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## Paper Information:

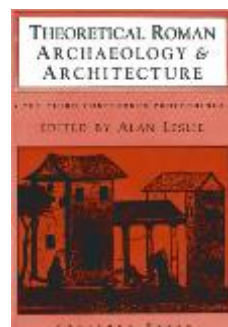
Title: Britannus/Britto: Roman Ethnographies, Native Identities, Labels, and Folk Devils

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Pages: 14–32

DOI: [http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1993\\_14\\_32](http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1993_14_32)

Publication Date: 16 April 1999



## Volume Information:

Leslie, A. (ed.) 1999. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology and Architecture: The Third Conference Proceedings*. Glasgow: Cruithne Press.

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**Britannus/Britto:**  
*Roman ethnographies, native  
identities, labels, and folk devils*

Keith J. Matthews

*Classical and antique writers* used two words to describe the inhabitants of Britain: *Britannus* and *Britto*. Did these two terms mean anything to the people they labelled, or were they imposed by outsiders? Is there any significance in the difference between the two terms? Use of either term, both by "proper authors" and colloquially, suggests that Britons were looked down upon. As late as the end of the fourth century, Ausonius was able to claim that "no *Brito* can link himself with Bonus".

Ethnic names convey all sorts of meanings, as with any name used by outsiders. Names have power, as many cultures have recognised. If we look at the archaeology of the Romano-Britons, it is difficult to understand how they can have shared a common identity at the time of the conquest. Rather, I will argue, that common identity arose from the treatment of the locals by the Roman administration but was, at best, fragile. By focusing on the classical ethnonyms *Britannus* and *Britto*, I will argue that the terms were coined by non-Britons and belong to a classi-

ficatory tradition of ethnography alien to the peoples so labelled. In this instance the label describes a state of being not recognisable to archaeologists. What we generally refer to as "archaeological cultures" draw together diverse elements of material culture without regard to group identity or ethnicity; in this instance the label describes a state of being only recognisable to archaeologists. Finally, I will examine the concept of "value" within the practice of the naming of groups to demonstrate the value-laden overdetermination of such labels.

As archaeologists we are prone to inventing complex classificatory schemes as well as adopting those of contemporaries (particularly of ethnonyms or supposed ethnonyms). We should be wary of projecting the values inherent in our labels onto the entities they describe.

### USE OF THE TERMS

Two words were used by classical authors to describe the inhabitants of Britain: *Britannus*/*Βριταννος*, the most common, and *Britto*. Both words are found in a number of different spellings, with varying numbers of *t*s and *n*s. The chronological difference between the two forms is of little definite significance: while the former is the only form used before the conquest of Britain, the latter is attested by the late first century AD in the works of Juvenal and Martial. The two words share a common derivation discussed below, but it is unclear whether *Britto* is of Latin or Celtic origin (Rivet and Smith 1979, 281). Claims that *Britto* refers to "the more primitive peoples of the north" (Frere 1987, 183) can be refuted by looking at its usage, especially in inscriptions and by sub-Roman insular authors. If there is a distinction to be drawn, it is that *Britto* appears originally to have been a more colloquial form, although it was quickly adopted by officialdom. It is noteworthy, though, that it became the dominant form in the sixth century both in continental and in insular writers: could its adoption be a reflection of Romano-British practice? I will return to this important point in the conclusions.

The classical ethnographers agree on a number of points: the Britons are less civilised than the Gauls, a situation that becomes worse the farther north-west one travels; in war, they use chariots and cavalry; they are prone to fighting each other. At the same time, there is disagreement on detail: either they had a considerable arable surplus or most did not know how to sow crops; they are either wholly native to the island or they are from Gaul, Spain and Germany. With the confused mass of detail these authors supply, it is difficult to assess how much the classical

writers really knew about Britain and its inhabitants. I will be arguing later that there was no British identity and that this was a creation of classical writers who lumped together a very diverse population in order to categorise and thereby include them in their world view.

