Thematic Studies

Which 'Romans'; What 'Home'? The Myth of the 'End' of Roman Britain

By H. E. M. Cool[*]

ABSTRACT

This paper uses the trajectories of material culture use over the centuries before and after A.D. 410 to argue that there was less of an abrupt disruption than has often been suggested. It argues that taking the long view of what people used and what these patterns tell us about how society was continually transforming, re-instates the fifth century in its proper place in the sequence. The material culture patterns can be seen as the logical outcomes of trends that often started centuries before.

People like anniversaries and boundaries. So when 2010 arrived, bringing with it both the centenary of the Roman Society and the anniversary of 410, what better opportunity could there be to debate the traditional 'end' of Roman Britain. No doubt the organisers also thought it would be humorous for the London conference logo to include the 410 date covered by the graffito 'Romans Go Home'. Possibly this was just a playful homage to Monty Pythons' *Life of Brian*, but it did encompass quite a lot of the problems and misconceptions that are frequently brought to any examination of the early fifth century. These are what I would like to explore in this paper.

First of all it is useful to deal quickly with the concept of 'Roman' as related to persons who could go 'home'. We have long known that the incomer communities arriving in Britain during the first four centuries A.D. were very heterogeneous in their ethnicities. Any random inspection of *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* demonstrates this. Naturally given the epigraphic habit of the military community, the inscriptions tell us most about them, but it is not difficult to find civilians as well. Soldiers from what are now France, Portugal and Greece died in Bath (*RIB* 156–60), but individuals such as Priscus the stonemason (*RIB* 149) from the Chartres region were working there as well. Cemeteries also provide evidence. We now know that the picture is more complicated than first thought (Clarke 1979, see now Cool 2010a), but there can be no doubt that some cemeteries seem to be showing different ethnicities. Increasingly too we have scientific techniques. Isotopic signatures in the bones and teeth show what and where people were eating when they were young, and indicate how diverse the incomer community was (see for example the papers in Eckardt 2010). If these were 'Roman', they would have had diverse 'homes' to return to. What this implies will be returned to at the end of the paper, but for now let us concentrate on the first to fourth centuries and consider the implications for the fifth century and beyond.

For a long time taking the year 410 as marking the end of Roman Britain seemed sensible. There was a historical narrative that told of Constantine III taking an army to the Continent to fight the barbarians in A.D. 407. There was the Honorius rescript of A.D. 410 apparently telling the towns of Britain to look to their own defences. New supplies of bronze coinage ceased following A.D. 402, suggesting some major disruption in Britain's relationship with the Empire. The much-cited collapse of the pottery industries in the early fifth century seemed to indicate that life in Britain as it had been lived in the previous three centuries was no longer possible. All these facts were, and are, regularly marshalled in accounts of the 'end' of Roman Britain; being arranged and glossed according to the theoretical affiliations and beliefs of the various authors. Some of the facts have been shown to be unlikely, or not simple to interpret. The Honorius

[*] Barbican Research Associates Ltd; hilary.cool@btconnect.com

rescript was an unproblematic fact to Frere writing the first edition of his *Britannia* (Frere 1967, 366). Now it is viewed as a reply which actually applied to towns in southern Italy, with the result that Mattingly chose to end his big book on Roman Britain in A.D. 409 (Mattingly 2006, 530). We now know that the Western Empire mints virtually stopped producing bronze and silver coinage after A.D. 402 (Guest 2005, 28). The absence of the normal supplies after that date thus ceases to be a plank in the argument for the 'end' of Roman Britain, and instead becomes part of the normal Western Empire pattern.

LONG TRAJECTORIES

The evidence from small finds and glass vessels rarely informs historical narratives about the end of Roman Britain. This is generally wise as you cannot write history with small finds. What you can do with them is look at broad chronological patterns. When this is done, the early fifth century is far from being a major point of disruption. Instead it appears to be part of a trajectory that started in some cases centuries previously. Taking the long view like this is rarely done, possibly because we continue to privilege the early to middle Imperial period as being 'properly' Roman. The later third and fourth centuries can be seen as a period of falling away, and the fifth century and beyond is someone else's problem. Look at most museum reconstructions of rooms and scenes to illustrate Roman life and what you will see is the first and second centuries, and not the fourth. To understand the fifth century it is necessary to reinstate the fourth century into our understanding of what was going on during the Roman period. I have done this with personal ornaments and military equipment on the northern frontier (Cool 2010b, 1–4). Here it can be illustrated by the trajectory of glass vessel use.

