



Regional Studies





A Brave New World? The Archaeology of Western Britain in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries

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ABSTRACT

The crisis of A.D. 410 saw the collapse of Roman Britain, or at least that is the common perception. Archaeologically, however, it is very clear that the West of Britain — roughly Wales, the West Country and the Marches — did not see any significant Anglo-Saxon settlement until the seventh century or later. It is argued here that this was because the people in charge of the late Roman province of Britannia Prima, which exactly occupied this area, were able to maintain their Roman power and identity throughout the fifth century and into the sixth. In doing so they enabled the survival of British identities that exist to this day: the Welsh and Cornish, despite the best efforts of the English to eradicate them and their culture.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. It subconsciously colours our understanding of history, distorting the reality of uncertainty at the time with the air of inevitable change when perceived from a later date. Thus it is with the End of Roman Britain. To us, it seems inevitable that Britain should have left Roman control and have been occupied by incoming Anglo-Saxon peoples who transformed the country into the Christian, medieval state of England, with its satellite countries and principalities of Scotland, Ireland and Wales. In the popular imagination, the Romans ‘left’ Britain in A.D. 410, taking to their ships and waving farewell to the tearful crowd on the shore and the Anglo-Saxons then moved in, usurping an enfeebled and defenceless Romano-British people (FIG. 1). The new masters rapidly established control over most of Britain but not, curiously, over the West. This paper is about what happened in the West of Britain, and why it was different.



FIG. 1. A Victorian view of the Roman army leaving Britain. The anachronistic costume is one obvious problem — but the main issue with this image is the implication that everyone there knew the Romans would not return. This cannot have been the case at the time. (After White 2007, fig. 1)

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Whatever happened in A.D. 410, we can assume that the removal of Roman government, however then constituted in Britain, did not result in an immediate and total collapse. This is not how governments work. Look, for example, at what happened in the Soviet Union in 1991. Take away the top layer and what is likely to happen is that the functionaries who are left will carry on regardless, at least for a time and until some form of order can be restored (Odom 1998). This is human nature. After all, who knew in A.D. 410 that the Romans would not be coming back? And when they did, they would expect to find things in full working order. People will have been concerned to keep up appearances, at least initially. Extraordinary as it might seem we do have some idea of what Roman civic government looked like at this time through a remarkable document, the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which lists all the military and civil posts of late Roman government from the emperor down (Seeck 1962; Kelly 2004, 40–3). There is a strong suspicion that this document's vision of organisation and structure was more hypothetical than real: it is a civil service vision, if you want, of what the Roman state would have liked to have believed was in existence. The reality may have been very different. However this may be, it is a useful starting point. The *Notitia* tells us that by the end of the fourth century, Britain had been divided into five provinces: *Maxima Caesariensis* in the South-East, *Flavia Caesariensis* centred on Lincoln, *Britannia Secunda* covering the area between the Mersey and Hadrian's Wall with a capital at York, *Britannia Prima* in the West, and an unlocated province *Valentia* — this last a later creation whose capital is unknown (White 2007, 36–8). (It is worth noting that the document does not actually tell us where these provinces were, nor their capitals, but on the basis of other evidence we can be reasonably certain of the relative positioning of the four earliest provinces: *Valentia* was presumably created by the sub-division of one of these.)

One can hypothesise that in the crisis of A.D. 410, those responsible for governing these five provinces presumably met up, probably in London as the senior capital, to explore what could be done to protect the country. Their solution is apparent in the archaeological record and is entirely consistent with what would be expected of Roman administrators: the employment of mercenaries to plug the gap in the provision of troops to protect the provinces (Elton 1996). In the case of Britain, this translated into Germanic warriors employed as mercenaries in the three provinces ruled from London, Lincoln and York, while in the West the help of the Irish was sought to protect the Irish Sea coast (FIG. 2). These troops were recruited with simple expediency; they were drawn from the closest territories in each case for each of the provinces. For *Maxima Caesariensis* in the South-East, the logical recruiting point was the continental coast, around the Low Countries at the mouth of the Rhine — the Franks, Frisians and Jutes. For *Flavia Caesariensis*, the recruiting area was around *Angeln* and the Jutland peninsula extending up into southern Sweden, while for *Britannia Secunda*, the proto-Viking peoples in Scandinavia proper were targeted. This interpretation is consistent with the archaeological pattern of finds from the earliest Germanic cemeteries in these respective areas which demonstrate clear cultural

