

## Introduction

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This book brings together contributions from a diverse group of specialists and scholars with the aim of reinvigorating discussions about research priorities for the archaeological study of Roman-period Britain.<sup>1</sup> Why is such an endeavour needed, and why now? The last time such a project was attempted was about 25 years ago, culminating in the volume *Britons and Romans: Advancing an Archaeological Agenda*, edited by Simon James and Martin Millett.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, the successful James and Millett agenda lacks the same urgency a quarter century or so later, given substantial multipronged advancements in the state of knowledge on Roman Britain.<sup>3</sup> New research has radically changed the face of how ‘Roman Britain’ is understood, variously driven by novel theoretical, methodological and scientific approaches, alongside an ever-increasing body of archaeological data. To give one example, whilst work in the late 1990s was still often responding to and deconstructing the influence of post-war Classics-trained scholars like Sheppard Frere, Peter Salway, John Wachter, and Malcolm Todd, their impact is arguably negligible in the 2020s, outside more rarified works of reference and historiography. That the twin *Britons and Romans* themes of ‘transitions and identities’ and ‘characterising settlement and society’ feel firmly well-worn and part of the establishment in 2025 is in no small

part testament to the volume’s success and legacy, while simultaneously underlining the need for new agendas and perspectives. On these older themes, archaeological research into the elaboration of identities in Roman Britain since 2001 has been the subject of countless PhD theses, chapters, journal articles, and monographs,<sup>4</sup> effectively replacing the tired Romanisation paradigm as a descriptor of archaeological and historical change. Likewise, several major research projects have integrated new and emerging data on Romano-British settlement in response to the *Britons and Romans* agenda.<sup>5</sup> From a present twenty-first-century vantage point, there is a sense of diminishing returns in continuing to blindly pursue these subjects with the same drive as in the late 1990s, as more urgent and fruitful areas for study emerge.

While *Britons and Romans* provides an intellectual keystone for the present volume, our aim is not to update and reprise the 2001 goals of James and Millett. Whereas *Britons and Romans* emerged in response to an initiative led by English Heritage to develop research frameworks for understanding England’s past,<sup>6</sup> the present volume received no such official stimulus, and is instead conceived as a bottom-up venture, showcasing younger and early-career voices (including many in precarious temporary employment at the time of writing), and above all alternative and competing visions and agendas for Roman Britain. Like the editors of *Britons and Romans*, we have resisted making overly prescriptive recommendations for

<sup>1</sup> The idea for this book was originally conceived by Martin Pitts, Lisa Lodwick and BAR Publishing in summer 2021. Lisa tragically passed away on November 3, 2022, aged 34, just a few weeks before the first annual ‘Reconnecting Roman Britain’ event was held in London in November 2022, which was co-organised by Lisa, Andy Gardner, Natasha Harlow, and Sadie Watson. Soon after, Andy Gardner, Eleri Cousins, and Penny Coombe joined the group of editors for the present volume, which we dedicate to Lisa’s memory.

<sup>2</sup> James and Millett 2001a.

<sup>3</sup> Summarised in Millett, Revell, and Moore 2016a, supplemented by the recent contents of *Britannia: A Journal of Romano-British and kindred studies*.

<sup>4</sup> Pitts 2007 provides an early review of Roman studies on identity and material culture; major studies include Mattingly 2006; Gardner 2007; Revell 2009; Eckardt 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor 2007; Perring and Pitts 2013; Smith *et al.* 2016; Allen *et al.* 2017; Smith *et al.* 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See also Perring 2002.

future study or attempting a semblance of comprehensive coverage in the subjects of individual chapters.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, we have designed the volume to make what we believe are compelling arguments aimed at shaping future research directions, and to serve as a means of focusing and fostering ongoing debate. To this end, contributing authors were asked to write provocative, forward-thinking pieces, grounded in critical perspectives borne of specialist engagement with the subject.

