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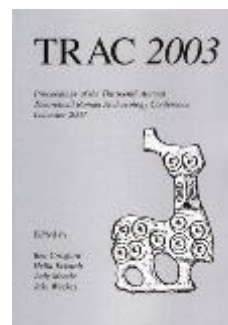
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# ‘The Camden Connection’: Revisiting the origins of Romano-British archaeology and its historiography

Leslie W. Hepple

## *Introduction*

William Camden’s *Britannia*, first published in 1586, is generally regarded as the first significant and systematic work in the history of Romano-British archaeology. However, his role has increasingly become that of symbolic progenitor, noted briefly in the initial or historical chapters of surveys of Roman Britain, rather than as a figure whose ideas and contributions still need to be engaged with today. The accepted view is that *Britannia* is built around the concept of Britain as a Roman province, yet until the last decade most studies of Camden and his work have been undertaken by scholars primarily interested in his historical or prehistorical contributions rather than his Romano-British archaeology.

Recent years have seen a revival of interest and research on Camden and his contribution to the study of Roman Britain, examining in detail his methods, sources, travels to Roman sites, his correspondence, and the collections of antiquities associated with his work. The present writer is one of those who have been active in this detailed historical research. The aim of the present paper is not, however, to report further detailed work, but to explore more conceptual issues about Camden’s methods and context. In particular it sets out to examine recent work in the history of science, widely applied to the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth-century and the impact of the Royal Society, and argues that several of the concepts may also illuminate earlier humanistic scholarship, and in particular Camden’s Romano-British contributions.

## *Camden and the Britannia*

Camden’s *Britannia* was the first major survey of the history and antiquities of Britain. It made a major impact on English historical scholarship and marked a very significant point in the development of antiquarian and archaeological studies in Britain. In particular Camden began the discovery of Britain as a Roman province and the reconstruction of a detailed geography of the Roman occupation, inspired by the great Continental scholar Ortelius to ‘restore Britain to Antiquity and Antiquity to Britain.’ In Joseph Levine’s words:

The *Britannia* was, therefore, first and principally a commemoration of Roman Britain; Elizabethans were to be reminded of their direct and immediate descent not from the apocryphal Trojan-Celtic history beloved of the Middle Ages but from classical antiquity, as a province of the Roman Empire, the equal of any other (Levine 1987: 93–94).

The work transformed historical and antiquarian knowledge in Britain, and encompassed many topics from prehistory through to the late medieval period. The *Britannia*, and Camden’s other writings, had significant impacts on the understanding of history (Woolf 1990), and, as the book became a ‘best-seller’ and went through several Latin (1586, 1587, 1590, 1594, 1600,

1607) and English editions (1610), it reached a wide public of gentry and scholars. Woolf has recently documented this (Woolf 2000) and also noted:

*Britannia* deserves a special place in the history of history in England, less for what its author did for historical method than for what the book itself did, in the century after its first publication in 1586, for the dissemination of a rudimentary knowledge of British antiquity, and the turning of many gentry minds toward the history and archaeology of their localities (Woolf 1997: 127).

Politically, the book helped in the creation of a sense of British national identity, important with the accession of James VI of Scotland to also be James I of England in 1603, and Hay even ‘suspects that in this way [the impact of both Latin and English editions] Camden did more to unite Britain in the long run than did King James’ (Hay 1977: 151).

The focus of the present study is purely on Camden’s contribution to the discovery of Roman Britain, but (as evidenced above) this is central to his *Britannia* project and one of the most enduring aspects of his work. There is no attempt here to address the wider historical and political aspects of the project. Camden’s study of Roman Britain began with the known historical sources, such as the Antonine Itinerary, but his originality lay in taking this historical knowledge out into the field, to trace Roman roads and sites in the landscape. Thus Camden always saw *Britannia* as a contribution to chorography rather than history *per se*. However, Camden was no excavator – systematic or otherwise – nor was he an acute field archaeologist in terms of careful observations and drawings of sites. The core of his field contribution was the collection of Roman inscriptions, founding the study of Roman epigraphy in England. The texts of these inscriptions, mainly from Roman military contexts, allowed Camden to link sites of Roman remains to the historical record. This recording and interpretation is the most enduring aspect of his Roman contribution, and Camden’s inscriptions remain the foundational work for the study of Roman inscriptions in Britain. In terms of Roman inscriptions, Camden’s success was immense: in the first edition of *Britannia* in 1586, Camden had a mere twelve Roman stone inscriptions to report; by his last edition in 1610 there were over 110.