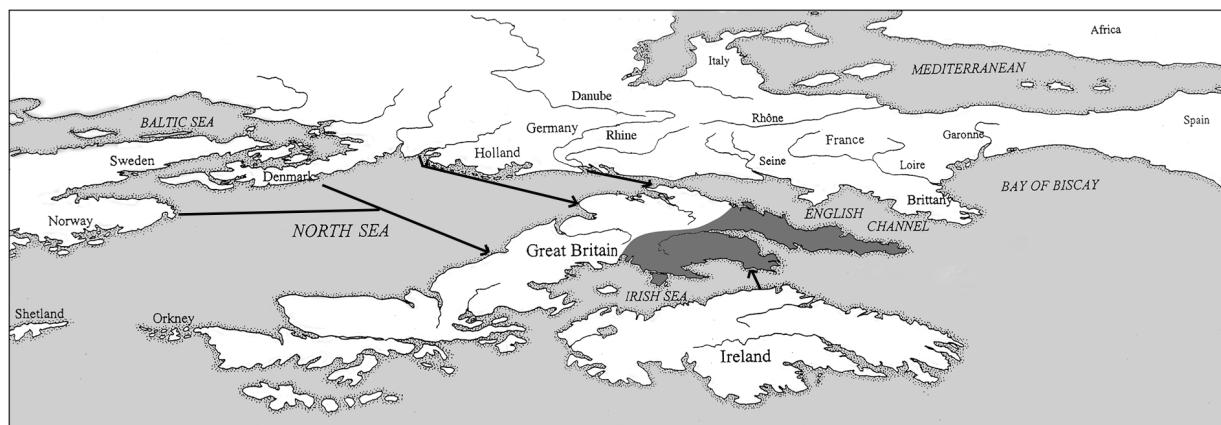


FIG. 2. A map demonstrating the link between the provinces of Britain and where they sought their mercenaries to protect them in the immediate crisis of A.D. 410. (After White 2007, fig. 62)



patterning (White 2007, fig. 74; Brugmann 2011, 31–3), but critically it also reflects the Anglo-Saxons' own understanding of how they settled Britain, as recorded by both Bede and the British historian Gildas. For *Britannia Prima*, isolated from the Continent and naturally facing west into the Irish Sea and Western Approaches, Ireland was the obvious source of mercenaries (White 2007, 196–9).

Within perhaps 20–40 years things began to go very sour indeed. It became apparent to everyone that the Romans were not coming back after all, and that there was no more money to pay for mercenaries. It was presumably at this point that the Germanic mercenaries became settlers and, eventually, rulers of the three provinces of eastern Britain. From this point on, the western province of *Britannia Prima* begins to take a different trajectory to the rest of Roman Britain. The élites within the province were confronted by two new developments simultaneously. The first was that their eastern border, having formerly been secure from attack due to its remoteness from the coast, was now an active frontier — a marcher land. The second was that these élites, based in the towns and luxurious villas around the self-same towns, found themselves cut off from their sources of wealth, power and prestige as not only were the existing trade routes cut but their sources of luxury goods in Gaul and elsewhere had also been affected by the tremendous crisis engulfing the Western Empire. There was, however, an alternative: the western trade route that throughout prehistory had been a dominant and critical path for contact with the continent of Europe (Cunliffe 2001). For those living within the major towns and settlements of *Britannia Prima*, however, there was still a fundamental problem with getting their hands on prestige items via this route; all of this trade was mediated through another set of élites — those who controlled the tribes living on the littoral of the Irish Sea and in the South-West peninsula. These peoples were all (notionally at least) also within *Britannia Prima*, but their identity was not expressed in Roman ways, as is made apparent by their lack of engagement with Roman material culture and distinctive settlement types (White 2007, 154–68). Having been marginalised throughout the Roman occupation of Britain, the peoples of the Atlantic coastline suddenly found themselves empowered by their new trade links with the Mediterranean, a route that although long and tortuous, was nonetheless effective and well-travelled.