An element of racism can also be detected in the sources. Ausonius's curious outbursts ("no good man is a *Brito*" quoted in Rivet and Smith 1979, 54) might be dismissed as humorous in intent, but they display an underlying attitude which was clearly not shocking or offensive to his audience. Furthermore, while the word *Brittunculi* ("wretched little Brits") is used by a Roman officer to refer to probably hostile natives (Vindolanda Tablet II.164, quoted in Bowman 1994, 106), the popular derivation of *Britto* from *brutus* recorded by the encyclopaedist Isidore in the sixth century shows that anti-British prejudice was commonplace.

#### LABELLING AND GROUP IDENTITY

There has been only sporadic interest shown by archaeologists in cultural identity. Much of this work consists of a critique of the older view that "style" is an important element in cultural identity following similar critiques in anthropology. Older generations of prehistorians, for instance, were happy to conclude that particular ceramic styles were associated with definable cultural and ethnic groups, and this remained unchallenged by the New Archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Sackett 1977, 317; Clarke 1978, 85). There have been a number of studies (notably Strathern 1979; Weissner 1984; Larick 1985; 1991) which have shown this view to be mistaken and which suggest that material culture styles are much more closely related to personal identity than to collective identity, even in pre-industrial societies. This is an interesting observation in view of the way in which sociologists and historians have treated the consumption of material culture as a means of establishing individuality as if it is a recent (even post-modern) phenomenon (Miller 1994).

Vere Gordon Childe (1929, v) first defined an archaeological culture as "certain types of remains – pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites, house forms – constantly recurring together." He identified these entities, which were defined purely by repeated patterns of material culture, with ethnic groups. His most famous and influential exposition of this equation was *The Dawn of European Civilization* (Childe 1973), which reached its sixth edition in 1957.

Attempts were made to retain the concept of the archaeological culture, most importantly by David Clarke (1978, 299 ff.). His definition (*ibid.*,

490) was more sophisticated than Childe's and recognised that it was grounded in material culture and nothing more: "CULTURE: Specific cultural assemblage; an archaeological culture is a polythetic set of specific and comprehensive artefact-type categories which consistently recur together in assemblages within a limited geographical area." It is obvious that this definition is tautologous.

The problem with this type of definition is that it is utterly self-referential and self-fulfilling. By creating a definition of archaeological entities that relies on material culture and nothing else – which is all we can do as archaeologists – we tend to draw in other non-archaeological concepts which define human groups. Colin Renfrew recognised this as long ago as 1978 with his realisation that the archaeological definition of culture is nothing more than an arbitrary label imposed on a continuously changing set of material culture. The change might be through time, through space, or both.

There is a useful parallel here with the sociological "labelling theory" much used in studies of criminality and deviance. This theory holds that the label creates the category and that, once created, the categorised individual will behave in a manner appropriate to the label (Giddens 1997, 178; Sumner 1994, 203). Although material culture is inanimate and therefore incapable of independent behaviour of this type, its interpretation is embedded within archaeological practice. In this way, the definition of certain classes of material culture as belonging to a particularly labelled archaeologically defined entity will cause that class of material culture to be regarded as "behaving" identically in very different situations.

To simplify further, the naming of a group – be it of artefacts, assemblages of artefacts, individual human beings, or assemblages of human beings – creates in the namer and their audience an impression of uniformity of behaviour. This uniformity of behaviour need not exist, or at least might only exist in one very specific attribute of the thing being named. Thus, in criminology, there is no uniformity of overall human behaviour among "criminals" any more than there is uniformity of behaviour among pottery sherds in the archaeological record. Nevertheless, the criminal "breaks the law" and the potsherd "represents the cognitive processes of its producer".

The label applied to a particular group by an outsider helps others outside the group to understand it. The analogy I am drawing is between archaeologists and their labelling of assemblages of material culture and between ethnographers and their labelling of assemblages of human culture. In classificatory ethnography (in other words, ethnography as

practised in the colonial West or the Roman empire), the labels applied to ethnic groups are overdetermined (that is, determined by outsiders in a position of superiority). As archaeologists labelling material culture and categorising it, fitting it into recurring assemblages, we overdetermine archaeological cultures. Labelling in this way can draw together many disparate elements which do not show any uniformity of behaviour or morphology.

