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## Paper Information:

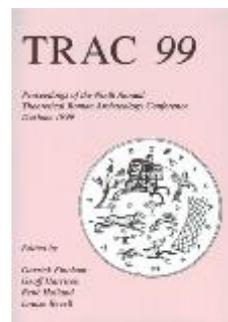
Title: Wood, Masonry and the Construction of Identity:  
Comparing Southern Britain and Gaul, 4th to 7th  
Centuries

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Pages: 83–89

DOI: [http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1999\\_83\\_89](http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1999_83_89)

Publication Date: 06 April 2000



## Volume Information:

Fincham, G., Harrison, G., Rodgers Holland, R., and Revell, L. (eds) 2000  
*TRAC 99: Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology  
Conference, Durham 1999*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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# Wood, Masonry and the Construction of Identity: Comparing Southern Britain and Gaul, 4th to 7th Centuries

by Dominic Janes

## *Introduction*

This article inquires into the fate of late Roman art and architecture, not with the aim of lamenting their demise or to measure their standards against those of the succeeding early medieval culture, but simply to seek an explanation for a dramatic change in the nature of the built environment in north-western Europe. Late Roman art and architecture can and should be seen, not simply as subjects in isolation, but as a component of antique material culture in a general sense. A division, however, may be made between the art and culture of ordinary Romans and that of their elite. The landed elite, together with the State and the Church, were the predominant builders and patrons in late Antiquity. The aristocracy's distinctive material culture was eloquently expressed through their patronage of public and religious buildings, as well as in their mosaic- and marble-decorated villas and town houses. These reached a peak of magnificence in Britain and parts of Gaul in the fourth century (De La Bédoyère 1999: 111-37). By the seventh century, on the other hand, these traditions of building and decoration were virtually restricted to the Christian Church and, apparently, nobles lived in simpler wooden dwellings. An important element of this process was the collapse of most forms of public building other than churches at the end of Antiquity across much of western Europe, even in Italy (Ward-Perkins 1984). Secular society seems to have become less interested in these large-scale forms of architectural display, or at least came to see them as referring to the Church.

How did this come about? In order to answer this question it is necessary to distinguish two linked phenomena, the first being changing economic circumstances and the second being changing cultural expectations. The traditional explanation has been that the late Roman civilian aristocracy would have liked always to maintain classical lifestyles and, therefore, they were forced to drop these forms only under the pressures of adversity. On the other hand, it is interesting to think of Heather's explanation of the end of classical education for the secular elite in Gaul (Heather 1994). This came about when learning in the old style was no longer advantageous in public careers. We cannot assume that building grandiose villas and town houses were automatically desirable, but instead must assert that such constructions were desired in certain circumstances. If economic conditions made the building, decoration and maintenance of such dwellings more difficult then the elite may have found it expedient to compete with one another, or to display their status, in new ways. But even if society became more socially equal, with fewer people holding vast accumulations of wealth, nevertheless there remains a clearly observable aristocracy in our very late and post-Roman written sources (c.400-600), even if their material remains are strangely insubstantial. Moreover, the persistence of the old-style of art and architecture in many Gallic, Italian and Spanish churches

indicates that the ancient masonry techniques were not impossible in the early Middle Ages. We must be dealing with cultural choices made in evolving economic circumstances.

#### *Building Elite Identity, 4th Century*

Elite culture was not simply an automatic aspect of the lives of aristocrats, but was carefully cultivated. The styles of aristocrats' houses were often eloquent of their ideals since style is a medium of communication which can be used to express identity (Wiessner 1990: 106). Style communicating status may have to do with labour, wealth or the display of connections (Wiessner 1990: 110). Meaning has to be sought in the study of conventions, in other words, what was expected in a particular society (Davis 1990: 25). In both ancient and medieval society the aristocracy monopolized much of the surplus production and used it both to live the good life and to show status. The aspect of the grand Roman houses that interests me is that of conspicuous expenditure, of architectural elaboration for the sake of decoration and ostentation. Large-scale villa building, for example, gave visible evidence of a claim to status by the builders within a social structure that valued such expressions, as was also the case in, for example, early modern and modern England (Girouard 1980: 3).