The continuity in the way identities were formed either through the use of Roman material culture by the peoples of the Roman core of the province or its rejection by those living in the coastal region of *Britannia Prima* finds much greater resonance when looking at the whole of Britain at this point. Archaeologically, the problem with the fifth and sixth centuries is the issue of recognising and characterising material culture among the population outside those areas controlled by the emerging Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Esmonde Cleary 2011, 23–6). The problem is a combination of factors but the contrast between the high visibility of the emerging Anglo-Saxon culture and the comparatively low level of craft production among the surviving areas of former Romano-British culture is, however, a major element (Hinton 2005, 7–38). This contrast can partly be attributed to differences in the uses to which material culture was being put. In the emerging Anglo-Saxon areas, material culture was a critical means of displaying in an overt way the defining appearance of a new society using a distinct and constantly evolving suite of clothing, jewellery and other artefacts (Owen-Crocker 2011). It is echoed too in the introduction of completely new forms of architecture that found few parallels in existing Romano-British culture (Hamerow 2011). In *Britannia Prima* and other Romano-British controlled areas (such as at Silchester and Verulamium) material culture was being used to emphasise continuity and the maintenance of existing practices and appearances as far as it was possible to do so (Fulford *et al.* 2006; Niblett 2006): the aim was to sustain a sense of Roman identity in the face of the growing and aggressive expression of a new Germanic culture and, to a degree, of the emerging Brittonic culture that evolved in the coastal areas of *Britannia Prima* and elsewhere in the British Isles.

In the fifth century, maintaining a Roman appearance will have been relatively easy since Roman material culture was still abundant. The raw materials were still readily available to create new artefacts in metal or bone through the recycling of existing abundant material culture or the continuing exploitation of animal products (Speed 2010, 92–4). All that was needed were sufficient people of technical ability to create the new artefacts. It is also likely that the pottery



industry was still in production in the earliest decades of the fifth century but by the latter half of the same century it seems probable, if not certain, that the specialised pottery industries of later Roman Britain had collapsed leaving at best a residual craft production only locally used (Esmonde Cleary 1989, 135, 154–7; Gerrard 2004). The archaeological problem though is that the demise of pottery production did not mean that pottery use ceased immediately. Instead, it is likely that there was active curation of the large quantities of fourth-century pottery still in circulation which will have softened the impact of this collapse in productive capacity (White 2007, 24–5).

This is one interpretation of the evidence but proving these developments is difficult. How does one demonstrate the continuing use of the material culture of the fourth century into the fifth? Ultimately, demonstration of this can only be through very careful statistical analysis of artefact groups, as has been demonstrated in the North of Britain in a range of artefacts (Cool 2000) and has been attempted on the pottery at Wroxeter, for example (Laflin *et al.* 1993), but such approaches demand large, well-stratified sample groups and the patience and time to work through large datasets — approaches that are very difficult to implement in the current economic climate. The sheer quantity of material culture on Roman urban sites in particular can also be overwhelming when seeking the fifth century. Among the thousands of sherds of pottery and fragments of glass may be one or two that are fifth- or sixth-century in date but it is very easy to miss them among the sheer quantity of earlier material. On the much smaller assemblages of Britonnic sites, such as the prestige site of Dinas Powys, it is inevitably much easier to retrieve and recognise imported material culture among the relatively small assemblages (Alcock 1987).

