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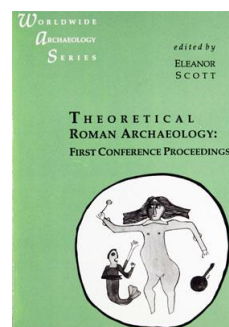
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ROMAN-PERIOD ACTIVITY AT PREHISTORIC RITUAL MONUMENTS IN BRITAIN AND IN THE ARMORICAN PENINSULA

Kenneth Rainsbury Dark

This paper is about the archaeology of superstition, a subject often neglected, although archaeologists frequently write about religion. The paper distinguishes between ritual and superstition, and explores the Roman material evidence in detail. It is argued that the evidence for Roman period activity at prehistoric ritual monuments in Britain and Armorica is invariably reduced to anecdotal significance, obscuring important relationships. It is argued that prehistoric ritual monuments were perceived in different ways in Roman Britain and the Armorican peninsula. In Armorica they were used as religious sites throughout the Roman period and in the immediate post-Roman centuries were often Christianised; in Roman Britain they were construed in a superstitious rather than religious fashion, and formed no part of organised paganism.

INTRODUCTION —————

This paper is about the archaeology of superstition, a subject often neglected, although archaeologists have often written about religion. Superstition is aimed at procuring advantage or avoiding disadvantage, but not forming a broader code of living and not requiring a wider set of related beliefs. The same superstitions can, therefore, be held by believers in different religions and who follow different codes of action in every other respect. Explanation is not a necessary component of a superstitious ritual and its action requires no explanation on the part of the participant. In this respect, superstition is different from Romano-Celtic or Classical paganism, where ritual is related to belief in deities who must be appeased, honoured, or persuaded by the participant. Here, I shall examine some evidence for superstition in Roman Britain.

Romano-British religion has been the subject of much recent study (e.g. Henig 1984; Rodwell 1980a), and its principal features are well known to modern archaeologists. Yet the Roman-period material found at prehistoric (by which I mean here, pre-Iron Age) ritual sites has received scant attention from either prehistorians or Romanists. The discovery of Romano-British burials, or even allegedly altars, at such sites has been reduced to almost anecdotal significance. This neglect has continued while some scholars of later periods have felt capable of accepting continuity, into the post-Roman period, of religious veneration at prehistoric ritual sites, on the basis of a coincidence between later churches and prehistoric ritual sites, and of the uncertainly relevant evidence of late Anglo-Saxon legislation (Morris 1989, 72–74, 81–82).

In this paper I examine how some types of prehistoric ritual sites were used in Roman Britain and how we might explain this use. It may be helpful to this approach to contrast Britain with another area, and for this purpose I have chosen the Armorican peninsula, which is close geographically and was probably (in terms of levels of Romanisation) similar to Roman Britain. The Armorican peninsula also has a recently well-published relevant database.

First, a misconception common among archaeologists must be cleared up. That is, the supposition that the coincidence of later church sites and prehistoric ritual monuments, or that the evidence provided by late Anglo-Saxon texts, inform us of religious continuity from pre-Roman Britain to Roman Britain. It has been claimed that when an Anglo-Saxon, or later church, was sited inside, or on, a prehistoric ritual monument, this was to Christianise the monument because it was still venerated by pagans. It has also been claimed that late Anglo-Saxon laws prohibiting pagan practices attest the contemporary existence of these practices; so that when they forbid worship of standing stones, for example, they attest the existence of that worship at the date of writing. If one were to accept such evidence, then there would be much to support a model of continuing rural paganism from the pre-Roman Iron Age into the late Anglo-Saxon period. But this interpretation is unacceptable.