Our aims are to do with stimulus for future work, rather than synthesis of existing material. Our intention has thus also not been to produce a comprehensive ‘handbook’ to Romano-British archaeology, either in the manner of the more traditional 2004 *Blackwell Companion to Roman Britain*, or the more radical 2016 *Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain*.<sup>8</sup> Even so, while both those volumes remain key points of reference, in our desire to reshape and reframe research questions for the field, we have more in common with the *Oxford Handbook* (unsurprisingly, given some overlap in contributors).<sup>9</sup> However, we also differ in how we structure the field. Our intention is not only to redefine agendas for long-established topics such as art or the Roman army. It is also to offer new ways of conceptualising how we ‘bucket’ our evidence. As a result, some canonical topics, e.g. towns or funerary practice, are notably absent as standalone chapters, while others that are traditionally treated as subordinate to broader conversations, e.g. economic inequality or technology and innovation, are placed in the spotlight. We are certainly not claiming that topics absent here have seen their day. Through our pairing of the familiar and the novel, however, we seek to spark conversations about how new perspectives and recombinations of material can shift our visions of the people and society of Roman Britain.

Similarly, unlike regional research frameworks, chapter scopes have not been conceived along spatial or chronological lines, or modern geographical divisions: the focus is on holistic approaches to the entire Roman province of *Britannia*. It is important to acknowledge that this can lead to a seeming imbalance in favour of English material, but authors, especially international contributors, were not considering the evidence along modern national boundaries. The themes addressed here, including in case studies, should be understood as relevant to the whole of Roman Britain and its wider context, both insular and continental.

Calls for new research directions and agendas imply an unsatisfactory state of the field, at least in some respects. Before turning to consider what these might be, it is important to recognise the great strides that have been made in the field of Romano-British archaeology, and especially

those made in recent years. Roman Britain remains a data-rich playground for some of the most innovative and influential archaeological research on the Roman empire, as well as in the bigger discipline of archaeology. The annual Theoretical Roman Archaeological Conference (latterly, often showcased in the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal*) began in Britain in the early 1990s and continues to be dominated by research on Roman Britain, remaining at the forefront of introducing new ways of thinking to the traditionally theory-resistant international field of Classical archaeology. In an age in which calls to decolonise history have become louder in global geopolitics, Romano-British archaeologists were among the first committed adherents to this standpoint, with post-colonial ideas having been explored more in Roman archaeology than most other subfields in archaeology apart from heritage studies.<sup>10</sup> Familiar narratives exist in other facets of archaeology. For example, the study of Roman artefacts and small finds has been a major driver of the successful Portable Antiquities Scheme in Britain which encourages the voluntary reporting of archaeological finds, principally by metal detectorists; Roman finds from the scheme amount to a (seemingly) disproportionate 40% of total artefacts recovered.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in the field of archaeological science, the pioneering use of methods to determine aspects of past human mobility through the presence of strontium and oxygen isotopes have been applied to Roman Britain more than any other part of the Roman world outside Italy.<sup>12</sup>

We are not suggesting the vibrancy of Romano-British archaeology has been universal in all corners of the discipline and in every moment of its history. But it has been a consistent thread running through it from its earliest days, going back to Haverfield’s theories of Romanisation, or R. G. Collingwood’s vision of Roman Britain as a testing ground for his philosophies of history.<sup>13</sup> Haverfield’s legacy now, and our long disciplinary struggles to free ourselves from the frameworks he imposed on the field, has obscured the radical act that he (and Mommsen) were taking in placing Roman provincial society centre stage and in endeavouring to devise rigorous answers to the fundamental problem of archaeology: how do we tell a social story from material culture?<sup>14</sup> His paradigms have now rightly fallen – but that aim persists in today’s liveliest debates, from globalisation to posthumanism, from decolonisation to network theory.

