancient cities combined with the first-class military recruiting grounds of the Iranian steppes gave successive Persian empires the strength to throw back repeated Roman assaults down the centuries. After the great conquests of the first century BC, therefore, the Roman Empire, hemmed in by *barbaricum*, gained little further territory. By the time of the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43, such military adventurism was exceptional.

The inflows of plunder which had fed imperial expansion had now largely dried up. The soldiers, the frontier defences, the imperial aristocracy, the monumental building, the largesse of ‘bread and circuses’, the whole system, in short, by which Rome defended its territory and maintained internal peace, came to depend on resources raised from *within* the imperial territories. Taxes went up. Labour services increased. Forced requisitioning was widespread. As the proportion of surplus siphoned away by the state increased, provincial life decayed. Resistance – usually passive, occasionally active – prompted governments to centralise administration and deploy military force. The Late Roman state therefore developed as a bureaucratic, paramilitary, totalitarian authority. And then, under the weight of this oppressive infrastructure, the system gradually collapsed. Over-taxation ruined the towns, the villa-owning gentry, and the agricultural basis of the entire social formation. Marginal land went out of use. Some villages were abandoned. Sections of the peasantry gave up and became bandits, revolutionaries, or fifth-columnists for the ‘barbarians’. As the tax base thus shrank, the imperial system was caught in a classic

'scissors crisis': increases in state surplus extraction to make up shortfalls and maintain military expenditures simply increased the resistance and decay that were destroying the empire's resource base.

This is the thesis I have advanced at much greater length in *The Decline and Fall of Roman Britain* (2000b). It has not, of course, found universal favour – or, indeed, much favour at all. It does, however, enable us to explain the salient changes in the evidence for Roman Britain between the late first and late fourth centuries. To summarise, in the Early Roman period (c.AD 50-225/50), a Romanised settlement pattern had developed rapidly. It comprised a network of forts and roads in the upland areas of north and west, and about 20 major towns, 100 small towns and 1000 villas in the lowland areas of south and east, in all cases associated with large assemblages of Romanised artefacts. By contrast, in the Late Roman period (c.AD 225/50-375/425), the towns declined from an early third century peak, the villas from an early fourth century peak, and overall the Romanised settlement pattern and associated material culture had collapsed to almost nothing by the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

This much has been argued before, notably, in the first instance, by Richard Reece (1980 and 1988). But I think this account of decline-and-fall can take us further – into the fifth and sixth centuries, when the evidence points, not to the immediate replacement of one form of 'complex society' by another, but to a profound hiatus, in which for a time 'complexity' ceased altogether, to be replaced by 'simplicity', and was only gradually restored in the generations that followed. The term 'complex society' is an academic obfuscation: all 'complex societies' are in fact class societies driven by competition between and within classes for control over surpluses. And what the evidence for the immediate post-Roman period indicates – a period of between 50 and 100 years after c.AD 375 – is an almost complete collapse not only of Romano-British class society, but of any sort of class society at all. There is a clear material culture gap separating the final collapse of Romanised settlements and assemblages in c.AD 375/425, and the emergence of distinctive Early Dark Age ones from c.AD 450/75 onwards. This gap has been much discussed (e.g. Brooks 1986 and 1988), but usually as if it were a lacuna in the evidence recovered due to a problem of archaeological 'invisibility'. I want to argue here that the evidence could be taken at face value. Why should it not reflect the collapse of the Romano-British ruling class and a shift of power and wealth in favour, not of an alternative ruling class, but of the British peasantry?

Is this possibility really so difficult to accept? Not only is it what the archaeological evidence implies; it also finds good support when various fragments of historical evidence are pieced together. This is not the place to review these in detail. I shall merely list the fragments to show that my archaeologically generated hypothesis does not have to stand alone: it can be supported by a number

of pieces of written evidence which may imply (I put it no more strongly than that) revolutionary change, popular revolt and radical politics in the period c.AD 375-475. Missionaries and monks built a popular Christian movement in the former western provinces of the Roman Empire in this period, and I suspect that the radicalism of their message has often been underestimated. The western monk Pelagius argued that people had free will, that they could choose to act righteously, and that this was the only route to salvation. In contrast to those like St Augustine, who believed that 'sin' was inevitable and that God's 'grace' could be earned by 'faith' and 'obedience' alone, Pelagius believed that people were responsible for their own actions and that it was deeds not words that counted (Chadwick 1990: 225-235); this was a much harder road for the rich to follow, since it required them not merely to profess to be Christian, but to act in a positively Christian manner. The contrast between orthodox grandees and the ascetics of popular Christianity is evident in the life and work of St Patrick. He describes himself as uneducated (*Letter*, 1), expresses scorn for 'priestly intellectuals' (*Confession*, 13), and tells us with bitterness that some elements in the hierarchy had attempted to prevent his mission (*Confession*, 26ff). The Church we glimpse in Patrick's writing was, then, deeply divided by class. It is in this context, perhaps, that we should read the references in Orosius to Constantine III, who, we are told, rose from the ranks, had a son who was a monk, and chose to promote militant monks to Gallic bishoprics (Dark 1994: 57). And what role, we are bound to wonder, did the most radical of the Christian preachers play in the revolts of *bagaudae*, the bandits and peasant rebels of the Late Roman countryside that are attested for Gaul, Spain and perhaps Britain by fleeting references in the classical sources (Thompson 1952 and 1977)?

