

## **Working with descendant communities in the study of Roman Britain: fragments of an ethnographic project design**

**Richard Hingley, Durham University, UK ([Richard.hingley@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Richard.hingley@durham.ac.uk))**

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If ... we broaden the idea of landscape and understand it to be a way in which people—all people—understand and engage with the material world around them, and if we recognize that people's being-in-the-world is always historically and spatially contingent, it becomes clear that landscapes are always in process, potentially conflicted, untidy and uneasy.

Bender (2001: 3).

### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore connections and contradictions between certain of the post-colonial archaeologies that have developed in the Old World and the New. It addresses the ways that Post-colonial Roman archaeologies in Britain have been created without the involvement of those from outside the academy. It explores the idea that an ethnographic project along the Frontiers of the Roman Empire might assist archaeologists to broaden out the agenda for Roman studies to enable a more inclusive approach that addresses the living relevance of the pre-Roman and Roman past to contemporary individuals and communities while also communicating archaeological interests and concerns about the classical past to a broader audience.

### ***1. Introduction***

The achievements and limitations of the so-called 'post-colonial' movement in Roman archaeology have interested me for some time. Post-colonial Roman archaeologies (PCRA) constitute the work of scholars who have been exploring ways of approaching the Roman past explicitly through critique in order to move beyond colonial thinking (e.g. Gardner 2013; Hingley 2000; Mattingly 2006, 2011; Webster and Cooper 1996). The post-colonial movement is part of a broader re-evaluation of the colonial legacy of past theory and practice in archaeology (e.g. Atalay 2012; Gero

2008; Gosden 2001). The aim of de-colonizing Roman archaeology appears particularly apposite in Britain, since the British drew directly upon Roman models in their imperial and colonial actions during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This had a deep and lasting influence on the types of archaeological approaches that were developed (Hingley 2000: xi-xii). PCRA suggest that we can move forward to address new themes and topics that avoid the baggage of the colonial past, but is this actually possible (Hingley 2014)?

PCRA' agenda includes the exploration of the political context of past ideas about classical Rome and the undermining of simplistic ideas of Roman civilization as 'progress' from barbarism to civilization. PCRA have sought to demonstrate the colonial concepts incorporated in these images and to create new more complex and critical accounts of the Roman Empire. I suggest below that it is debatable whether images of Romans communicated by the media have moved on in a comparable manner. Popular television renditions of Roman Britain continue to emphasize positive images of imperial Rome in civilizing the people of southern Britain (cf. Taylor 2006: 112-131; Wilkinson 2000). This may help to perpetuate collective assumptions about the continuing legitimacy of the philosophy that lay behind British imperialism (cf. Mattingly 2006: 4). It is easy to be critical of the media for promoting outdated images of Roman Britain, but the issue that drives this paper is that PCRA have not engaged at all directly with the public. I propose that we should seek to commence a broader discussion about the contemporary meanings of the Roman past that spans the division between the academy and the public.

The exploration of public attitudes to the ancient monuments of Roman Britain should enable archaeologists and heritage practitioners to assess the intangible ideas that link to tangible heritage (cf. Smith and Akagawa 2009). Some of the theories and methods developing within heritage studies may help in this regard by addressing the complex relationships that mediate present views of the past. This paper addresses how those in the academy and heritage practice might take studies of Roman Britain forward by engaging more fully with the public (cf. Atalay 2012). My argument draws on new work that is addressing the major frontier structure of Roman

Britain, Hadrian's Wall (Hingley 2012a). This paper seeks to establish the context for a new project that will address the 'ethnography of the Wall', but also to explore the important international context of this debate. A broader programme of work exploring the views of the current populations living along the extensive Roman frontier works in different countries (figure 1) is likely to raise significant issues about the valuation of Roman culture throughout a vast and variable territory in Europe, North Africa and the Near East (Hingley 2012b). In the context of this international situation, the creation of PCRA within the territory of one previously dominant Western imperial nation may, in itself, be seen to raise problematic issues that draw a number of contrasts and comparisons with the case studies explored by a number of other author's in this volume (particularly papers by Hodge et al. and Mrozowski et al.).

## **2. Images of Roman Britain**

I shall address the critique of the progressive model of Romanization that has been outlined by PCRA and then explore the extent to which such ideas appear to be perpetuated in some of the recent accounts of Roman Britain developed for the television. The paper will then explore the relevance of the concept of descendant communities for people in the UK, addressing issues arising from post-colonial archaeologies that have developed in other parts of the world.