Roman Britain’s enduring status as a ‘playground of ideas’ has been driven by several factors, some serendipitous, but others, we would argue, intrinsic to the data itself. Serendipitous has been the place of the field within UK academic structures over the course of the twentieth century. As Millett has discussed, from the 1970s onwards,

<sup>7</sup> James and Millett 2001b, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Todd 2004; Millett, Revell, and Moore 2016a. The differing outlooks of the two volumes are neatly summed up by their dedications, Todd 2004 to Francis Haverfield, Robin Collingwood, Ian Richmond, and Sheppard Frere, and Millett, Revell, and Moore 2016a to Richard Reece.

<sup>9</sup> Millett, Revell, and Moore 2016b, xxvii–xxviii.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Gardner 2024, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Brindle 2014, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Eckardt and Müldner, this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Haverfield 1915; Collingwood 1939, 120–146.

<sup>14</sup> Freeman 2007 explores in depth Haverfield’s intellectual development in dialogue with Mommsen’s.

the shift from Classics to Archaeology departments as the main training ground for specialists in Roman Britain decentred historical and textual approaches to the province (and with it Rome itself), while elevating methods and theories from other parts of archaeology.<sup>15</sup> This has made Roman Britain a primary interface between Roman archaeology – traditionally notoriously under-theorised, as discussed above – and archaeological discourse as a whole. What is less often recognised is that the influence between Roman Britain and the rest of archaeology is not unidirectional. Roman Britain’s status as the ‘home turf’ for UK-trained archaeologists has meant that it has often served as an early sandpit for many practitioners better known globally as prehistorians and archaeological theorists.<sup>16</sup> This is especially significant given the often-leading role UK-trained archaeologists have played in the theoretical development of the discipline from post-processualism onwards.<sup>17</sup>

However, that Roman Britain has long served as an intellectual testing ground within Roman archaeology is not only due to its serendipitous disciplinary position. Characteristics fundamental both to Britain’s position in the Roman world, and to the nature of its archaeological data, make the province a particularly fruitful place for tackling complex methodological and theoretical problems. Its liminal position, on the edge of empire and yet, through its heavy militarisation, at the coalface of Roman imperialism; its fraught relationship with Mediterranean cultural norms, from art to language to urbanism, alongside its deep and complex entanglement with the social and economic networks of northwest Europe; its fractured landscapes of social, cultural, and ethnic continuity and discontinuity before and after the Roman period: all of these create especially productive laboratories for thinking through the dynamics of ancient societies and how we understand them. Meanwhile, the undeniable relative paucity of Roman Britain’s material culture compared to that confronted by Mediterranean specialists, along with the partial nature of the ancient literary sources for most of our questions, means that those who study the province are perforce required to think harder about how to do more with less. Romano-British archaeologists may – and often do – look with envy at the votive assemblages of a Mediterranean sanctuary, or the sculptural programmes of Augustan Rome, but the ephemeral occupation levels of a Romano-British farmstead, or the often threadbare local pottery traditions of the end of the Roman period, bring us into much more sustained contact with the methodological problems of interpretation that lead to theoretical innovation. Moreover, our data may be stubbornly opaque, but thanks

especially to decades of developer-funded archaeology (and now, increasingly, the PAS), we have a lot of it. This enables a scale and rigour of analysis and hypothesis-testing often unachievable for other parts of the Roman world. As a result, as the chapters in this volume show, the questions and research agendas that are most urgent for Roman Britain also often have a deep relevance and usefulness for Roman archaeology as a whole.

