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To cite this article: Richard Hingley (2021): Assessing How Representation of the Roman Past Impacts Public Perceptions of the Province of Britain, Public Archaeology, DOI: [10.1080/14655187.2021.1947064](https://doi.org/10.1080/14655187.2021.1947064)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14655187.2021.1947064>



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Published online: 06 Aug 2021.



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# Assessing How Representation of the Roman Past Impacts Public Perceptions of the Province of Britain

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There is a lack of detailed research into the attitudes of the public in Britain to the Roman past. Information and views about the Roman period are communicated to people in the UK through education at school and also by the media (TV, films, the Internet). Museums and other heritage centres also provide interpretations for visitors, although these venues tend to cater for people who have progressed to a fairly advanced level in the educational system. This paper explores the public debate resulting from the BBC cartoon of a ‘Roman family’ in Britain (Beard, 2017). It argues that some of the extreme reactions to the idea that people came from North Africa to settle and to live in Roman Britain may have drawn upon some old-fashioned ideas about the past that have persisted in school education in England. It appears to be difficult for certain members of the public to understand that ideas about the past that they learnt at school were interpretations rather than ‘facts’ and that knowledge is constantly changing. That society in the Roman empire was highly mobile provides particularly informative parallels for modern Britons. To exploit this potential, however, will require archaeologists to take a more direct interest in communicating their research to a broader range of audiences.

KEYWORDS ‘good thing’, heritage, public, mobility, frontiers, colour

## Introduction

This paper argues that it is important to undertake further research to assess the attitudes of the public in England to the Roman past. Some Roman archaeologists suspect that the ideas held by much of the public about Roman Britain focus on the notion that the Roman conquest was a ‘good thing’, resulting from a general

emphasis in education on the idea of *What the Romans Did for Us* (Mattingly, 2006: 3–4; Hingley, 2015). This is a teleological idea that fits with an outdated understanding that the Roman conquest made a major contribution to ‘our island story’ by establishing conditions that enabled ‘civilization’ to develop across the southern part of the province. This overly simplistic message is communicated by Roman history teaching in schools and by certain television programmes. This is, of course, a powerful origin myth for people living to the south of Hadrian’s Wall (Hingley, 2020a). Meanwhile, the Internet has developed as a space where contentious interpretations of the Roman past are communicated (Bonacchi, et al., 2018; Gardner, 2017).

The history National Curriculum in English schools (Key Stage 2) includes information about the invasion of southern Britain by the Roman army and the valiant resistance of Iron Age Britons, particularly in the guise of Boudica (Department of Education, 2014; cf. Hingley, et al., 2018: 286–87). After successfully conquering the south, the Roman military are then thought to have served as guards in central and western Britain, protecting the peoples in the ‘civilized’ parts of Britain, who were subsequently able to ‘Romanize’, while the ‘barbarians’ to the north of Hadrian’s Wall remained independent of Rome. The Roman soldiers then left during the abandonment of the province in the early fifth century. Archaeological research used to be dominated by comparable perspectives in terms of ideas of the Romans civilizing the southern Britons through a process of Romanization and policing the frontiers in Wales and northern England (cf. Hingley, 2000).

A comparable understanding that the Romans nurtured an ancestral ‘civilization’ is common across much of Europe, although this teleological viewpoint of the Roman conquest as a ‘good thing’ is directly contradicted by the perspectives that have emerged from archaeological research since the 1980s. The absence of any convincing indication that Roman culture survived the fifth century can also be used to counter the idea of continuity in the history of England; after all, many Germanic peoples came to settle across Britain in the post-Roman centuries as Roman culture collapsed. The archaeological challenge to this picture of a ‘Romanized’ south focused upon the demolition of the concept of Romanization (Hingley, 2000). Recent research has developed far more complex and nuanced perspectives on the Roman past. The idea that the Roman conquest represented a ‘good thing’ is contradicted by academic research that communicates an entirely different set of ideas, including negative, in addition to positive, aspects of imperial incorporation (e.g. Mattingly, 2006; Hingley, forthcoming). The considerable diversity of current approaches to Roman Britain is illustrated, for example, by the variety of papers in the recent *Handbook of Roman Britain* (Millett, et al., 2016), as considered below.

Archaeologists now focus much more attention on the less wealthy Roman communities in both town and country, while the idea of Romanization has been dismissed by many (e.g. Mattingly, 2006; Hingley, 2014). Important recent research has focused on the disparate geographical origins of the peoples who came to settle in Roman Britain, particularly in military regions and significant urban centres (Eckardt & Müldner, 2016). This perspective, drawing upon ideas of diaspora and mobility, is deeply changing accounts of life in the province.