For instance, there has been discussion for some time about the label "Celt" and its appropriateness in archaeology (Collis 1996; Fleury-Ilett 1996; James 1998). Our knowledge of ancient Celtic identity derives from classical writers, exactly as our knowledge of Romano-British identity depends on their accounts. They give a clear impression of a group of peoples who had no political unity, and perhaps not even a common language (Powell 1958, 17). According to Caesar, their northern border lay on the Rhine, although he regarded them as only one of three groups of peoples in Gaul.

While the relationship between ethnicity and material culture is an important question in archaeology, it is now widely recognised that there is no simple equation between the two (Shennan 1989, 10; Jones 1997, 141). This is evident in the doomed attempts to define a Celtic culture complex: its geographical extent varies according to the criteria used for definition as does the date at which it is supposed to have emerged. Archaeologists have long identified it with the La Tène culture complex and sought Celtic origins in the earlier Hallstatt and Urnfield cultures (Fitzpatrick 1996, 241). Linguists have identified it with a particular group of closely related languages, but linguistic definitions of Celticity fail in pre-literate societies. Such is the confusion over Celticity that it has even been possible for a Celtacist to write that "Celtic art ... is anything but Celtic" (Green 1989, 6).

A large part of the problem is that an identity called "Celtic" still exists in contemporary Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany, and Cornwall. However, that identity is a fusion between a sub-culture officially suppressed for centuries and its Romantic re-creation two centuries ago. The ethnonym Celt as currently used is invested with many emotional burdens: other-worldliness, oppression, exoticism, nationalism, periphery, lost grandeur, bellicosity, and so on (Delaney 1986, 219). Study of the Celts has particularly been linked with Welsh and Irish nationalism and, more surprisingly perhaps, with French nationalism (Kristiansen 1990, 827; Fleury-Ilett 1996, 204). Thus, in using the overdetermined label "Celt", we cannot avoid the many nuances of meaning inherent in its

polysemous nature.

This type of modern politicised ethnic identity is meaningful only in terms of relations between groups, self-identifying or otherwise (Cohen 1978, 389). It must be questioned whether the peasant farmers of the second century BC from the Danube to Ireland could conceive of themselves as part of a single people. If there were any community of interest, it was shared between those engaged in the exchange network of prestige goods, the consumers of La Tène metalwork. These material signifiers of identity were not ethnic signifiers as they were not available to the majority of the population: they circulated among a restricted, self-identifying "subpopulation", in other words, a subculture. When archaeologists use the term "Celtic", it is not one that would have had any meaning whatsoever to the peoples of temperate western Europe in the late first millennium BC (Collis 1996, 175). The label "Celtic" describes something unrecognisable archaeologically; the classical writers who used it were not consistent in its application and it is unreasonable for us to use a term that attempts to reify a concept that is ultimately sterile.

#### PERCEIVING NATIVE IDENTITIES

So, how do we begin to understand how the natives of Roman Britain saw themselves? Apart from the writings of St Patrick, the sub-Roman Gildas, and the odd graffito, they left no descriptions of themselves. We are therefore dependent on archaeology to fill in these details, with all the uncertainties which it involves. Before turning to the physical evidence, though, what can we make of the scant literary references?

Patrick has very little to say about his British origins, but he does let slip one or two odd comments about the Irish that tell us something about his perception of himself. At the beginning of the *Epistola*, an open letter addressed to Coroticus, King of Dumbarton, he claims to live among barbarian people (*inter barbaras itaque gentes habito* (Hood 1978, 35)), the obvious implication being that he is not himself a barbarian. The *itaque* ("verily") reinforces this interpretation. He further qualifies this in the next paragraph by describing the Irish as his fellow citizens in contrast to the citizens of the holy Romans or the citizens of the demons, meaning Coroticus's subjects (*non dico civibus meis neque civibus sanctorum Romanorum sed civibus daemoniorum*). Despite his self-deprecating comments about his own rusticity (*rusticus*: *Confessio* 12 (Hood 1978, 5)), he evidently saw himself as civilised in an uncivilised land, but already

not actually Roman. Is this because of his Britishness or a result of his self-imposed exile among the barbarians? Unfortunately, he does not say.