With craft-produced items, such as brooches, beads or pins, however, there is a greater chance of innovation and thus definition and recognition of new forms of artefacts. Thus it is that one can detect in penannular brooches, for example, traits such as the evolving shape and appearance of terminals, the decoration of the hoop, or the length of the pin and how the pin is attached to the hoop that differentiate fifth- and sixth-century brooches from their fourth-century or earlier Romano-British predecessors (Mackreth 2011, 215–30; White 2007, 154). The development of new decorative elements, such as zoomorphic terminals, the use of enamel, engraved and etched hoops, and long pins on penannular brooches, thus produced decorative styles that link across to other artefacts such as dress pins, bracelets and, tellingly, hanging bowls, that can be independently dated through their occurrence in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (FIG. 3). Such items are found in unequivocally high-status Britonnic sites and must be seen as part of their evolving identity, demonstrating that by the sixth century appearances could no longer be maintained. More crucially, the emergence of Britonnic culture in contrast to the now established Anglo-Saxon material culture meant that it was no longer possible or desirable to maintain a purely Roman or Romano-British culture. Tellingly, we also see the appearance of a particular brooch design — the Class G penannular — that is produced in Britonnic regions but in a style designed to echo, or even appeal to, Anglo-Saxon people, suggesting that a more nuanced relationship of trade and contact was evolving (Dickinson 1982).

Through such links we are gradually defining what fifth- and (especially) sixth-century material culture looked like. The process is a slow one and is hampered above all by the lack of well-stratified groups from Roman or Britonnic sites that are demonstrably in use in the fifth century. The model put forward here for the persistence of Romano-British culture, and the gradual emergence of a Britonnic identity over the course of the fifth to sixth century in the West offers the opportunity for more research in the future when sites become available.

It is in this context that we must now turn to the archaeology of *Britannia Prima* to see how the élites in the towns and on the coast reacted to these developments, and why they took the paths that they did. The first requirement in the minds of the élites of the Romanised part of the province must have been defence. Without a secure defence how could they hope to survive? Fortunately, the building blocks of that defence had long been in place. The principal defended city of the region was Chester, which had been a legionary fortress for three centuries and was the probable base for any military organisation that might have survived the withdrawal of Roman forces (Mason 2001, 161–80). Notionally, their commander was an official not listed in extant versions of the *Notitia Dignitatum* but whose existence can be surmised on the basis of