### ***2.1. Colonial and post-colonial***

The Roman colonization of Britain during the early first millennium AD has long been supposed to have introduced 'civilization' to the peoples of the lowland Britain living to the south of Hadrian's Wall (figure 2). Classical authors established the view of the passing on of Mediterranean culture from the Roman invaders to the lowland Britons. From the late sixteenth century to the twentieth, this idea of the inheritance of civilization by the ancient barbarian population was used as a powerful imperial tool in the conceptualization of the actions of the British as an expanding nation (figure 3; Hingley 2008: 59-67). It was drawn upon during the late sixteenth to nineteenth centuries to help to provide a justification for the subjugation and incorporation of the peoples of the northern and western peripheries of the British Isles (Wales, Scotland and Ireland) into an expanding

metropolitan order. It was used by the English to help define their feelings about the superiority of their own ‘civilization’ in the context of the supposed continuing ‘barbarity’ of communities living in northern and western Britain. It was also drawn upon to justify the conquest and incorporation of indigenous peoples across the extensive overseas territories to which the British wished to lay claim (Hingley 2000). This image of ancestral civilization continues today in the media and presumably, to at least some extent, in the public mind.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this powerful image was articulated through the concept of the ‘Romanization’ of the indigenous population of the southern and eastern British Isles (Hingley 2000), a concept that shared much of its logic with early theories of acculturation in historical and colonial archaeology (Funari et al. 1999, 4). This tradition emphasized the importance of the ‘Roman’ aspects of the province—cities, forts, villas and roads—and downplayed the lives of women, slaves and peasants (Hingley 1999) and the extensive evidence for armed violence and the imposition of the dictatorial rule of Rome (Mattingly 2006: 4). Roman military studies tended to address the creation of military order and discipline on the frontiers of civilization, policies deemed necessary to impose imperial peace (James 2002). The idea of ancestral Romanization was particularly apposite in Great Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the scale and value of Britain’s imperial territories. The idea that this ancient act of Roman colonization led directly to the contemporary international standing of the British was used to justify acts of violence and oppression aimed against many of the indigenous peoples across the British Empire (Hingley 2000). In such colonial images of Roman Britain Hadrian’s Wall formed a vital element, a well-defined boundary to the area occupied by the Romanized population (Hingley 2008, 85).

Britain’s territorial possessions mostly gained independence during the middle decades of the twentieth century and it is felt to some extent that we now live in a ‘post-colonial’ world (although, as the Introduction to this volume emphasizes, not all agree; cf. Gregory 2004; Hingley 2013; Morley 2010; Parsons 2010: 2-4). PCRA has recognized that the world has changed

significantly since the 1960s and has developed new approaches and interpretations about the Roman past. Relevant studies have explored how colonial thinking was exported by Western colonial powers across Europe and the Mediterranean, including David Mattingly's seminal study of French and Italian archaeology in the Maghreb (Mattingly 1996). PCRA has also transformed the agenda to address the complex responses of indigenous people in Britain to Roman conquest and incorporation (Mattingly 2006). Much of the focus has been to problematize the largely positive image of the Roman conquest and assimilation of the indigenous peoples (cf. *ibid*: 4). This has been achieved by building more complex understandings that address the negative—in addition to the positive—aspects of imperial incorporation. Influential approaches have adopted ideas of hybridity, creolization, discrepant experiences and diaspora (cf. Eckardt 2011; Mattingly 2006; Webster 2001). A wider range of archaeological sites has also been excavated, some of which appear to be less apparently 'Roman' in character than the villas, forts and cities that were formerly the focus of scholarly attention (Hingley 1999; cf. Fulford and Holbrook 2011). PCRA has also developed to address the influence of Rome in other areas of Europe, the Mediterranean and parts of the 'New World' (e.g. Dietler 2010; Garraffoni and Funari 2012; Funari et al 2008; Jiménez Díez 2008; Totton and Lafrenz Samuels 2012).

Recent media accounts of classical Rome continue, however, to project a positive image of imperial civilization, drawing upon the ideas that dominated scholarly accounts until the 1990s. A consideration of images of Roman Britain in two popular recent television programmes, which have both been turned into successful books, suggests a great degree of continuity in the Eurocentric models that PCRA have sought to critique. This raises the issue of what we might consider to represent 'official' views of Roman Britain—are the ideas of the Roman past communicated by PCRA examples of official interpretations (cf. Mattingly 2006), or are the Eurocentric interpretations communicated by popular television programmes and books more representative of official heritage? Television programmes evidently seek to entertain and interest people without a

strong educational remit, but many may gain their understanding of the past from these sources, especially where the views of experts are drawn upon.