As noted above, many of the accounts and assessments of Camden and his work have been written by scholars primarily interested in aspects other than his Romano-British scholarship. There is no full or modern biography of Camden, but accounts can be found in Piggott (1951) and Trevor-Roper (1971). Recent scholarship on Camden’s Romano-British work includes Boon (1987), Kunst (1995), and the studies of Cotton’s collections of inscribed Roman stones (Davies 1997; McKitterick 1997), both part of a wider engagement with Sir Robert Cotton’s role as collector (Wright 1997). Edwards has studied Camden’s links and correspondence with north-west England (Edwards 1998) and the role of Reginald Bainbrigg of Appleby as a key informant (Edwards 2001). The present writer has studied the 1599 tour of the north and its role in Cotton’s collecting (Hepple 1999), Camden’s use of a John Dee manuscript as the source of his earliest Cumbrian inscriptions (Hepple 2002b), and Lord William Howard’s early seventeenth-century collection of Roman inscribed stones at Naworth near Hadrian’s Wall (Hepple 2002a). Other papers have examined the significance of the collections of these Roman antiquities (Hepple 2003) and their outdoors role as ‘museums in the garden’ (Hepple 2001).

Discussion of Camden’s role as ‘father of Romano-British archaeology’ has generated some divisions, mainly dependent on how strict a definition one takes of the discipline and practice of archaeology. Most studies of the history of archaeology date the emergence of the field from after the foundation of the Royal Society, seeing a gradual development during the

eighteenth-century, and anyway they pay only limited attention to Romano-British archaeology, focusing rather on British prehistory (e.g. Daniel 1981; Trigger 1989). Such a view inevitably puts Camden amongst the antiquarian predecessors rather than the pioneering archaeologists (see also Piggott 1976; Hunter 1995). However, focusing on Camden's 1599 tour, McKitterick has argued that

The results [of the tour] were as dramatic as any in the history of British archaeology. Between them, the two men [Camden and Cotton] set out for the first time the materials for an ordered account of the Roman occupation of northern Britain, based not simply on literary evidence, but, now, on surviving archaeological remains (McKitterick 1997: 106).

Kunst clarifies the differences in viewpoint:

Camden's archaeological achievements have been underrated by students of the history of archaeology who tend to trace the beginnings of archaeological thought almost entirely to the influence of the natural sciences at the end of the seventeenth century. It is hardly necessary to point out against this that the humanist philological tradition had a strong interest in chronology and classification based on a concept of anachronism rooted in the study of palaeography (Kunst 1995: 123).

The aim here is not to continue that debate, but to examine Camden's practices in the light of recent work in the history of science.

### *New Histories of Science*

Recent scholarship on the history of science has been much influenced by parallel work on the sociology and practices of science, such as that by the Edinburgh group of Barnes and Bloor (e.g. Barnes 1974; Barnes, Bloor and Henry 1996) and by French sociologist Latour (e.g. Latour 1987). In particular, studies of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century have used these new perspectives, beginning with Shapin and Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, which contrasted the Hobbesian *a priori*, deductive reasoning approach with Boyle's commitment to empiricism and experiment (Shapin and Schaffer 1985). However, this and later work also emphasised the necessary structures and everyday practices that were as important as – if not more important than – philosophical perspectives. Scientific progress was generated and sustained by social networks and institutional structures of 'scientists', and those networks and structures were situated in space. This has led to recognition of the spatiality of scientific practice and the need for historical geographies of scientific knowledge (Livingstone 1995, 2000, 2003; Ophir and Shapin 1991; Shapin 1998). Studies of seventeenth-century science have highlighted, amongst others, three elements that may be discussed here: evidence, sites and communication.

