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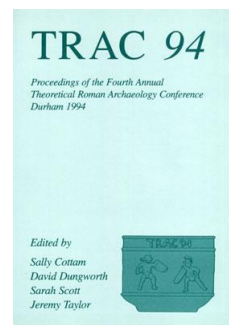
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15. Roman Imports into Late Iron Age British societies: Towards a Critique of Existing Models

by Steven Willis

Introduction.

The aim of this paper is to examine some areas in which our approaches to Roman imports into Late Iron Age Britain may be developed. In the course of the paper possibilities for a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of this material are explored. In particular some potential ideological dimensions to exchanged material culture are examined, especially questions concerning its deposition and its relationship with the milieu in which it circulated. The paper is suggestive and speculative in tone and character, fittingly so for this volume. Whilst the examples focused upon are drawn from the LPRIA (and early conquest period) in Britain, it may be that the arguments and cases in question are equally relevant to other domains of exchange.

A Problem in our Conception of Roman Imports in Late Iron Age society?

Roman imports into Britain (that is imports from the Roman continent) during the LPRIA and early conquest period have been widely studied and our apparent knowledge base is extensive. The episode constitutes one of the most high profile instances of exchange in the archaeology of Britain. Traditionally evaluations of these imports (eg amphorae and their contents, fine pottery, metalwork, etc.) in Britain have been closely bound up with Romanization studies. This has followed from the fact that since we know that 'Trade — or at least imports — preceded the Flag', imported items, the process of importing and 'cultural exchange' are seen as a logical prelude to the Roman conquest and the incorporation of Britain into the Empire. This episode of the arrival of Roman goods in the later British Iron Age is usually characterized as a period of 'softening-up' and has been perceived as 'Romanization before the conquest' (Haselgrove 1984; Millett 1990: 29–35; Cunliffe 1991: 545). The phenomenon of pre-conquest imported material has customarily, and conveniently, provided raw material for Chapter One of the story of the Roman conquest and of Roman Britain (Frere 1987; Salway 1981; Todd 1981). Roman imports have tended to be looked at from the perspective of what they might tell us of the Romanization of LPRIA Britain. This process has been searched for and, not surprisingly, identified.

This bias of perspective carries important consequences for our study of the period; not least it engenders a distorting and restricting vision. Two important effects can be highlighted here. First, Roman imports into Iron Age Britain are invariably considered in terms of the knowledge we have of what subsequently took place in the course of the first century A.D. What appears to happen is that, in effect, we inadvertently 'reason back' from the known outcome to rationalize the existence of Roman imports and material goods as if their presence was instrumental in generating, or crucially facilitated, the long term process of Romanization¹.

What is lost is a recognition that what happened need not necessarily have occurred; alternative outcomes were possible. This observation obliges us to evaluate the significance of this material in terms of its specific context, its meaning/s at a moment in time. This is an obligation we should welcome. Our view of past societies, seen as it is through the structure of an historical perspective, is both privileged and hindered by that perspective. As archaeologists we must make conscious efforts to minimize the distortions that this structure gives rise to.

Secondly, in contrast to the emphasis given to Roman imports as (alleged) instruments and symbols of Romanization only limited attention has been paid to how this material might be examined in order to study the Iron Age per se and, indeed, ideological aspects of Late British Iron Age societies. To illustrate that this is the case it is sufficient to take but one example. It is through this bias of perspective that the possibility of examining the incidence of imported continental material as an index for investigating indigenous exchange relations within and between British Iron Age societies has not been comprehensively addressed.

The treatment of imported material in Late Iron Age society

How were Roman imported goods treated? It seems that we customarily assume that such items were treated differently to indigenous items (eg. Haselgrove 1982; Cunliffe 1984). However, we need to establish more assuredly whether this was the case or not rather than assume it. The spectacular Welwyn series burials (Stead 1967) and the Lexden Tumulus (Foster 1986), together with the recent finds at Folly Lane, St Albans (Niblett 1992) and Colchester-Stanway (Crummy 1993), and, indeed, their presentation, have framed and perhaps over-determined our perceptions. We need to bear in mind that these depositions represent only particular fields of practice, and highly specific ones at that.