There is no archaeological or historical evidence that unambiguously informs us that any Anglo-Saxon church was sited at a place where non-Germanic paganism survived into the Anglo-Saxon period. Nor does any pre-ninth-century Anglo-Saxon penitential refer to the worship of what may be prehistoric ritual monuments, such as standing stones (Morris 1989, 62–63). It is not credible that earlier ecclesiastical legislators chose to

ignore such activity, and, in this absence of ecclesiastical prohibition, Britain is unlike Gaul, where such texts are common at a much earlier date (Ferguson 1872, 24–25). Nor are there equivalent prohibitions against the worship of, or at, what may be prehistoric ritual monuments in penitentials written in Celtic Britain and Ireland (Bieler 1963). It would, therefore, seem reasonable to suppose that when these prohibitions are encountered in late Anglo-Saxon texts they derive from earlier, but presumably continental, sources, as did much of late Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical culture (e.g. see Szarmach with Oggins 1986).

It is also necessary to note that Anglo-Saxon textual sources reveal a considerable interest in explaining the countryside, including the origins of place-names referring to the presumed pagan function of sites such as Avebury (Gelling 1978, 141–42; Burl 1979, 31, 130–32). Thus a visible, and to a (later) Anglo-Saxon, obviously pagan, place, irrespective of whether or not it was used as a religious site in the pre-Anglo-Saxon period, might have been explained as a pagan site.

It would, then, be probable that some Anglo-Saxon (or for that matter, some later medieval) churches might have been so located as to negate ‘heathen *foci*’ which were merely the result of Anglo-Saxon attempts to explain the surrounding landscape. The siting of such churches need tell us nothing about the pre-Christian religious use of these sites, only, perhaps, about late Anglo-Saxon (and later) attitudes to them. The Anglo-Saxon perception of the prehistoric landscape is a source for Anglo-Saxon England, not for prehistoric or Roman Britain.

Our proper sources for evaluating the possibility of the religious use of prehistoric ritual sites in Roman Britain are, therefore, Roman-period archaeological sources. It is only these sources, lacking directly relevant historical data, which may inform us of what role, if any, such pre-Iron-Age monuments had in Roman Britain, and it is to them that we may now turn.

Regrettably there is no general survey, or corpus, of Roman-period material at British prehistoric sites, and it is not my intention to attempt to provide such a corpus here. The most recent discussion of this question has been Aitchison’s re-evaluation of the numismatic data, which was exclusively concerned with coins (and ‘toilet-instruments’) (Aitchison 1988, 275–76). Consequently, a survey, albeit brief, of the relevant data is first presented.

THE ROMANO-BRITISH EVIDENCE —————

This may be considered under categories of prehistoric ritual sites. Here,

barrows, megalithic structures, and henges, are chosen as types of monument which, as stone or earthwork features, might have been readily visible in the Roman-period countryside, but which were not, in general, reused for major sites in the intervening centuries since their prehistoric ritual use.

Roman-period activity at pre-Roman Iron Age hill-forts is excluded from this discussion as it is far from clear that these sites were primarily ritual foci in their ultimate pre-Roman form. Earlier use of these sites for prehistoric ritual monuments may, therefore, have been obscured, confused, or superseded by their pre-Roman Iron Age occupation. The inclusion of pre-Roman Iron Age shrines within them should not dissuade us from this view, as these may be a ritual aspect of an otherwise domestic context. It is interesting, however, in the context of the comments below, that hill-forts were used for temples in Roman Britain, as at Maiden Castle, and so were, in this respect, unlike the sites discussed here.

Barrows

Many prehistoric barrows have produced Romano-British finds upon excavation. These finds may derive from inside, on, or adjacent to the mound and comprise two main categories, pottery and coins. Sometimes the pottery, which can occur in some quantity, is present as sherds, sometimes as complete vessels. Coins are present individually, as 'accumulations' (Aitchison 1988, 276–77), and in hoards. Chronologically, although there is a broad range, some bias towards the fourth century is visible; but this may merely reflect the greater availability of coins in fourth-century Britain, a characteristic seen also on settlement sites (Aitchison 1988, 276–77). Coin- and pottery-finds combine in coin-hoards placed in pottery vessels (*ibid.*, 276; e.g. Kinnes and Longworth 1985, 48, 51–52, 55, 113). Pottery found at many sites encompasses a wide range of dates from the first to the fourth centuries AD, with perhaps some ceramic bias towards the fourth century, arguably lending weight to the numismatic bias. It would, however, probably be unwise to place too much significance on this as, again, it may be a reflection of no more than availability.