Glass vessels effectively arrived in Britain alongside the invasion forces in A.D. 43 as instances of them in pre-Conquest contexts are extremely rare (e.g. Price 1996). This was a period when the range of vessel forms was at its peak. The technique of glass-blowing had been invented during the previous century and the mid-first century A.D. marked the point at which the industry reached its maturity. The glass found on British sites reflects this and FIG. 1 illustrates the sort of assemblage to be expected in Flavio-Trajanic contexts with average figures for the proportions of the categories included (see Cool and Baxter 1999, tables 2 and 4). The vessels served a variety of functions. Amongst the tablewares there are vessels for serving and consuming both food and drink. There is a whole range of robust household containers in the bottle series together with other useful jars. There are containers suitable for toilet purposes such as perfume bottles and oil containers for visits to the baths. Glass is also used for very specialist functions such as funnels and inkwells.

By the later second into the third century approximately half an assemblage (55 per cent) will be drinking vessels, the bowl category is much reduced (6 per cent), and flasks have declined to 5 per cent. In the fourth century drinking vessels have risen to 70 per cent, jars and robust bottles have disappeared, and flasks are very rare. Glass is not being used for utilitarian containers. It is being used for tablewares, especially those appropriate for the consumption of liquids. This is a tendency that accelerates during the fourth century so that by the time we reach the late fourth/early fifth century even closed forms for pouring are becoming rare. Against this it need come as no surprise that when 'Anglo-Saxon' glass of the later fifth to mid-sixth century in Britain is presented, it is dominated by drinking vessels with virtually no other forms noted (Evison 2000, 50 fig. 2). Evison noted that it was curious that bottle forms were not at all popular in Britain compared to France and the Rhineland in the fifth and sixth centuries (Evison 2000, 65). The trajectory leading up to the late fourth century suggests that this is what is to be expected. In Britain the population had long since decided that glass was for drinking out of, and that other uses were not really appropriate.

