

Roman Britain

R.G. Collingwood

April 10-13, 2007

Roman Britain was no interlude of Roman civilization entering a barbaric country and then departing, leaving everything more or less the same as it was when it arrived. Britain certainly was a marginal outpost of the empire, and as such very atypical from the core Roman provinces, which, at least when language is concerned, can be traced continuously up to the present time, and where Roman remains constitute a natural component of the cultural landscape. It is due to considerations like this that this notion of a temporary aberration has arisen, and it is the object of Collingwood to explode it.

Collingwood has written extensively on the philosophy of history and one approaches this book with some excitement to see those principles in action. Unfortunately, but not unsurprisingly, once expectations are bound to be disappointed. First and foremost this book is short, more in the nature of an extended essay. Due to the subject, this is not so much history as archeology, because of the paucity of written records, however, without which, there would be very little context for the archeological excavations to start out with. Much is known about the Roman world, if not the British, and forarmed with his knowledge one is able to make many an intelligent guess and form reasonable hypothesis. Yet there are precious little of those guesses and hypotheses presented in this slim volume to be tested. Yet, with some common sense and general historical expertise, the author is able to pose some questions about the nature of the Hadrian wall, whose ultimate object it was not to expel actual intruders, a determined army of which would have had no problem overcoming it, but deter smugglers and robbers, who would have little problem scaling it and overcoming the lone sentry, but would have problems returning with their loot.

Britain was not a barbarous country at the time of the Roman invasion, and Collingwood takes such distinctions seriously, as he does racial differences, being a child of English imperialism. It did partake of a Celtic civilization, which was endemic on both sides of the channel¹. In particular the Roman notables in Britain could as well have been of Celtic or Gaul provenence as Italic, and it certainly was not analogous to the present British lording over foreign races like that of the Indians or the Sudanese.

If you are an Englishman, the rattling off of some ten different towns of supposedly Roman heritage, is not just a list of names, but one of individuals of which you have many specific associations. Most notably though is the Roman provenence of London, and Collingwood goes into some detail in trying to figure out its ancient plan and density of population. The position of London is, he points out, very conducive to a big trading center, and as such would possibly, just as in natural evolution, appeared repeatedly in history. Most other cities were not that populous, or even densely inhabited, and there are also doubts as to the historical continuity of those Roman towns with those that now

¹ This is certainly still very much noticeable there being a striking similarity in the typical houses of Brittany and Scotland, with the chimneys flush by the gables.

share their positions. In the fourth and fifth century the Roman Britain provinces were devastated, whether by raides by Scots or Picts, or the newly arrived Saxon tribes is hard to establish. The fact is that most if not all of those stately country houses, that gave to the Roman occupany a real Roman touch, were destroyed, islands of luxury the likes of which would not reappear on the British Isles until mid Victorian times. Undefended, vulnerable attractors of bootyseekers.

Pottery is one of the prime components of archeology, not so much because of intrinsic interest, but because it being the most ubiquitous of pre-historic arefacts, and as such markers of civlizations. Thus every shard of pottery is given intense scrutiny, in order to milk out as much information as possible from the random scrap. From those considerations one may identify a typical Celtic style of pottery, weak on solid objects, but a mastery of surfacial decoration. In this way one can discern a fusing of Roman imports and indigenou art, at first achieving an increased invigoration, as Collingwood notes is typical of initial interbreeding, only later to degenerate.

So what happened in Britain? In a way the period that superseded the Roman is bound to be more interesting, when Celtic and Saxon elements fused, but not, as Wales is a living testimony to, completly so. But of a slim book with such a title as the one under study, one may not expect any such relevations. Due to the success of the Saxon invasion, the language of presentday Britain turned out to be Germanic not Roman. Also, incidentally, another result of the Saxon infusion was the expulsion of Christianity which had gained a tenous foothold on the Isles, due to Christianity becoming the State Roman religion. Britain was re-christening again a few centuries later, but then by the Irish, who had been unaffected by the Saxon conquest.

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