Burial is also, surprisingly perhaps, common. Inhumation and cremation both occur – for example at Roxton, Bedfordshire – but inhumation is, in general, more common, perhaps again suggesting a Late Roman chronological bias (Taylor and Woodward 1982, 106, 142, table 3 on 100–1; Darvill and Grinsell 1989, 58). Burials were placed on, or adjacent to, barrows. The cremations may be in urns or without urns, and

characteristically burials of both types are few in number at any site, often occurring singly. It would, therefore, seem that barrows were not centres for major Romano-British cemeteries rather than for individual burial or the burial of small groups. The use of barrow sites for small groups of inhumations or for single inhumations, some with what may be associated churches of immediately post-Roman date, continued in Britain after the end of the Roman period (e.g. Edwards 1991, 131–33).

Interestingly it is not only round barrows but also, perhaps especially, long barrows that were treated in this way (Ashbee 1984, 69, 74, 152–53, 157). At Julliberries's Grave, for example, Romano-British finds included a hoard of Constantinian coins in a pot, a complete samian-ware (form-27) cup, a late fourth-century coin, an inhumation burial, and over fifty sherds of Romano-British coarse pottery, some in association with a hearth (Jessup 1937). Hearths have also been found at the periphery of a few Glamorgan-shire barrows (RCHM 1976, 79, 93). But the evidence from such hearths is neither obviously ritual nor obviously domestic.

Much more striking, if correctly attributed, is the evidence of altars at an alleged, and perhaps doubtful, Gloucestershire barrow, although a second possible example has been discounted on the grounds that it was an eighteenth-century gazebo (O'Neil and Grinsell 1960, 54, 104). Other than these barrows, ritual artefacts and templestructures are conspicuously absent from such sites, although the nineteenth-century discovery, adjacent to Silbury Hill, of shafts, wells and many coins could hint at an adjacent temple or complex of 'ritual shafts' there (Goddard 1913, 186).

There are two other claimed instances of Romano-British shrines at prehistoric barrows: at Haddenham the shrine stood on a barrow, but this was, as the excavator observed, also an elevated dry 'island' in a fen, so the shrine may have been positioned simply to take advantage of a small area of dry land (Evans, 1985, 88). More convincingly, at Slonk Hill, in Sussex, a pair of barrows was enclosed in a rectilinear ditched enclosure in the pre-Roman Iron Age, one of the barrows being further enclosed by a rectilinear fence or building (Rodwell 1980b, 217, fig. 10.3). But even at Slonk Hill the evidence is far from clear cut, with interpretative and chronological problems and reports of Romano-British inhumations at the site, confusing the picture (Rodwell 1980b, 216–18). If this is an instance of the use of a barrow for a Romano-British shrine, it is the only strong evidence that such locations might be specially used in this way, but it clearly is not secure enough evidence alone to be used to contradict the overall patterning visible in the data from other sites.

Megalithic Structures

Romano-British material is known from a number of megalithic sites. Stonehenge itself has produced finds of Romano-British pottery, coins and, probably Romano-British, inhumation burials (Atkinson 1956, 21, 51). Indeed, the close association between the stratigraphy of Romano-British pottery and that of 'blue-stone' chippings within the stone circle need not necessarily be fortuitous (Atkinson 1956, 92). Stone-chippings do not occur in one of the Romano-British burials on the site, suggesting that, as these chippings form a continuous layer across the site, the chippings were not present when the grave was filled in. According to Atkinson (1956, 92) the vertical and horizontal distribution of the 'blue-stone' chippings 'strikingly matched' that of Roman pottery on the site. The observation that some 'blue-stone' chippings may have been deliberately dumped in ditches (*ibid.*, 93) tells us nothing about the origin or date of all the 'blue-stone' chippings found there, and so does not rule out the possibility of a Roman-period date for at least some. Whatever the date of the 'blue-stones's' arrival at Stonehenge, the techniques of stone finishing employed on them may indicate the use of metal tools (*ibid.*, 137). Although it is possible that an atypical monument received atypical treatment in prehistory, perhaps it is plausible that Roman-period activity at the site included refacing the stones, rather than, as Atkinson has argued, aimed at destroying them (*ibid.*, 2-3). The possibility that 'blue-stone' chippings derive from Roman-period reworking must re-open the question of whether the Y and Z holes are Romano-British, for deliberate deposits of such chippings were found at the bases of these holes. If so, then Stonehenge saw substantial Romano-British activity and may have received its final large-scale remodelling only in the Roman period.