The assembly of reliable, 'truthful' evidence is central to scientific experiment and progressive knowledge, but what constitutes reliable evidence, what counts as observable 'fact' and who counts as a credible witness? The issues, which are questions of practice as much as philosophy, were answered in various ways during the scientific revolution. 'Facts' could be made and then measured in various ways (e.g. Poovey 1998). The concept of a credible witness was, at that time, closely allied to gentility (Shapin 1994): the civility and material disinterestedness of the gentleman's position were important, both in conducting and witnessing experiments and, even more so, in reporting events or facts from a distance.

Secondly, the development of science required 'heterotopias', places and special sites marked off from everyday spaces, where science was constructed, debated, represented and displayed (Ophir and Shapin 1991). The first of these is the laboratory or 'house of experiment', usually located in a private space (domestic house) but also constituting a public space for those admitted to witness scientific experiments (Shapin 1988). Livingstone (2000, 2003) has examined a number of other sites. 'Cabinets of curiosities', objects – natural and anthropological, curious and exotic – discovered or brought back from foreign parts, were originally private collections but they then formed the basis for public museums such as the Ashmolean in Oxford (Findlen 1994; Impey and Macgregor 1985). Similarly 'gardens of display' allowed the collection of plant species from across the globe, culminating in the grand assemblage at Kew Gardens in London (Livingstone 2000).

These various sites were linked together in networks of communication. The Royal Society held meetings, bringing scientists together to read and debate papers; research was diffused through the publication of scientific journals, whilst scientists such as the Royal Society secretary, Oldenburg, kept in contact with extensive epistolary networks. Such networks became extensive, and extended, but within them there were what Latour has termed 'centres of calculation', nodes where the information was gathered, processed and developed (Latour 1987). Laboratory experiments could be replicated at other sites in other regions or countries, but much field-based information (geographical, environmental, anthropological) could not actually be transported, and science had to depend on travel and reportage, raising issues of the credibility of eye-witnesses and reporters (Withers 1999).

These concepts reflect very basic issues, but this does not diminish their significance, and they have been widely deployed in the recent history of science. Much of the initial work focused on the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth century but more recent work has also employed the concepts in the analysis of later natural and social science. Thus Stewart (1999) has examined 'other centres of calculation', alternatives to the Royal Society in London coffee-houses, whilst Miller (1996) has applied the concept to Joseph Banks' imperial botany in late eighteenth century London. Geographers such as Livingstone and Withers have used the ideas in the emergence of field-based disciplines, and Withers' work on Scotland includes the archaeological researches of Sibbald (Withers 1999, 2001).

Because of the origins of this work, there has been a tendency to assume that these concepts identify distinctively new features that emerged during the seventeenth century and characterise the 'new science'. In terms of the overall conjunction of elements, and their maintenance through time, this may be true. But it is much less true to assert that earlier scholarship and humanistic studies did not share some of these characteristics. However, the relevance to humanistic studies and 'sites' has been either denied or ignored by most of the literature. For example, partly because of Ophir's study of Montaigne and his library (Ophir 1991), the literature ignores the library and documentary archive as scientific sites, seeing the library as a private place of solitary study. Thus Harkness's study of John Dee's laboratory (Harkness 1997) has been widely cited as a pioneering 'house of experiment' (e.g. Livingstone 2000), whilst Dee's library has not been seen as a site of parallel significance, yet Sherman has shown its public role and argued it was a 'centre of calculation' in Elizabethan England (Sherman 1995). Similarly, studies of the 'Archives of the Scientific Revolution' are made without cross-reference to work on historical archives such as those assembled by Camden's friend Robert Cotton (Hunter 1998).