## ***2.2. Media images of Roman Britain***

The highly popular television series *What the Roman did for us* was shown on the BBC in 2000. It explored the positive innovations supposedly introduced by the Romans to Britain. This programme led to a published volume produced by the researcher who developed the series (Wilkinson 2000). The programmes and the book both emphasize the Roman innovations of the cities, roads and villas (elite country residences). The programme directed very little attention was directed to any potentially negative factors of Roman imperial rule, such as the slaughter of Britons during the process of conquest, their enslavement or the impact on the lives of the agricultural population. By drawing a close connection between classical Rome and modern Britain, it ignored the intervening centuries between the collapse of Roman rule during the fifth century and the rediscovery of classical cultural models during the sixteenth-century Renaissance. Perhaps more significant, it also sidelined the large-scale immigration of people to the UK from overseas from ancient times by stressing the stability of 'our island story' from the Roman period on (cf. Runnymede Trust 2013; Tolia-Kelly 2011). This media agenda closely reflects the narrative of Romanization that has been critiqued by PCRA. It emphasizes the ways of life of the elite and the well connected, linking aspects of modern civilization directly to the ideas and materials introduced to Roman Britain during the first few centuries of the first millennium AD. Comparable with Romanization narratives that have characterized past scholarship, this unquestioning emphasis on progress links the Romans directly to our present time in a way that is familiar from other colonial discourses that address innovation and tradition in strictly binary terms. As other articles in this volume indicate (including those by Cornell and Mrozowski et al.), colonialism does not inevitably lead indigenous people to adopt innovations wholesale and the process of cultural change in colonial situations requires complex negotiations, but there is little sign of such processes in *What the Romans did for us* (cf. Hingley 1999).

The equally popular and long-running TV series *Time Team* followed very much the same approach. The general editor, Tim Taylor (2006: 112), published a book that drew on the knowledge of the experts featured in the programme. This publication summarizes the results of the excavations undertaken over the years. Addressing the Roman period, Taylor emphasized that:

Time Team has dug at over 20 Roman sites, including Hadrian's Wall, Arbeia Roman fort [and] large villa sites ... We have searched for remnants of Roman roads, temples and forts and have been lucky enough to find many beautiful objects, including rings and high-status pottery.

The emphasis here is again on the progress of the province under Roman rule. For example, Taylor (*ibid*) explains that:

the dark peat floors inside the [Iron Age] roundhouse in which we found bone tools and pottery are in marked contrast to the mosaic pavements and concrete floors found on Roman sites. The technological advances that accompanied the Roman invasion have been emphasized by our reconstructions.

The Roman invasion did result in substantial technical innovations, but the emphasis placed on this in such popular accounts simplifies the processes of change and continuity in a Roman territory where the majority of the population lived in a comparatively humble way in the countryside (cf. Hingley and Miles 2002). Earth floors strewn with bone and broken pottery were very common in the Roman countryside, while mosaic pavements were comparatively rare.

Taylor (2006: 113) discusses the hypocausts (underfloor heating systems) and villas explored by *Time Team*, emphasizing mosaic floors as works of art. Along with 'luxury artefacts', he argues that these mosaics make us aware of the 'tremendous' increase in consumer goods that resulted from Roman occupation. *Time Team's* expert on Roman topics told Taylor that much of what we know about the Roman period has 'stayed fairly constant' since the early part of the twentieth century' (*ibid*). Indeed, *Time Team* focused attention on the same types of monuments

that fascinated Victorian and Edwardian excavators, the cities, forts, roads and villas (cf. Hingley 2000: 149-152). There is no mention in Taylor's book of aspects of Roman society such as slavery, prostitution and exploitation, while the rather un-Roman-style life of many rural dwellers across the province is largely sidelined. The issues of the lives of the less-Roman or non-Roman populations of the British Isles represent much more of a focus for PCRA but are effectively written out of these popular accounts, with the indigenous peoples fully acculturating themselves to Roman rule.

Taylor (2006: 114) discusses the military aspect of the Roman province, drawing on the work undertaken by *Time Team* with the Ermine Street Guard re-enactment group. Roman re-enactment groups are highly popular in Britain and are often employed by English Heritage and the National Trust to provide entertainment and live action for visitors at Roman monuments (figure 4) (Giles 2012). Taylor (2006: 114) notes that 'seeing them in action makes you realize that the Roman army's planning and technological advances were on a different scale to the Iron Age'. Not all commentators agree about the extent to which the Roman army represented an advance over the pre-Roman situation, since the Roman invasion led to an increased technology of violence. The Romans were not a peace-keeping force but a ruthless mechanism of imperial enslavement. Graham Appleby, who is a Roman re-enactor turned archaeologist, has argued that Roman re-enactments 'pander to popularized notions of Roman culture, replete with red tunics, togas, shiny helmets and armour' (Appleby 2005: 257). He has also observed that the performances tend to focus more on the military and the elite and less on more mundane aspects of life in the Roman province. Appleby argues that 'public expectations are pandered to rather than challenged.' Thus, Roman military re-enactors present a rather one-sided view of life in Roman Britain. They do not explore major issues of provincial life such as slavery and violence. Indeed, it is important that we do not draw too closely on the idea of the Romans as directly comparable to modern society. The performances of Roman re-enactors sanitize a violent and dangerous past.