Gildas, typically, has a lot more to say. However, he was writing at a distance of some four or five generations from the collapse of imperial power in Britain (unless we follow the singular views of Higham 1994, 139), and had little concrete information about the Roman past. This means that his comments about the Britons must be taken primarily as referring to those of the mid-sixth century. However, he does make a few generalising comments which are meant to refer to the past. The most obvious of these comes right at the start of his historical summary: "ever since it (i.e. Britain) was inhabited, it ungratefully rebelled, stiff-necked and stubborn" (*haec erecta cervice et mente ex quo inhabitata est ... ingrata consurgit* (Winterbottom 1978, 90)). He quotes a proverb to the effect that the Britons were neither strong in war nor trustworthy in peace (*Britanni nec in bello fortes sint nec in pace fideles* (Winterbottom 1978, 91)).

This is a general theme of Gildas: the duplicity and untrustworthiness of his fellow countrymen, and we should not perhaps take it too seriously. Nick Higham (1994, 190) has pointed out that Gildas's approach to history was largely providential: his aim was to show how God's grace had operated through British history. Because of this, he was at pains to show the wickedness of his countrymen, as this explained their current misfortunes. We must conclude that although his writings provide evidence for a native self-awareness, he does not supply any information we can legitimately regard as ethnographic or as supplying any information about the form that self-awareness took.

Without written statements from the natives themselves, it is important to consider how they constructed their identities through material culture. This phenomenon is generally referred to as consumption, and its study has been a fashionable branch of sociology for the past fifteen years or so. Material culture is seen to be invested with multiple meaning in modern society (Campbell 1995, 109). This has been assumed to be a recent change in attitude, with Baudrillard (1996 [1968], 200) claiming that "*the virtual totality of all objects and messages readily-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse*" (his italics) is a recent conversion in the relationship between humanity and the material world.

This mistaken deduction derives from the privileged position which traditional Marxian analysis accords socio-economic status: many documented societies, including pre-modern (or "simple") societies, also consume material culture as a means of establishing personal identity. The symbols used in this may never have been simple; it is only the



views of earlier generations of archaeologists that have treated them in this way. The views of more recent archaeologists have not yet been taken up by the majority of culture historians or sociologists. In contrast to the widely held belief that symbols identify close-knit populations, collective identity is constructed from polysemous symbols and it is the margins which define membership of a community (Cohen 1985, 50). In this way, sub-cultures are central to a community's self-definition: existing on the boundaries between different communities of interest, sub-cultures enable a group to define itself by what it is not. This has an interesting correlate in sexual identity: there have been few theorisations of male heterosexuality, and a large part of traditional masculine identity consists of placing the notions of femininity and homosexuality in opposition to conceptions of the self (Matthews forthcoming). For a politicised ethnicity to develop, it is therefore necessary to have a complex of sub-cultures and an awareness of their specific and divergent consumption of cultural symbols.

The important factor is Baudrillard's (probably correct) insistence upon understanding the totality of all objects to begin to grasp the discourses they represent. With archaeological material this is clearly difficult. Not all objects survive in the archaeological record, nor can we usually be certain that any assemblage is representative of even a small part of the discourse of objects. The discourse of archaeological entities is therefore at best fragmentary, at worst unrepresentative. Analyses of material culture tend to objectify, even fetishise, certain classes of artefact. For instance, pottery takes precedence over bronze objects in the average excavation report, yet the value placed on these objects by those who used them was almost certainly the other way round. On the other hand, does the very banality of pottery mean that it has a more subtle but pervasive rôle in the total discourse? Of course, even to ask this question highlights Baudrillard's insistence on the near-totality of what he calls the "system of objects".

### **BURIALS AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

There is one archaeological situation where we can be reasonably sure of retrieving at least that part of the system of discursive objects to survive in the ground: the excavation of human burials. Where they have not been disturbed by later activity, they will contain those durable objects which the living thought appropriate to accompany the dead individual. Here we have a discourse potentially involving disposal of the dead, care

of the deceased person's afterlife, the prevention of haunting, personal grief, religion, commemoration of departed family members, expressions of love from a partner, and so on. The discourses are likely to be as complex as those of everyday life, and it may therefore be possible to recover some information about how the living viewed themselves in relation to the dead. This in turn might help us to understand something of their ethnic self-awareness.