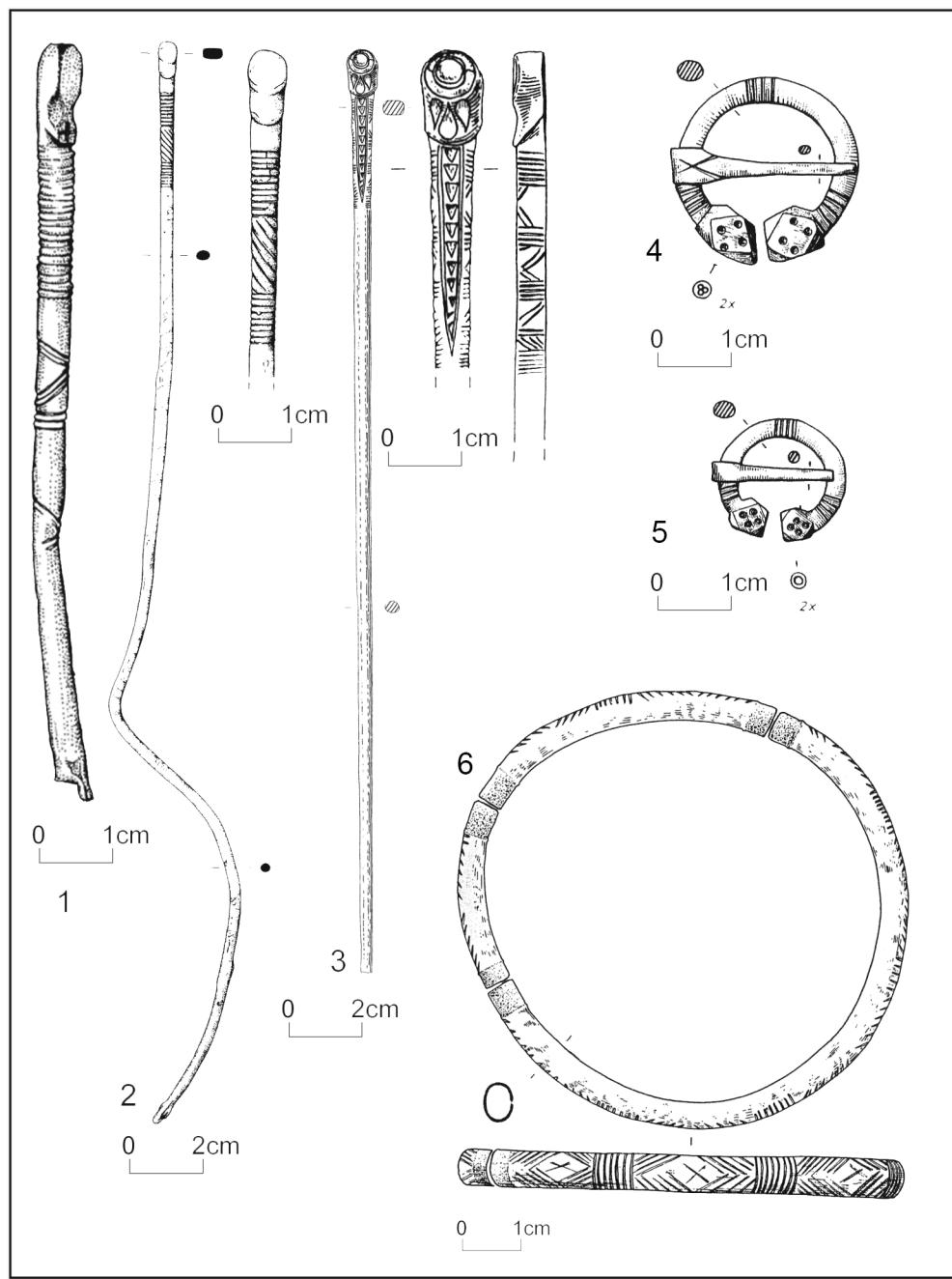


FIG. 3. Fifth- and sixth-century metal dress accessories from *Britannia Prima*, including Class G penannulars. (After White 2007, fig. 57)

other evidence: the *Comes Tractus Maritimis per Britannias* (White 2007, 57–9, 64). Whether this official was still in post in or after A.D. 410 is unknowable and, in any case, we cannot prove that any troops were still in the province. One of the key elements of the events of A.D. 410, after all, was the supposition that troops were withdrawn to the Continent. Yet from what we can see of the archaeology of the province, the towns and cities of what became the March were defended in most cases by stout walls and soldiers to man them. This evidence comes in the shape of the body of the ‘Gloucester Goth’ and the tombstone of an Irish warrior, Cunorix, at Wroxeter (Hurst 1985; Wright and Jackson 1968). From Wroxeter, Caerwent and Cirencester, as well as other town sites, we have the evidence of late Roman weapons — notably the *plumbatae* or lead-weighted darts, more than have been found anywhere else in the Western Empire (Robert Vermaat, pers. comm. 2004), as well as the crossbow brooches, zoomorphic belt sets and fittings



appropriate to soldiers in the employ of the state. That some of these were in short supply or were being made officially or unofficially is shown by miscast examples of buckles from Cirencester and brooches from Wroxeter (White 2007, 71–2). The troops were presumably drawn from the ranks of the townspeople themselves: we do know that the *Cornovii* provided a cohort at Newcastle on Hadrian's Wall, for instance, so this is not totally improbable (Breeze and Dobson 2000, 238 and appendix 2). We will never know the details of how they managed their defence, but manage it they did as for much of the region there is no Anglo-Saxon settlement until the seventh century and in Cornwall it is the ninth century before conquest finally takes place. An echo of this tradition is, of course, to be found in the record of Gildas' Ambrosius Aurelian, and the more poetic and less verifiable 'Arthur'. For the élites on the western coasts, re-ensconced in their hillforts, there will have been little active fighting initially since the threat posed by the incoming, settling Anglo-Saxons must have seemed very remote, but it may well be that they supplied troops to support the cities of the March as they plainly did in the seventh century, for instance (Rowland 1990).