If we turn to pottery it is possible to see something similar happening, though comparisons are sometimes difficult because the nomenclature of forms is not always standardised (Evans 1993, 95–6; Tyers 1996, 44). The cup is something that is introduced but can be seen to go out of favour even before samian pottery, which had supplied the function in so many cases, ceased to be imported. This is clearly demonstrated in the functional figures of mid-first- to mid-second-century pottery in London (Davies *et al.* 1994, fig. 148). That there was no demand
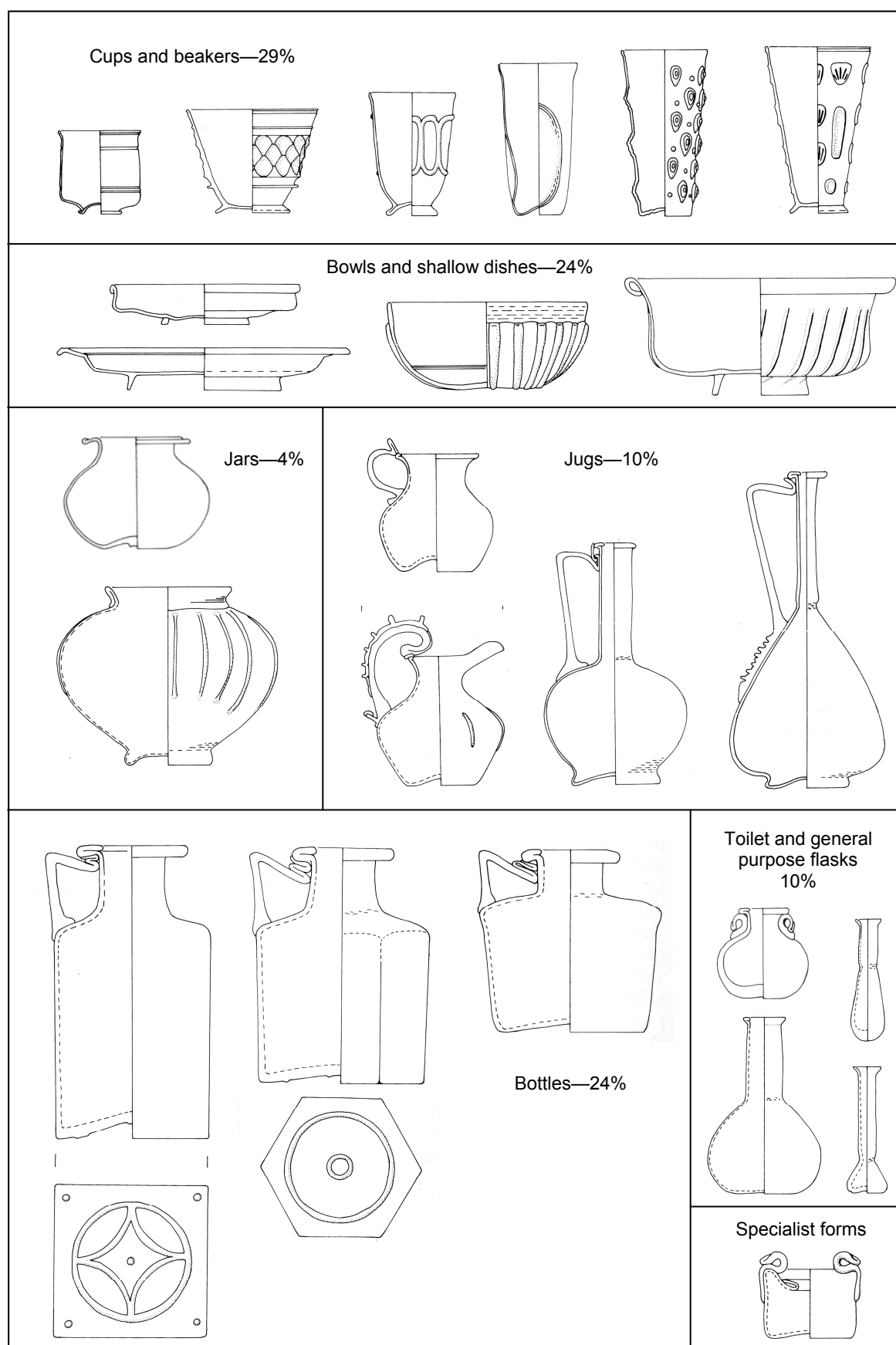
FIG. 1.   Glass assemblages of the later first / early second century. Scale 1:5.

for pottery cups by the third century is also obvious from their absence amongst the common repertoire of the British fine ware industries that took over the supply of the samian forms (Tyers 1996, 167–78). Perhaps this is to be explained by the growing concentration amongst the glass repertoire on drinking vessels. At about the time the pottery cups are disappearing, there is an explosion in the use of colourless glass cups (Price and Cottam 1998, 99) which would have been a more than adequate, and perhaps preferable, substitute. Pottery flagons can also be seen to be becoming less popular from early in the third century (Chichester and Verulamium: Millett 1979, fig. 13; Chelmsford: Going 1987, fig. 109; Evans 1993, 113–16, disregarding the specialist well assemblages). Here the number of glass jugs do not increase to compensate. It is reasonable to conclude that this was a functional type that many people increasingly felt no need of.