There is a perception that burial rites in the late pre-Roman Iron Age were fairly homogeneous across south-eastern England and north-western France (e.g. Stead and Rigby 1989, 86), with cremation being the main rite. However, significant variations do occur, including uniquely inhumation cemeteries (Burleigh and Matthews forthcoming; Matthews this volume and forthcoming). There is thus already a tension between the older rite of inhumation (which appears to originate in the middle Iron Age) and the "continental" innovation of cremation. The choice of which rite to employ must have been based on a number of complex factors, not simply religious belief. Cremation, for instance, is much more expensive than inhumation because an open pyre of Iron-Age type needs to be fed with fuel for up to eight hours to reduce a body. Moreover, there may have been a resistance to "foreign" rites by some sections of the population while others eagerly took up the new practice.

The "standard" Aylesford-Swarling cremation burial is nevertheless typical of the last century of independence; burials were deposited in pits with a variety of pottery vessels and other objects. Sometimes the burial was in the centre of a square enclosure, thought to have been a quarry for a central mound (Burleigh 1982, 12; Stead and Rigby 1989, 86). The more elaborate graves contain items such as planked buckets with bronze fittings, probably used for mixing wine during feasts, imported bronze vessels, and amphorae. The richest of these are referred to as "Welwyn-type" burials, after the first well-publicised discovery in 1906 (Smith 1912, 1).

### *King Harry Lane, Verulamium*

At the King Harry Lane site, in Verulamium, a cemetery dating to the first sixty years of the first century AD was extensively excavated in the mid-1960s and remains one of the few fully published sites of this type. The grave groups there consisted of between one and ten vessels, with beaker and jar types being the preferred containers for the ashes (although every closed vessel form represented on the site was used as an urn). There seems to be no sex or age patterning evident in the choice of

goods placed in the grave pit. Even more curiously, little attempt seems to have been made to fill the cinerary urn with human remains, a phenomenon which has been observed on other sites (McKinley in Burleigh and Matthews forthcoming).

The pottery derives from a variety of sources; while there was much locally made material, early imports came from elsewhere in south-eastern England, northern Gaul, central Gaul, and the Mediterranean region. Later groups also included southern Gaulish wares, but it is notable that post-conquest groups contain only locally made wares and central Gaulish Samian. Two vessels had been inscribed: one tazza in the grave of an adult female bore the legend ANDOC (to be compared with AND/ANDOCO on coins of Tasciovanus) while a platter had RX cut into its underside. Around ten per cent of all vessels had been damaged before burial, mostly by removing small sherds from the rim, while seven vessels had been trimmed before deposition. These latter phenomena are known from contemporary burials elsewhere in the region (Ashworth in Burleigh and Matthews forthcoming; although not mentioned in the text, plans and drawings in Partridge 1981 make it clear that the same practices were known in Romano-British Braughing).

Other objects from the cremations include ten coins, large numbers of copper-alloy brooches, three bracelets (from male graves), six mirrors, toilet instruments, spoons, as well as iron nails, knives, tools, and other objects. There were a few bone objects, a number of glass objects (including some beads associated with an inhumation), and metal fittings from decayed wooden objects. Some of the graves had been covered with wooden or other organic "lids".

What can we deduce from the huge quantity of data? All the common vessel forms belong to the international Gallo-Belgic style: butt-beakers, platters, and flagons, with sixty-one per cent of all vessels belonging to a cosmopolitan style. The obvious inference of this is that those responsible for arranging the types of goods which went into the graves saw the dead as part of the "international set", the users in life of this highly visible and status reinforcing material. Little interest seems to have been shown in expressing personal differentiation: apart from brooches, items of adornment were uncommon and only token amounts of calcined bone were deposited. We cannot, of course, be sure of the status of the pottery in the burials. Some of it had evidently been re-used as there were fifteen vessels with signs of repair, although they all came from smaller (and perhaps poorer) grave groups. On the other hand, there was a complete lack of cooking pots and storage jars, common on the adjacent and

contemporary settlement site at Prae Wood.

There is thus a specificity to the burial group, for all its complexity, which sets it apart from the standard domestic assemblage. The pottery was deliberately chosen, not simply collected from whatever was found lying about the home, although the motives behind the choice are not now apparent, except in the negative sense of knowing what people did not want to use. However, following the Claudian conquest, the range of goods in the cemetery changed dramatically.

