

## Roman Britain – Celtic Studies (HPCS5020/HPCS6020) 2022

Assessments yr 2

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Essay, 2500 words: 'How Roman was Roman Britain?' (using a case study)

*(This could be a site, a person, a tribe/group of people, an artefact/group of artefacts, religious expression, etc. Images are always appreciated. While it is a single case study, try to include a range of references. Due Sunday 11th December. Worth 50% of the mark)* NB date later adjusted: 'deadline for the Essay assignment to **Thursday January 5<sup>th</sup> 2023 at 23:59**'.

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### Aquae Sulis

*' . . . On this bright city with its wide domains  
Stone buildings stood, and the hot stream cast forth  
Wide sprays of water, which a wall enclosed  
In its bright compass, where convenient  
Stood hot baths ready for them at the centre.  
Hot streams poured forth over the clear grey stone,  
To the round pool and down into the baths.*

[1]

The excerpt above taken from the Anglo-Saxon poem, 'The Ruin,' considered to be a depiction of Bath in the 10th century, illustrates the ongoing fascination with the natural thermal springs and the way that the Roman administration had imaginatively exploited the location in line with similar bathing architectural development on the Continent.

'Ofer harne stan hate streamas' . . . the early English central image of the harnessing of the heated water directly to the stone encompassed bathing area without the need to heat it is a unique feature of the site. One of the advantages which no doubt came to mind when considering a major bathing complex in that part of the new province: transformation of what was once a natural phenomenon emanating from the earth into something that could become a major attraction within the Empire, possibly confirmation to native societies of the superiority of the engineering and infrastructural opportunities opening up before them.

### **Why did the site become transformed? Tribal urbanizations and conformity of the community to civic ideals**

The early English marvel of the ingenuity of constructing a bathing complex . . . 'the hot streams and the masonry' perhaps give us only part of a reason for addressing the question. There can be little doubt that the site had been well known to earlier British communities. Before the Roman colonization had taken hold in the west of England, the tribal delineation had resulted in a well-defined group of small communities collectively referred to by Claudius Ptolemy in the 'Geographia' as 'Dobuni' and 'Atrebates'. [2] Reference to various Ordnance Survey maps including historic elevated settlements of the Iron Age sometimes referred to as 'oppida' [sing. 'Oppidum'] indicate several in the vicinity of Aquae Sulis.

But. . .

*. . . settlement on a hillfort. . . was no substitute for urban existence, as envisaged by Rome. . . Britain was expected to have a similar development and provide administration where citizens could follow commercial, industrial and social activities*

[3]

Civilizing the environment with a drive towards urbanization was the cornerstone of the infrastructural developments within the century following the invasion of 43AD. New designs of buildings would also affect the spiritual life of the new colony. And further opportunities to influence the people to accept a Mediterranean lifestyle or mindset could be brought into play by introduction and assimilation of a Greco-Roman Pantheon and their accompanying temple sites.

**Deistic status quo: Not tempting fate? What was the impetus behind the duality of the divine?**

The general consensus among authors and scholars in consideration of the process of association has taken the view that Roman forces entering newly occupied terrain

...

*' would have felt the immediate need to make contact with the local spirits so that they could assuage their fears.'*

*' A ritual would have been performed, or a vow taken sealed by an altar, when the characteristics of the deity were known, so that a pairing could be made with the most suitable classical god or goddess, in order to obtain the best of both unseen worlds' [4 ]*

In effect what we have is a synthesis between the civilized (or 'civilizing') world of the trans-Alpine Greco-Roman traditions and the counter-cultures in the old Celtic Europe and Britain, which in a pre-monotheistic Christianised environment resulted in a sort of modified, improved status quo:

*'Provincial religions were conventionally interpreted as reflective of a neutral, laissez-faire syncretism whereby polytheistic peoples willingly welcomed new divinities and/or drew equivalences between indigenous and non-indigenous deities [5]*

The 'spin-off' from the contact with foreign gods and goddesses had consequences in Britain. The army, for example, developed a particular affiliation with an eastern deity, Mithras, dramatically portrayed in the London Mithraeum temple site as a figure of formidable strength, a 'bull-slayer'. Something closer to home were effigies of Greek origin such as Apollo, Dionysus [Bachus] and in the same part of the Bath and west of England/Cotswold areas, what appeared to be various images of Orpheus. There is a possible correspondence of these in that they have a commonality of association with music and specifically lyre performance. The large communal altar located in the precinct of Aquae Sulis does, in fact, feature two of

these deities at the corners of the structure, again suggestive of a healing or mollifying process via music, but of course this is not confirmed by any real evidence. However, as will be noted below, there is a similar point of interest at nearby Lydney, Gloucestershire, in the form of a recovery of a leaden tablet at the temple site dedicated to the Celtic god Nodens.