Despite the continued status of Roman Britain as a crucible for novel research developments and approaches as we have discussed, it is noteworthy that several issues raised in the introduction to *Britons and Romans* in 2001 remain just as pressing in the 2020s.<sup>18</sup> These include:

1. a burgeoning mass of archaeological data and materials, with fewer specialists and increasingly pressured resources for their effective study, preservation and curation;
2. persistent disconnections between the main research communities working on Roman Britain, namely professional field archaeologists, university-based academics, and museum and heritage specialists;
3. an increasingly fragmented and pluralised field of expert knowledge, with attendant competing claims for diminishing research funding, replacing the tendencies towards consensus amongst older generations; and
4. an enduring sense of parochialism in the disciplinary study of ‘Roman Britain’, in which new research can outpace the progress of comparative studies that meaningfully situate developments in *Britannia* with those within and beyond the geographical and chronological confines of the Roman world.

To be clear, our intention in bringing these items to the fore is not to weaken the field by pointing out (what to many readers will be) familiar failings, but rather to highlight future possibilities, and above all, the immense opportunities for new generations of archaeologists. To this end, we have prioritised three themes to drive forward future engagement with such challenges: communities, connectivity, and complexity. These themes run through all the contributions to this volume.

**Communities** refers to the too-often disconnected groups of professionals and amateurs who take responsibility for the ongoing study of Roman Britain and its archaeology, whilst simultaneously emphasising approaches that seek to understand the diverse patchwork of ancient communities that inhabited *Britannia* and its immediate neighbours. The diversity of constituencies engaging in active research on Roman Britain, encompassing university academics, heritage professionals, commercial archaeologists, and a long-standing and vibrant landscape of grass-roots community archaeology groups, has significant potential advantages for the field. Each of these sectors has distinct strengths and areas of specialist expertise. For example, the nature of university-based research has made it more

<sup>15</sup> Millett 2016, 33–36.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Hodder’s early work on Romano-British pottery and urbanism (Hodder and Hassall 1971; 1974); Cunliffe’s excavations at Fishbourne (Cunliffe 1971) and Bath (Cunliffe 1985); Bradley’s formative experiences on Romano-British sites (recounted in Jones 2013, 175–178).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the important role of TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group), which began as a UK-based event, before expanding internationally from 2006, and which directly influenced the foundation of TRAC.

<sup>18</sup> James and Millett 2001b.

prone than other areas to focus on methodological and theoretical debate, while commercial archaeologists have a familiarity with the nature of the Romano-British settlement pattern and material culture unattainable in less fieldwork-focused parts of the discipline. Museum professionals and amateur archaeologists both have different sets of experience concerning the role of Roman Britain in modern heritage. Uniting all these strengths can lead to more robust – and shared – appreciation of our material and of why we study it. Too often, however, priorities and advances in understanding in one sector fail to be integrated into the others. To address the need to reconnect the disparate groups working on Roman Britain, of the final list of the eighteen core contributors to the present volume, seven directly affiliate as academic researchers at UK universities at the time of writing, with the rest being made up by university posts overseas in the US and EU (four), UK museums, heritage bodies, and commercial archaeology (seven). Additional perspectives are provided by four critical external respondents, based in the UK, US, Australia, and Denmark, reflecting the increased international participation and scope of research on Roman Britain. Less present than we would have liked, for the reasons detailed in the Preface, are public voices and the role of Romano-British archaeology in present-day communities. This is a point we pick up in the volume's coda.

**Connectivity** has been a research theme in Roman and Mediterranean archaeology since Horden and Purcell's influential work, *The Corrupting Sea*,<sup>19</sup> and is an essential concept for archaeological studies influenced by ideas of globalisation and network analysis.<sup>20</sup> Rather than espousing these particular paradigmatic approaches to the past or their alternatives, our focus on connectivity in this volume aims to challenge the perceived parochialism of Romano-British studies, through a dual advocacy of connecting research communities in the present (within and beyond the UK), and meaningfully connecting bodies of knowledge on the Romano-British past with those from the rest of the Roman world (and beyond). This need is especially pressing in the immediate aftermath of the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union in January 2020. While it remains to be seen if there will be any major impacts of Brexit on archaeological research in the short or long term, at face value there is a sense in the public and political imagination that the process serves to strengthen existing forms of methodological nationalism in the study of the past,<sup>21</sup> potentially further estranging research communities and the study of archaeological materials on either side of the Channel. Meanwhile, the lack of foreign language training in British schools and universities, a systemic national problem to which

our discipline can offer only piecemeal solutions, presents a serious hurdle to integrating UK-based and European research. This is a situation rightly frustrating to colleagues from non-anglophone countries – but, given the socioeconomically driven inequality of access to language training in the UK, academically justified insistences on multilingualism bump up against broader issues of gatekeeping to the discipline, in ways that are currently difficult to solve.