Roman coins and pottery also occur at, for example, the Anglesey megaliths, although burial is not found at these sites (e.g. Smith and Lynch 1986, 79, 82, 113, 115-6, 121), and elsewhere in Britain stone circles have been the find-spots of the same sorts of miscellaneous pottery sherds and coins as found at barrows (e.g. Smith 1989, 35). Again certain Romano-British 'ritual artefacts' are not found at any of them.

Henges

The last class of prehistoric ritual site considered here is the henge. Roman coins and pottery have come from a number of these monuments, including Avebury (Smith 1965, 243).

Nevertheless, not a single Roman temple or altar demonstrably comes

from a henge-site, nor (again) are 'ritual artefacts' found on them. The only possible exception is Maumberry Rings, Dorset (Bradley 1976), where the henge was changed into a Roman-period earthwork amphitheatre. Some have seen this re-use in the context of the ritual associations of amphitheatre activities, but without further evidence it may be equally likely that the henge was merely of a convenient shape to allow the construction of the amphitheatre (cf. Lambick 1988, 46-7).

INTERPRETATION —————

Romano-British finds and burials thus commonly occur in small quantities at prehistoric ritual monuments, but encompass a narrow range of objects (mostly coins and pottery) and features (inhumation graves, cremations, hearths). The only possible exceptions to this generalisation are all either doubtful, as at Slonk Hill, the Gloucestershire barrow with altars, and the Haddenham shrine, or otherwise exceptional as prehistoric sites, as at Stonehenge and Silbury Hill.

This range of artefacts and features stands in contrast to the rich Armorican data. Using J. André's (1961) and P. Galliou's (1989, 31, 151-53) lists of sites, it is possible to construct a table which displays this contrast more vividly than would a non-graphic presentation of it (see p. 140).

CONTRASTS BETWEEN ROMAN-PERIOD AND LATER ACTIVITY AT PREHISTORIC RITUAL MONUMENTS —————

With the contrast between the British and Armorican evidence set out in this way we may note that the British sites lack votive objects, reuse as temples, evidence of refurbishment, evidence of later Christianisation, and evidence of early Roman burial. The coin series at British sites is also more restricted, being primarily of the later Roman period (third to fourth century). The lack of early Roman material in Britain, but its occurrence in Gaul, might represent continuity of activity from the pre-Roman past in Gaul, but discontinuity from that past in Britain. Although artefacts were deposited in these monuments in Britain, there are no instances of amphora or glass vessels being so used, the British evidence consisting of other ceramics, coins, and other types of 'domestic' artefacts.

An interpretation of this contrast may be sought in the Roman-period attitudes to, and functions of, these monuments in Britain and Gaul, for explanation is certainly not to be found in the availability of classes of arte-

	Armorica	Britain	Correlation
coins in monument	**	**	*
coins on monument	**	**	*
coin hoards	-	*	-
fine pot in monument	**	**	*
fine pot on monument	**	**	*
coarse pot in monument	**	**	*
coarse pot on monument	**	**	*
amphora	**	-	-
tile/brick	**	-	-
glass	**	-	-
other 'domestic' objects	-	**	-
Venus figurines	**	-	-
other votive	*	-	-
altars	-	(?)	-
temple/shrine at monument	-	*	-
temple/shrine constructed out of monument	**	-	-
cremation in monument	**	-	-
cremation at monument	**	-	-
inhumation in monument	**	**	*
inhumation at monument	-	**	-
mausoleum at monument	*	-	-
Christianisation by carving	**	*	-
church on monument	**	**	*
church constructed out of monument	*	-	-