The post-conquest phase of the King Harry Lane cemetery lasted for only twenty years, but the burial groups from this phase are completely different from earlier groups. Gone are the large numbers of imports from Gaul and the Mediterranean, and instead almost all the pottery (except for some central Gaulish Samian) is locally made and restricted to a much narrower range of forms. It is scarcely credible that the Roman conquest would have led to the complete cessation of trade with continental Europe (indeed, we know from the plentiful imported pottery found throughout Britain that it was more readily available): what we can see must be put down to consumer choice.

I contend that the choice was in part dictated by a sudden need to emphasise the local roots of the population, not its cosmopolitan taste. The changes caused by the conquest had included a brief period of resistance and warfare for the Catuvellauni, the loss of its apparently dynastic rulers and the probable incorporation of the remaining aristocracy into the regional government. Like it or not, everyone was now part of the "international set" and it was no longer necessary to assert this through the consumption of those meaningful objects that were part of that discourse. Instead, it was now more important to use those forms which proclaimed a sense of belonging to the region; additionally, the forms include flagons and poppy-head beakers, good Roman forms, which show a continuing interest in being cosmopolitan. There may also have been an element of economic support for the local pottery industry, but this cannot have been paramount.

To summarise so far: we have seen how classical writers use two terms to refer to the inhabitants of Britain, although there is little significance in the choice of term. We have also seen how the terms were used as a classification system without reference to native identity but how, by the sixth century at least, a politicised ethnicity can be detected in the works of Gildas. The archaeological evidence is less able to speak directly, but it can be shown that the King Harry Lane burials (which are probably the best means of determining how people think about themselves) show a

distinct change after the Roman conquest. I have attributed this change to a shift in consumption patterns away from those which declare cosmopolitan identities towards those which instead emphasise the local.

### *Roman and native deconstructed*

I would also like to examine the binary opposition Roman/native, which figures prominently in the modern literature of Roman Britain and is an important element in the contemporary archaeologist's understanding of Romano-British self-identification. In structuralist terms, we can refer to this as "myth" (Barthes 1972, 109). The modern archaeological discourse neatly parallels the classical ethnographic discourse. On one side we have the Romans, usually male, a military and active force, promoting Mediterranean ways of life, administration, language, economy, and so on. Some of them even left behind literature, often describing the deeds of other men (and, very occasionally, mannish women and *femme fatales*). Conversely, we have the native, who is also usually male, but who is acted upon, receives Roman influences, and figures very little in our histories or archaeologies. The hypothesised process of Romanisation, so important in twentieth-century archaeological discourse, becomes the point of articulation of these opposites. Table 1 summarises some of the principal elements of the mythic structure.

### BRITANNUS/BRITTO

I have already reached the conclusion that the term *Britannus* was given to the population by outsiders rather than deriving from a sense of common identity. However, the word has been thought to possess linguistically Celtic antecedents, \**Pritanos* in southern Britain and \**Pritenos* in the north: this is first recorded as Greek Πριτανος. The name has traditionally, and probably correctly, been taken to mean "tattooed" or "painted", an epithet that is well suited to people, but less so to places. The place-name *Britannia* given to the island (probably known as *Albion* before this) is almost certainly an abstraction from the ethnonym and not its source. Rivet and Smith (1979, 281) have pointed out that it is reasonable to assume that the name was conferred on the people by outsiders, probably Gauls. It could then have passed into Greek usage through the colonies established in southern Gaul. The term itself cannot, then, be taken as evidence for a unified native self-awareness.

What, then, is the purpose of using an opposition of *romanitas* with an

Table 1: *The Roman/Native mythic structure*

Roman	Native
active	passive
military	civilian
tax	tribute
literate	illiterate
homes	huts
invades	surrenders
civilised	barbarian
temples	shrines
rich	poor
conquers	resists
sexy	sad
visible	invisible
rules	obeys
élite	peasant
cosmopolitan	provincial
luxury	subsistence

identity that is likely to have had meaning as a label only to outsiders? There is the indisputable historical fact that much of Britain was conquered by an army of the Roman empire. Insofar as the inhabitants of the island were then subjugated to an imperialist regime, a distinction must be drawn between those involved in conquering and those being conquered. Moreover, as we have already seen, it may be that the conquest itself lent impetus to the creation of a British self-awareness.

