
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

Title: Romans and Britons on the Northern Frontier:
A Theoretical Evaluation of the Archaeology of
Resistance

Author: Bernice Kurchin

Pages: 124–131

Persistent URI:



Volume Information:

Rush, P. (ed.) 1995. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: Second Conference Proceedings*. Worldwide Archaeology Series, vol. 14. Aldershot: Avebury/Ashgate.

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Avebury Press (an imprint of Ashgate). This volume is no longer in print, but hard copy editions may still be available from book dealers.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access, after consulting the original publisher's rights office. Copyright remains with TRAC and the individual author(s), and all use or quotation of this paper and/or its contents must be acknowledged. This paper was released in digital Open Access format in April 2013.

**ROMANS AND BRITONS
ON THE NORTHERN FRONTIER:
A THEORETICAL EVALUATION OF
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE**

Bernice Kurchin

Despite the multiplicity of approaches in the revolt against strict positivism in archaeological theory, all of them share a focus on human agency as a necessary part of explanation. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the recent literature concerning complex societies, relations of inequality and particularly studies of power and dominance where, according to Daniel Miller, 'agency and resistance are integral to their definition' (1989: 64).

Archaeology has long been concerned with the cultural remains of dominant ideologies, but has understood them normatively rather than in terms of conflict. When we consider relations of domination and resistance, the focus turns from normative systems of interaction to the behaviour of individuals.

The subject is most often subsumed under the broader categories of gender and colonialism, and often the first is seen as a subtopic of the second under the Marxist paradigm of imperialism and female subordination being peculiar to capitalism or class societies. Gender studies are an outgrowth of the feminist movement, with its concomitant need to develop a 'herstory' for women, similar to that of minority peoples who were without history and known to the present only through the voice of colonial usurpers. The intense focus on colonialism however seems to be the result of theoretical realignment in a period when both imperialism and the

appearance of being aligned with imperial policy are politically incorrect. Thus, archaeological interest in colonialism is shifting away from questions of extraction, taxation, and urbanisation, where culture change is presented as something imposed from above by the intrusive power. Instead a discourse between domination and resistance is being analysed as a source of cultural transformation.

Both these terms – domination and resistance – need some clarification. To paraphrase Randall McGuire and Robert Paynter (1991: 8), domination occurs when A tells B what to do and B does it, whether it is in his best interests or not. B's response may be a reaction to force or the threat of force. It is more likely a dialogue in which both A and B acknowledge A's right to dominate in terms of a shared legitimising ideology (Miller 1989; McGuire and Paynter 1991).

In the Roman case both factors worked to establish dominance. As Edward Luttwak (1976: 195–200) pointed out, the direct force of the Roman army, and even more, the power of its reputation, served to ensure imperial control. At the same time, the Romans linked the interests of the native elite to their own administration, and acculturation took place through the intercession of the elite with their people (cf. Millett 1990: 82–85).

Resistance is more difficult to define. On the one hand, there is overt resistance. In, for instance, the uprising of AD 118–119 on the northern British frontier or during the Boudiccan revolt, B was acting to remove A's domination. A number of such acts of rebellion have been documented for us by the Romans (Dyson 1971).

A less dramatic form of this can be seen in the creation of what Owen Lattimore called 'interior frontiers' in certain parts of the empire (cf. Dyson 1975: 148), such as inaccessible mountain retreats for bandits, rebels and malcontents (Dyson 1975: 173). It must be noted here, however, that the difference between, for instance, banditry and revolt is not necessarily in the attitude of the provincials, about which we know nothing. It is in the response of the Romans, who chose to record the presence of Dardanian bandits in Moesia but apparently ignored them because they did not interfere with trade, nor were they a threat to the empire (Mócsy 1974: 152). This kind of resistance can be interpreted as useful to the Romans, in fact, because it served to strengthen the propaganda value of the *Pax Romana* and, through backlash, could reinforce their dominant position.

Most of the recent archaeological literature, however, is concerned with a more covert form of resistance, which might best be characterised as B

doing what A says to do, but thumbing his nose at him behind his back. This conflict is enacted in the ideological arena and may never go further than symbolic counter-cultural expressions. Elizabeth Brumfiel has shown how women resisted the negative and subordinating image of themselves propagated by the official Aztec religion by intensifying production of ceramic figurines showing them in the traditional pre-Aztec manner (1989).