Evans (1993) charted the shift from a mixed assemblage of tablewares and cooking wares in the early to mid-Roman period to one that was increasingly dominated by cooking wares. This tendency has been elegantly demonstrated again by Bidwell and Croom (2010, 30; Bidwell forthcoming) comparing the proportions of wheel-thrown Crambeck reduced ware to hand-made calcite gritted vessels on the northern frontier (see here FIG. 2). The transition comes neatly at the point where the assemblages may be dated to the end of the fourth or early fifth century because of the presence of Theodosian coinage. The North is not the only place where hand-made cooking wares re-emerge. They can be noted in the South-East of England (Pollard 1988, 142; Tyers 1996, 191–2), and of course the Dorset Black Burnished industry was still active until at least the end of the fourth century and beyond (Gerrard 2004, 67–71; Gerrard this volume). Given that there were both continuing and reborn cooking ware industries in the fourth century, and that the functional profile of pottery assemblages suggests that was what was increasingly wanted, what role could the fine ware industries have had in the fifth century? Need the demise of these industries have any major historical significance? It is of course a social shift if communities and households decide they no longer want so much fine china, but it scarcely has the apocalyptic overtones that the demise of these industries are sometimes clothed with. As archaeologists I suspect we sometimes consider pottery to be far more important than the people who actually used it did.
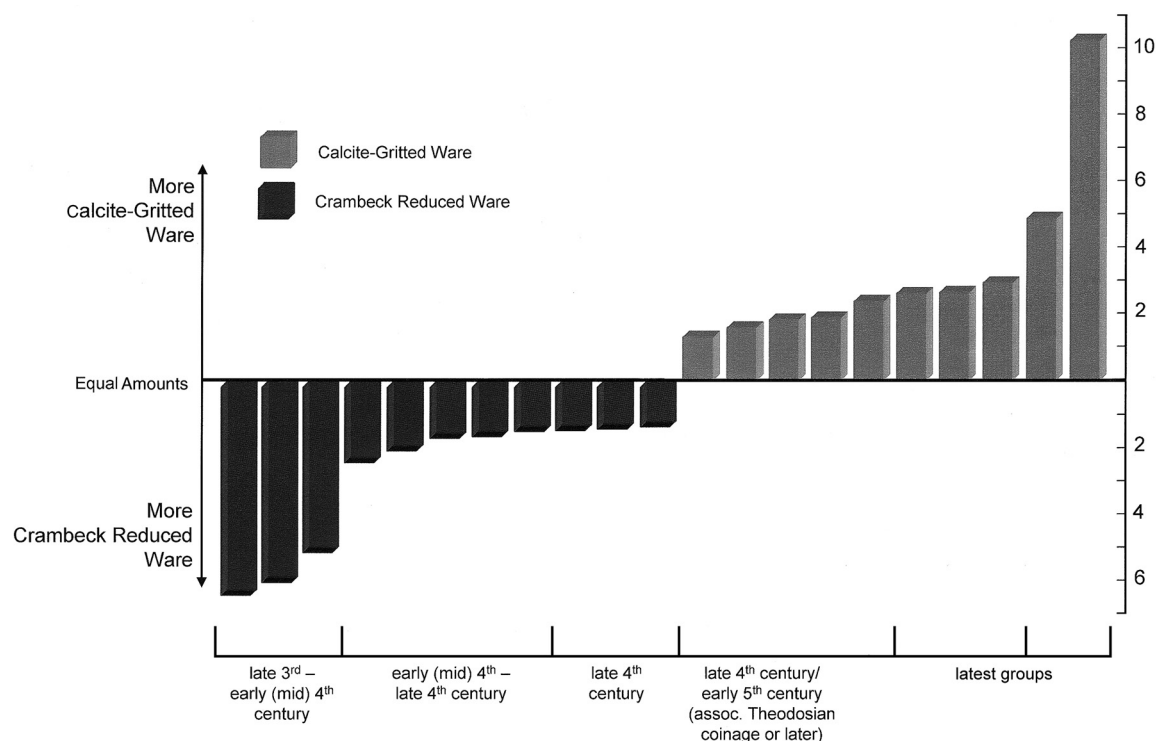

FIG. 2. The ratio between Crambeck reduced ware and calcite-gritted wares in assemblages from Hadrian's Wall from the late third to early fourth century. (*From Bidwell and Croom 2010, table 4.3, with full discussion there and in Bidwell forthcoming*)

REGIONAL PATTERNS

Placing phenomena within a longer trajectory becomes especially important when considering new types of finds that clearly belong to the very end of the conventional Roman period. To my eyes building a historical narrative about sub-Roman Britain underpinned by small find distributions as Laycock (2009) has done, using regional patterns in the sort of belt fittings originally studied by Hawkes and Dunning (1961), is somewhat problematic. The distributions they show are frequently very similar to regional distributions in other small finds in earlier centuries such as hair pins (Cool 1991, 175–7) and toilet equipment (Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 65–9). To my knowledge regional distributions of those have never been used as evidence of political fragmentation. Should we privilege the latest fashion in male personal ornamentation, just because it occurs at this point? It depends on whether you believe belts are a uniquely military symbol. Certainly they were in the early Imperial period, but the evidence is more equivocal later (Cool 2010b, 8). What can be agreed is that there was a growing militarisation in male dress, but whether every young man with the latest horse-head buckle was a soldier or member of a militia is unclear.

