

The West Midlands in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries

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Background issues

Core problem is dating: preceding period relatively strongly dated – lots of 4th century coins and generally well known corpus of diagnostic pottery and glass. Most of it, if not virtually all, imported into the region. These industries and trade are unlikely to progress much beyond the first quarter of the fifth century at the latest, although objects could have survived in use for considerably longer – cf Wroxeter phases W-X.

Solutions

Cool has identified a group of artefacts and traits that can be associated with this period, and these may in the future be underpinned by scientific dates.

Scientific dates are the main hope of advance in identifying sites, and indeed are often the only secure means of identification. Main techniques are:

- Radiocarbon (esp. AMS)
- Remanent magnetic dating (still relatively imprecise – more dates needed)
- Dendrochronology (again too few dates known for region but improving).

Environmental work offers possibility of improving the situation by looking at long-term trends and offering evidence for coarse analysis of landscape use, including periods of abandonment.

Analysis of Late Roman Britain tends not to take into account the vast differences in the economic, social, religious and political geography of the late period when contrasted with the first two centuries AD. These are bound to have had a profound impact on this and the other regions of Britain. The sub-Roman period can only be understood in the context of what immediately preceded it.

Settlement evidence

Locally strong: Wroxeter is inevitably the key site yet paradoxically has poor artefactual ‘proof’ of late date: the dating rests on the *depth* of stratigraphy and the interlinking of dates and contexts across the site. This has tended to be accepted rather than tested. If the dating is accepted, certain features can be highlighted.

- Survival of Roman culture throughout the fifth century, though getting progressively more diluted and diminished
- Reformation of the town and thus its people into a new social paradigm in which public space is transferred to private ownership and reordered
- Implication of manipulation of population to achieve physical transformation of public space and buildings
- New buildings classically inspired but also exhibit an architecture in which different constructional elements can be combined unexpectedly: beam-in-trench with rubble-footed or dwarf wall in same building
- Uncertain identity of those manipulating power but only two real possibilities: church and warlords (or possibly a combination).

However, the existence of Wroxeter and its evidence begs two inter-linked questions

- How widespread was this reorganisation (both in the city and in the region)?
- Are we looking at town life, or life in towns (not the same thing!)?

Whitley Grange has provided evidence of similar character in close proximity to Wroxeter but in a rural setting. It suggests core Cornovian territory stayed essentially Roman until the 6th century.

(NB. Whitley's buildings are not directly dated but both sub-Roman buildings overlie the villa rooms or walls and the baths within the villa have a remanent magnetic disuse date of 410-510 AD.)

Further afield, hints of sub-Roman evidence at Wall argued by Jim Gould and others – highlighting the role that smaller urban settlements may have played in continuity of settlement into the 5th and 6th century. Kenchester, Worcester and conceivably Leintwardine may be other sites of similar character. Droitwich too may also have continued into the sub-Roman period due to the salt industry. Here the parallel with Cheshire's salt industry is instructive. Inscriptions on Late Roman lead pans from Northwich and Shavington (Nantwich) refer to *Pbr* and *Ecc.* – respectively 'Priest' and 'Bishop' – implying the involvement of the late Roman church. In the later medieval period, Chester's bishop had rights on the salt industry and this may be its genesis.

One category of site that is not represented but which may be a possibility is sub-Roman re-occupation of hillforts. Best candidate is Berth at Baschurch – poetic references and a triangular-lugged cauldron of 5th century date give strong hint (also a late bead). Nesscliffe too has produced late Roman pottery.

Evidence at Catholme / Fatholme on the eastern border of the region reminds us that the division between *Britannia Prima* and *Maxima Caesariensis* probably ran through the region: territory east of the Trent watershed may have lain in another province whereas our western border will not have existed. Thus in the developing sub-Roman world the division between the pagan and increasingly Anglo-Saxon eastern part of our region and the Christian and British-Roman people of the west will have become more marked – seen in the demise of Wroxeter and the growth of Lichfield rather than Wall as the new political centre.

Military evidence

Not surprisingly, there is little archaeological evidence although the poetry hints that more exists but may be anachronistic (written in 9th cent.). The tombstone of Cunorix (c. 475) at Wroxeter may imply the use of Irish mercenaries to defend the town (note that it is not a Christian epitaph). The well-known finds of plumbatae (7 or 8 known) at the same site, and evidence for crossbow brooch manufacture also confirm military presence here. Other towns may also have had military or quasi military aspects – cf. Wall and its walled enclosure.

Also in the fifth century is the creation of Wat's Dyke. This, however, is aligned to protect Chester rather than the whole of Cornovian territory. This fact may have two implications:

- Fragmentation of the Cornovii into North and South along the line of the Ellesmere moraine / Press Heath, probably after the creation of Chester as a town when the military base closed and the establishment of its Bishop

- Clear mistrust between the northern Cornovii and territory to the West (proto-Powys). Shorter (undated) dykes also known to west of Offa's dyke.

Religion

A crucial aspect to the period. At its start, the Christian population is likely to have been largely urban – cf the possible church at Wroxeter and the later evidence for chapel within the baths, and the ChiRho bowl at Wall. By its end, the rural population is strongly moving towards Christianity: reflected in placename evidence (Eccleshall, etc). This may be to differentiate from the pagan German-speaking population (analogous to the invention of the Celts in the 17th century after the English appropriated the term 'British'). Further evidence in the form of cemeteries, although few known (Kenchester), and none of the scale of Cannington for example.

Research Priorities

- Settlement evidence for this period can only be seen and often only dated by opening large areas, unless one is very lucky. The bigger the dig the better
- Scientific dating samples and environmental sampling is an enormous priority
- Need to take on board changed economic, social, political and religious frameworks of the immediately preceding period, and apply them to the equally fluid situations in the fifth and sixth
- Keep searching for cemetery and early Christian activity through investigating Anglo-Saxon foundations to examine possible British antecedents.
- What lies beneath Anglo-Saxon villages? Are they founded de novo or are they preceded by Roman / British communities?
- Sites producing finds of 4th century date may not necessarily end in that century: awareness of 5th century cultural traits needed – rivetted pottery, use of dark jewellery, etc.
- Possibility of hillfort reoccupation
- Look to continent, especially Gaul, for parallels

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