There has been a persistent tendency in reports and commentaries upon the period in question to assume the value of imports. Hence in numerous texts these items are categorized as exotic, as luxuries, as prestige goods (eg. Salway 1981: 57; Frere 1987: 35; Millett 1990: 30 & 38). Through the repeated characterization of these objects as special, as prestige items, etc. archaeologists have brought into being a construct, a definition of past reality, that is taken almost as axiomatic². However, it is contestable that this was the case. A very real problem lies in the fact that models have been formulated on the basis of these less than certain definitions (eg. Partridge 1981; Haselgrove 1982; 1987a; Cunliffe 1987: esp. 339–45; Millett 1990; Trow 1990). If our accounts of the past are to have a validity we must be wary to avoid imputing unwarranted and unproven judgements of value (cf. Millett, this volume).

Archaeologists are aware that the values ascribed to objects will have determined the manner of their disposal (cf. Fitzpatrick 1994: 68). We should explore the extent to which imported material within the Late Iron Age cultural environment may have been ascribed different values vis-à-vis indigenous material, and treated differently. As a matter of good practice this question should be asked of material at all levels, from the study of the stratigraphic context to the general synthesis. The possibility of regional and social-contextual variations in practice should be acknowledged and our approaches designed to anticipate this. The new picture that is emerging of the nature of depositional regimes and actions in the Iron Age (Haselgrove 1987b; Hingley 1990; Hill 1994) suggests this to be both a sensible and necessary procedure. Conjointly we must consider the social contexts within which discriminating treatment of the imported and the indigenous might have occurred.

Structured Distribution

Find-spot distribution maps, that familiar tool of the archaeologist, have been employed widely in exchange studies being presented and interpreted as mapping trade and exchange relations, or as an index of these relations. The structured nature of the distributions of imports in Late Iron Age and conquest period Britain (Fitzpatrick 1989; Willis 1993) indicates that there were evidently complex processes taking place which strongly influenced the incidence of this material.

Awareness that generally such mapping may not necessarily provide a valid picture of actual distributions, but that apparent distribution patterns may be a function of variable research input by archaeologists (cf. Fitzpatrick 1987), is now widespread. However, it is crucial that it be recognized that such incidence maps may be recording not simply access to imports, but also attitudes to exchanged items, and particular actions involving items; that is to say, they are in part a function of depositional practice. This observation accrues a new cogency from our perspective in the 1990s for we may be now more willing to accept that activity in the Iron Age and Roman period was, at least in part, directed by ideological frameworks. We are perhaps now able to accept that the archaeological record of this period was not the absolute and straight-forward product of practical and material considerations, but rather also consequent upon the range of beliefs guiding action. This understanding poses a challenge to exchange studies for several reasons. Not least it suggests the probability that many (or most?) deposits will have resulted from ideological practice and constitute intentional, selected, structured depositions. Equally it is likely that in certain circumstances similar factors may have resulted in imported material not having entered the ground.

Structured Deposition

Archaeologists have long sought to elicit structure from the artefact distributions which they plot. In contrast they have been remarkably slow to explore the possibility of structuring in the deposition of material in the past. The exceptions here though, of course, are the ways we approach burials with grave goods and hoards; artefacts associated with such contexts have long been comprehended as selected assemblages and hence are invested with a special significance by the archaeologist. What has not been entertained is the likelihood that what went into the ground generally (eg. at other types of site and in different contexts) to provide us with our archaeological record of imports to Late Iron Age Britain may have been consciously selected and controlled. J. D. Hill has shown that such a regime operated at settlement sites of the early and middle Iron Age of Wessex (Hill 1994, with refs) whilst Aitchison (1988) has argued that some coin deposits of the Roman period in Britain represent votive offerings. Hence the possibility that similar attitudes and activities existed in the later British Iron Age must be faced up to. What gives cause for anxiety is that exchange studies have been reluctant to recognize this possibility, and have remained curiously enchanted by that old spectre of archaeological reasoning, namely the assumption that a 'death assemblage' is an uncomplicated index of the 'life assemblage' (cf. Orton 1989).