It is possible to put these media reflections on Roman Britain into context by considering other more critical forms of reception. For example, the two films *Centurion* (2010) and *The Eagle*



(2011) present more reflective views of the role of Rome in Britain, building upon a cinematic tradition of portraying the darker side of the Roman Empire (Mattingly 2011: 5; cf. Cyrino 2005). Both films reflect public concerns in Britain and the West about recent military action in other parts of the world; they represent Roman soldiers and civilian populations in a more critical fashion than the television programmes. Howard Brenton's notorious play, *The Romans in Britain* (Brenton 1989) first performed in 1980, provided a similarly critical reflection on Roman rule. This direct linked the actions of Roman colonists in Britain with the activities of the contemporary British army in Ireland. Tim Brennan's performance art raises the theme of the relationship of the Roman frontier in Britain to attempts to prevent movement between peoples in today's world (Brennan 2005; cf. Hingley 2012a: 323). Brenton's and Brennan's accounts are united in their fictionalization of the Roman past but neither has become mainstream in media terms. They draw upon a far more critical tradition in reflecting negatively upon modern and ancient acts of colonialism (cf. Hingley 2011: 624-626).

In answering the contention that we need to provide more critical views of the Roman past for television, one response is that studying the negative side of Roman conquest could lead to less successful programmes. Another stock response is to argue that the public would not engage with the nuanced nature of the past as communicated by archaeological writings, and are likely to favour simpler and more linear versions of history. Appleby (2005: 258) has observed that: 'To propose to Roman re-enactors that they should consider theoretical issues such as identity, hybridization or creolization, would, I am sure, have the majority running for cover!' Appleby also suggests, however, that archaeologists should engage with re-enactors to explore a more complex and critical interpretation of the Roman past. The rise of 'Indigenous archaeologies' and 'descendant archaeologies' clearly communicates that people feel strongly about the past, and it is becoming increasingly evident that archaeologists in the UK need to develop a more open agenda in order to be able to communicate their arguments (cf. Atalay 2012).

## **2. Indigenous voices**

The consideration of issues arising from Indigenous and descendant archaeologies in the ‘New World’ raise issues about the degree to which official versions of the Roman past interact with the views and interests of various publics. Television programmes such as *Time Team* and *What the Romans did for us* reach far larger audiences than the writings of PCRA. Although an attempt has been made to develop a more accessible post-colonial version of Roman Britain by David Mattingly in his book *An Imperial Possession* (2006), the impressive level of detail may discourage all but the most enthusiastic member of the public from reading this entire volume. PCRA has paid very little attention to the interests of the public and future research should address this topic. I argue that, although we have no ‘Indigenous groups’ in the legal sense in the UK, we do have people who draw deeply on associations with the ancient communities who built our monuments (cf. Hingley 2012a: 282). The voices of these people might potentially enable Roman archaeologists in Britain to re-orientate their aims, theories and methods.

### ***2.1. Post-colonial archaeology of the New World and the Old***

A fundamental issue here relates to the contrasting character of ‘post-colonial’ archaeology in the ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Worlds (cf. Hingley 2014). The basic tenets of archaeology in the ‘New World’ and Australia have been challenged through engagement with the thoughts and beliefs of Indigenous peoples. For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘indigenous’ is used to address occupants of a single area whose communities appear to have had a long-term history connected with that particular place (although we need to note the complexity of this concept; see Hayes this volume). By contrast, ‘Indigenous’ has a more specific definition (Smith and Wobst 2005: 7), relating to contemporary communities living in 72 countries who are in a disadvantageous position with regard to the dominant population (including the Indigenous peoples of North America, Oceania, New Zealand and Australia). In these parts of the world, the discipline of archaeology has developed a powerful ‘post-colonial’ movement as a result of the intellectual and political conflicts that have occurred with Indigenous peoples. As a result, archaeologists have increasingly engaged with alternative ways of interpreting the right of access by these communities to human remains,

cultural property and land (Gero 1999; Smith 2004; Smith and Wobust 2005). This has gradually led to a more open agenda that draws in communities that can be identified as 'descendant'. Theresa Singleton and Charles Orser (2003, 143) define descendant communities as 'broadly speaking, present-day groups of people whose heritage is under investigation at an archaeological site or who have some other historical, cultural, or symbolic link to the site.' They also observe that too many archaeologists imagine that descendant communities are simply those who are the biological descendants of the people who occupied the site (*ibid*: 144). Descendant communities might be defined in more abstract terms to include people who draw historical, cultural or symbolic associations from an archaeological site or from the concept of a link to a perception of life in the past (cf. Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008: 8). Archaeologists have increasingly worked to involve Indigenous and descendant communities more fully in excavations and research (Atalay 2012; Smith and Wobst ed. 2005).