The argument of the present paper is that several of these ideas and concepts now being widely deployed in the history of science are also applicable to certain earlier humanistic and

antiquarian studies, and that Camden's Roman epigraphical work is a prime example. By deploying these concepts on Camden's work, its enduring qualities are illuminated.

### *Camden in Context*

Camden was never the solitary scholar. Based in London he was at the heart of a social and scholarly network of communication. He was a key figure in the Society of Antiquaries, and, although he never crossed the Channel himself, he maintained an extensive correspondence with international scholars. Within England, he corresponded with clerics, gentry and scholars from all regions, and his friendship with his wealthy pupil and protégé, Robert Cotton, gained him access to elite social groups. Camden's *Britannia* project was written by someone who had made himself a 'centre of calculation'. In the years of Camden's greatest activity, from 1586 to 1607, the London scholarly network and the meetings of the Society of Antiquaries displayed many characteristics later found in the early years of the Royal Society. Cotton's library (like that of Dee in previous decades), and in particular the archival collection he assembled, provided an important 'site' and 'heterotopia' for this scholarly work (Tite 1994).

But the evidence of Roman Britain that Camden needed for his *Britannia* project could not be found solely or even mainly through archival and library sources located in London, or other international 'centres of calculation'. In particular the best-surviving Roman antiquities and sites were located on the geographical periphery of the country – in the far north of England and across the Severn on the Welsh frontier. Camden therefore travelled extensively, witnessing for himself Roman sites and inscriptions, and *Britannia* is peppered with assertions that 'I saw' or 'we saw'. One might say that, for Camden, Caesar's '*veni, vidi, vici*' became '*veni, vidi, descripsi*'. However, such travel would never have led to successful completion of *Britannia* if he had not been guided to significant sites and finds by the reports of others. These men reported local 'finds' to Camden, some of which he was subsequently able to see for himself on his riding tours. Thus Camden undertook a journey through Yorkshire and Lancashire in 1582 and saw the stone coffin of Marcus Verecundius Diogenes, discovered in 1579 at York 'which we saw in house of an Alderman'. In Lancashire, he visited Salesbury Hall to see the inscribed pedestal discovered in 1578 at Ribchester, and also an inscribed base found close by.

Nor could he see all the inscriptions for himself and provide his own reliable eye-witness evidence. Thus he had to rely extensively on the testimony of others, involving the same issues of 'credible witness' and the virtues of gentility as discussed in the history of seventeenth century science (e.g. Shapin 1994). In many instances in *Britannia* Camden identifies the quality of the testimony by naming the gentry or clerics who provided it. Thus he notes of a Cumberland inscription 'This also with others Oswald Dikes a learned minister of God's word copied out for me', and elsewhere in Cumberland 'were found these inscriptions exemplified for me by the hand of the right honorable Lord William Howard of Naworth.'

It would, of course, be wildly anachronistic to expect *Britannia* to display the 'scholarly infrastructure' of a modern paper, with footnotes of sources or Harvard referencing, but parts of it can be reconstructed. Thus the source for some of the earliest Cumbrian inscriptions in the 1586 edition can be identified as a journal of John Dee dating from 1573, and presumably borrowed by Camden (Hepple 2002b). We also have the evidence of many of Camden's own notes and letters sent to him by his correspondents. Cotton is a key figure here, for it was he who collected Camden's paper together and preserved them. Selections of these letters

(especially those from international scholars) were published as long ago as 1691, but key reports on British inscriptions are to be found in the Cottonian manuscripts in the British Library. Some of these sources were Camden's London-based friends, antiquaries and lawyers, men such as John Dee and William Lambarde. Others were clergymen and gentry of a scholarly turn of mind such as Oswald Dykes, Reginald Bainbrigg, Bishop Francis Godwin, and the noble Lord William Howard. The letters to Camden sometimes reveal the actual process of discovery, usually by ordinary people, and then transmitted by 'credible witnesses'. Thus a statue of a man on horseback was 'found by a man plowinge' near Ribchester (Lancashire) in 1604 and reported by Thomas Braithwaite, a cousin of Camden, and Henry Savile acquired two inscribed stones found by a ploughman in Yorkshire, whilst Bishop Francis Godwin used local information, a 'report of the people', to decide to 'bestowe some mony in diggyng' at Caerleon in 1602.