Overt resistance may sometimes be difficult to operationalise on the ground. For example, did the Romans destroy Newstead, the Roman fort near Melrose, Scotland, where excavation has revealed deliberate slighting of the walls (Curle 1911) or did the natives attack it? Did this happen during the 'Brigantian revolt' or as part of the abandonment of the Antonine frontier (Richmond 1924)? Nevertheless, the study of overt rebellion is conceptually less problematical than the covert resistance with which most of the current archaeological literature is concerned. The latter is not only hard to operationalise, but there are also difficulties with the way the concept has been applied.

Colonial situations are no less fluid than time. In the nearly four centuries of its existence Britannia changed both politically and economically, as did the empire of which it was a part. The same factions whose interests were served by resistance in the first century may have been just the ones to benefit by the economic changes of the post-Severan period. Martin Millett has shown how the shifting locus of power is reflected in the emergence of new centres of exchange, suggesting as well that new people were benefiting from these changes (1990: 127-37). The tribal elites most likely to support Romanisation in the early years of the province may have been most threatened by the disruptions of the third century.

Although change is less evident in the military zone than in the south, intermarriage between military personnel and northern women was creating a new population of Romano-British, while opportunities to serve in the army at home were increasing for the Britons, making the military presence less provocatively foreign - though not totally - as the centuries passed. Rather than an object of hostile resistance, the army would have become part of the social fabric of the northern community. While the possibility of resistance would not necessarily diminish under new circumstances, both the source and object would be different, a factor which must be considered in any evaluation of colonial interactions.

Having reasons for resistance is not the same thing as having evidence of resistance. McGuire and Paynter (1991: 19) point out that using prehistoric assemblages unsupported by documentation runs the danger of presenting

a circular argument where resistance is assumed and material culture is then used to verify its existence. This is so for the severely limited documentation of the Roman period as well.

There are several reasons to suppose resistance occurred in Britain on both sides of the frontier zone. Historically, the mere presence of a standing army is provocative, and not everyone would have experienced the army as an economic stimulus (cf. Whittaker 1989: 66–69).

Mark Gregson (1982: 21–23) suggested that indigenous land tenure was rooted in social relationships that conflicted with Roman practices. It is quite reasonable to suggest that northern British land tenure differed from Roman, and that changes in these relationships would not be well received by all parts of native society. If nothing else, a mixed subsistence economy with considerable open pasture might conflict with the carefully surveyed land boundaries of the Roman administration. Presumably, Roman pacification also put an end to cattle raiding, which could have been central to the native prestige economy (Kurchin 1983).

If we believe resistance to have been the case and have reason to expect it, we may tend to see it in all the material we find. Usually, the kind of evidence put forward is negative, that is, lack of acculturation or retention of native cultural traditions is seen as resistance. Andras Mócsy's (1974: 148–49) analysis of the distribution of tombstones and his interpretation of the resurgence of cart burials in 2nd century Pannonia is just such a case. Burial practices are particularly sensitive to ideological transformations, and both resistance and acculturation have been argued from them in New World historical archaeology (Robinson et al. 1985; Axtell 1981). Such data need more critical attention before qualifying as examples of resistance. Since burial data for the Iron Age are nearly non-existent in most parts of Britain (Whimster 1981: 196), and what there is for the Roman period is as likely to be Roman and military as civilian and British, it is currently impossible to assess whether traditional practices were retained or Roman practices adopted by indigenous people, though a closer investigation of the Romano-British burial practices in north-east Yorkshire could be fruitful. Even here, difficulties arise from the context of behaviour which are further explored below.

The continued construction of and residence in Iron Age round houses during the Romano-British period is a phenomenon that can be interpreted as resistance through retention, particularly as villas and town houses are universally accepted as examples of *romanitas*. If the rural Britons did consciously resist such acculturation, it may have been in the

deliberate retention of traditional house forms, but how do we distinguish resistance to Roman architectural styles from cultural conservatism, or from the poverty that seems so prevalent in the north?