At this point I should make clear that this is to take a generalized view of late Roman buildings. Villas were but one part of estates, and many were far from ostentatious. Indeed the term 'villa' itself is rather unsatisfactory, since it is sometimes applied to the main dwelling on an estate, and at other times to the main building-complex including a range of agricultural structures. Moreover, it is important to note the trend over recent years to stress regional variation across the empire. A 'villa' was not the same everywhere since there were a great variety of house forms within even each small region (Percival 1976). In Britain the usage is applied to country houses with Romanizing features such as extensive use of masonry in plans based on right angles, presence of mosaic or painted plaster and of heating systems or baths (De La Bédoyère 1993: 55). Greg Woolf, in his recent study of the rise of Roman Gaul, has argued that we should think in terms of general cultural influences and fashions; that "the rebuilding of "native farms" as *villae* thus reflects a deep internalization of Roman tastes, rather than a desire to imitate Roman style *in toto*", in other words, not an explicit desire to assert Romanness by building identically to people in Italy, but rather to show status in a society heavily influenced by Roman standards (Woolf 1998: 157). For centuries such elite status was demonstrated in ways that had something of a common template, including such elements as mosaics, baths, tiled roofs and so forth. These traditions began and faltered at different dates in different regions, suggesting a variety of local experience which, nevertheless, moved in the same direction away from classical models all across Europe.

Romanness itself, of course, was never static. According to Woolf, becoming Roman was like joining a debate (Woolf 1998: 11). Romanness was, arguably, more about social status, and how to show that distinction, than about ethnicity (Woolf 1998: 240). Recent years have seen the rise in theoretical studies of the negotiating individual working out his or her options and acting not simply at the whim of circumstances and entrenched social structures. When there are new foci of power in society - post-Roman royalty, for example - local elites may have been expected partly to appeal to traditional standards of prestige, but also to adopt to new conditions. The question is what material forms are equated with success at a particular point.

The last great rise of Roman-style elite self-confidence under the empire in Britain was expressed in the early fourth-century architecture and art of great villas, such as complex decorative floor mosaics (De La Bédoyère 1999: 111-37). Art and architecture worked in

tandem to express prestige within a society that valued romanitas (Scott 1991: 29-30). Two of the main flourishing workshops were Cirencester (examples at Chedworth, North Leigh and Newton St. Loe) and Dorchester (Frampton, Hinton St Mary, Mow Ham and Lufton). Another was in the north, centered perhaps on York (Winterton, Brantingham, Horkstow, Rudston) (Neal 1981: 19). Examples of this art include the vast (2,500 sq. ft.) floor at Woodchester, perhaps the largest of its kind north of the Alps. This was an Orpheus pavement showing the power of the gods over nature as an image of the power of the lord over his land (Clark 1982: plate xiv; De La Bédoyère 1991: 156). The high point of this art is between c.320 and c.350, with 50% of the examples coming from Gloucestershire, Somerset and Dorset (Smith 1969: 114). The last villa mosaics and the latest villas cluster near Bath, Gloucester and the Cotswolds, in what has been referred to as a 'sheltered' region (Branigan 1977: 104-5). An example is Hucclecote, where coins in mortar bedding give a date for a mosaic floor of 395 or perhaps even later (Smith 1969: 79). The end of this art is clearly associated with the end of the villas and should be seen in the light of dramatic change in the nature of British secular architecture from the end of the fourth century away from classical models.

#### *The Role of Christianity, 5th to 6th Centuries*

The varied fate of such buildings and their art across the empire can be easily seen from the fact that in Aquitaine there was widespread persistence of villas and mosaics into the fifth century (Randsborg 1991: 106; Percival 1992). Nevertheless, one of the most significant features of the post-Roman world in general was secular abandonment of the more ostentatious Roman building and decoration styles (Powlesland 1997: 102-4, for an overview of Roman to Saxon settlements). One of the keys to studying the transition from Roman to medieval settlements may lie in looking at Christian centers. An important element of the transition from Roman to medieval life on the Continent was that many villas may have become the bases for churches and monasteries in the late and post-Roman periods, with continuance of worship in their house chapels (Knight 1999: 126-7; Dumville 1993: 22; Duval 1993, argues this for south-west Gaul). Sulpicius Severus at Primuliacrum and Paulinus at Nola set up religious communities around themselves and their dwelling place at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries (Percival 1997: 2; Knight 1999: 126). Sidonius Apollinaris (c.430-80) found a friend of his much changed, living frugally as a monk in his villa which was sparsely furnished with stools, hard couches and hangings of horse-hair (Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae*, 4, 24). We should think perhaps of a continuum extending from the traditional Roman aristocratic pursuit of *otium*. Furthermore, archaeological excavation on the monastic sites of Ligugé near Poitiers, and at Marmoutier, has shown the reuse and redevelopment of Roman buildings, such that we should not assume that conversion to monastic use was simply a passive process in architectural terms (Percival 1997: 5-8).