If one wishes to use small find distributions to suggest something new is going on, then it is helpful if they do *not* fall into one of these long-established patterns. This is what happens with the zoomorphic prick spurs that appear at the end of the fourth century (Cool 2010b, 4–7). This is a new piece of equipment more associated with barbarian warriors than Roman cavalry. The type itself though is undoubtedly insular. The distribution centres in the South-West around the Severn and the East around the Wash: both are ideal entrances from the sea to rich agricultural hinterlands for any sea-borne raiders, and both are areas where mobile cavalry units might well be needed.

THE FIFTH CENTURY AT CIRENCESTER

The spurs and the belt equipment are part of the small find suite that starts to appear in the last third of the fourth century (based on coin dating), and goes on through into the fifth century (Cool 2000a; Swift this volume). 'Can the coin dates be trusted?' and 'how far into the fifth century?' are the big questions. People wedded to the idea that life can only continue with regular supplies of new coinage and china, will say only into the first quarter. It is easy to argue against this from the patterns in both the finds and the stratigraphy. Cirencester is a good example and a useful case study, especially now that Breeze (2010) has made the case for it being the Iren where Gildas was educated at the end of the fifth century. If it was still acting as the equivalent of a university city at that time, then we should see some physical record of it given the amount of excavation there.

There certainly seems to be prolonged use of the Verulamium Gate (Holbrook 1998, 44–5, fig. 19). The street that ran through it had seen numerous resurfacings. The fifth and final surface was associated with coinage that ran down to the latest issues commonly supplied to the province. So it could be said that the dated stratigraphy matches the traditional expectations of what happens at the end of Roman Britain nicely. The previous surface, though, also had the same suite of coinage. It is that surface that technically has the *terminus post quem* of A.D. 395, not the final resurfacing. Unless one posits a very pro-active town council, the final road surface must surely date to some considerable time after A.D. 395.

The very late finds assemblage I defined in 2000 contained new forms; showed changing proportions of common items; seemed to favour material of certain colours such as black, green and orange; and often showed an increasing use of old material, often re-used in a new way. Since then it has been possible to add new diagnostic types and demonstrate the growing importance of items such as spindle whorls (Booth *et al.* 2010, 274–6). Looking at the published sites from Cirencester it is not difficult to identify this suite of finds, with Site DE at the Beeches providing the most intriguing group of material (McWhirr 1986).