As academic perspectives have been transformed, the ideas communicated through school education and much of the media (TV and films) have, at best, changed only gradually. School education in England and the media coverage continue to focus upon the idea that the Roman conquest of Britain was a ‘good thing’ for people living across southern Britain (Hingley, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Some attempts have been made to communicate ideas about the diversity of Roman-period populations through the media of museum exhibitions, the provision of school teaching materials, and on the BBC. Some of this attention has focused, for reasons that are entirely understandable, on the presence of Africans, or people descendant from Africans, in Roman Britain (Olusoga, 2016; Hirsch, 2018: 85). On occasions, these attempts to communicate the diverse character of the population of Roman Britain to the public have met with highly negative responses online (Eckardt & Müldner, 2016: 215; Beard, 2017). This paper proposes that this ruffling of feathers may be, in part, the result of the very traditional ways that the ancient history of Britain is taught in English schools. A teleological perspective on progress and civilization is inherent in many people’s understandings; there is no place for the idea of mobile populations in an agenda that focuses upon the civilizing of the people of southern Britain. This is not to ignore the extreme right-wing views of many who have provided negative comments on social media, it is more an emphasis on the idea that the views of these people may in part result from their education and the attitudes that their experiences have inspired.

### Roman Britain as a ‘good thing’

Research that has aimed to assess the ways that the Roman past is communicated to the public in England is relatively scarce. Relevant studies have concentrated on the media (TV, films, Internet), the educational system at schools, re-enactment and the display of the past at ancient monuments and museums.<sup>2</sup> This is an important topic that requires further and more detailed study across Europe as a whole. Occasional reviews have suggested that many old-fashioned views are persisting that present our knowledge as well established and unchallengeable. In the Preface to a volume entitled *Presenting the Romans*, Peter Stone (2013: xiii) has observed that the images used to teach the Roman past in schools are perceived by some children as ‘boring’. Nigel Mills (2013a: 1), in the same volume, writes of the ‘simple facts and stereotypes’ used to communicate the Romans to schoolchildren, encouraging the idea that the Roman past is, essentially, boring and that most of the important things are known. Peter Wilson (2016: 52) has suggested that the prominence of the Roman past in the public arena reflects the ‘tele-visual’ character of Roman sites and finds, which supplements the coverage of Roman Britain in the National Curriculum for schools in England. The Roman past seems, according to these views, to be well established, an idea that presumably helps to make it seem boring for children to learn.

It has also been argued that coverage of Roman Britain on TV often emphasized the idea that the Roman invasion was a ‘good thing’ for people living south of Hadrian’s Wall (Hingley, 2015: 167–72; Hingley, et al., 2018: 286). David Mattingly (2006: 4) has observed that mainstream views of the Roman Empire are constrained by collective assumptions that imperial rule is justified, leading to a broad

consensus that the Romans were a force for good. The Iron Age has sometimes been communicated as a time when the peoples across Britain were ‘barbarians’ who needed to be ‘civilized’ and, similarly, the post-Roman period is often described as a move to a ‘darker age’ (Hingley, et al., 2018: 286).<sup>3</sup> In the sequential history of ‘our island story’, the Romans are often viewed as relevant to the nation because of the way that they contributed civilization to the peoples of the fertile landscapes of the south, while defending the frontiers of the province to the west and north (cf. Hingley, 2000).

The perspective that portrays the Roman invasion as a ‘good thing’ is ultimately derived from classical texts, including the classical writings of Julius Caesar and Tacitus. These texts were rediscovered during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and gained considerable popularity during the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries when they were re-used and re-interpreted as part of a British discourse of empire (Hingley, 2000). The idea that the Roman invasion was beneficial to the British has usually been developed by building on the ways that classical authors addressed the Roman conquest, emphasizing the positive aspects of imperial incorporation.<sup>4</sup>

In their parody of school history teaching, *1066 and All That*, Sellar & Yeatman (1930: 10–11) observed that:

The first date in English history is 55 BC in which year Julius Caesar [...] landed [...] when the Romans were top nation on account of their classical education, etc. [...] The Roman conquest was, however, a Good Thing, since the Britons were only natives at that time.

This idea of the ‘good thing’ encapsulates the generally pro-Roman character of the attitude of the English to the Roman conquest and, until 2013, the teaching of British history in the English National Curriculum for schools began with Julius Caesar’s invasions (55–54 BC). This agenda influenced generations of schoolchildren.

Monty Python’s highly popular comedy film, *Life of Brian* (1979), followed a comparably positive logic. Reg, a representative of the People’s Front of Judea, demands to know ‘What have the Romans ever done for us?’ Reg is responding to the observations of his fractious followers who have listed a variety of innovations — including the aqueduct, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, and order — in response to his initial statement that the Romans had ‘bled us white’ and ‘taken everything that we had’ (Monty Python, n.d.). The inference is that the Roman Empire was a formative influence on the development of society in the Mediterranean, Europe, and Britain. Reg’s anti-Roman sentiments are seen to be more than a little unbalanced. Through satire, the teleological concept of a Roman contribution to British history included in *1066 and All That* and in *Life of Brian* is recreated as an even more powerful national myth of origin.

More recently, the idea of the ‘good thing’ was adopted quite directly as the conceptual basis for the influential TV series *What the Romans Did for Us* (*What the Romans*). This series, which derives its title from Reg’s diatribe in *Life of Brian*, was first broadcast by the BBC in 2000, and was later published as a book (Wilkinson, 2000). *What the Romans* proved highly popular since it provides

a simplistically positive account of the Roman impact on Britain, an approach that draws upon much past scholarship, the ancient monuments that are available for schools to visit, the theme of Roman military re-enactment, and a popular teleological perspective that emphasizes the continuity of national history (Hingley, 2015: 168). This has communicated a powerful message that resonates well with the ways that many archaeologists once interpreted the Roman past. It draws upon the concept of Romanization which was, for almost a century, used to provide a positive message about the values of the Roman invasion to the peoples of southern Britain (Hingley, 2000).