If a structured regime, controlled, however, tightly or loosely, was being exercised over deposition in the early and mid Iron Age across a substantial part of southern Britain (at least) implications are raised for our thinking and interpretation of the incidence of exchanged and imported items at settlement and other sites in the LPRIA and conquest period. It is particularly pertinent that at this time social relations, affiliations and identities are likely to have been

under abnormal tension and material from the Continent and Empire will have appeared at its most conspicuous whilst being perhaps politically and culturally sensitive. How was the fate of this material decided by indigenous populations?

It is feasible to propose an alternative scenario to the traditional view that imports will have been valued items and that they were problematic only in so far as their existence generated competition for control (cf. Haselgrove 1982; cf. Millett 1990: 38). Their presence, treatment and understanding within indigenous societies is likely to have been more complicated than existing models allow. We must consider the very real possibility that they engendered a range of organic and dynamic attitudes encompassing ambiguity and ambivalence, a positive desire to possess and/or conscious rejection. The artefacts themselves will have been active categories in these processes. The archaeological record should be interrogated with these probabilities in mind.

Two provisos to this line of argument might be usefully sounded here. First, it cannot be taken as given that the manner in which material culture was treated in the Late British Iron Age was entirely analogous to preceding patterns. The larger volume of material that we encounter incorporated into the archaeological record of the later Iron Age, at both settlement sites and ritual sites (such as Harlow and Snettisham (France & Gobel 1985; Stead 1991; cf. Haselgrove 1989: 17)) suggests that attitudes to discard may have been altering generally³. Second, the probability of regional differences and of contextual diversity might be anticipated. An additional point of relevance is the simple, though often unemphasized, reality that without deposition exchange will be archaeologically invisible. Since it is possible to envisage a situation in which conscious attempts were made to exclude imported items from processes which would result in their incorporation in the ground it is germane to recall the old dictum that 'an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence' (cf. Hingley 1990: 105).

To return to the mainstream of the argument presented here, if we accept the case for an ideological dimension to deposition in the Late Iron Age, important implications follow. Not least amongst these are implications relating to the oft quoted quantities of imported material. It must be recognized that the manner in which deposits came into being may be a or the determining factor in shaping our perception of the absolute or relative quantities of imports.

Identification or Difference: Imports as Alien?

Imports are often distinctive objects. How this distinctiveness was understood, marked and negotiated (if indeed it was!) constitute crucial and stimulating lines for enquiry. In this section two somewhat different possibilities relating to these questions are delineated.

First, within what appears to have been an increasingly hierarchical and structured society (eg. Haselgrove 1989: esp. 12; Sharples 1991: esp. 87), one with increasing bounds (cf. Tester 1993), imported objects may have been less 'value-laden' than indigenous material. This possibility arises from the fact that they will not have been embedded within the existing social order or social relations; on their arrival at British sites amphorae, wine, fine pottery, metalwork and other commodities will have been novel and distinctive. The possibilities, therefore, for their deployment in society may have been less bounded by normative rules than that of established indigenous objects. One connotation is that they may have carried a potential to be highly subversive of established social relations and definitions (contra Nash 1984); not least they came from outside the British social order⁴. For local and regional paramounts in Britain, and, indeed, for others too, they will have implicitly constituted an objectified token of

the boundaries of power, and the limits of their dominion, since they will have been a reminder of the existence of a greater power, the Empire. If this line of reasoning is valid it may explain why, within an apparently highly status conscious social order, elites would have desired to control the definition and circulation of this incoming material. From this perspective the control of this incoming material was important to elites not because it was a symbol or means to power, nor because it was necessary *per se* for status maintenance. Rather its existence may have demanded management and control by elites because its presence was detrimental to, and corrosive of, existing power structures.

Following a second avenue, it could prove useful to examine the question of how foreign or alien this material was to the inhabitants of Iron Age Britain. Certainly their conceptualization and categorization of this material — their sense of identification or difference with regard to it — will have shaped their attitudes to its use and discard. However, our thinking in this area is hindered by the fact that we are not accustomed ourselves to regard this material as alien or unfamiliar. On the contrary the items that are under consideration here: amphorae (and their contents), fine table wares, metalwork, glassware, etc. are readily familiar. We are used to their form and appearance, we know their origins, we think we know how they were used; we study them with regularity. Additionally, it is possible that they do not appear alien to us because we have ourselves taken on a sense of identification with 'the Roman' (cf. Hingley 1991). As a consequence, we are not accustomed to readily conceive of these imports in their British context as alien items, as being from the alien; however, this, of course, is feasibly how they would have been regarded within that context.