A basic issue in the UK is that, if we adopt the strict legal definition, we have no Indigenous communities. No individual or community can demonstrate a direct claim to descent from the members of a pre-Roman or Roman population. The indigenous populations of the UK have been highly mixed since immigration began in prehistory which may have accelerated during the Roman period and at various times since the early fifth century (Eckardt 2011; Tolia Kelly 2011). Many people in the UK have imagined a continuity of population from the ancient past to the present day, but there is a powerful myth that the English are descended from the Anglo-Saxons (Young 2008). Archaeologists today generally feel that it is likely that the modern population of the entire UK, like that of many nations, has complex genetic origins. It is likely that some of the prehistoric and Roman populations that lived across southern Britain have descendants living in England today. DNA studies suggest a certain amount of population stability in some areas and changing populations elsewhere (cf. Oppenheimer 2006).

There are many people across the UK who feel a deep spiritual connection with the past populations that lived in Britain and it is possible to consider these people as descendant

communities. These peoples include pagan groups, members of Iron Age (Celtic) and Roman re-enactment groups and also communities that live close to or identify with particular ancient monuments.

## ***2.2. Iron Age and Roman descendant communities in England***

There is no legal requirement for archaeologists to obtain permission to excavate from local people across much of Western Europe, unless they own the land on which a project is to be undertaken (Gosden 2001: 256). This lack of engagement ignores the powerful attachment that some local communities have to their sites and landscapes. This is increasingly being addressed under the banner of ‘community archaeology’ (cf. Smith and Waterton 2009), but research on Iron Age and Roman heritage remains extremely limited. As a result, we really do not have very much information about the range of attitudes held by the public about the legacy of ancient Britain and classical Rome. It is unknown to what extent school and media presentations of Roman Britain influence the public and to what degree other contrasting ideas about the past may occur. Future work with the public might investigate this issue, but in the absence of any detailed information on how the public perceives ancient monuments, I shall explore some ideas considered by archaeologists to represent unofficial heritages. I shall not address some of the problems that arise through the use of Celts and the ancient Britons as national ancestor figures, ideas that can sometimes draw upon the embittered narratives of the extreme right (Wilson 2013: 213; cf. Bowen 2000; Kenrick and Lewis 2004; Kuper 2003). Instead, I shall focus on some alternative ideas of historical origin that are potentially more inclusive in nature.

Contemporary pagans, who draw upon ancient sources in a wide variety of ways for their beliefs, have presented a formidable challenge to the official ideas of ancient heritage. An important element in these pagan religions is the concept of the ‘sacred site’, which Blain and Wallis (2007: 28) have argued is derived by pagans partly from the claims of indigenous communities for their own rights with regard to the repatriation of artefacts and the reburial of human remains.

Monuments in the British countryside sacred to pagan individuals and communities include stone

circles, barrows, standing stones, 'rock art', Iron Age forts, Roman-period temples sites and holy wells. Religious performances in these places are often marked by votive offerings such as flowers, food, drink, candlewax and coins (*ibid*: 38, 42). Attention has been focused mainly on the activities of pagans at Stonehenge and Avebury (cf. Bender 1999; 2001; Stout 2008), and some contemporary druids draw on an association with these and other megalithic monuments. This is a tradition with a long ancestry. A number of eighteenth-century antiquaries drew upon classical texts to elaborate tales that connected historical writings about druids to places (Chippindale 2004: 82-95; Smiles 1994: 80-82). Nineteenth-century painters continued this tradition by associating Stonehenge with druids (e.g. Smiles 1994: figures 42, 48, 60; Hutton 2013: 24). Druidic performance at Stonehenge commenced in the early twentieth century and drew upon these earlier ideas about the character of the monument and its association with the druids (cf. Chippindale 2004: 172-174; Stout 2008: 126-53). Only when archaeological dating techniques started to develop was it realized that the construction of megalithic monuments pre-dated the historically attested druids by several millennia. Archaeologists have often used this knowledge to argue that such 'un-official' forms of heritage can have no place in a scientific understanding of the human past (cf. Blain and Wallis 2007: 34-63; Stout 2008: 163-165).