* = 1 ** = more than 1 - = not present (?) = uncertain

factual material. Glass, amphora, and votive objects were to be found even in 'remote' highland-zone areas of Britain (e.g. Green 1978). Nor is explanation to be found in the chance patterns of discovery, or bias produced by the means of recovery; excavators of such monuments have, especially during this century, often noted the presence of Roman-period material found during their work, and both Britain and Armorica have seen much relevant fieldwork.

The most conspicuous difference between the British and Armorican evidence is the lack, in Britain, of specifically 'religious' artefacts, of refurbishment (as temples), and of Christianisation in the fifth and later centuries. The latter may, arguably, suggest pagan veneration up to that point. From this it seems reasonable to infer that prehistoric ritual monuments may have been the foci of religious activity in Gallo-Roman Armorica, but that they were not in Roman Britain.

Interestingly, the county in which there is, albeit doubtfully, an anomalous instance of altars placed at a barrow site, is Gloucestershire, an area for which Branigan has made a case for Roman-period Gallic immigration (Branigan 1973), and where unusual religious practices – a concentration of hill-top temples, for example – are otherwise attested. Perhaps these altars, if they were located at a barrow in the Roman period, could be a further expression of this Gallic dimension, but this is uncertain because both the identification of the site as a barrow and the Gallic character of the area can both be questioned.

EXPLAINING THE BRITISH EVIDENCE

It remains to offer an explanation for the British evidence. If it is not 'religious', what is it? The key may lie in the difference between religion and superstition set out at the start of this paper.

In his discussion of the coin evidence from such sites, Aitchison has briefly mentioned that we might employ early medieval Irish literary evidence in formulating an interpretation of the Roman-period conceptualisation of the monuments.

Such Irish literary evidence has frequently been employed in the search for an understanding of pre-Christian paganism in Britain and Ireland and, despite the late date of the texts containing it, derives in part from what has been seen as a society chronologically, socially, and culturally close to both rural Roman Britain and Gaul (Wait 1985, 210–34). In early medieval Ireland the native population seems to have viewed the landscape as having an active mythical quality in which places were associated with legends and supernatural figures. In this highly developed ascription of meaning, seen most clearly in relation to the ritual monuments of the prehistoric past, monuments of the types discussed in this paper played an important role. These were seen as the *síde*, the home of the *áes síde* (minor supernatural figures), and as gateways to the 'otherworld' (ibid., 217–18, 226–270).

That these concepts may not have been alien to Romano-British perceptions of the landscape is suggested by the close links between Britain and Ireland throughout the pre-Roman Iron-Age and Romano-British periods, evidenced by archaeology, language and, possibly, literature (Stevenson 1989; O'Kelly 1989, 312, 327).

This relationship enables us to construct a model of the conceptualisation and utilisation of prehistoric ritual monuments in Roman Britain. This would suppose that Roman Britons saw prehistoric ritual sites as dwelling

places of minor supernatural beings and especially as entrances to the otherworld. It is not necessary to assume that Romano-British and later Irish interpretations of these monuments were identical, merely, given the attested contacts between the areas, that they were similar.

Such a model enables us to reconsider the evidence from Roman Britain. A conceptualisation as entrances to the 'otherworld' might easily explain burial at such monuments, especially as adult burial was seemingly forbidden at Romano-Celtic pagan temples in Britain – even Lewis's sparse list of alleged examples probably overstates the case (Lewis 1966, 6, 13; for an example now discounted see Rahtz and Watts 1979, fig. 12 on 191, 194). The association of coins and pottery with funerary practices is also well attested in Britain (Black 1986). Alternatively, if minor supernatural beings were supposed to inhabit these places, or they were seen as leading to the otherworld, then offerings, including food offerings, might be expected. Either interpretation might account for the coins and pottery, the pottery being deposited either on its own account as a valuable item or as a container for food. In Ireland, both such votive deposits and burial are found at one excavated site, Newgrange, which we know to have been interpreted by early medieval Irishmen in this way (Aitchison 1988, 275–76; O'Kelly 1982, 42–7).