Defence secured, the people of the towns of *Britannia Prima* seem to have tried to live life in their former Roman ways as much and for as long a time as possible. They continued to use Roman pottery and glass even though they found it more and more difficult to buy replacements in the market place. They wore Roman brooches and bangles, favoured black jewellery and wore outlandishly long pins for their cloaks (Cool 2000). They used their public buildings as long as they could, until they literally began to fall about their ears. The sequence at Wroxeter is both the best known and the most complete example of this phenomenon. There the baths and its basilica appear to have remained in use throughout the fifth century having been given an extensive refurbishment in the early fourth century and then a more cosmetic make-over in the 370s. Even when the roof was taken off the baths basilica in the 480s they appear to have used the unroofed space as a market (White 2007, 177–86). In that market it is clear that the available produce had become more locally sourced: the variety of wild species available to eat increases dramatically and is mirrored by the presence of an Irish wolfhound, alongside a more bizarre import of a Barbary Ape in the latest phase of the town's life (Hammon 2011). This last import is perhaps concrete evidence for the tenuous links with the Mediterranean world. If so, it is entirely appropriate that the import in question should be both prestigious and essentially useless. Similar structural evidence can be seen in other cities: at Caerwent, Cirencester and Gloucester, the forum courtyards at least appear to have continued in use for many years, perhaps also indicative of markets continuing to function (White 2007, 189–90; Rogers 2011, 75–83). At Bath the temple and its precinct remained in use until the façade collapsed perhaps in the 480s or later (Gerrard 2007). All of this smacks of an attempt to retain town life for as long as possible. There was, however, one problem with all this, which was that things could not continue as they were, not least because the skills base of mosaicists, masons and engineers was rapidly lost. Instead, the élites were forced to a return to reliance on timber and other organic materials in which to build.

This development can be most clearly seen in the countryside. At Whitley Grange villa, newly built as a hunting lodge in the 370s with a 20 m (60 ft) bath suite including an internal pool, the bath-house was last fired between A.D. 410 and 510. It was then dismantled or allowed to collapse while the ruins of the villa were occupied by smaller buildings in timber or reusing elements of the still-standing walls in a form of mixed construction (FIG. 4; Gaffney and White 2007, 95–142). Such evidence is very typical of villas in the West — as can be demonstrated at Barnsley Park or Frocester in Gloucestershire, for example (Webster and Smith 1987, 85 and fig. 9; Price 2000, 329–30). In the past this evidence has usually been referred to as signifying occupation by 'squatters'. The implication of this term, whether intended or not, is that the original occupants have moved on, the buildings have become ruinous, and then have been occupied by homeless people who have stumbled across the site and occupied it. As a scenario, such events are possible but do not take into account the fundamental changes that were overtaking Roman society. Families continuing to live on these sites would not have been able to repair their elaborate Roman buildings, even if they wished to, as they would not have been able to find people with the right skills to carry out the work, nor would they have had the means to pay them. As a result,