The archaeological response to druidic worship at Neolithic sites has modified considerable in the past two decades and many pagans and archaeologists are now united in efforts to protect and promote these sites (cf. Wallis and Blain 2011). It is generally accepted that public support assists with the promotion and protection of these remains, even if archaeologists and pagans cannot strictly agree about their values and meanings. Since Stonehenge, Avebury and other henge monuments did not physically disappear during later prehistory, subsequent populations have continued to interact with them and it is likely that some may still have been perceived as sacred places when the Romans came to Britain (Hutton 2011: 12-13). The scientific bias of analytical archaeology may have led to the exclusion of ephemeral evidence for the later significance of these surviving remains.

Pagan activities also occur at Roman-period sites across Britain, where they draw on ‘Celtic’ gods and spirits. Marion Bowman (1998) has explored the city of Bath (Avon) as a contemporary centre of pagan religion, healing and pilgrimage. Bath has a rich mythical history and pagan and New Age influences are discernable at the reconstructed Roman baths focused around the sacred pool (*ibid*: 27). Roman dedications and offerings of coins, curses and other objects at this spa relate to the twinned goddess Sulis Minerva. Minerva is the Roman goddess in this pairing and Sulis is believed to represent a pre-Roman or ‘Celtic’ goddess who may have been worshiped here before Roman times, although there is no clear evidence for an Iron Age shrine. Recent events here draw on the idea of Bath as a ‘Celtic’ religious centre and Bowman notes that ‘Offerings, blessings and the odd curse are still occasionally thrown into the waters of the Roman Baths.’ These activities focus on the idea that the Romans found an existing pre-Roman cult centre focused on the baths. The contemporary pagan cult also focuses on the mythical history of the spa, drawing on the medieval and early modern tale of King Bladud and his association with the druids (Bowman 1998: 28; for the story of Bladud, see Hingley 2008: 194-201). The cult site at Bath is also integrated with the concept of holistic healing which draws upon the Roman and modern tradition of the spa waters (Bowman 1998: 29). Bowman argued that ‘in contemporary Bath there are undoubtedly those for whom such legend is lived experience’ (*ibid*: 30).

Bath is by no means the only place in Britain at which ‘Celtic’ and other pagan spirits are celebrated. Although there has been no thorough survey of the available information, there is evidence for pagan activity at a number of Roman ritual sites along Hadrian’s Wall. Just to the west of the Roman fort at Carrawburgh (Northumberland) there was a cluster of small Roman temples, constructed in a waterlogged valley. The only structure visible today is the temple dedicated to the eastern god Mithras. This was re-discovered and excavated in 1949 and 1950 (Breeze 2006: 219-222). Close by was a temple dedicated to the Nymphs and the *Genius loci* (the spirit of place) and just to the north was a shrine now called Coventina’s Well. Coventina was a nymph or water goddess whose cult focused around a natural spring (*ibid*). Her shrine was located and excavated in

1876 and produced a wealth of offerings, including a number of evocative images (figure 5).

The mithraeum at Carrawburgh contains three concrete reproductions of altars connected with the worship of Mithras. Offerings left by visitors on the central altar most commonly feature modern coins, drawing on a tradition of leaving coins in wet places in the British countryside. Other objects placed on this altar include flowers, sweets, food items, golf balls, plastic dinosaurs, a modern wooden writing tablet and two ‘Ten Commandment Tokens’ (figure 6). The latter items, produced by the company ‘needGod.com’, are commonly left in places where the dedicator feels that people need to reflect on the presence of God. Perhaps the offerings on Mithras’ altar are at least partly directed at the cult of Coventina, since she is highly popular on the internet. In February 2013, a search with Google produced 129,000 websites with references to Coventina, referencing her in a wide variety of ways. Her cult appears to draw upon associations comparable to that of Sulis at Bath. There is no obvious present-day place in which to leave offerings to Coventina and it is possible that the altar at the mithraeum constitutes a convenient place to commemorate her healing spirit. On the other-hand, Mithras also has quite a cult following in the present day and the offerings may partly represent his continued worship.

These examples demonstrate that the Roman invasion and settlement of Britain has a living relevance to some people in Britain today. These particular activities may seem to be rather marginal in reflecting beliefs that few specialists would accept as in any way relevant to understanding the past, but they also provide challenges to media images of Roman culture as progress. They may suggest that unofficial heritages exist in a variety of different forms across Britain, partially spread by digital media, although more research is required to assess this suggestion.