The Romans did not enforce acculturation, nor did they require anyone to act like a Roman, particularly since most of the material aspects of being Romanised were expensive. In Britain, Romanisation was a prestige good fitting nicely into an established pattern of social interactions and leaving those without prestige living on their traditional Iron Age farms in round houses. That the northern environment was not particularly conducive to the production of significant agricultural surpluses is suggested by the relative paucity of late pre-Roman Iron Age material data.

In addition, Millett has noted (1990: 100–101), and I have argued elsewhere (1989: 11–12), that the administrative role which enhanced the status and wealth of the southern and eastern elites was absorbed by the military in the north, resulting in a far less Romanised civilian landscape.

Acculturation itself is a fairly flexible term. Roman syncretism and eclecticism (Henig 1984: 210–14) left room for broad interpretations of what being a good Roman meant. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Romanised Celtic gods, the Celticised Roman gods or Romano-Celtic Mithraism. One could argue that the elongated Celtic faces of many of the gods (Henig 1984) and the Celtic clothing worn by the goddesses (Allason-Jones 1989) are a form of resistance to religious conversion but they could be just as well understood as the Roman dieties being made local or those of the barbarians being 'civilised'.

Both acculturation and resistance are actions situated in particular contexts. Even for the elites, acting in the new style in public would not negate using traditional forms in private. Lindsay Allason-Jones has suggested that women may have fared better in native society than under colonial jurisdiction, particularly those who found themselves living in towns (1989a: 191). Since women were not part of the public arena as defined by Romans, their retention of native clothing styles, jewelry, textiles, even cooking technology could only be considered as private action. Does conservatism in the domestic arena constitute resistance or a separation of contexts: public being Roman, and domestic being native?

An interesting phenomenon that could be understood here as resistance in the public arena is the unusual distribution of earrings throughout the empire, noted by Allason-Jones (1989b). Traditionally worn by both men and women of the eastern provinces, they were assumed to be worn only by women in Britannia. But Allason-Jones discusses in this volume the lack

of evidence for such an assumption. In fact if they were worn by both men and women, the fashion is counter to classical taste – Allason-Jones suggests it might not have been quite respectable (1989b: 36) – and may indicate an interesting cultural alignment with the exotic, the non-Roman, on the part of some Britons. Alternatively, it may indicate a much more inclusive definition of what is Roman on the part of the provincial Britons – a different concept from that of the Roman elite.

This last example illustrates what is here considered the overriding difficulty with defining resistance in the archaeological record. Understanding resistance means reading not only the symbolic content of an artifact but the intent behind its use. While I accept the claim of Mary Beaudry et al. (1991: 174) that almost all material objects have symbolic and social meanings which mediate their use – as, for instance samian ware might be understood in the context of upward mobility – the same objects can mean different things to different people, and their meaning is rarely our meaning. The really convincing studies of artifacts as objects of resistance are done in settings where written sources confirm or support symbolic interpretation. Where there is a shared or homogeneous system of meaning in the culture we are studying, we could probably come to a consensus of interpretation. In a complex situation such as the northern frontier, with Romans, Britons, and soldiers of various ethnicities, and little likelihood of perfect communication between them, how are we supposed to understand and choose from among the array of possible meanings?

Finally, not even texts can completely elucidate the intent of the actors in these cases. Documentation is data filtered through elite perspectives (McGuire and Paynter 1991; Kurchin 1989). Since covert resistance enables a far wider range of expression than overt confrontation, it is possible that it is not recognised by the dominant authority for what it is. Or, perhaps more likely, it is recognised but ignored as irrelevant or even as behaviour useful to the power structure (Miller 1989: 68). Finally, resistance may reside in alternative perspectives or thoughts even as the behaviour gives the appearance of conformity, leaving no evidence for resistance in the archaeological record. Thus, we need to question whether resistance can be so distinguished if B alone understands his actions as such.

