Review Article: Archaeology and History: A Late Antiquity for Britain

Robin Fleming, *The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300–525 CE*.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. 333 pp. + 22 b/w figs.
ISBN: 9780812252446. $45, £36.

Mateusz Fafinski, *Roman Infrastructure in Early Medieval Britain:
The Adaptations of the Past in Text and Stone*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam
University Press, 2021. 239 pp. + 2 b/w figs. ISBN 9789463727532. €106.

Archaeology was, once upon a time, referred to as "the handmaiden of history." Images of artifacts served primarily to adorn the pages of historical accounts regarded by publishers as needing enlivening. How times have changed. Material culture—uncovered for the most part by archaeological excavation—is increasingly playing a central role in the writings of early medieval historians. Notable examples include Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (2005) and, more recently, John Blair's *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (2018).[1] The two volumes under review here—both written by historians—bear witness to this growing engagement with material culture and how it is changing the way we view early medieval Britain.

The Material Fall of Roman Britain has the archaeological record at its core and uses it to challenge conventional understandings of the notoriously elusive late Roman to post-Roman transition. Refusing to be constrained by traditional disciplinary and chronological divides, the book spans the period 300–525 CE, allowing the author to illustrate how many of the material

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1. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); John Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

changes traditionally attributed to the post-Roman centuries in fact had their roots in the fourth century. Robin Fleming's central aim, however, is to gain a better understanding of the profound economic and political dislocation experienced by ordinary people trying to make a living in post-Roman lowland Britain. The emphasis throughout is on "ways of doing," drawing on the concepts of *habitus* and object agency. These ways of doing—whether growing and storing crops, preparing food, building and repairing houses, or procuring metals—changed radically after Britain was uncoupled from the imperial economy (and sometimes before). The "entanglement" of food production, mass pottery manufacture, the metal economy, and the building industry catalyzed dramatic changes in ways of doing that led to wholesale changes in material culture. Once certain types of pottery were no longer available, for example, the foodways associated with them inevitably disappeared. A point repeatedly emphasized is that many of these new "ways of doing" in the later fourth and fifth centuries had little if anything to do with arrivals from mainland Europe.

The production and use of ceramic and glass vessels occupy much of the discussion, due to the prominence of such vessels in the archaeological record. Once it was no longer possible to acquire professionally manufactured ceramics, mass-produced in a range of distinctive forms designed to perform specific functions, pottery was formed by hand, mostly within the household. There was far less of it, and it was less durable and less varied—virtually every vessel was either a jar or a bowl. People who used such pottery had to adapt their ways of storing, cooking, and eating to "its particular material characteristics." Leather, metal, and wooden vessels must have become increasingly important but leave little archaeological trace. In marked contrast to late Roman Britain, nearly everyone in the fifth and sixth centuries, regardless of rank, would have eaten "out of the same hand-built pots and wooden trenchers" (72). Fleming also points out that, in parts of Britain, the end of Roman pottery industries and the adoption of handmade wares were less abrupt than traditionally thought. Some late Roman pottery production continued into the early decades of the fifth century, and it therefore seems likely that Roman pottery and handmade wares were sometimes used at the same time by the same communities in the early decades of the fifth century. Whether late Roman wares constituted a "high percentage" of the pottery in use during the fifth century at settlements like Mucking, in Essex (61), is, however, debatable given the difficulties involved in dating the handmade pottery of this early period.

Chapter 4 examines the use and reuse of Roman ceramic and glass vessels in the fifth century and beyond. This took essentially two forms: the ritualized deposition of carefully curated, sometimes centuries-old, Roman vessels in wells (as at Shadwell, Essex) or graves (as at Baldock, Herts) and the scavenging of vessels from Roman burials or other contexts by those who reoccupied prehistoric hill forts in the west of Britain, until they were able to replenish their stocks with newly imported ceramics and glass vessels from the Mediterranean world. Such objects, together with olive oil, wine, and perhaps other foodstuffs, enabled these groups to cling to elements of Roman-style aristocratic wining and dining for a few more decades. The lack of fresh metal supplies, once Roman networks of supply, production, and transport had broken down, was likewise dealt with by scavenging and recycling.

Not all the explanations for reuse presented here are equally convincing. The reworked Roman pot bases argued to have been used as molds for casting Saxon-style saucer brooches are widely found in late Roman as well as post-Roman contexts; they occur not only in the Upper Thames Valley, where such brooches were made and (mostly) worn, but also in regions such as East Anglia, where saucer brooches were neither worn nor manufactured. The earliest saucer brooches were, furthermore, not cast at all but rather consisted of a base plate with a separate rim and applied decorative sheet. In any case, it seems unlikely that fifth-century smiths capable of casting elaborate equal-arm and supporting-arm brooches needed to rely on broken Roman pot bases when it came to making saucer brooches.