### **3. Archaeological ethnographies: a proposal for a case study of Roman frontiers**

In the absence of any detailed research on public attitudes to Roman monuments in Britain, an ethnographic study of the contemporary population of Hadrian’s Wall is planned to be undertaken over the next few years. This proposal builds on the earlier project *Tales of the Frontier* that has

already addressed the afterlife of this major Roman frontier system (Hingley 2012a). The Wall was a complex frontier structure within the northern borderlands of the Roman province of *Britannia*. Constructed during the AD 120s, it was occupied for most of the Roman period until the early fifth century, when imperial control of southern Britain collapsed (Breeze 2006). This monument has continued to have a dramatic physical presence and has been deeply drawn upon for cultural and political reasons (Hingley 2012a), including ideas about nationhood and empire. *Tales of the Frontier* explored aspects of the contemporary relevance of Hadrian's Wall (e.g. Hingley 2012a: 304-326; Tolia Kelly 2011; Witcher 2011), but the main emphasis of study was placed upon the past history of this substantial monument and it was not possible to consider in any detail the attitudes of people who live along the line of the Wall today or of visitors to the remains.

When heritage managers arrange for the public to be interviewed about their experiences of archaeological sites in the UK, questions usually focus on issues relating to the marketing of monuments. It has not been common to explore ideas of the sense of place focusing around particular sites (cf. Warnaby et al 2010). For example, a recent survey of actual and potential visitors to Hadrian's Wall incorporated four aims that related to identifying the needs of visitors and whether these were being met (Mills 2013: 171). Such surveys are linked to the idea of generating increased income from better-informed visitors (Warnaby et al 2010: 1365). This approach does not seek to identify the extent to which various forms of 'official' knowledge of Roman Britain might have influenced the ideas of people who live close to, and of those who visit, the monument. Such surveys also fail to address the complex variety of views and attitudes that are held by local residents about ancient places (*ibid*: 1379). Recent developments in heritage practice relating to the debates about descendant communities help to point towards a different approach to the assessment of the public views to ancient monuments.

Heritage practice has been changed across much of the world as a result of the political debates arising from Indigenous responses to established heritage measures (Atalay 2012; Smith 2004). In some cases the outcome has been a healthy engagement between heritage practitioners,



academics and some members of particular communities. As a result, new concepts of valuation have been developing (Atalay 2012: 3). Comparable considerations have had a deep impact in the museum world in Britain, partly as a result of the multitude of items held by British museums that were derived from indigenous peoples across much of the former British Empire (cf. Benton and Watson 2010). These debates, however, have not had so much influence is on the consideration of the intangible aspects of ancient heritage (cf. Hassard 2009), especially the unofficial views of heritage which may well be held by local communities across Britain.

A variety of approaches have been developed in heritage practice to assess and communicate the associative values inherent in ancient monuments and places, including papers in this volume (cf. Atalay 2012; Giaccardi 2012; Hollowell and Nicholas 2009; Kurtz 2010; Labadi 2007; Orange 2011; Smith and Waterton 2009). These works seek to inform and enrich heritage practice but they also have value in influencing how ‘specialists’ view the historical resources they explore. Some relevant work has been undertaken in Britain, often drawing upon intangible heritage and heritages that have formerly been marginalized (cf. Harrison 2010, 2011; Watson 2011). The proposed project on Hadrian’s Wall aims to assess the significance of the monument as a living landscape and to explore the ways that people view and value the areas—both rural and urban—that constitute the monument today. Part of this assessment will explore the ways that official views derived from education and the media have influenced people’s appreciations of the Wall. There is a general feeling that public images of the monument relate to the masculine fixation on the idea of the Roman centurion, derived from the City of Rome, marching up and down a ruined stone frontier Wall (figure 4). There are many other ways in which this monument can be appreciated, from the image of the Wall as a bastion of Western civilization (e.g. Kipling 1906), or as an analogy for contemporary efforts to re-create the European Union as a ‘gated community’ (cf. Carr 2012), to ideas of the enforced imposition of a divisive military frontier on an unwilling indigenous population (Hingley 2012a: 320-321), or those that draw upon the gods, goddesses and famous people who formerly inhabited these landscapes.

Mythical ideas are highly variable in character and relate tales of a variety of figures, from giants who may have built the stone curtain Wall to legendary tales of King Arthur (Hingley 2012a, 180-181, 211). Although some survived into the middle of the nineteenth century, it is not apparent whether these tales live on in the landscape of Hadrian's Wall. It is likely that many folk tales have ceased to circulate through the development of official notions of Roman heritage over the past 150 years (*ibid*: 231-54). Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know the extent to which such stories may still exist amongst the communities along the Wall, and perhaps they could be reintroduced following the ethnographic fieldwork proposed here. Other ideas, such as the cult of Coventina, have been revived as a result of Victorian archaeological discoveries and these could be supplemented through additional archaeological fieldwork at a range of archaeological sites.