Acceptance and assimilation of alien deities therefore seems to have become fairly commonplace. And if the rather arthritic-conducive climate of Britannia could be ameliorated by the prospect of a visit to a state of the art bathing complex in the western part of the Province, where memory for some of the long distant heat of the Mediterranean could be in part compensated for together with the prospect of resolving problems via an offering to Minerva, then this would seem to be a unique Latin solution to transforming a muddy hot spring primitivism into something really constructive during the adoption of the Roman way of doing things, 'Romanitas'. You might be bathing in the waters of Sulis, but the whole experience would be enhanced if you might wish to approach the tangible image of Minerva, who had the authority of the Roman state, and who might offer recourse to some resolution of a problem, and justice, should a 'curse tablet' be deposited. But, crucially, the incredible imagery of what had now become something almost unseen before, must have had a life-changing effect on all newcomers to the site's facilities particularly if no previous contact with public statuary had been experienced.

**Syncretism as a feature in the adjoining areas and not an isolated instance.  
Nodens: a Celtic dog-god? A power for healing, and alternative options for the citizen**

Synthesis of religious entities and perhaps an all-pervasive power behind the image is certainly suggested at the nearby site at Lydney, at the Temple dedicated to the Celtic god Nodens and in his conflated embodiment as Nodens-Mars (or vice versa), and even the suggestion of tripartite 'Trinity' or 'triad' aspect in the temple plan itself.

This would seem to add a further layer of complexity to a relatively straightforward dualism, if indeed it could be straightforward. [ 6 ]

But it is to the possibility of mitigating ill health that is more relevant here. Comparison with Bath is an interesting exercise, as the two sites appear to be contrasting but also have some obvious links. For example, both have elaborate bathing areas, although the Lydney site is perched on an Iron Age settlement and requires heating by artificial means. Both have a masonry temple with pediment. The association with rivers is another feature, the Nodens site being within sight of the River Severn as opposed to the Avon. A large elaborate mosaic illustrates the personal link between the Lydney hilltop and the nearby estuary via the dedication. . .

*'To the god Nodens, Titus Flavius Senilis, officer in charge of the supply depot of the fleet, laid this pavement out of money offerings; the work being in charge of Victorinus, interpreter on the Governor's staff.'*

Votive objects were a feature. A lead tablet recovered from the Lydney site would seem to offer the possibility of discussing these, at least on a theoretical exploratory basis. The object is shown below Fig **i** [7]



Interpreting the image can be difficult owing to the possible abrasion of the surface or perhaps exposure to fire. But it seems what we have here might reflect the potential power pervading the purpose of the temple establishment. As with Aquae Sulis, there seems to be more than one influence at work here. What is immediately questionable is the inclusion of the central figure at a site ostensibly associated with Nodens, who has associations with a dog-healing cult. An analysis of this would seem to be something along the following interpretation:

1 There is a central male figure holding aloft a large lyre type (possibly we are looking at a classical Greek 'kithara' here) and the figure seems to be without any tunic. What we possibly have then is an image of Apollo.

2 However, on closer scrutiny the outstretched hand reaching up seems to be closely scrutinised by the muzzle of a large dog, looming over the action as if being guided or assisting in some way a triangular plectrum [plectron] used for striking the strings. In fact the lower figure seems to merge into the upper, should this interpretation be accurate.

There appears to have been the intention of attaching the whole object to something as there appears to be a central hole as opposed to being thrown into a sacred spring.

Actual miniature models of dogs were recovered from the site. General consensus indicated by the investigation team in the 1930's can be summarised:

*... [the dog] represents a dominant factor in the Nodens cult. Now in the classical religions, the dog is most widely associated with cults of healing. At Epidauros, dogs sacred to Asklepios were kept in the temple, and are recorded to have been instrumental in healing by licking the affected part. Similarly, at Rome, at the Piraeus, and at Lebene in Crete, dogs were associated with temples of this god. It is a fair conjecture that amongst the attributes of Nodens should be included some of those of a god of healing. [8]*

Taking a few points of interest in comparison to the Apollo relief at the corner of the altar at Bath, noted above, we can see that if the Lydney example is a depiction of Apollo then it is almost opposing in imagery in the sense that the Bath example is static, a pose with the lyre; but here we have a dynamic alternative, if not dancing, then balancing the torso into a position where the heavy instrument can be held aloft

into a public performance state, as is sometimes seen on classical Greek ceramic-ware. However, over and above everything else, why an Apollo image should appear in this instance remains a possible paradox, particularly as a large number of small dog models were discovered at the site, and the conjectured affiliation analysed above only seems to emphasize the diversity and contrasts found in such objects. Nevertheless, what we cannot overlook is the possibility of a comprehensive knowledge by these temple developers and clients of the fundamental relationships found in the Greek Olympian Pantheon with non-Hellenic sources. The relationships and functions of Athena (and by implication Minerva) and Apollo have a genealogical link; but then there is also a functionality link in terms of combating ill health as would be the case with a Nodens-Apollo combination.