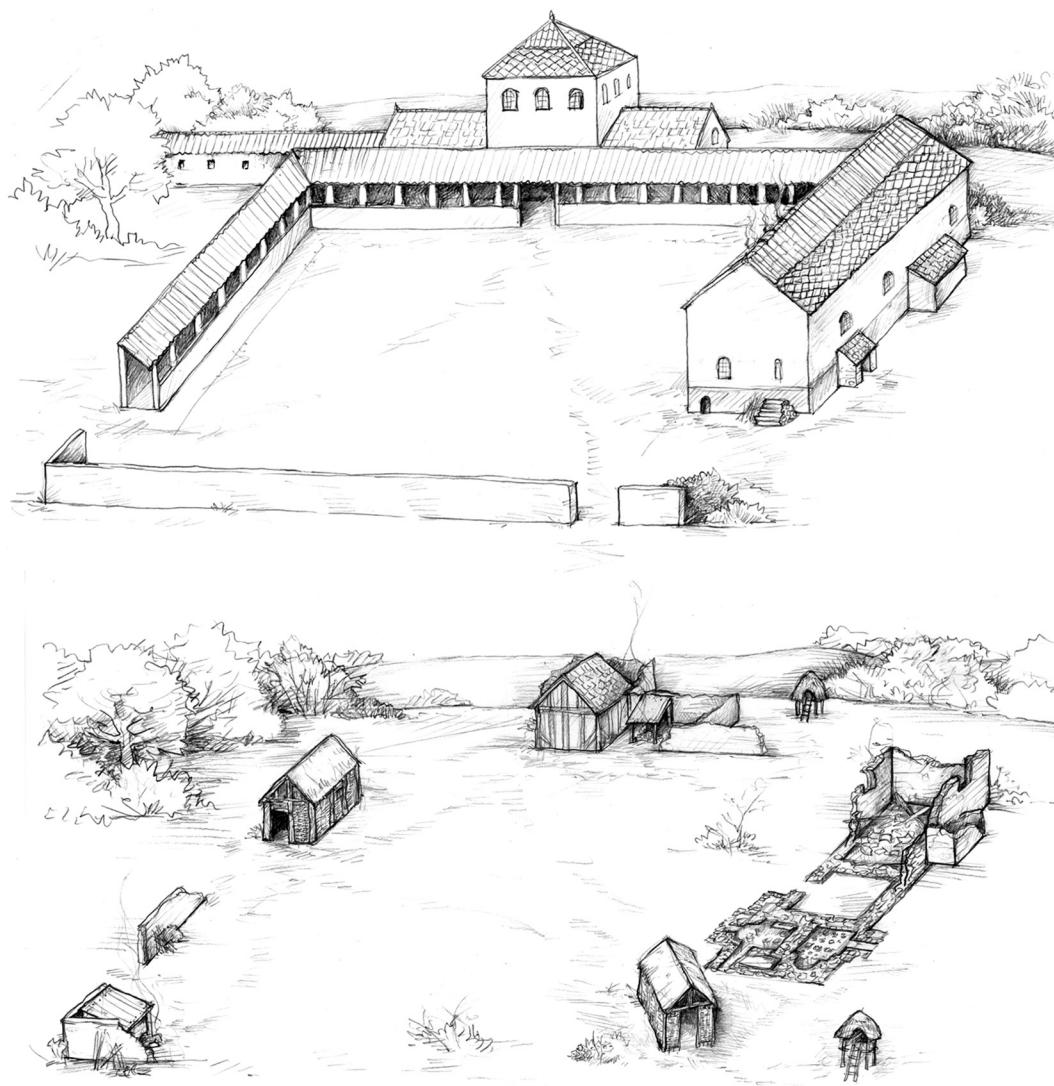


FIG. 4. Whitley Grange Villa in its fourth-century heyday (top) and the more ephemeral fifth- or sixth-century occupation (below). Even had the inhabitants wanted to retain the bath-house, they would have needed specialist builders to achieve this. It was simpler to let it collapse. (After White 2007, fig. 51)

people who continued to live on these sites will have turned to more basic technologies to create dwellings. Such structures are thus the inevitable outcome of a technical inability to maintain the existing sophisticated buildings of late Roman Britain, some of them architecturally quite daring, as at Great Witcombe for instance.