It seems possible that the later 'conservatism' of the Celtic Church was rooted in a tradition of popular asceticism and radicalism that had endured in the British Isles because of the near-complete collapse of elite culture in the years after c.AD 375. The supreme representative of this tradition is the early-sixth-century monk and pamphleteer Gildas. Compared with the ghastly, power-worshipping panegyrics of the fourth century, *The Ruin of Britain* is a delight to read, for Gildas was a dyed-in-the-wool 'red' who hated the rulers of his age. Not only does he condemn the 'tyrants' for corruption, injustice and oppressing the poor, but he has withering contempt for the clerical toadies who attached themselves to royal courts, the spin-doctors of the Early Dark Ages, who, he says, 'do not look to the good of the people but to the filling of their own bellies'. It is perhaps worth adding that Gildas stands very much in the tradition of Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic literature – a tradition which runs from the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament to the Fifth Monarchists of the English Revolution, where religion, instead of being a stale litany of dogmas, becomes a living language for voicing the anger of the oppressed. Why, we must ask, was Gildas so

radical and so angry? Perhaps because he represented a popular tradition which, as a new elite emerged in the early sixth century, was being destroyed by new forms of class exploitation. This is a good point to return to the archaeological evidence to see whether we can pick up a story there of a new class society in the making.

We have noted already how profoundly different is the archaeological imprint of the period after c.AD 450 or 475 from that of Roman Britain. Whatever measure we take – settlement hierarchies, site characterisation, artefact assemblages, distribution patterns – provided we assess matters statistically, not selectively, we are witness to a transformation. The process of change, moreover, was continuous. Between the late fifth and the early seventh century, we see two major developments. First, in broad terms, a large number of small elite sites in western Britain was replaced by a smaller number of larger sites; in other words, a fairly flat settlement hierarchy evolved into a more extended, differentiated one. Secondly, we see an increase in the density and a spreading westwards of distinctively ‘Anglo-Saxon’ material, which at the outset had been confined to a limited number of sites in eastern Britain. I hardly need add that our historical sources imply that the entire period was characterised by conflict and change, including two major phases of warfare between ‘Britons’ and ‘Anglo-Saxons’, the first in c.AD 450-500, the second in c.AD 550-600. What explanatory framework might be offered to account for this epoch of apparent storm and strife?

I am not an Early Dark Age specialist, but a Romanist who enjoys flying kites. The evidence summarised here has been culled from secondary sources; it is the evidence used, amongst others, by ‘Late Antiquity’ theorists. My argument is that this evidence does not support the claims frequently made for it, and that instead, if archaeology is allowed to tell its own story, and if that story is then compared with the fragmentary historical references available to us, much more convincing models for Britain between the late fourth and the early seventh century AD can be constructed. I conclude, therefore, by offering one such model.

The Anarchy, c.AD 375/425-450/75

Break up of the Roman army due to the cessation of army pay and partial troop withdrawals, and consequent collapse of the Roman imperial state in Britain.

Popular (‘bagaudic’) resistance to tax-collectors and landlords, supported by Christian radicals, challenges ruling class control over land, labour and the social surplus.

Land becomes controlled by primary producers. Elite surplus appropriation is ended. The Romano-British ruling class disintegrates. Residual local state activity ceases. Britain becomes a region of largely self-sufficient,

independent peasant farms, with only localised networks, and balanced exchanges of goods and services.

The Age of Chiefdoms, c.AD 450/75-550/75

Military insecurity and threats to property gives rise to war-chiefs and war-bands offering protection in return for tribute.

Military competition between war-bands for control of territory, tribute and manpower compels war-chiefs to increase exploitation and accumulate larger surpluses.

Political instability gives way to growing consolidation of war-bands and their territories, and increasingly effective surplus accumulation by the emergent ruling class.

Increasingly sophisticated legitimisation strategies include the ‘invention of tradition’, fake genealogies, the use of Roman titles, and patronage of the Church.

The Emergence of Kingdoms, c.AD 550/75 onwards

Military competition between war-chiefs gives rise to unstable and contested centralisation of power under kings.

The consolidation of royal power leads to larger territories, more stable authority, the establishment of state infrastructures, elaborate ideologies of political legitimisation, a more secure and powerful ruling class, and more efficient, bureaucratically-controlled surplus appropriation.

Military competition continues mainly as conflict between tributary royal states.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Richard Reece for reading this paper in draft and offering critical comments.

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