Parallels to any of this in Britain are hard to spot since the material culture of the fifth-century Britons appears to have been so impoverished. A possible example has, however, been identified on the site of the late Roman cemetery next to Poundbury hillfort outside Dorchester (Sparey-Green 1996: 128-33, figs. 2 and 3). The late Roman sequence included a number of stone mausolea, which appear to have been integrated, perhaps as funerary chapels, into a post-Roman sequence of buildings using drystone and wood (Sparey-Green 1996: 127), to which it is interesting to compare the contemporary sequences at Wroxeter (Barker, White and Pretty 1997; White 1990). There is a lack of Anglo-Saxon features at Poundbury, such as the opposed doorways (seen at the nearby Alington Avenue site) which have been interpreted elsewhere as an intermediary phase representing occupation by a hybrid Germanic and Romano-British

population (James, Marshall and Millett 1985). The crucial problem is a lack of datable artefacts. The buildings at Poundbury were attributed primarily through the relationship of sequences to the late Roman material (Sparey-Green 1996: 136). As has been commented "in the Dorset countryside there may be many Poundburys which... lie unrecognized" (Sparey-Green 1996: 151). However, even Poundbury failed to make the transition into the English medieval centuries. The overall picture of the end of late Roman rural occupation in Britain is not so much of construction or destruction as slow recession and decay, with so-called 'squatter' occupation as a last stage (De La Bédoyère 1993: 123; Dumville 1993:21; Higham 1992: 116). Most sites subsequently went completely out of use, with not even any Anglo-Saxon materials being found (Myres 1986: 210).

It is tempting to suggest that in post-Roman western Britain, as in Gaul, the saints became the patrons of the local communities. For example, there is the occasion in 585, described by Gregory of Tours, when the Frankish king Guntram sent an army against Gundovald whose troops were holed up in Comminges. The attackers came to the church of Vincent at Agen where the locals had barricaded themselves inside with their treasures. Their hope was that "the shrine of so great a martyr would not be violated by men calling themselves Christians" (Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 7, 35). Their prayers were not answered that day. However, crucially, the saint avenged the desecration: "the hands of many [attackers] caught fire supernaturally... some were possessed by a devil and rushed about screaming the martyr's name. Others fought with each other and wounded themselves with their own javelins" (Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 7, 35). Gregory saw some of them later at Tours and could testify that "they suffered to the end of their present lives from the torture of excruciating pains" (Gregory of Tours, *Gloria Martyrum*, 104). Gregory tells us elsewhere how, in Bordeaux, "because Severinus' holiness was recognized, the local inhabitants thereafter took him as their patron. They knew that whenever their city was either invaded by an illness or besieged by some enemy or disrupted by some vendetta, they would immediately be delivered from this threatening disaster as soon as the people gathered at the church of the saint, observed fasts, celebrated vigils and piously offered prayers" (Gregory of Tours, *Gloria Confessorum*, 44).

The presence of patrons and protectors, which was a key element in Roman society, would have played a crucial role in the defense of property by providing the threat of punishment for attacks and so reducing their incidence. The society of post-Roman Britain which resisted the pagan Anglo-Saxons became Christian but was very different from the society of Gaul, and particularly from the society of southern Gaul which appears to have remained far more similar to that of the late Roman period (Knight 1999: 49-50 and 95). The British Church grew up after the collapse of traditions of monumental building. In large parts of Gaul the saints may have helped to provide patronage and protection for grand edifices which were prime targets for looting. Lay aristocrats could raise retinues, but would have to pay heavily for the privilege, thus leaving far less available for villas and their decoration, which would not have enjoyed spiritual patronage. This helps to explain why there were mosaic-laden churches in Gallic regions with no such private dwellings, whilst there was no such architecture in fifth- and sixth-century Britain.