**Multi-faceted conflation between gods: some suggested further analysis. . . synthesis within syncretism? Is 'Roman' Britain a simplification?**

By 117 AD, the beginning of the Emperor Hadrian's reign, the Roman Empire had ceased to become a southern European phenomenon. An examination of the territorial union indicates a pan-European circular tranche encompassing an accretion taking in eastern areas around the Black Sea, Middle East, Egypt and North Africa. The epithet 'Roman' could well be thought of as institutional as opposed to ethnic or nationalistic. As these different nationalities merged, multiple attributes or associations can be allotted to various gods within themselves as for example the situation of a pre-conflation synthesis as a combined perception of a Greek and Latin position. So, in theory at least, a goddess such as Minerva has the position of one of the three Roman Republic's Capitoline Triad as a supreme figure, but also retains much earlier Greek progenesis in the figure of Athena, who might also be pre-Hellenic, and who was associated as the protectress of Athens before the defeat of Greece by the Roman Republic. Characteristically portrayed wearing a large Greek hoplite battle helmet, which seems to have been omitted or lost from the Aquae Sulis model, in the case of Bath this feature may have been possibly regarded as less relevant as a Sulis-Minerva conflation than a Minerva-Athena image where the protectress against, and proponent for, war was all important to Athens. A

comparison of extreme diversification of imagery is offered in the Appendix to the assignment.

Establishing an association between Apollo to a site ostensibly and predominantly British by virtue of Nodens is possibly less obvious and clear-cut than Sulis and Minerva at Bath. Nevertheless, Lydney associations seem remarkably fluid:

“ Nine representations of dogs in stone or bronze, a bronze plaque of a woman, a bronze arm, an oculist’s stamp, 320-odd pins and nearly 300 bracelets quite definitely indicate a healing cult. . . . There is some indication, from the inscriptions and philology, of a hunting aspect. . . . Sea-monsters and fish on the cella mosaic, and bronze reliefs depicting a sea deity, fishermen and tritons suggest some connexion of Nodens with the sea. A bronze object (headdress or vessel?) also shows a sea-god driving a chariot between torch-bearing *putti* and tritons. . . . Thus a picture emerges of a complex deity, combining the diverse aspects of healing, hunting and the sea. . . .” [9]

Encyclopaedic summaries such as those found in ‘Britannica’ also portray Apollo as someone who has the ability to act in various capacities and guises . . .

*. . . he was the god of divine distance, who sent or threatened from afar; the god who made men aware of their own guilt and purified them of it; who presided over religious law and the constitutions of cities; and who communicated with mortals through prophets and oracles his knowledge of the future and the will of his father, Zeus. . . the gods feared him, and only his father and his mother, Leto could easily endure his presence.*

God of crops and herds, primarily protector against wild animals and disease. Apollo acquired a Greek epithet, ‘Alexikakos’ (Averter of Evil). His forename Phoebus means “bright” or “pure,” hence a connection with the power of the Sun.

*‘He was also called Lyceius, presumably because he protected the flocks from wolves (lykoi); because herdsmen and shepherds beguiled the hours with music, scholars have argued that this was Apollo’s original role. In art Apollo was represented as a beardless youth, either naked or robed. Distance, death, terror, and awe were summed up in his symbolic bow. A gentler side of his nature, however, was shown in his other attribute, the lyre, which proclaimed the joy of communion with Olympus (the home of the gods) through music, poetry, and dance.’*

*'Also associated with healing, he was the father of Asclepius.'* [10]

## Postlude

In conclusion, Such summaries as found above only seem to suggest a process of accretion of functionality and attributions over time and space possibly reflecting a sprawling empire and former empires such as the Alexandrian. In the case of Apollo it is as if we have an entity which is 'all things to all men'. In fact the overlapping attributes of a pair such as Athena (Minerva) and Apollo could also take on a kind of logic if an association was sought between Nodens and Apollo, such is the diverse functionality and flexibility of the pre-Christian polytheistic environment. As a final effort to clarify the situation, a Venn diagram suggesting the possibilities of inter-relationships across zones of the Empire is also offered as Fig iv below.