Other mainstream media sources that had archaeological input have served to convey comparable teleological perspectives of the Roman conquest as a good thing. Despite the involvement of archaeologists, some episodes of the popular and long-running TV series *Time Team* focused on the gifts the Romans are supposed to have brought to Britain in its portrayal of urban, rural, and military life in Roman Britain (Hingley, 2015: 168–71). Part of the problem with the deceptive character of such interpretations of the Roman past is that the idea behind *What the Romans* is derived from the British tradition of spoof history, as reflected in *1066 and All That* and *Life of Brian*.

Within this generally positive perspective there is also an engrained knowledge amongst the public of the presence of Roman soldiers in Britain. The image of the legionary soldiers of Roman Britain is probably the most pervasive one as a result of the popularity of Roman military re-enactment (Hingley, 2015). The generally peaceable and friendly demeanour of the individuals who spend their spare time undertaking Roman military re-enactment is likely to suggest a benevolent and supportive occupying force to the public, protecting the frontiers of the ‘civilized’ south where a peaceable ‘Romano-British’ population lived in towns and villas. Since most of the re-enactors live in Britain, comparisons are often drawn between the activities of the Roman and modern British armies. The prominence of the image of the Roman legionary soldier appears to live alongside ideas of the Roman Empire as a ‘good thing’.

The new National Curriculum for English schools was introduced in 2013 and, although prehistory was added, the Roman past retains a considerable prominence.<sup>5</sup> This is in part a result of the background of the teachers and the available educational materials. Many teachers have been longing for clearer guidance on the teaching of prehistory to support the numerous resources available for the Roman and later periods (Kate Sharpe, pers. comm.). A number of Iron Age ‘open-air museums’ with reconstructed roundhouses have been established over the past few decades, in part, to provide heritage venues that provide different stories for school parties to visit (Hingley, 2020b). The current National Curriculum continues, however, to emphasize Roman history, highlighting the invasion, the resistance of certain Britons (particularly Boudica), and ‘Romanization’ (Department for Education 2014: 247, 251). The teaching resources provided by the BBC to support history teaching in schools generally emphasize a comparable perspective, including sections on how the ‘Celts’ fought back against the Roman invaders, life as a Roman legionary, visiting a Roman town, looking around a Roman villa, the nature of the technology that the Romans brought, and how the Romans left their mark on Britain (BBC, 2017a). Internet searches reveal a wealth of websites

and resources for school teaching that adopt the concept of *What the Romans*. Many derive their perspective from the BBC programme which was repeated for a long time on TV and is still available.

### ***Military monuments and the legions***

A large number of Roman ancient monuments are managed and presented for the public by English Heritage, while CADW and Historic Environment Scotland manage and present many additional Roman sites across Wales and Scotland (Hingley, 2020c: 7–13).<sup>6</sup> This highly important collection of ancient sites are deeply entwined with the education system because they are used by many schools to give children an experience of life in Roman Britain. Many of the monuments were first taken into ‘care’ many generations ago and they include some of the best preserved and most impressive Roman sites across Britain. These sites also fit very well, however, with the perspective outlined by *What the Romans*, since they highlight the role of the Roman military across Wales, northern England and southern Scotland (Figures 1 and 2). Impressive military monuments include the auxiliary forts, milecastles and sections of curtain Wall along Hadrian’s Wall, and the preserved remains of the legionary fortresses at Caerleon (Newport, Wales), Chester (Cheshire), and York. A scattering of military sites also characterizes the southern parts of Britain, including the well-preserved remains of several late Roman Saxon Shore Forts. The common use of re-enactors to promote these military sites for visitors presumably helps to support a general public perception that large parts of Britain were dominated by Roman soldiers who were invariably legionaries.

Appleby (2005: 257) has observed that Roman re-enactment tends to ‘pander to popularized notions of Roman culture, replete with red tunics, togas, shiny helmets and armour’ focusing on military and elite aspects, with less importance on the more mundane aspects of life (cf. Bishop, 2013: 25). One issue with legionary re-enactment is that it is so well established as a practice that it has well-defined rules which constrain the activities of performers. Roman re-enactment helps to communicate the messages that many museums and heritage organizations use to publicize the Roman past, including the performing of rigid gender roles. There is an international consensus in Roman re-enactment circles with gender roles that keep women and children in subservient positions, cooking, spinning, and undertaking craft activities (cf. Gonzalez Álvarez & Alonso González, 2013). Many ‘camp-followers’, women and children, accompany the male soldiers in their weekend manoeuvres and perform this range of roles.

This portrayal of gender imbalances is historically accurate since women could not join the Roman army and many forts and fortresses had an external settlement (*vicus*) where the unofficial families of soldiers and traders are thought to have lived (auxiliary soldiers could not officially marry during the early decades of the conquest). Indeed, some women may have lived in Roman forts at particular times (Greene, 2013). The discovery of the Vindolanda letters indicate that high-status women could have had a considerable presence and it has become popular in re-enactment circles for women to dress up in elegant clothing to portray Roman ‘ladies’. All the performances of female re-enactors that focus on family



FIGURE 1 Roman military ancient monuments made accessible to the public by English Heritage, CADW, and Historic Environment Scotland. The sites are categorized as military or communication. The monuments included in the latter class are related to the road system and also include a lighthouse (drawn by Christina Unwin).