These are not insignificant challenges. However, there is also considerable momentum in the field towards a more connected Roman Britain and Romano-British studies. Britain's integration into new, methodologically innovative research on the material culture and societies of the northwest provinces is increasingly routine, and large-scale international collaborations becoming more common.<sup>22</sup> Individual chapters in this volume highlight areas where contributors see opportunities for furthering the contextualisation of Britain with other parts of the past and our own connections to other parts of the field. At the broadest level, increased connectivity with research in the Mediterranean and with both Iron Age and early Medieval researchers offer still-largely untapped scope in this regard, and tremendous potential for the future.

Lastly, **complexity** refers to the generation of increasingly specialised cultural and scientific knowledge on the Roman past, and the challenges of integrating this information into historical narratives, for specialist and public audiences. For a quick example, let us take the issue of 'labels'. Over twenty-five years of research on social identities and diaspora communities in Roman Britain means that it has never been more evident that Britain's Roman past is about so much more than interactions between 'Britons and Romans'.<sup>23</sup> Parallel re-engagement with the idea of 'style' by material culture specialists underlines the pressing need to re-evaluate many of the culture-historical labels still in routine use across the academic, commercial, and heritage sectors. Terms like 'Celtic', 'Roman', 'Romanising', 'Romano-Celtic', 'native', 'Belgic', 'Briton', and 'Romano-British' are historical constructs with imprecise, inconsistent and ultimately scant relationships with material culture, yet there is little consensus on how they should be replaced, and with what. While David Mattingly's proposed tripartite division of Roman Britain into military, urban,

<sup>19</sup> Horden and Purcell 2000.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Knappett 2013; Pitts and Versluys 2015.

<sup>21</sup> On methodological nationalism see Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Pitts, this volume.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Van Oyen 2016's integration of Romano-British transformations of *terra sigillata* and 'Rhenish' ware into a broader reframing of how we conceptualise their production and social categorisation in the NW provinces; Pitts 2019's exploration of the 'objectscapes' of NW Europe; the 2017–2023 ERC-funded LatinNow international collaboration's groundbreaking sociolinguistic work on the Latinization and multilingualism of the Latin West; the ongoing AHRC-DFG-funded project 'Ritual, Rubbish and Retrieval: New Approaches to Roman River Finds', which explicitly aims to bring together not only British and German evidence, but also archaeological approaches and attitudes towards public archaeology.

<sup>23</sup> Eckardt 2010.

and rural communities derives from robust archaeological patterning concerning prevailing socioeconomic conditions by settlement type,<sup>24</sup> it glosses a great deal of archaeological and cultural complexity. The challenge then is to do justice to this complexity, now apparent in exponentially growing and new forms of data, without losing sight of the needs of the many professional and public stakeholders variously invested and interested in the idea of ‘Roman Britain’.

Shifting definitions are not the only issue presented by a multiplicity of data available on the archaeology of Roman Britain. Increasing amounts of information are shedding new light or offering potential for new analyses, but also raise issues related to this quantity, its complexity, and accessibility. Issues range from the very practical to more conceptual: how can new material and information be stored and retrieved as archives and personnel are already often overwhelmed; how can professionals without affiliation to specialist libraries access the latest research, often behind expensive journal paywalls; how can we account for less archaeologically visible populations and important nuance at the same time as codifying data for large-scale machine readability; how will the next generation of (scientific) experts be trained amongst threats of closure of higher education archaeology departments; how can legacy information best be integrated and made available on swiftly changing platforms; how can information generated by major projects be maintained beyond the life of the initial funding; how can the potential of artificial intelligence and machine learning be leveraged to best effect in analysis alongside expertise and human appreciation; and so on.