Whilst the inscriptions seen or reported could be interpreted as texts, the material objects they were carved on – altars, tombstones, dedication slabs and building stones – raised other issues. Left where they were found, they were liable to neglect and disappearance. Yet, unlike small, easily-portable objects such as coins, they could not simply be taken to London and placed in a 'cabinet of curiosities'. Camden himself seems to have been little interested in collecting the physical objects of Roman Britain, but his colleague Cotton certainly was, and many of the best inscriptions from the Roman north were brought to his summer-house at his country home of Conington near Peterborough. The lengthy and expensive process of moving the stones was fraught with difficulties. One of Cotton's agents in Newcastle reported that they had been let down by

some of those you trusted in Northumb: for this busines are in some degree north bryttans [Scots] a great parte wherof are in showe att your service but in tryall nothing soe yt the stones are not yet hurde of heare att Newcastle (British Library Ms: Cotton Julius CIII, f.314).

When Cotton prevailed on his friend and fellow antiquarian Lord William Howard to assist, Howard also had difficulties obtaining a suitable cart to move the stones to Newcastle:

Till haye tyme was past I could gett no draughts to undertake to carie them, and nowe haye tyme is done ther are no draughts in the countrie able to drawe them, so as theruppon I have appointed myne owne draught to deliver them at Newborne (British Library Ms: Cotton Julius CIII, f.210. See Hepple 1999).

Several other, more locally-based collections were made in Cumbria: at Elenborough (just outside modern Maryport) by the Senhouse family; at Naworth near Hadrian's Wall by Lord William Howard (Hepple 2002a); and at Appleby by Reginald Bainbrigg (Edwards 2001). On the Welsh frontier, a small collection from Caerleon was formed by Bishop Godwin. Howard, Bainbrigg and Godwin were all friends and correspondents of Camden, and a visit to John Senhouse's collection of altars at Elenborough was the highlight of the 1599 tour, as Camden enthused:

The ancient vaults stand open, and many altars, stones with inscriptions, and Statues are here gotten out of the ground. Which I. Sinhaus a very honest man, in whose grounds they are digged up, keepeth charily, and hath placed orderly about his house. In the mids of his yard their standeth erected a most beautifull foure square Altar of a reddish stone right artificially in antique worke engraven five foote or there abouts high, with an inscription therein of an excellent good letter (Camden 1610: 769).

These collections not only secured the objects, but also provided 'museums in the garden', for most were located out of doors, where suitable visitors could examine the stones and the location used to reference the material, as Camden did of several items in the 1607 *Britannia* (Hepple 2001). These assemblages themselves constitute significant 'heterotopias', specialised sites where the evidence of the Roman occupation was stored. These early collections – and they predate most of the seventeenth-century 'cabinets of curiosities' – had the quality of scholarly focus and were not the ragbags of exotic and unrelated items that many of the better-known cabinets were.

A remarkable feature is the survival of significant parts of these epigraphic collections to the present day. Cotton's collection was moved to Cambridge in the 1750s, and is now in the Museum of Archaeology there (Davies 1997; McKitterick 1997); surviving Godwin stones are in the museum at Caerleon; the Senhouse collection remained in the same family until the survivals were moved to a new Senhouse Roman Museum at Maryport in 1990. The surviving Bainbrigg stones and copies (for he was a keen copier and imitator) can be seen built into a low wall in the town of Appleby, completely unprotected by listing. Perhaps the most remarkable is the Howard collection from Naworth, moved to Rokeby near Barnard Castle in the mid-eighteenth century. Today the stones are still arrayed on a platform on the lawn, and in the centre of the display stands the altar to Jupiter, an inscription first seen by Camden on his tour in 1599 and recorded in the 1600 *Britannia*.