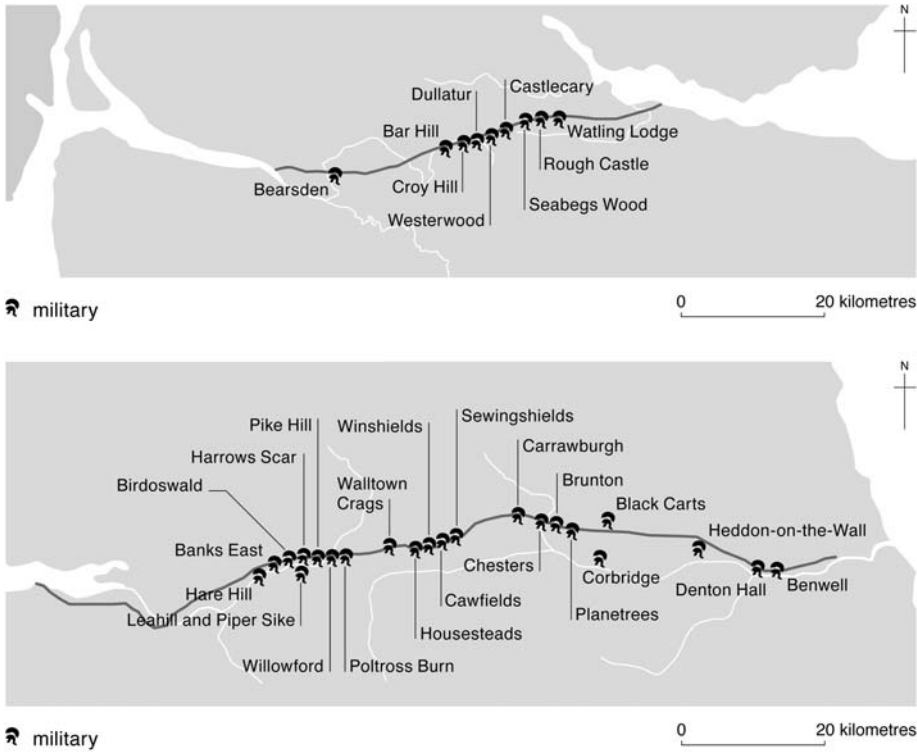


FIGURE 2 Sections of the Antonine Wall (top) and Hadrian’s Wall (bottom) made accessible to the public by English Heritage and Historic Environment Scotland (drawn by Christina Unwin).

life, industrial and domestic activity reflect the changing emphasis in academic research which has transformed from contemplating the careers and lives of soldiers to focus on the communities of which they formed part (e.g. James, 2001; Haynes, 2013).

Social hierarchy is also a strong concept that is drawn from the Roman past. Legionaries were Roman citizen soldiers. As Appleby (2005) has noted, the emphasis on legionary soldiers and elite living helps to communicate the hierarchical character of Roman society to the public. Auxiliary soldiers also had an elevated public status across Britain and the more senior soldiers will have had slaves who accompanied them and lived within the fort, fortress, or *vicus*. In addition, the military communities across Britain will have included many marginalized people (below). A study of the Internet illustrates that some Roman re-enactment groups are seeking to address such issues in subtle ways.<sup>7</sup> It is generally true, however, that violence and slaughter are avoided in the effort to tell palatable tales that are aimed at interesting and enthusing visitors. This highlights the tendency of Roman military re-enactment to sanitize the past, reproducing for public appreciation the sorts of tales that people recognize from school education and popular television programmes.

The military monuments on the frontiers help to support the idea that the Roman military conquered southern and central Britain relatively swiftly and then established and protected the frontiers. This is thought in popular terms to have enabled the flowering of civilization among the people of southern Britain. The Roman soldiers are then popularly supposed to have departed from Britain when the Empire ‘fell’ during the early fifth century. The simplistic portrayal of a society that was highly obsessed by status and gender divisions draws upon a rather traditional approach to the Roman past and may help to explain why some schoolchildren find learning about the Roman period predictable and boring.

### ***Civil life and Romanization***

The civil side of life in the province of Britannia is represented by the remains of several villas and fragmentary traces of the buildings and walls of the Roman towns of southern Britain (Figure 3). English Heritage manage a handful for villas, while a number of other trusts and agencies display the remains of several additional impressive villas to the public, venues that are commonly used for school trips (Hingley, 2020c: 14–17). These villas include the famous sites at Chedworth (Gloucestershire) and Fishbourne (West Sussex). Several museums in towns and cities across England display archaeological remains derived from the excavations of the Roman urban centres that once occupied these locations, including the important collections and displays at the Museum of London and at Chichester, Colchester, St Albans, and York. It is entirely understandable that the villas and urbanized settlements across southern Britain have public prominence, since they include impressive and important archaeological remains. These venues also help to support the school teaching embedded in the English National Curriculum by providing materials that address gracious country living and the development of agriculture, trade, and industry under Roman rule.