It is also possible to draw on the potential of recent debates about the establishment of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site (cf. Breeze and Jilek 2008). Hadrian's Wall has been a World Heritage Site since 1987, but over the past decade this monument has been incorporated into a transnational WHS that includes the Antonine Wall in Scotland and the Roman frontier works along the rivers Rhine and Danube in Germany. Other European sections of the Roman frontiers are under discussion as potential extensions to this WHS but relatively little progress has been made in considering sections of the Roman frontier in North Africa and the Near East (Hingley 2012a: 321-324). An ambitious plan for the future would be to link the proposed ethnographic cases of Hadrian's Wall to comparable fieldwork in other sections of the former Roman frontier areas of Europe, the Near East and North Africa. Politicians often consider the Roman Empire as ancestral to modern Europe, but this is a Eurocentric concept, since classical Rome also incorporated extensive areas of the Mediterranean rim. This Eurocentric notion of imperial Rome reflects its appropriation as a fundamental symbol of civilization by Western nations. Exploring the broader agenda of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire, including areas in which attitudes to Roman imperialism may well be more critical, should enable the creation of a whole series of locally-based ethnographies, accounts that could address a variety of local, regional

and global issues (cf. Lafrenz Samuels and Totten 2012). This might, in turn, enable the development of a broad-based, inclusive and challenging agenda—a transformative and descendant-based post-colonial Roman archaeology (cf. Moser et al. 2002: 221). This approach might also be used to reflect back on the notions of the Roman and pre-Roman past across Western Europe and in the New World (cf. Hingley 2011; 2012b), aiming to challenge the worrying rise of new nationalisms.

### ***Conclusion***

The prime aim of the future development of this project will be to build some participatory work into the ways archaeologists assess Hadrian's Wall. It would contribute to the official policy that aims to build a more collegiate approach bringing together the interests and concerns of the public, heritage practitioners and those in the academy (Hingley 2012a: 336; Mills 2013). It would build on the more directly cultural approach developed through *Tales of the Frontier* in order to focus on people's sense of place in the landscapes making up the Wall zone today. Linking into the introduction to this paper, which emphasized the character of the PCRA that have arisen over the past two decades, the project should also aim to address a critical focus on contemporary geopolitics, exploring the cross-cultural and cross-temporal potential of Hadrian's Wall as a source of reflection on frontiers and the movement of people in the contemporary world (Hingley 2012a: 324-325; cf. Cooper and Rumford 2013). As in the case of the Harvard project (reviewed in this volume), the aim here should be to decolonize the way that the past is received by those in the academy, by local people and by visitors—to situate and interrogate our colonial narratives by articulating the relationship between ancient and modern worlds.

What purposes does the idea of Rome play in the views of people along and across this Roman frontier zone today? The example of pagan beliefs at Carrawburgh would suggest a critical anti-Roman (or anti-state) stance for some visitors and Iron Age and Celtic re-enactment groups may project a comparable image; it should be noted, however, that Roman re-enactment groups are far more common than their Celtic rivals. What is the balance of interpretations in contemporary

views about the Wall? To what extent should PCRA of Hadrian's Wall seek to prioritize a critical reflection on academic traditions and to what extent should it seek to absorb multivocality and cosmopolitanism? These are issues that remain to be addressed in firming up this fragmentary research proposal and they are also ideas that resonate with a number of other papers in this volume. The messy business of comprehending values for the Frontiers of the Roman Empire should reflect the complexity of current views and also the genealogy of how these attitudes have come into being. It should also direct a focus toward how to include and influence the public who inhabit the Wall's landscapes along the entire Frontiers of the Roman Empire.

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### ***Illustrations***

Figure 1. The Frontiers of the Roman Empire. The more darkly shaded areas represent territories from which soldiers were recruited to serve on Hadrian's Wall. Drawn by Christina Unwin using information provided by Rob Witcher.

Figure 2. Map of Britain, showing the location of Hadrian's Wall, the Antonine Wall, York and London. Drawn by Christina Unwin.

Figure 3. Agricola by J. Goldar. This illustration is from E. Barnard's *The New, Comprehensive, Impartial and Complete History of England* (1790). It shows the Roman governor Agricola bringing the gifts of the civilization to the ancient Britons in the first century AD (see Hingley 2005, 24-5). Engraving in possession of the author.

Figure 4. The ‘Living Frontier’ event at Corbridge (Northumberland) on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

Photograph by Robert Witcher.

Figure 5. One of the commemorative stones from Coventina’s Well, now at Chesters Museum (Northumberland). Photograph by Richard Hingley, reproduced by permission of English Heritage.

Figure 6. Offerings on the Roman altar at Carrawburgh (Northumberland) in 2012. Photograph by Richard Hingley.

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