Examining this question from a different direction, it is equally pertinent to consider how alien these items or their source were. Much of the imported material present on Late Iron Age sites in Britain is of Gallic rather than Roman/Mediterranean origin, being either made in Gaul (eg. Gallo-Belgic pottery; provincial samian; other pottery; metalwork) or arriving in Britain via Gaul (eg. amphorae). Britain had been receiving items from Gaul though the course of the Iron Age (Fitzpatrick 1989). Importation, therefore was not without precedent. However, what appears to be new during the Late Iron Age is an increased scale of importation and a greater diversity of imports. If one follows the premise that at this time Gaul was conceived of by the peoples of Britain (? especially southern Britain) as ethnically and/or culturally close (cf. Millett 1990: 33; Cunliffe 1991: 545), the arrival of these new material items via or from Gaul may have lent them an association which rendered their consumption in Britain acceptable.

This is an important and exciting area not just for the field of exchange studies, but for any one studying the Late Iron Age in Britain and, in turn, the process of Romanization. It raises questions concerning cultural boundaries, identities, and cultural hybridity. If a sense of cross-channel ethnic/cultural closeness existed and was a factor in the recognition of newly arriving material culture what might this mean for the way this (and subsequent) material was regarded in the British context? One inference which follows from this is that we may need to be more subtle in probing for potential evidence of identification with, or distancing from, imports. From our current knowledge of the British Iron Age, and how societies work more generally (eg. Giddens 1984), we might anticipate that any forthcoming picture will not be straightforward. Rather we may surmise that it is likely to be complex, indicating that there were perhaps shifting attitudes towards and between items and their use, differences over time and between the social milieux of use and possibly with a regional dimension too. Practicable

guides to assist our work here will continue to be the study of context and association and the search for patterning and deviation from the 'norm'.

Copying and Replication: From Imports to Romanization

A tenable possibility is that the potentially alien or culturally sensitive nature of imports was negotiated through the production, by indigenous communities, of copies or imitations of imported material. This may have been the case with brooches. Types preceded and/or common on the continent appear to have arrived in Britain as imports, to be subsequently reproduced in Britain (eg. the Aucissa-Hod Hill and Colchester types (Fitzpatrick 1989: Chapter 13) and probably also the Langton Down and Thistle types). Other factors may, of course, account for the spread of these types into Britain in the first century A.D. but this thesis regarding copying might be entertained as an explanation, or part explanation.

The same phenomenon of imitation is seen in the case of some pottery forms. One example of a ceramic type which was evidently widely copied in Britain is the butt beaker Camulodunum 113 (Hawkes & Hull 1947: 238–9; Rigby 1986: 263; Stead & Rigby 1989: 137) imported into Britain from Gallia Belgica in the early and middle first century A.D. On the evidence of fabric and other characteristics this form was frequently copied in southern and eastern Britain (eg. Partridge 1981: 67–9, nos. 47–8; Clamp 1985: 50–1, no. 5; Trow 1988: 72–3, nos. 136–8; Friendship-Taylor & Friendship-Taylor 1989: 10, nos. 22–4). Examination of the evidence from the east of England (Willis 1993) shows that the distribution of both imported examples of the type and of 'copies' closely correlates with known indigenous settlements. Examples of the copies in this region occur in a wide variety of fabrics suggesting the probability of geographically diverse production. Indeed, in this region at least these copies appear to have been locally, or comparatively locally produced. This implies that there existed a 'culture of copying', an impetus to the replication of the form, which, whether communicated or not, was shared over a wide area.