Several other Roman-period settlements are displayed for the public and include buildings that are more characteristic of the Iron Age, including two sites with roundhouses in Wales, and the two courtyard house ‘villages’ in Cornwall at Chysauster and Carn Euny. These monuments help to represent the vast number of rural settlements of various types that once dotted the landscapes of Roman Britain, where most of the population lived in the countryside. The relative scarcity of low-status Roman settlements among the ancient monuments made available for the public to visit across southern Britain is entirely understandable since many of these sites were built of insubstantial and poorly preserved materials and such archaeological remains would be unlikely to prove economically viable as attractions for the public. The only Roman-period settlement in England at which a charge is made for entry is at Chysauster.

Many Roman and Iron Age sites survive as earthworks and ruins that can be visited as the result of local access agreements (Hingley 2020c: 3–6). Across lowland Britain, however, there are no Iron Age ancient monuments that include indoor spaces for visiting school groups and most have little interpretation apart from information boards. Measures were taken many decades ago to provide venues for the public to inform them about life in the Iron Age.<sup>8</sup> The earliest of the Iron Age open-air museums at Butser Ancient Farm (Hampshire) was



FIGURE 3 Roman civil sites made accessible to the public by English Heritage, CADW, and Historic Environment Scotland (drawn by Christina Unwin).

established during the 1970s with the aim of presenting a perception of life in ancient Britain and to provide a contrast with the presentation of the better-known Roman ancient monuments. A number of open-air museums have been established

since this time and remain open; the most well-known are Butser and Castell Henllys (Dyfed, Wales). Many additional educational and heritage venues have been established that are focused around reconstructed Iron Age roundhouses and these give a very different picture of life in Britain before the Romans arrived, often exploring the idea of egalitarian communities and sustainable lifestyles. There has been a penchant for building Iron Age roundhouses since the 1970s and this fashion has continued until the present day (Hingley, 2020b: 119–21). Reconstructions of Roman buildings are far rarer than Iron Age roundhouses and one of the relatively few examples is the small villa at Butser Ancient Farm, built to supplement the Iron Age village in order to enable school groups to learn about the transition to Roman rule.

The re-constructed roundhouses at open-air museums are almost invariably described as Iron Age, although we know that such buildings continued to be constructed in large numbers across Britain throughout the Roman period (Smith, et al., 2016: 45–53). At Butser, the interpretation on site explains that the roundhouses were replaced by the villa in the decades after the Roman conquest. The transition from timber roundhouses to stone-built villas was a key element of the Romanization debate and has continued to be used to communicate the idea that the Romans brought civilization to the peoples of southern Britain (cf. Hingley, 1989). Therefore, again the interpretation provided for the public supports the perspectives outlined by the educational resources inspired by *What the Romans*.

## The diversity of the population of Roman Britain

The teleological approach behind many of these images of the Roman past has been largely rejected in recent research on Roman Britain as a result of its flawed perspective. The emphasis in *What the Romans* upon the innovations of cities, roads, and villas and the generally positive impact of the Roman military is viewed today as problematic (Hingley, 2015: 168). The programme/book paid little attention to the aspects of Roman imperial rule that might be viewed poorly by teachers, parents, and children, such as the slaughter of Britons by the Roman military during the conquest, the enslavement of many, and the negative impact of the invasion on the lives of the majority of the rural population (cf. Hingley, forthcoming). Mattingly (2006: 175) has written about the potential impact of the army in terms of the devastation of Iron Age agricultural communities and the number of prostitutes across Britain. Evidently, re-enactors need to take care in communicating such issues to the public, especially to children.

Perhaps a more significant criticism of *What the Romans* as an educational resource in the third decade of the twenty-first century is that it did not feature in any detail the wealth of archaeological and epigraphic information for the large-scale immigration of people to Britain.<sup>9</sup> It did explain that in Roman times people, including soldiers, came to Britain from the Continent, although its main focus is upon a teleological perspective that emphasized the contribution that the Romans made to life in Britain before they left again during the early fifth century.

Scholarship on the Roman past has changed dramatically over the past five decades as large numbers of new classes of archaeological sites have been discovered and current interpretations are far more nuanced and complex than those of

the mid-twentieth century. One of the most recent books to attempt to update knowledge of Roman Britain is the *Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain* (Millett, et al., 2016). This contains a collection of articles written by a wide range of scholars. Mike Pitts (2016: 57) has observed:

you do not need to be an academic to find [the *Handbook*] fascinating. Issues of multi-culturalism, diaspora, status, deviancy, power and gender [ ... ] matter to us as much as to how well we understand the Roman past.

Pitts is briefly addressing some of the issues described by individual papers in the *Handbook*. Although the main focus of these papers is on the Roman past as distant and over, several authors address topics which resonate with the issues that Pitts lists.

Others working in the field of Roman studies have emphasized a comparable perspective in terms of the potential relevance of the Roman past to contemporary communities. Renata Garraffoni and Pedro Paulo Funari (2012), in a highly innovative paper, have outlined the ways in which Roman heritage has been used to awaken empathy towards those with different backgrounds and ways of life in Brazil (cf. Pinto and Pinto, 2013).<sup>10</sup> These studies might well provide a model for future educational initiatives in Britain. Materials on mobility, status, and gender are certainly deeply relevant to contemporary interests.