### *Romanus*

It is widely recognised that Roman imperialism was very different from British colonialism, but it is still difficult for the English (or Welsh or Scots, for that matter) to shake off colonial attitudes. This is not helped by the education system, which teaches British history in terms of waves of invaders and settlers (a concept now unhappily enshrined in the National Curriculum). Indeed, imperialist discourse in Victorian Britain consciously employed models derived from Roman history. There can be little doubt, though, that the Roman empire was neither colonialist in the sense of the British empire, nor was it expansionist in the sense of Nazi Germany.

True enough, the Roman government fully intended to exploit the territories it conquered, but there were rarely periods at which the state became expansionist for its own sake and there is no evidence for mass migration into newly pacified areas. The idea of *romanitas* does not seem to have been specifically problematised by Roman writers, although it is possible to detect certain features which were thought to characterise it. Fifty years ago, R. H. Barrow (1949, 215) drew attention to what he called "a sense of self-subordination which marked the Roman mind". All the characteristics he goes on to list – *pietas*, *humanitas*, *libertas*, *mores*, *fides*, *disciplina*, *severitas*, *gravitas*, and *constantia* – are surprisingly abstract for a people we today regard as principally practical. However, the very abstraction of these concepts proved immensely useful in subsuming a variety of ethnic groups into thinking of themselves as Romans.

### *Further myth making: citizen/non-citizen*

The constantly expanding citizenship of Rome allowed the incorporation of provincials into her public life, blurring the distinctions between Roman and native. Instead the dominant polarity became citizen/non-citizen. At the time of the conquest of Britain this division already operated among the approximately 40,000 "Romans" engaged in it (Frere 1987, 48) with the parallel opposition between legionary and auxiliary. As locals were taken into the army and civil service, this division would have become much more important socially than that of Roman/native. The distinction will have been apparent from an early date in south-eastern Britain, where the native aristocracy was assimilated rapidly (or perhaps simply and instantly transformed) into the new urban élite. Even in northern areas the practical effect of changing from one system of taxation to another seems to have been relatively painless. Evidence for widespread dissatisfaction at Roman rule within the province (which to the local farmers would primarily have meant taxation) does not exist. The Boudican rebellion stands out as a unique incident.

The effect of the Roman/native structural myth is to keep the natives firmly in the background with little understanding of their self-identity. The "Romans" are presented as a civilised, literate people who are readily understandable, even by seven-year olds; "natives" are benighted savages, lifted from the mire of prehistory by their conquerors. In Britain the conquerors transformed material culture, importing Mediterranean styles and tastes, which were adopted by the native élite who are then transmuted into "Romans" by modern historiography although, interestingly, not by ancient or medieval historiography: this is the

process generally called Romanisation (Haverfield 1906, 186). This deconstruction of the term "Romanisation" still permits a distinction to be drawn between those who have been "Romanised" and those who have not. In crude Marxian terms, this is a class division, access to (and consumption of) Romanising material culture being determined primarily by the possession of transformable wealth. The original Roman/native opposition is a convenient fiction which allows us to disguise our ignorance of the daily lives of the majority of the population and to continue to extol the virtues of classical civilisation.

### GROUP LABELLING AS VALUE SYSTEM

Ethnic labels have frequently been bestowed by outsiders, often with the best of intentions but with no appreciation of the self-identity of the peoples so labelled. Nevertheless, the ethnographers of colonial powers are not disinterested observers, no matter how much they may claim to be. Classical authors used the language of ethnicity as a classificatory tool for peoples they regarded as "other" (that is, non-Roman); we can go further and ask why they regarded these categories as useful.

To the Romans, all good literature had a moral purpose: the ethnographer was not concerned to give a scientific account of the various foreign peoples the Romans knew about, but to use their supposed traits as warnings and lessons for the audience. This is immediately apparent in Tacitus's *Germania*, which contrasts the simple lives of the Germans with the decadent population of Rome. In many ways, these Germans closely resemble the supposedly more austere Romans of the early Republic. That, of course, was the main purpose of Tacitus: to encourage his contemporaries to return to the ancient virtues. This could be achieved by pointing out how the Germans of his day posed a threat by displaying those very qualities that had made Rome a world power.