The finds came from a uniform rubbish deposit that had little residual material. The bulk of the coin sequence went from the 330s to issues of A.D. 388–402 and there were relatively few fine
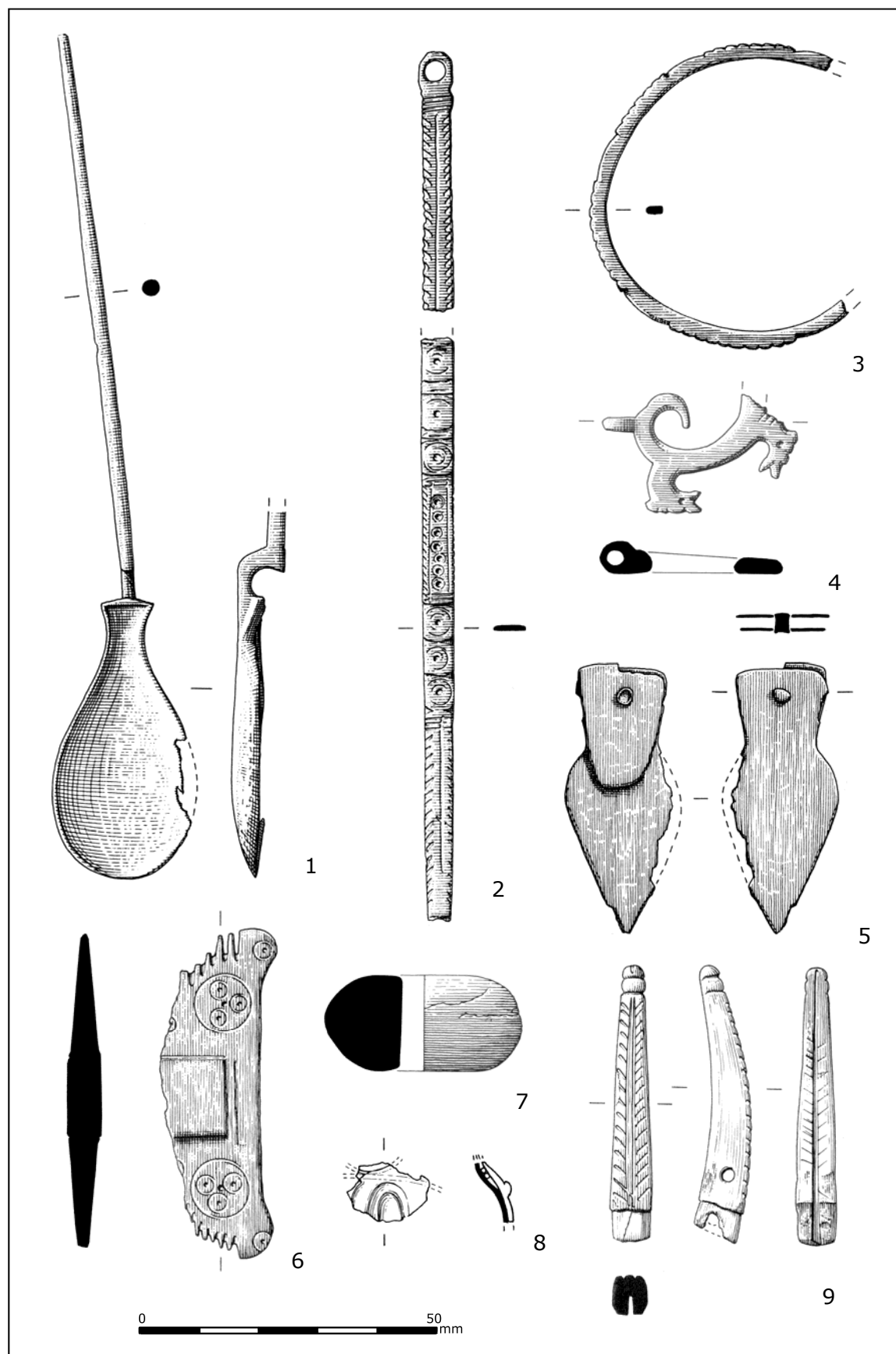
FIG. 3.   A selection of the finds from Site DE Cirencester (Nos 1–5 copper alloy, 6 and 9 bone, 7 shale, 8 glass). Scale 1:1. (*After McWhirr 1986, figs 78–80, 84, 85, 87*)

tablewares amongst the pottery. The small finds include many of the items to be expected in one of the proposed late assemblages as well as demonstrating the patterns in proportions of finds normal then, such as a preponderance of bracelets and no hair pins. The bracelet assemblage itself does not contain any of the normally ubiquitous cable twist bracelets, again a pattern normally seen. A selection of the finds can be seen in FIG. 3.

Reece was adamant that this was a large and homogeneous group of late fourth-century pottery and coins that would not have been available for deposit later in the fifth century. He went as far as to say that they fixed the deposit firmly around the year 400, and that there was no hope for 'Dark Age Dementia' (Reece in McWhirr 1986, 104). This firm statement arose because a ^{14}C date had been acquired from animal bone in the deposit and that had returned a date of 1570±70 bp. McWhirr (1986, 131) had pointed out that, as then calibrated, this returned a date range of A.D. 410–580 at the 68 per cent confidence interval and that this did not fit neatly with the coins.

We can play devil's advocate with this date and point out it is old, it has an error bar far larger than more modern dates, modern practice would be to explore multiple samples etc. Allowing for all of this, the result when calibrated using modern methodology is instructive and is shown in FIG. 4. This calibrates the date to A.D. 341–636 at the 95 per cent confidence interval. It is worth reflecting on what the density distribution is saying. For any two dates the *area* under the curve estimates the probability of the calendar date lying between the two values. The bulk of the probability thus lies in the late fifth and sixth century. Indeed, if one were to maintain this was a deposit belonging to the end of the fourth century, then one could perhaps be accused of '410 dementia'.