### ***Mobility and migration***

An innovative body of work has explored the degree of mobility through ancient DNA (aDNA), stable isotopic analysis, and information from inscriptions and classical texts (Eckardt & Müldner, 2016; Hingley, et al., 2018). Studies of human remains have also begun to add highly significant information on the diet and lifecycles of Roman-period populations at various places across Britain (Gowland, 2017). Gender is also addressed in more advanced terms, mainly through the study of Roman burials (Sherratt & Moore, 2016). The conquest, control, and administration of the extensive lands incorporated into the Roman Empire depended on large-scale migration that included large numbers of soldiers, imperial officials, and traders (Eckardt, et al., 2014: 534). Evidence is provided by classical writings that name imperial officials and also by inscriptions on stone, writing tablets, and other media that record the places of origin of particular individuals visiting or living in Britannia. This relatively limited information has been significantly supplemented in the past decade by scientific studies that have addressed the mobility of individuals through a suite of techniques, including isotopic analysis, aDNA, and cranial measurements. This research has been communicated through ideas of mobility and diaspora. One of the first of such projects to direct sustained attention to such mobility was the Roman Diaspora project, directed by Hella Eckardt at the University of Reading (2007–09), which explored human remains from a number of urban Roman sites (University of Reading, n.d. a; Eckardt, 2010; Eckardt, et al., 2014; Eckardt & Müldner 2016). Comparable work has been undertaken by the Museum of London, focusing on the dead from a number of Roman cemeteries in London (Redfern, et al., 2017).

Several of these archaeological projects that have addressed the mobility of people in the Roman past have directly sought to communicate their results to the public through museum displays and educational packs. This agenda has been explored since at least 2013 by a leading race equality thinktank and the BBC. This is one of the means through which the BBC has been seeking to supplement their rather predictable materials on the Roman past for school education.

### ***Communicating migration***

The exhibition *An Archaeology of 'Race': Exploring the Northern Frontiers of Roman Britain* visited two sites along Hadrian's Wall in 2009, Segedunum Museum and Tullie House Museum (Durham University, n.d.).<sup>11</sup> Part of a broader project on the post-Roman life of Hadrian's Wall, this exhibition aimed to show the diverse origins and mobility of individuals living along this frontier in the Roman past and also explored the complex roles and representation of the 'African' emperor, Septimius Severus (Tolia-Kelly, 2010). The website for *An Archaeology of 'Race'* (Durham University, n.d.) includes a teaching pack aimed at children and mentions that:

Part of race equality teaching is helping pupils to understand their multicultural origins, and dispelling the myth that Britishness is synonymous with a white, mono-ethnic, religious and cultural background.

Eckardt and Müldner (2016: 215) have provided a short addendum to the *Roman Diaspora* project which observes that the identification of migrants in Britain's past is an emotive topic in contemporary discourse and careful engagement with the public is required by researchers. One particular case study from York led this research team to identify 'mixed-race' individuals, most notably the so-called 'Ivory Bangle Lady'. A display in the Yorkshire Museum picked up on this individual and a facial reconstruction of the Ivory Bangle Lady was displayed at York Museum in 2010. Eckardt and Müldner (2016) have noted that press coverage was initially dominated by ideas of exoticness and the identification of 'the first African' (Mail Online, 2010), although they soon became characterized by 'the subsequent, often vitriolic, responses by readers of certain newspapers'. As Eckardt and Müldner (2016: 216) have noted:

the more subtle points of an academic paper can get lost when reconstructions such as that of the 'Ivory Bangle Lady' [...] clearly capture the public imagination and form part of a modern discourse about 'black' identity, in many ways crystallizing general debates about immigration.

The *Diaspora* project also developed a website for primary school children, working in conjunction with the Runnymede Trust (Eckardt & Müldner, 2016: 216). This Trust is a leading race equality thinktank that ran a previous campaign to prevent the government pushing the teleological idea of 'Our Island Story' too directly in the 2013 National Curriculum for English Schools (Runnymede Trust, 2013). This website (University of Reading, n.d. b) is:

designed to promote the project findings of diversity for Key Stage 2 learners, their teachers and families, and to break down the astonishingly strong public perception of the

Romans' as uniformly 'Italian'. Throughout the emphasis is on questioning 'how do we know', trying to teach children about archaeological techniques but also that knowledge and interpretation can and do change. (Eckardt & Müldner 2016: 216)

It explicitly addressed the diversity of the Roman population of Britain through stories told about four characters, including the Ivory Bangle Lady (who is given the name Julia Tertia).

The BBC has subsequently expanded on this theme in some education materials and a few programmes. The BBC's portrayal of 'one family' in their six-minute video, *Roman Britain (animation)* (BBC, 2014) was aimed at children and released on the Internet in May 2014 as part of the materials that the BBC provides to support school teaching of history in Britain. This video, which is still available online, is described by a caption:

Life in Roman Britain as seen through the eyes of one family nearly 2000 years ago. The Romans bring towns to Britain, and also roads, forts, and Hadrian's Wall, to keep out the Picts. The father is supervising the building of Hadrian's Wall, while his son manages to lose his special military scarf, or focale. This incident is used to explore Roman beliefs and religion.