Camden's careful observation, recording and reporting of Roman inscriptions, together with his use of the accounts of trustworthy witnesses meant his epigraphic work was a genuine cumulative resource, one that he developed through the editions of *Britannia* from 1586 to 1610 and one that could be built upon by others. It thus had – at least in the Roman epigraphic dimension – many of the key qualities of modern science and scholarship, and it is no surprise that *Britannia* is still referenced as a foundation source for *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (known as *RIB*) (Collingwood and Wright 1965). But did it in practice generate cumulative progress after Camden's death?

*Britannia* was immensely successful and influential, and it provided a template for such surveys until the early nineteenth century. Thus Gibson, with a network of contributors, updated the work in 1695 and 1722 and Gough in 1789 and 1806. However, these works had to include much more than the Roman component, and it was perhaps Horsley's individual venture that most truly built on Camden's Roman legacy (Horsley 1732). But the longevity of editions of *Britannia* cannot hide the fact that context within which it was conceived and grew did not outlive Camden. The scholarly community of the Society of Antiquaries lasted only a short time, until 1607, and Van Norden has noted that the Society's duration roughly coincides with the span of the six Latin editions of *Britannia*. The political content of much historical scholarship – witness Cotton's political activity – meant James I was unwilling to allow the Society to re-form six years later. Political change and civil war further shattered the flowering of scholarship associated with the turn of the century. Despite the later editions of *Britannia*, and an edition of Camden's letters and a biography (Smith 1691), many of Camden's sources and letters became lost in the Cottonian and later British Museum archives. It was not until the era of Bruce (1851, 1875), Huebner and Haverfield, in the grand nineteenth-century flourishing of Romano-British studies, that the Camden archive re-emerges into the scholarly literature. Huebner, in producing his *Corpus* of the Roman inscriptions of Britain (Huebner 1871), used some of the Camden correspondence, followed by the more detailed work of Haverfield (1911, 1913), and the detailed modern cataloguing of Collingwood and Wright (1965).



## Conclusions

Within Romano-British studies and archaeology, epigraphy no longer has the centrality it once had. But it remains a significant aspect of the discipline, as witness the annual reports in the journal *Britannia*, the series of eight fascicles of *RIB II*, the proposals for *RIB III* (Tomlin 1999), and the great interest generated by the Vindolanda writing-tablets (not, of course, on stone) (Bowman 1994). In this sub-discipline, studies of the early history of the field and Camden's contribution remain of interest. Equally, Camden has always had a secure place in the historiography of Hadrian's Wall (Birley 1961). However, beyond this locale and in the wider arena of Romano-British archaeology, the revitalised interest in the history and historiography of the discipline (Wallace 2002) has seen attention focus on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century roles of figures such as Haverfield and Collingwood, both of whom were very active in epigraphic studies and the history of those studies (Freeman 1997; Hingley 2000). There are interesting questions here. For example, whether, and how, Haverfield's interpretations of Camden's connections (Haverfield 1911) were influenced by Haverfield's own perspectives on empire and Romanisation.

The main conclusion, if the argument of this paper is persuasive, must be that re-examination of 'the Camden connection' – Camden's methods and travels, his network of correspondents and what counted as evidence, the archives and collections of Roman antiquities stimulated by his work – is worthwhile. In terms of contemporary perspectives on the history of science, 'the Camden connection' displays many of the positive characteristics of seventeenth-century natural science, and study of 'the Camden connection' may assist in seeing the relevance of such perspectives to other humanistic studies of the period.

Let Camden himself have the last word, from his address to the reader in the 1607 edition of *Britannia*:

For me it is enough and more to have made a start, and I will consider it a gain if I have attracted others into this field, be it to write more or to amend what I have written (Camden 1607, *Britannia*).

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