Obviously, this interpretation as burial sites closely fits the British evidence, and explains the contrast between the religious character of the Roman-period activity at the Armorican sites and the non-religious character of the British data. In order to test this model beyond its ability to fit the data which it aims to explain, we may note that such an explanation might suggest a different relationship, in each area, between such sites, their Roman-period use, and Romano-Celtic pagan religion.

Given the localised character of Romano-Celtic paganism one might expect, if the mythology associated with these sites was integrated into pagan religion, that it would also be localised in character (Jones and Mattingly 1990, 274–83). This is what we find in Armorica, with most cases occurring in the Morbihan. In Britain, conversely, there is a thin scatter of such sites throughout and beyond the Roman province. This contrast in distribution reinforces the contrast between the lack of certainly relevant religious artefacts and structures (with the exception, perhaps, of Slonk Hill) in Britain and their presence in Armorica.

If our interpretation of the Roman-period use of these sites as burial places is correct, this must suggest a very widespread popular perception of the landscape, separate from localised Romano-Celtic pagan religion. Such a perception, assigning advantage to be obtained from burial or offerings

at these locations, can be considered to be superstition rather than religion. It is not integrated with a specific set of wider beliefs or a broader code of action, but relates to the advantage to be gained by ritual (burial or offerings) at specified locations.

It may also be significant that the later Roman period was, in Britain, marked by an increased variability of burial practice, interpreted by Miranda Green as deriving from anxiety about the dead reaching the 'otherworld' (Green 1986, 130-32). Such anxiety may have led to burial at places claimed as entrances to the 'otherworld' so as to facilitate the passage of the dead, explaining the apparent Late Roman bias in the British evidence. Interestingly, Green (*ibid.*, 132-35) has also shown that ritual shafts may themselves be associated with entrance to the underworld; so perhaps explaining the evidence from Silbury Hill.

The possibly more elaborate treatment of Stonehenge remains an anomaly to this overall pattern. It may be explained as a response to the site's unique character as a monument in the landscape: certainly a source of special comment in later centuries. But, again, the most confidently attested Roman-period features at the site are burials.

If separate from pagan religion, and seen as a widespread superstitious belief about gaining easy passage to the otherworld by burial and/or offerings close to its entrances, then, obviously, on these grounds too, religious structures and artefacts would not be expected. It is significant that burial and 'religious' structures on the one hand, and artefacts on the other, do not occur together at the Armorican sites, although both are found within the total range of Armorican evidence. Adult burial would, then, have been permissible at such sites precisely because they were *not* religious foci, but places appropriate to the disposal of the dead. Indeed, the presence of adult burial strongly suggests in itself that these places were not used for religious purposes.

Consequently, we may interpret this activity as a result of widespread non-religious folk-beliefs about the landscape. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that British and Irish ecclesiastical legislation did not include denunciations of the worship of prehistoric ritual sites, for pagan religious activity at these monuments did not exist in Britain and Ireland.

CONCLUSION

It would seem that prehistoric ritual monuments were perceived in different ways in Roman Britain and in the Armorican peninsula. In Armorica

they were used as religious sites throughout the Roman period and were, therefore, often Christianised in the immediately post-Roman centuries, in opposition to this continuing veneration. In Roman Britain they were construed in a superstitious rather than religious fashion, and formed no part of organised paganism.

Such an interpretation encompasses all the relevant available archaeological and historical information and, perhaps, gives us more understanding of the differing rural religious and antiquarian perceptions of Roman provincials. It also provides a potential 'middle-range' logic for recognising superstition rather than religion in the archaeological study of Roman Britain.

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