The father in the video is presented as having dark skin, as is his son, although not his wife or daughter. Mary Beard (2017) has suggested that the senior officer is intended to represent Quintus Lollius Urbicus. Urbicus originally came from Numidia, Algeria (Birley, 2005: 139) and was appointed governor of Britain by the emperor Antoninus Pius in the 140s. Urbicus was responsible for supervising the construction of the Antonine Wall. As Beard mentions, this choice involved some chronological shift, presumably a result of the greater fame of Hadrian's monument and the wish of the producers of the animation to represent a diverse Roman Britain.

The historian and broadcaster David Olusoga spent eighteen months producing a documentary titled *Black and British—A Forgotten History*, which was broadcast by the BBC in 2016. Olusoga (2016) has observed that:

The series was born out of an ambition to challenge the idea that black history is a specialist subject, only of interest to black people. We set out to re-imagine black history as part of mainstream history and bring little-known stories to the public in a new way.

This programme explored the 'enduing relationship between Britain and peoples whose origins lie in Africa'. The first episode focused on Roman Britain and began at the village of Burgh by Sands (Cumbria), near the western end of Hadrian's Wall. There is evidence from the Roman fort at Burgh for a unit of North African soldiers during the third century. This episode of the programme featured the unveiling of a plaque at Burgh to attest to the former presence of these African soldiers, while also exploring the evidence for the diversity of the population of Roman York. It also told the story of the 'Beachy Head Woman', who appears to have been of African descent but was raised during the Roman period in what is now East Sussex. The series then moved on to consider Africans in later periods of British history.

### ***Emotive responses on social media***

A heated dispute arose on the Internet in 2017 as a result of the image of ‘one family’ in Roman Britain, as featured on the BBC animation *Roman Britain* (Beard, 2017; Philo, 2017). Some of the extreme comments posted in response to the idea that dark-skinned people lived in Britain clearly repeated some opinionated points posted online as responses to press coverage of the Ivory Bangle Lady by the *Mail Online* seven years earlier. Beard has referred to an ‘alt-right’ commentator who objected to the animation by stating: ‘the left is literally trying to rewrite history to pretend Britain has always had mass immigration’. Beard observes: ‘several people responded to point out that there is quite a lot of evidence for ethnic and cultural diversity in the province’. When Beard took up discussion of the diversity of the Roman population of Britain, her observations were met with a ‘torrent of aggressive insults’, many of which were deeply sexist, as well as a considerable amount of support for the points that she made. As Beard (2017) has observed, Roman Britain as a topic sounds harmless enough, although this appears not to be the case.

Beard commented:

I don’t much like the line which goes ‘I’ve read more than you on this topic so I am right’. But in this whole exchange I did resort sometimes to asking ‘Have you read any books on the history of Roman Britain?’

She also observes that amongst most of the tweeters and commentators there was ‘far too great a desire for certainty in the face of the diversity of the past’. People who are increasingly uncertain about the present seem rather desperate to find security in the ideas that they hold about the past. The Roman past has been communicated though ‘simple facts and stereotypes’ and this approach may, perhaps, be rebounding upon us. What does this tell us about the roles of archaeology, education, and heritage display? News items and media reports sometimes raise hackles, although certain subtle interventions have, apparently, attracted rather less of a negative response.

On 17 June 2017, the BBC broadcast an episode of *Dr Who* titled *The Eaters of Light*. This featured legionaries from the ill-fated Ninth Legion, including one soldier played by a dark-skinned actor (BBC, 2017b). This is an interesting way of subtly influencing the public to think in different ways, especially since the vast majority of the legionary re-enactors that they meet at monuments are British in origin and given the impression that the Roman army was invariably light-skinned. The Victorians had no problem with conceiving that dark-skinned soldiers lived in Roman Britain (Hingley, 2012: 164–69). Re-enactment today presents a rather different picture.

In 2018, the Museum of London Docklands held an exhibition on ‘Unearthing the Roman Dead’ of London. This addressed the substantial work that has been undertaken to investigate the character and origins of some of the individual burials that have been found in the cemeteries that surrounded the Roman town (Jeater, 2018). Part of the information provided online outlines the results of aDNA analysis, including information, for example, about a girl of around fourteen years with blue eyes who was born in the ‘southern Mediterranean’



(Redfern, 2016). Is it possible that subtle communication might be a more effective way of challenging the existing perceptual focus of some members of the population?

## What to do? The purposes of the Roman past

It has been tentatively suggested above that views of Roman Britain can be divided into two broadly contrasting sets of ideas. In the company of all binary oppositions, this division into two ‘images’ of the Roman past is certainly a simplification, although it would seem that an old set of ideas is hanging on and may be part of the reason that has led to several disputes with those who seek to communicate alternative conceptions (cf. Hingley, et al., 2018). A well-established set of ideas has been communicated for decades by the media (TV, radio, popular books) and this helps to characterize the way in which the school curriculum has developed in England over the past ten years. This is an image that very much interprets the Roman past as an element of ‘our island story’, imagining that the Romans conquered southern Britain, held down the frontiers with legionary soldiers, and enabled ‘civilization’ to develop society in the southern parts of the province. This persuasively teleological story fits well with the focus of the archaeological scholarship that addressed Roman Britain until the late 1980s. It places an emphasis on two aspects of life in the province: (a) the military occupation across northern England and northern Wales, fixated in the mind of the public around the idea of the legionary soldier, and (b) the civilizing of the peoples of southern Britain (our ancestors?) who lived in towns and villas as a result of their ‘Romanization’.