This is an old date with health warnings, but fortunately there is another piece of independent evidence in the form of a small fragment of vessel glass (Shepherd in McWhirr 1986, 121 no. 655; FIG. 3.8 here). It has several unusual features including being tooled out from the interior and being made in much poorer quality glass than the rest of the assemblage. Shepherd rightly drew parallels with claw beakers because of these features. The combination of tooling and trailing is certainly very hard to parallel within the normal fourth-century repertoire. The
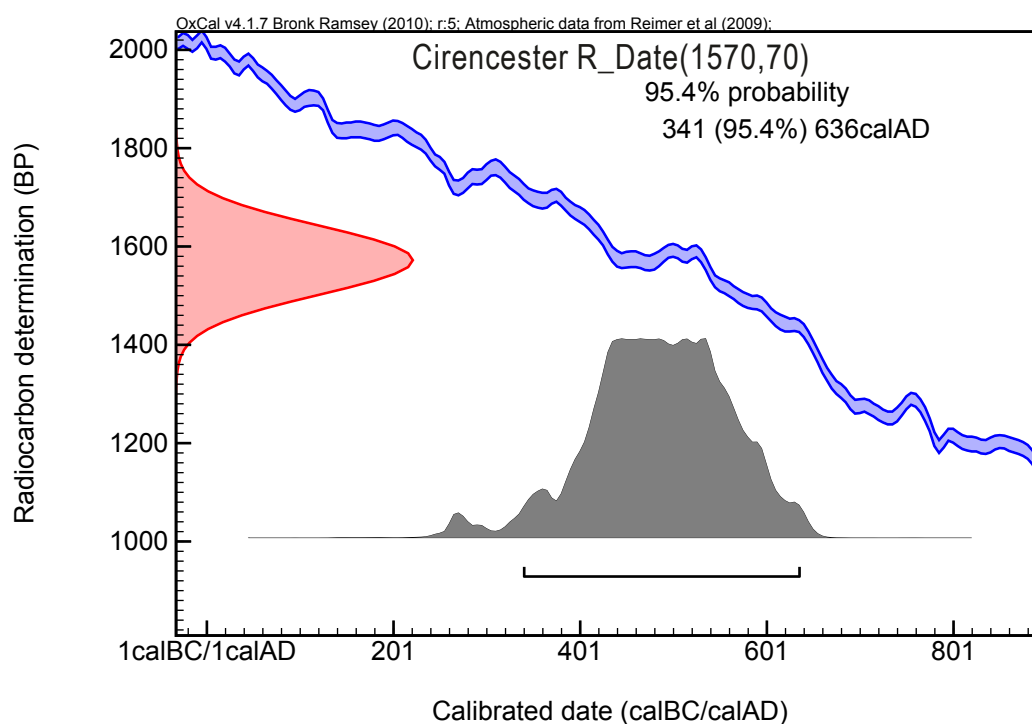

FIG. 4.   An OxCal plot of the ^{14}C date (HAR-1623) from the rubbish dump at Site DE Cirencester.

earliest claw beakers do not occur until the mid-fifth century and are typical of the late fifth to seventh centuries (Evison 2000, 63). On balance there are very strong grounds for suggesting that this rubbish deposit was accumulating in the second half of the fifth century (or possibly later), rather than the first half and certainly not as early as A.D. 400. If this is correct, then where does that leave 410 and the end of Roman Britain, for this is a rubbish dump that looks happily Roman.

TIME AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Useful though the potential of the small finds is for helping date fifth-century contexts, probably more important are the insights they can provide into the way that society was transforming. The decline in hair pins indicates a major shift in female hair-dressing fashions which could well be linked with new social norms that expected women to cover their hair. The early Church Fathers were obsessed with what women did with their hair and preferred them veiled (Cool 2000b). The rise in the numbers of spindle whorls is also noteworthy. They were increasingly made by skilled craftsmen, and they became a suitable grave good for apparently élite women. All this points to a change in the role of textile production, possibly becoming a much more domestic industry again and an important responsibility of the mistress of the house. Interestingly both female veils and the more dominant role of textile equipment are precisely the patterns that can be observed amongst the archaeological remains of 'Anglo-Saxon' society from the late fifth century onwards (Walton Rogers 2007).

Other aspects of this late suite of finds, such as the searching out and re-use of old items, can also be seen repeated in 'Anglo-Saxon' settlements and burials. Whilst some can be dismissed as the casual accumulations of curios, it is difficult to argue that when Roman period brooches were actively being worn. This is clearly the case at Lechlade where two women buried in graves dated to the later fifth and sixth centuries were wearing Romano-British bow brooches of the late first century (Boyle *et al.* 1998, 118 no. 152, 125 no. 169). There can be no doubt that these were being worn, both from the position in the grave and from the associated minerally-preserved remains of the clothes which they had pinned (ibid., fig. 5.91 no. 152.1 and fig. 5.96 no. 169.1). This is not new 'Anglo-Saxon' behaviour. This is a pattern that starts to be noticeable before the end of the fourth century.