This paper is not meant to argue the glories of *romanitas* or decry the docility of the northern Britons. Rather it is a lament for the limits of archaeology. Material data do not readily yield answers to questions of intent. The great advantage of our discipline – time depth, or *deja vu* as Miller (1989: 78) calls it – may be able in the long term to identify those

elements of a culture resistant to change or acculturation in a colonial situation. Interpretation of human agency, in the short term at least, suffers from indeterminacy. The linkage with the archaeological record weakens as we move from questions of action, to meaning, to motivation, to intent, though all are aspects of agency. Without supporting documents, which are flawed by their own biases, or several data sets pointing to the same conclusion, it may be nearly impossible to present a testable archaeological argument for any but the most overt resistance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS —————

This paper is a by-product of research sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation For Anthropological Research. I am grateful to Professors Gregory A. Johnson and Thomas H. McGovern of Hunter College, CUNY for reading and commenting on drafts of this work and most grateful to David Yoon of The Graduate Center, CUNY for his critical comments and editorial assistance at every stage. The mistakes are my own.

References

- Allason-Jones, Lindsay 1989a. *Women in Roman Britain*. London: British Museum.
- Allason-Jones, Lindsay 1989b. *Earrings in Roman Britain*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (British Series 201).
- Axtell, James 1981. The Acculturation of Native Funerals in Colonial North America. *The European and the Indian*, 110–128. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Beaudry, Mary, Lauren J. Cook and Stephen A. Mrozowski 1991. Artifacts and Active Voices: Material Culture as Social Discourse. In Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter (eds), *The Archaeology of Inequality*, 150–191. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Brumfiel, Elizabeth 1990. Figurines and the Aztec State: the Case for and against Ideological Domination. Paper presented at the 89th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. New Orleans.
- Curle, James A. 1911. *A Roman Frontier Post and its People: The Fort at Newstead, near Melrose*. London.
- Dyson, Stephen L. 1971. Native Revolts in the Roman Empire. *Historia* 20:239–274.
- Dyson, Stephen L. 1975. Native Revolt Patterns in the Roman Empire. In H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II:3, 138–175.

- Frere, Sheppard S. 1987. *Britannia: a History of Roman Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Gregson, Mark 1988. The Villa as Private Property. In Keith Branigan and David Miles (eds), *The Economies of Romano-British Villas*, 21-33. Sheffield: J. R. Collis Publications.
- Henig, Martin 1984. *Religion in Roman Britain*. London: Batsford.
- Kurchin, Bernice 1983. The Effect of Colonization on the Votadini: a Settlement Pattern Analysis. MA Thesis, Department of Anthropology. Hunter College, C.U.N.Y.
- Kurchin, Bernice 1989. Native Speeches in the Latin Tongue: the Archaeological Evidence for Imperial Abuse in Roman Britain. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Washington, D.C.
- Luttwak, Edward 1976. *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McGuire, Randall H. and Robert Paynter 1991. The Archaeology of Inequality: Material Culture, Domination and Resistance. In Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter (eds), *The Archaeology of Inequality*, 1-27. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Miller, Daniel 1989. The Limits of Dominance. In Daniel Miller, Michael Rowlands, Christopher Tilley (eds), *Domination and Resistance*, 63-79. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Millett, Martin 1990. *The Romanization of Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mócsy, Andras 1974. *Pannonia and Upper Moesia: A History of the Middle Danube Provinces of the Roman Empire*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Richmond, Ian A. 1924. The Relation of the Fort at Newstead to Scottish History, AD 80-180. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 58:309-321.
- Richmond, Ian A. 1958. Ancient Geographical Sources for Britain North of the Cheviots. In Ian A. Richmond (ed.), *Roman And Native in North Britain*, 131-149. Edinburgh: Nelson.
- Robinson, Paul A, Marc A. Kelley and Patricia Rubertone 1985. Interpretations from a Seventeenth Century Narraganset Cemetery. In William W. Fitzhugh (ed.), *Cultures in Contact*, 107-130. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Steer, Kenneth A. 1958. Roman and Native in North Britain: the Severan Reorganization. In Ian A. Richmond (ed.), *Roman and Native in North Britain*, 91-111. Edinburgh: Nelson.
- Whimster, Rowan 1981. *Burial Practices in Iron Age Britain*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (British Series 90 i and ii).
- Whittaker, C. R. 1983. Trade and the Frontiers of the Roman Empire. In Peter Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker (eds), *Trade and Famine in Classical Antiquity*, 110-127. Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society (Supplement 8).