The archaeologists who are addressing Roman Britain have deeply transformed ideas and the available information over the past three decades, eroding the old notion that people across the southern areas of Roman Britain went through a simple process of Romanization as a result of their incorporation into the Empire. Archaeologists now see life in the province as far more complex and diverse. Ideas about military identities have also been transformed. Far more attention has been paid to the auxiliary soldiers of the Roman military, as legionaries only formed part of the manpower that served in the province. In addition, a focus of attention has developed on the communities that lived alongside the soldiers, exploring the diverse ways of life of people on the frontiers.

This body of work has challenged the late Victorian assumption that Roman rule was necessarily beneficial for the people who were conquered. This has, explicitly, contradicted many of the tenets of the long-established approach by challenging the idea that Rome had a directly positive impact upon the peoples of southern Britain. Adding to this, since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a considerable emphasis has developed in Britain on exploring the diversity of the population resident in Britain through projects that have used archaeological science to map the movement of peoples from overseas into the Roman province. Archaeologists have aimed to communicate some of this new understanding to the public and the BBC has produced educational material and a series that provides information

about Africans living in Roman Britain. Some temporary and permanent museum displays have been installed to introduce ideas about the diverse population of Roman Britain to visitors, including schoolteachers, children, and the public.

It appears highly problematic and also rather worrying, if the characterization of school teaching presented above is accurate, that the main focus of education remains on the resistance of the Britons and the subsequent incorporation of those of the south into the Empire. The topic of resistance against Rome has not been addressed here, although this has been used simplistically by those who campaigned for Brexit (Bonacchi, et al., 2018). That many of the ancient monuments and museums the public can visit fall into categories that align with the idea of the Roman Empire as a ‘good thing’ is entirely understandable since these are the best-preserved and most visible remains of the Roman past. The attempts are being made at many of these venues to communicate the idea of diverse populations in the Roman past are highly important. By focusing on a (supposedly) peaceful legionary army and the homes of upwardly mobile Roman Britons, these heritage venues may, however, help to support the idea that the Roman past is well understood, and that knowledge is unchallengeable. Roman Britain appears today to be surprisingly political and continuous work is clearly required to challenge public understanding as we seek to support the tolerant aspects of our society.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The school curricula in Wales and Scotland differ from that in England and will not be addressed in this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> Works that analyses how the Roman past has been interpreted in Britain include Beard & Henderson (1999), Appleby (2005), several articles in Mills (2013b), Hingley (2015; 2020a), Polm (2016), Beard (2017), Hingley, et al. (2018), Bonacchi, et al. (2018).
- <sup>3</sup> Alternative perceptions of the Iron Age among the public view this period in terms of relative freedom and environmentally sensitive living, a perspective that is communicated by a number of open-air museums that have reconstructed roundhouses (Hingley, 2020b). However, associations with the idea of Pagans and Druids limit the scope to which Iron Age equality and sustainability can be communicated at school.
- <sup>4</sup> The writings of Tacitus actually incorporated nuanced views of the Roman conquest which were not entirely positive, but the positives have been picked up by many in school education and the media (Hingley, forthcoming).
- <sup>5</sup> The arguments in this paragraph summarize the points addressed in Hingley, et al. (2018: 286–87).
- <sup>6</sup> The character of this resource will be addressed in far more detail in the full publication of the Ancient Identities project.
- <sup>7</sup> This information will be published in full elsewhere.
- <sup>8</sup> This paragraph summarizes research published in Hingley (2020b).
- <sup>9</sup> Which, evidently, is partially explained by the changing emphasis in research since 2000 with a new focus on diaspora and mobility.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for instance, reflections on the Harper Road burial (Redfern et al., 2017; Hingley, et al., 2018: 290).
- <sup>11</sup> This was part of the AHRC-funded project, *Tales of the Frontier* (2007–09) that was directed by the current author and also involved Rob Witcher, Claire Nesbitt, and Divya Tolia-Kelly.

## Acknowledgements

This paper derives from the project ‘Iron Age and Roman Heritages: Exploring Ancient Identities in Modern Britain’ (Ancient Identities in Modern Britain), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under a Standard Research Grant (2016–19; Project ref. AH/N006151/1). The paper draws upon the

author's research for this project and the assistance of other project members, Chiara Bonacchi, Kate Sharpe, and Tom Yarrow, is gratefully acknowledged. I am also grateful for comments on papers delivered on this topic at the Limes Congress (2018) and at two European Association of Archaeologists conferences (2017, 2019). It also draws upon my eclectic career, which has involved spells working as an archaeologist in local government (1984–89), and Historic Scotland (1989–1999), followed by a move to a post in academia, where I have spent the remainder of my career.

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