At the same time, there are sector-leading successes and a welcome general acknowledgement of the importance of open access. *The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain* and *English Landscapes and Identities* projects, for instance, turned large amounts of a range of (existing but often less accessible) data, into synthesised, digestible, accessible results. They not only offer a tremendous resource in themselves, but can also be, and have been, readily leveraged by other researchers. Similarly, the Portable Antiquities Scheme, mentioned above, has spawned a wealth of further studies, though conclusions are, of course, affected by collecting practices and material. Online publication of the *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* employs linked data to demonstrate the connections that can be made across this information. Though in printed form only for now, the completion of the *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* and *Roman Mosaics of Britain* are a tremendous achievement in documenting artworks from the province. The advice and repository of the Archaeology Data Service, espousing FAIR principles and offering an online platform for datasets, is an important asset. Major cross-provincial projects such as the *Roman Provincial Coinage*

*online*, *Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire*, *Oxford Roman Economy*, and *LatinNow* projects have been spearheaded by teams in the UK. Ongoing funding for this kind of work, and especially that which links British information and scholars of Roman Britain with those working on other parts of the Roman world, is crucial to understand better the society of this province in context.

### The structure and contents of this volume

The following chapters are loosely arranged thematically, starting with a pair of chapters dealing with the coalface of Roman archaeology in Britain – on the state of data being generated by developer-funded commercial archaeology (Aldred and Evans), and the challenges of curating and presenting Roman Britain in a museum context (Davis, McIntosh, and Lee). Our aim in placing these chapters first is to draw renewed attention to the real situations in which archaeological data are generated and managed across the UK, rather than presenting such concerns as ephemeral to intellectual and methodological developments emanating from university-based research. As both chapters make clear, the perpetuation of artificial divides between academic, commercial, and museum-based archaeology is detrimental to the development of sustainable research frameworks for the study of Roman Britain. The next major section features a series of chapters that closely engage with what has recently been termed the ‘dark side of imperialism’,<sup>25</sup> starting with an overview of post-colonial approaches to power and imperial violence (Gardner), followed by contributions on inequality and poverty (Van Oyen and Pasquini), human health and suffering (Redfern), and the place of the military in Romano-British studies (Collins). These contributions double-down on the necessity of grappling with the negative human consequences of Roman conquest and imperialism, a theme that was too-often evaded in mainstream scholarship for a greater part of the twentieth century, and one that arguably holds a powerful mirror to forms of imperialism and colonial violence that are becoming increasingly commonplace in the contemporary world. Finally, the remaining contributions turn to the challenges of understanding cultural and material complexity – complexity that has too often been glossed over in legacy concepts of Romanisation, acculturation, resistance, etc. From this standpoint, the chapters present novel perspectives on cultural diversity and human mobility informed by isotope analyses (Eckardt and Müldner), art and visual culture (Cousins and Coombe), and technology (Humphreys and Sutton), all themes that were conspicuously absent from *Britons and Romans*. In the same theme, the last two contributions make the case for rethinking the foundational role of pottery in Roman and post-Roman archaeology in Britain, firstly by emphasising connectivity and undertaking more extensive cross-provincial comparative research

<sup>24</sup> Mattingly 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Fernández-Götz, Maschek, and Roymans 2020.

(Pitts), and secondly by emphasising genealogy and the enduring legacy of Roman things into the post-Roman era (Fleming). The volume concludes with the contributions from our four respondents, and a brief coda by the editors that brings together their points with those of the rest of the volume, to drive home what we see to be the next key steps for the field.

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