Gardner (2007, 133–9) has discussed time as experienced by the people we study and how we as archaeologists rarely take this into consideration. How did people experience living through this period? Someone born in A.D. 340 might have lived long enough to be struck that the soldiers she now saw in her old age had flashier uniforms than they had done when she was young. She might have lamented that you couldn't get the right sort of china anymore. Her granddaughter would have been bemused by the latter complaint, who, after all, would want to use such out-dated items. She might have pondered a little wistfully on stories Granny told of a time when you didn't get shouted at for not wearing a veil. In turn her daughter would probably have ended up shocked if she saw an unveiled woman because it just wasn't done and she had no recollections of another world. Society is always in a state of transforming itself into something new, and the period we are dealing with is no different in that respect to what had gone before.

Much play is often made of important historical events that can be seen as turning points. The sack of Rome by the Goths in A.D. 410 could be viewed as one such event. How much impact did it have on people living in *Britannia*? Probably very little. Certainly none on the garrison at Piercebridge (Cool and Mason 2008, 308–9). Not only must the orders telling them to march south and leave the province in A.D. 407 have gone astray, but equally no-one had told them that Roman Britain had ended in A.D. 410 and plumbing was no longer needed. A major re-organisation and insertion of new main drains was taking place at the time, and the bath-house drains were adapted to fit this new configuration so that it could continue to function. Going to the baths is a quintessentially Roman trait. So when did Roman life cease at Piercebridge? Occupation into the second half of the fifth century is shown by the presence of an olive oil amphora dated to that period. Piercebridge's demise was probably associated with the rise of a neighbouring ecclesiastical centre in the seventh century. Interestingly it has been suggested that Silchester may have ceased to be occupied about the same time, also through church interference

(Fulford *et al.* 2006, 280–1). These are not the only places where the inhabitants did not notice the world had ended early in the fifth century.

People might, and do, argue that it was not a proper Roman life, just occupation on the same sites; the 'shadowy society and economy' that Esmonde Cleary (1989, 200) could find few traces of. I would ask whether it was substantially different from life in the fourth century, and whether that in turn was substantially different to life in the third. Some of the overarching patterns I have outlined in the earlier part of the paper would suggest that it would have been very hard for people to have noticed when they ceased to be 'Roman'. If to be Roman and live in a Roman town was to live in masonry houses with red tiled roofs, then the excavations in Insula IX at Silchester show a post-Roman landscape in the fourth century (Fulford *et al.* 2006, reconstruction on front cover). Whatever we might think such architecture says about a falling off from the urban ideal, the rats thought differently. As Robinson has pointed out (in Fulford *et al.* 2006, 218), their droppings mark the insula as still part of a fully urban environment at that time.

Traditionally scholars of Roman Britain have dealt in dichotomies; opposing military and civilian; urban and rural; north and south etc. Things are not that simple when dealing with material culture. It is a polychotomous world rather than a dichotomous one. I do wonder if the need to define when the end of Roman Britain was, reflects more on our needs than what was happening at the time. It fits our obsession with dichotomy and boundaries. On one side is our area of study, on the other it is someone else's problem. Ends and beginnings are extremely attractive and tidy but I am not convinced they are helpful in teasing out what happened in the past which is forever in a state of transformation.

At the beginning of the paper it was noted that the ethnic make-up of the 'Romano-British' population was far more mixed than many people realise. Newcomers brought with them new forms of material culture that could become fashionable amongst the rest of the populace. As an example the widespread fourth-century fashion of women wearing bead necklaces can be traced back to fashions amongst the women of military families in the later second and third centuries, judged by the upsurge in the numbers of small beads on military sites then (e.g. Brewer in Zienkiewicz 1986, 147–55). Isn't this what we see in the fifth and sixth centuries too? Is there really a need to invoke a seismic upheaval in A.D. 410 (or any other date of choice) to explain how the world of the fourth century became that of the sixth? The material culture would argue against this. Should we not rather be looking at the overarching and long-term ways in which society was changing? Yes there was a continuing transformation of the Roman world in the fifth century; but as with decimation, once you know what it really means, it probably was not that bad for the people who lived through it.

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