Why was the Cam. form 113 copied? A traditional argument in cases like this would perhaps propose that the manufacture of copies was a response to local demand, the number of imports available being inadequate to satisfy requirements. Whilst attempts at explanation along such lines might be queried in themselves, for example, by asking 'why was this 'demand' created?', different possibilities may be posited. It could be argued that these and other imitations represent a straight forward desire on the part of the copier (and their constituency) to display affiliation or symbolize identification with the Roman world through a reproduction and possession of its forms. This is possible but seems simplistic; further, it implies a degree of cultural diffidence which seems improbable. An alternative scenario, however, can be proposed. It is conceivable that these imports were copied because it was thought necessary to interpret or 're-interpret', in a parochial and familiar manner, an alien import. By casting the form of the import through the employment of the local and accustomed technologies the product of 'the other' — from outside — and its ideas, associations and what it represented might have been rendered acceptable to indigenous populations. Such action may thereby have legitimated the use of both the copy and the copied, and, indeed, their consumption at different levels of meaning: as practicable object, as symbol, and so forth. The adoption of coinage in Iron Age Britain might be considered another example of this phenomenon.

These ideas are, clearly, speculative. However, consideration of questions like these is valid and important with regard to our enquires of material culture (cf. Tilley 1990; Miller 1991). Moreover, if we come to accept that imitation and replication arose (even partly) out of these imperatives or similar ones we may come close to engaging and understanding a key aspect in the process of Romanization. It was through the local imitation and replication of more widespread metropolitan forms, practices and patterns, produced and reproduced as basically similar but parochially different, that the Empire had an existence. In this way the replication of material (and other) forms gave the Empire one of its central characteristics, its hybridity. This hybridity both united and differentiated the components of this construct (cf. Woolf 1992: 352).

Conclusion and Advocacy

In exchange studies generally there has continued to be an imbalance between, on the one hand, the attention paid by archaeologists to the study of the finds per se, and, on the other, the quality of our synthetic discussions. We have employed systematic approaches and measurement, been highly conscientious in mapping incidence, strong in typological study, have applied a battery of scientific techniques to source our objects, and so forth. By contrast our interpretations of the incidence of exchanged items, (often, of course, in the form of models), have, with exceptions, been comparatively simplistic, monolithic, universalizing and utilitarian. Our use, for instance, of core-periphery models, systems theory, concepts of 'gateway communities', directional trade, 'Roman 'drift' in Scotland', etc., as models and attempts to engage the subject, have seemed to provide either partial accounts and explanations or have not been fully developed as concepts appropriate for archaeological use.

Some of the observations and points touched upon here may suggest specific ways in which we might develop our subject; they may also imply a style of approach which others may find useful. To summarize, we need to collect and consider our data with greater sophistication, but also, crucially, with new ideas and theories in mind. The erstwhile tendency towards monolithic accounts and models of exchange systems might be challenged by our anticipation of, and search for, regional and sub-regional patterns, as well as other levels of variability and possibility. We should engage 'the evidence' with caution whilst at the same time permitting adventurousness in interpretation. An approach including these criteria may enable us to develop accounts which range more freely than the confines of the processualist paradigm allowed. The scope for, and nature of, interpretations of exchanged material can now, with confidence, become less bounded and more exploratory. By raising 'awkward questions' for existing models and through striving to suggest and interpret our understandings of Roman imports into Late Iron Age Britain will become more textured, more nuanced. Thereby the study of this material should retain its key relevance to enquiries into both the Iron Age and the Iron Age — Roman transition.

Notes

- 1 A tendency towards 'backward projection' from a 'known' outcome may be a widespread conceptual practice (and problem) within archaeology (cf. Hill 1989).
- 2 The attention which these items have continued to receive from archaeologists, together with their profile and manner of presentation in archaeological accounts, approaches a marked object fetishism (cf. Miller 1991, 112).
- 3 This increase in the quantity of material entering the archaeological record is a development which has yet to be well explored or explained.
- 4 The referee of my paper notes that similar suggestions have been advanced by N. M. Sharples in his paper 'Late Iron Age society and continental trade in Dorset', in Duval, A., Le Bihan, J. P. & Menez, Y. (eds) *Les Gaulois D'Armorique, Actes du XIIIe Colloque de l'A.F.E.A.F., Quimper, Mai 1988*, *Revue Archeologique de l'Ouest*, supplement No.3 1990. Unfortunately I have been unable to see a copy of this article prior to the submission of the current paper (July 1994).

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