It is less easy to trace such attitudes in the disparate accounts of the *Britanni*. While their lives are at times made to appear simpler and less complicated (and, therefore, supposedly more authentic) than those of the Romans, there is also a sense that the writers are stressing that the Britons are essentially primitive and uncivilised. They are not, therefore, to be admired or feared. Caesar makes the point very tellingly when he declares that the inhabitants of *Cantium* are the most civilised: he uses the term *humanissimi*, "most human". The inhabitants of the interior do not know how to sow crops and run around in skins, much like the popular twentieth-century view of a "caveman". At the same time, of course,



Caesar is desperate to show that his opponents were skilled warriors, otherwise he would have had more success in his campaigns. This makes Caesar's Britons more akin to *The Flintstones* than to *Stig of the Dump*.

The term *Britannus* was already ancient by the time Roman authors adopted it and it is important to remember that they did not coin it. However, there is no indication in the very limited information we have about pre-Roman political affairs in Britain that its inhabitants saw themselves as a unified ethnic group. Indeed, the British policy of Augustus seems to have been designed to prevent the formation of large power blocs by pitting groups against each other (Frere 1987, 30). In a society which valued warfare as a source of prestige, it is unlikely that a common identity transcending political and tribal boundaries could ever form.

It was the impact of the Roman conquest which changed this situation by stopping inter-tribal warfare. Michael Fischer (1986, 197) has pointed out that the superficial homogenisation of culture throughout the world in the late twentieth century has led to an upsurge of an emotionally charged and politicised ethnic awareness and considers the two closely linked. Can we suggest that similar processes were at work in first-century Britain, with the imposition of Roman government speeding up the process by which native peoples were acquiring Roman-style goods? It is easy to see how a new British identity might coalesce around worries about this rapid incorporation into a pan-European identity; the very act of the Roman conquest and subsequent classification of its new provincial subjects was the catalyst by which a politicised ethnic identity was forged. This much is evident from the material culture changes in burials at King Harry Lane.

The purpose of classical ethnography may have been partly concerned with creating and reinforcing Greek and Roman identities. I observed above how many communities define themselves by reference to what they are not, in other words, to the marginal groups on their conceptual boundaries; the self-awareness of classical Greeks and Roman was constructed with reference to the groups on their physical boundaries. With the incorporation of Britain into a large political unit as a single province, for the first time its inhabitants could view themselves as a group in opposition to the inhabitants of the other provinces.

## CONCLUSIONS

To return to the *Britannus*/*Britto* question with which this paper opened, it is now possible to suggest an answer about their difference. *Britannus* is

clearly an etic category, devised by the peoples of Gaul who had contact with the inhabitants of the island they knew as *Albion*; it passed into classical usage and remained a popular characterisation. *Britto* is probably an emic category, deriving from a self-awareness of what it was to be an inhabitant of Roman Britain. As such, it is unsurprising that it is not recorded until the end of the first century, two or more generations after the conquest. This also explains why it becomes the dominant form in sub-Roman insular texts.

As archaeologists trying to extract meaning from the material culture remains of the past, we must return to Baudrillard's insistence on the total system of objects: under certain favourable conditions, we can examine the synchronic and diachronic relationships of these systems. As I have shown, a diachronic treatment of burial groups from a single site can uncover something of the semiotics behind their composition. Among these semiotics there are meanings which relate to self-identification, although not specifically ethnicity, which depends on the interplay of many more factors.

In using archaeology as a tool to reconstruct ethnic identities, there are many traps into which we can fall. The most obvious is the mapping of material culture assemblages directly onto ethnic groups, as Gordon Childe attempted. Secondly, we can search for the ethno-specific object as in the futile attempts to recognise separate "Saxon" and "Anglian" brooch types. Most damaging of all, though, is the acceptance of ethnographic labels as givens in historical archaeology. What I hope to have shown is that the ethnic label can precede the formation of ethnic identity and that the existence of an ethnonym does not always mean that the group so named is even aware of its existence.

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