Prestige and power in post-Roman secular society were increasingly identified with adherence to the norms of the Germanic rulers who differed greatly in their appreciation of *Romanitas*. The Church achieved a compromise which legitimized private wealth in return for acts of charity (Janes 1998: 153-5). The building and decoration of churches replaced the endowment of temples, and these buildings became the premier repositories of the late Roman

art and architectural tradition in large parts of the Continental early medieval west. The prestige of Roman elite art was now associated with the Church, a connection upheld with the failure of iconoclasm in western Europe. The persistence of Roman material culture in much of Gaul, above all in the south, was, therefore, strongly bound up with the circumstances in which Christianity established prominence. In Britain this occurred largely in a post-Roman environment and, therefore, the British Church did not bear the same architectural inheritance from the Roman world since this had already been lost in society at large. In southern and western Gaul the more Romanized Church acted as an institution affording the Gallic population prestige and protection, and so offering a powerful challenge to the cultural confidence of the Franks, Goths and Burgundians, which apparently was not presented so successfully to the fifth-century Anglo-Saxons in Britain.

### *Early Medieval Society, 7th Century*

In relation to the early medieval re-establishment of Christianity in eastern Britain, we should ask why the main buildings of stone were churches with almost everything else in wood? The answer would appear to be that there was a preference for building in stone since that was what the Italian and Gallic missionaries expected for important churches. Wooden buildings for lords were clearly seen as quite sufficient. The descriptions of Beowulf, taken together with the halls excavated at sites such as Yeavinger and Cheddar, are quite enough to show us that the prestige of the built environment was important in English lay society. But the Anglo-Saxons were not concerned to build their halls in the 'Roman' masonry style.

The prominence of stone and brick building in the imperial period would appear to have been associated with Roman cultural prestige. The degradation of that tradition might be seen in the light not so much of reduced but of more fluid circumstances. If property holding itself were much more unstable there was far less incentive to plunge money into large-scale building works. The grand silver tableware and jewellery of the late Antique elite may have made aristocrats' villas an obvious target for looting. We could understand that where there was sufficient stability, as in parts of south-west Gaul, these ancient villas might have been preserved as relic-protected monasteries.

Areas such as southern Britain which, unlike Aquitaine, did not enjoy an imperially negotiated Germanic settlement, appear to have been considerably more chaotic than those that did. In Britain the pattern of continuity from villa to monastic church was especially unlikely since, as Watts has spelt out as the main argument in her recent book on religion in later Roman Britain, Christianity seems to have 'failed' there in the period before the collapse of Roman material culture and only re-emerged subsequently (Watts 1998). Post-Roman Britons may have continued, at least for a while, to think of themselves as Romans, but their material culture, simply through its singular invisibility, was not classical.

Even in southern Gaul the glamour of classicism was rapidly to fade in the early Middle Ages as Rome's association with power withered, at least outside the Church with its emphasis on Latin learning. Some villas became monasteries or churches whilst the secular elite ceased to build in this manner. This meant that styles changed more easily amongst the laity, whilst the Continental Church continued to patronize many of the ancient material arts, such as stone building and carving, window-glass manufacture and mosaic; even though these art forms had largely fallen out of use amongst the secular aristocracy. The Church gained prestige from these forms of display and yet, unlike laymen, was helped to protect such investments by the

retributive power of the saints, without having to transfer spending from building to military retinues.

The reintroduction of Roman-style churches from the Continent to Anglo-Saxon England through the seventh century did not lead to a spread of stone architecture into the world of the secular aristocracy (Dixon 1992; Gem 1992). When these forms were reintroduced to Britain the meaning of this material culture was now Christian and religiously inspired. Roman-derived architecture and decoration then pertained to the Church and, therefore, may even have seemed inappropriate in a private context. By the seventh century society in Britain and Gaul was characterized by a sharp division between secular and sacred building and decoration traditions which had not been present in the late Antique culture of the fourth century.

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