The demise of masonry buildings had serious social implications, above all for the material practices involved in repairing and refurbishing them. A downward spiral of deskilling meant that attempts to refurbish buildings in the later fourth century and beyond were "each one bad in its own way" (102). Fleming is surely right to suggest that the majority of the population of Britain would have shed few tears over the dilapidation and decay of grand buildings that monumentalized social difference and whose construction depended on appropriated labor. Thinking about stone buildings in this way should also make us rethink the social implications of the timber buildings that replaced them in parts of lowland Britain, buildings that were largely undifferentiated in terms of materials, layout, and size. The chapters on reuse and refurbishment present fascinating snapshots of life at the very end of Roman Britain and beyond, revealing how some communities managed, one way or another, to engage with Roman material culture well into the fifth century. Whether finds like those from Baldock and Shadwell represent rare

survivals that provide a guide to what was happening more widely or whether they are exceptions that tell us little about the lives of the majority in fifth-century Britain, it is impossible to know.

Later chapters focus on the identity and origins of those buried in furnished inhumations and cremations in the fifth and early sixth centuries. A series of cautionary tales illustrate how scientific analysis of human remains reveals that the complex interrelationship of biological origins, dress style, identity, and burial practice is such that the results "do not always line up neatly to match our expectations" (162). That could be putting it mildly. It is becoming increasingly clear that men, women, and children were highly mobile in this period, and that there appears to be no consistent link between mortuary rite and natal origins. The role of women—in whose graves the majority of surviving material culture is found—in shaping new "ways of doing" when it came to dress styles is also explored. As for the men buried in the early decades of the fifth century with late Roman belt sets and (rarely) weapons, it is now widely accepted that they need not have been mercenaries from the European mainland; it does not necessarily follow, however, that they were "members of a local indigenous household," or that they regarded themselves purely as "late Roman officials" (179). More complex, hybrid identities, at once Roman and "barbarian," may be envisaged.

Relatively few archaeologists or historians would now refer to those buried in furnished graves in fifth-century Britain as Anglo-Saxons. And most would not find controversial the author's suggestion that "at least a few" of the people living in settlements like Mucking were the descendants of people who lived there in Roman times. Indeed, the present writer observed nearly 30 years ago that "few would now contest the assertion that not all the people buried in 'Anglo-Saxon' cemeteries and living in 'Anglo-Saxon houses' were in fact immigrants or the direct descendants of immigrants."[2] In some respects, this engaging book—which presents a wealth of material with clarity and flair—is knocking on a door that has been standing open for some time.

Roman Infrastructure also examines the impact of Roman materiality on post-Roman Britain, but from a very different perspective. Mateusz Fafinski examines a somewhat longer time period (the fourth to mid-eighth centuries), includes Wales, and draws predominantly on evidence contained in

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2. Helena Hamerow, "Migration Theory and the Migration Period," in *Building on the Past: Papers Celebrating 150 Years of the Royal Archaeological Institute*, ed. Blaise Vyner (London: Royal Archaeological Institute, 1994), 164.

early medieval texts; this is not a book about archaeology, which is mentioned only in passing (indeed, the book contains only two maps, one diagram, and not a single image of a Roman road, bridge, or building). Although the author includes symbolic and social infrastructure in his study, most relevant here is his investigation of material infrastructure (transport infrastructure, i.e., roads and bridges; urban infrastructure; and infrastructure related to the early medieval church) and how it underpinned the survival of immaterial elements of the Roman world, such as laws and governance practices. A key message here is that Roman infrastructure could exert influence on early medieval society even after a period of dormancy and decay, becoming re-activated by changing circumstances.

Fafinski—like Fleming—sees the year 410 as a "non-event" (93) and contends that the transformation of Britain "from a Roman province to a conglomerate of small successor-polities" was a process that began in the late fourth century and continued for at least seventy years (100). Instead of arguing about continuity versus discontinuity, he sees the use and reuse of Roman infrastructure as a means of claiming the past and "maintaining distinction" in the early medieval world; it served as a link with the "phantom limb" that was the Empire—gone yet in a sense still present. Roman infrastructure, even when no longer functional, represented the bureaucratized state and as such symbolized something post-Roman rulers hankered after. Control over Roman infrastructure—whether still functional or not—was a means of legitimizing authority. Reuse was therefore never a neutral act but a "strategy of activation," as much as the witnessing of a charter in a former Roman city. The decay of urban infrastructure is regarded here not as a sign of catastrophe but rather as an adaptation to new, post-classical circumstances, allowing cities to reemerge as centers of authority, not necessarily because they were urban but because they were distinct. Change and adaptation were similarly key to the survival of Roman roads. It was their use and reuse that gradually allowed some to merge into the early medieval landscape, both as an element of economic infrastructure (a means of transporting goods such as salt and iron) and as a governance resource (a means of marking boundaries). Turning Roman forts into churches and monasteries allowed them to remain productive, politically and economically, in an early medieval context: "That process of change was what actually made Britain a still recognisable part of the world of the Roman Empire" after the fifth century (71).

The text (based on the author's doctoral thesis) is engagingly written, but the publisher has allowed it to be marred by numerous typographical errors. A few slips have also crept through: the "open field system," for example, has not been shown to have originated "way before the Early Medieval Period" (101), and Dorchester-on-Thames is not the same Dorchester that lies near Poundbury in Dorset (104).

These thought-provoking books lie at the intersection of written and nonwritten sources, the authors demonstrating how a consideration of material culture can disrupt deep-rooted historical narratives. Without denying that the later fourth to early sixth centuries saw dramatic change, the authors present us with a Late Antiquity for Britain, a period of decay but also of transformation, where change was less sudden and less absolute than we have tended to believe. ■

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