## Notes

1

Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501:

*Stanhofu stodan, stream hate wearp  
'...widan wylme; weal eall befeng  
beorhtan bosme, þær þa bapu wæron,  
hat on hrepre. þæt wæs hyðelic.  
Leton þonne geotan  
ofer harne stan hate streamas'*

2 Aquae Sulis alternatively known as 'Aquae calidae' . . . Book 2, cap 2

3 Alcock, p158

4 Webster, G. 1987, p54

5 Moat, S., (2020) "Native Deities and Multiple Identities: Native Deities and Multiple Identities: An Anthropological Approach to Reconceptualising Divine Marriage in the Roman Provinces", *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 3(1),

6 Wheeler, R. E. M. , p.41

7 Discovered in the region of the guest accommodation at the Lydney Temple complex. Copy received directly from the estate administrators pending an additional attempt at photographic reproduction [awaited]

8 Wheeler , R E M p 41

9 Lewis,M J p.89

10 The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Apollo summary". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Apollo-Greek-mythology>.accessed5Dec2022

## **Bibliographic and foundation reading section**

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### Appendix to Assignment: Diversification of Minervan imagery

Fig. **ii.** Detached head of a possible Minervan manifestation from the Aquae Sulis complex [suggesting an androgynous characteristic]

Fig. **iii.** An American conjectured reconstruction of a classical period Greek representation of a supreme Athena by the Athenian sculptor, Phidias 437 BC



Fig. **ii.** above: Sulis Minerva gilt-bronze side profile recovered from the votive pool area

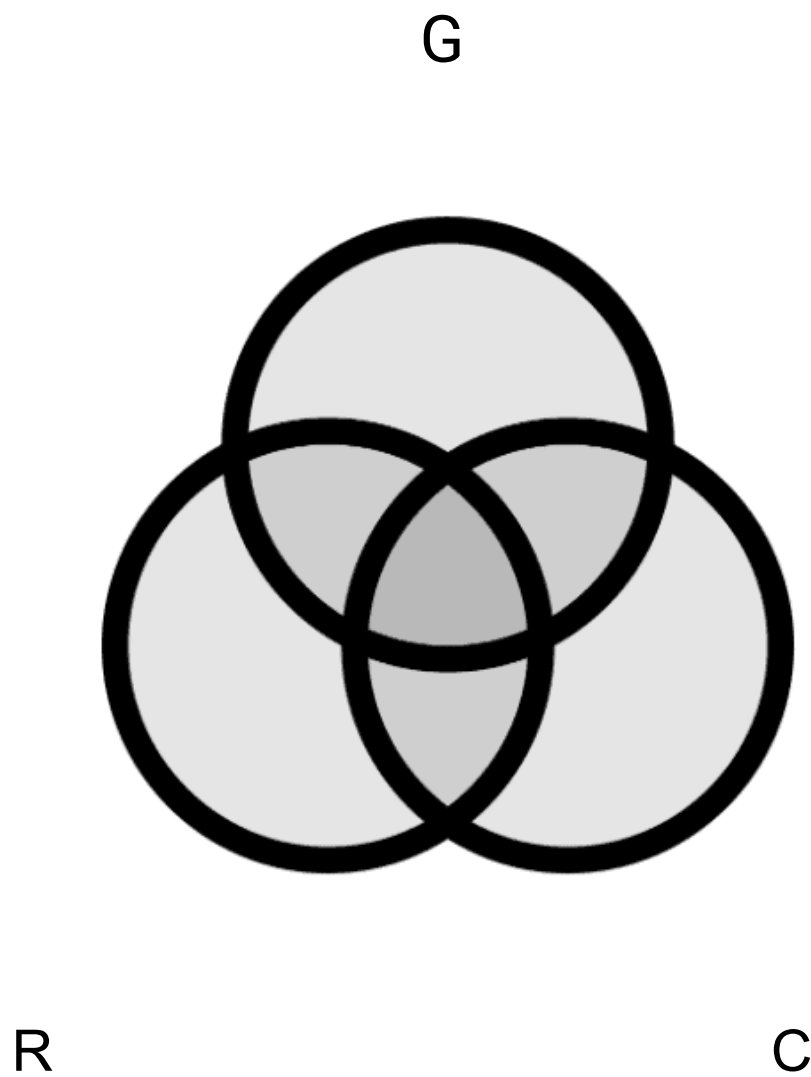
Fig. **iii.** below: reconstruction of an early Greek representation of a monumental Athena originally located at the Temple of the Parthenon in Athens

The ancient historian Pausanias, in his work *Description of Ancient Greece* described the statue in this way: "The statue is created with ivory and gold. On the middle of her helmet is likeness of the Sphinx...and on either side of the helmet are griffins in relief. The statue of Athena is upright, with a tunic reaching to the feet, and on her breast the head of Medusa is worked in ivory. . . She holds a statue of Victory (Nike) that is approximately four cubits high, and in the other hand a spear; at her feet lies a shield and near the spear is a serpent. This serpent would be Erichthonius. On the pedestal is the birth of Pandora in relief."



*Fig iv.*

Venn diagram suggesting interlocking common powers and features of different gods spanning the Greco-Romano-Celtic related pantheon



The central portion of characterisation would therefore contain the greatest extent of conjectured relevant mutual compatibility and functionality

Notes / comments / critique