The academic reaction to the evidence at Wroxeter was for a long time to dismiss it as an aberration, and certainly as nothing Roman or urban. Increasingly, as evidence has gathered from other sites, for example at Chester or, more recently, Worcester and Kenchester within the province and Silchester beyond it, it has been realised that this form of architecture is present from the fourth century on many urban sites and, moreover, is definable as an architectural approach with specific characteristics (White 2007, 187–92). These include the use of *spolia* in the form of fragments of earlier buildings and the use of organic materials to create buildings that nonetheless conform to Roman traditions and measurements (Rogers 2011, 149–58; Fulford *et al.* 2006). The scale of Wroxeter and perhaps its late survival is unusual but it is demonstrably in the same tradition of urban form as earlier incarnations of the town. The measurements of



the buildings, even the largest, are in Roman feet. The market displaced by the new, private, structures, was recreated in a new location where it continued to function. The town-houses around it were also rebuilt. This suggests a continuing engagement with urban life alongside the organisational ability to achieve it, and the authority to enforce it. These are characteristics of an urban approach, albeit one very different from the classical or even late antique approaches seen in these towns. It is, however, legitimate to ask who by this stage was in control. At the heart of Wroxeter's reconstruction was a very large timber-framed building, but who lived in it? Given what we understand of the evolving early medieval society of the period, only two candidates can be postulated: the warlord or the holy man. For me, the latter is more likely, specifically I would suggest this is a bishop's residence. The offices of the early Christian Church were often populated by the élite who increasingly saw Christianity as a means to hold on to the reins of power in a fractured society where civic posts were rare and dangerous to occupy, as is demonstrated by the life of the fifth-century cleric, Sidonius Apollinaris (Harries 1994). The late Roman Church was, moreover, organised to operate from the urban environment: the concept of the monastic bishop had not yet been invented. In the specific case of Wroxeter, the lack of a defensive circuit placed around the built-up core also indicates that a warlord cannot have operated from it. These are to be found instead in the re-occupied hillforts that are such a feature of the fifth- and sixth-century archaeology of western Britain, an amplification of the continuing rejection of the Roman cultural norms that had always been a feature of the peoples of the Atlantic coastline (Pearce 2004, 223–5). While we have no proof of a late Roman bishop in Wroxeter, we do have evidence for a Bishop Viventius from quite close by: at Shavington near Nantwich, Cheshire, where a salt pan with the bishop's name on it has been found. Another from Northwich, Cheshire, refers to Cunitius, a *clericus* or priest (Penney and Shotter 1996; *eidem* 2000). These pans have been ascribed to the fourth century but I would suspect they are more likely to be fifth-century, reflecting the growing power and influence the Church exerted on society after the collapse of Roman Imperial authority in the Western Empire (Matthews 1975). In this context, it is sobering to realise that the only reason for our confidence about the sequence at Wroxeter rests upon the slender, but firmly founded, scientific dates within the stratigraphic sequence, in the same way that the suspicion of late occupation on Insula IX at Silchester ultimately rested on the knowledge that the Tébiccatus stone came from that location (Fulford *et al.* 2006, 278–80). For both sites, these tenuous elements are the slim foundations on which the exiguous elements of fifth- and sixth-century occupation can be recognised. Without these we would be, as is so commonly the case in this period, just guessing as to their real date.

Ultimately, the pretence of sustaining Roman towns could not be continued forever. The English grew in power, absorbing both population and land and creating a hybrid Anglo-British culture, epitomised by the 'frontier people' — the Mercians — that felt they had as strong a claim as the emerging Welsh or Cornish to these lands. The relentless growth of English power, brought to a head by the campaigns of Edward I, led ultimately to the conquest of the last vestiges of the Western Roman Empire at the end of the thirteenth century (White 2007, 209–14). What is interesting in this story, however, is the way that both English king and Welsh prince couched their struggle in terms of Roman values and expressions of power. It was no accident that Edward I 'discovered' the graves of Arthur and Guinevere and reburied them before his campaign in Wales, nor that he constructed a round table to be hung in Winchester, nor that he built Caernarfon in an echo of Roman style (Prestwich 1988, 120; Morris 2008, 191–3). Given this background it is no surprise to find that the great prize that the Welsh handed to their conqueror was 'Arthur's Crown' whose loss was lamented by the Welsh poets who witnessed that terrible event. Awful though the defeat was, it is still true that the Welsh, and for that matter the Cornish, have managed to keep their identity to the present day. That they were able to do so is a direct result of the resistance that the people of *Britannia Prima* put up against the incoming settlers, although few now appreciate the fact.



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