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A Brief History of Roman Britain

University of Rhode Island
Osher Life-Long Learning Institute
Summer 2013
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Week 1

- History and Archaeology – sources & methods
- Bronze and Iron Age Britain
- Iron Age Italy and the Etruscans
- The Roman Republic: 509 BC – 27 BC
- Roman Britain: Caesar's invasions during the Gallic Wars

History and Historical Sources on Ancient Britain

- History: Everything that happened in the past
- An analysis of past events via written word and *objectively* identify patterns of cause and effect, continuity and change
- But...
 - Not everything that happened was written down
 - Not everything that was written down survived
 - Interpretation and bias – in both the sources and by historians

The Sources on Roman Britain?

- In total there are about 100 references to Ancient Britain in classical literature
 - Only one was set entirely in Britain (Tacitus, *The Agricola*); rest are typically fleeting references
- Some from Greeks (“arm-chair” geographers)
- Most were written by Roman elite
 - Presume a pro-Roman bias
 - *Civilization vs. barbarian*
 - The word *civilization* comes from the Latin *civilis*, meaning *civil*, related to the Latin *civis*, meaning *citizen*, and *civitas*, meaning *city* or *city-state*.
 - Romans believed they were on a mission.
 - Often the bias in these sources can be easy to spot...

Romans sources referred to Britons as:

- brutes
- warlike
- inhuman
- savage
- barbarians
- fierce
- frenzied
- raving
- terrifying of aspect
- lawless
- free from luxury
- red-haired
- prone to fight
- tent-dwelling
- swarthy
- simple
- cannibalistic
- clothed in skins
- naked
- unshod
- promiscuous
- modest
- tattooed
- aboriginal
- old fashioned
- uncivilized

Britain was distant, exotic, on the edge of the known world

- Britain was on periphery of empire
 - No one traveled through Britain to get somewhere else
 - Was never central to Roman politics or economic life
 - Romans (and Greeks) believed that the further away from the center of civ. one went, the more degraded the society would become
- Greek and Roman authors weren't usually very critical of the sources they used
 - Writing for elite audience that didn't care about the details we would like know today
 - Even the "good" authors (e.g. Tacitus, Livy, Pliny) were not objective reporters in the way historians (or journalists) strive to be today

Archaeology

- The scientific study of the material culture left behind by human activity
- **Material culture**: recurring assemblage of artifacts that constitutes the remains or material history of a particular past human society
 - Reconstruct the relationship between artifacts and the society that created them
- **Key Terms:**
 - Artifacts: objects made, used, or changed by humans (e.g., a tool, a coin or a button)
 - Ecofacts: natural objects and material found at archaeological sites (e.g., pollen, bones)
 - Features: aspect of human non-portable activity (e.g., ditches, walls, pits, wells, graves)
 - Assemblage: group of different artifacts found in association with one another (in same context)

Archaeological Methods

- Field Survey
 - Walkovers
 - Surface mapping (surveyor)
 - Aerial photographs
 - Lidar
 - Magnetic resonance
 - GPR sensing
 - Produces few artifacts but does keep the site intact
- Excavations
 - Shovel pits
 - Trenches
 - Machine stripping
 - Excavation destroys the site

Reconstruction of contexts in site in space and time

- Horizontal axis: grid
- Vertical axis: strata
 - **Matrix:** three-dimensional location/record of each artifact, ecofact and feature spatially and temporally with every other find
 - Harris Matrix - ID's complex strata
 - **Provenance**
 - Reconstruct relationships between objects, we can reconstruct the *ideas* that connected the objects
 - Very detailed measurements; record excavation using steps of the **scientific method**
- Dating methods
 - Superposition
 - C14, Dendrochronology
 - *terminus post quem* / *terminus ante quem* (e.g. coins)

Prehistoric and ancient Britain

- **Bronze Age Britain – 2500 BC - 800 BC**
 - “Beaker” culture spread across Europe
 - Megalithic monuments, metal-working gradually replaced stone-tool tradition
- **Iron Age – 750 BC – c. AD 60**
 - Trade/culture became more closely tied to continental Europe, especially in South and East parts of Britain
 - Extensive field systems & enclosed hillforts (*oppida*)
 - New weapon types appeared with clear parallels to those on the continent, esp. in Gaul
 - Cremation & burial urns replace elaborate tombs/barrows
 - Invasions? Or migrations? Both look very similar in archaeological record
- **LPRIA (Late Pre-Roman Iron Age c. 100 BC – AD 43)**
 - Coins
 - Some *oppida* began moving off hilltops – new trade routes opened up between Roman Gaul/Britain
 - Arrival of Caesar – client kings in South and East

The Romans

- Early Iron Age Rome
 - Like the Celts and Greeks, the Romans originated in a broad migration of Indo-European-speaking farmers
 - Italic-speaking tribes arrived in Italy c. 1200 BC
 - Ancestors of the Romans settled at ford of Tiber River
- Etruscans
 - Civilization that developed north of Tiber River
 - Confederation of 12 city-states, the Etruscans dominated much of Italy for over four centuries
 - Conquered Rome c. 753 BC (legendary founding date)
 - Made same sort of “civilized improvements” to Rome as the Romans would later do in Britain – drained marsh, built stone bridge across the Tiber, set up the first *forum* in Rome
 - Rebellion, established the Roman Republic 509 BC

The Roman Republic

- **Romans vowed never again to be subject to a king; considered monarchy barbaric**
 - State headed by two consuls, with power of *imperium*, elected annually by the citizens of Rome
 - Advised by the senate (council of elders that served for life)
 - **Aristocracy** based on land ownership
- **Over 200 years a complex government evolved**
 - Separation of powers
 - Checks and balances
 - Citizenship
 - Written legal system
- Except in times of dire national emergency, public offices were limited to one year, so that no single individual wielded absolute power over his fellow citizens

Expansion of Roman State

- **Combination of warfare, alliance & diplomacy**
- **Latin League (493 BC)** Allies not allowed to leave alliance; considered an act of war
 - Conquered/allied cities supplied the Roman army with soldiers
 - In return Rome offered protection and certain privileges of Roman citizenship
- **Goals of Roman warfare**
 - Waged all wars, even defensive ones, offensively
 - Rarely made peace except with a beaten foe
 - Forced defeated enemies to sign treaties that assured Rome of military support against other foes

Expansion of Roman State

- **Effects of Roman Diplomacy**
 - Romans were able to field huge armies from allied resources
 - Vast reserves allowed new forces to be raised whenever the Romans were defeated
 - “Carrot and Stick”—Romans offered alliance & citizenship (carrot), but if refused resorted to force (stick); defeated foes were then made allies (have a carrot, they’re free!)
- **Control over all of Italy by 272 BC**

Problems after 202 BC

- **Roman society/politics highly competitive**
 - Successful military career requisite to advance in *cursus honorum*
 - Wars became end in themselves to advance the careers of ambitious generals
 - Financial benefits: war booty at time of conquest, subsequent “tax farming” of provinces
 - Distinction made between Italy, provinces outside Italy
- **Contact with / conquest of older, more sophisticated Greek civilization also caused social problems**
 - Sophists, skeptics, religious cults &c...

Problems after 133 BC: Civil War

- Citizen farmers away from home for increasingly lengthy periods of time during Punic Wars
 - Lost farms → without land, could not serve in army
 - Eventually not enough citizens left to field armies required to keep the juggernaut rolling
 - Situation reached crisis by 140s BC...
- Government was designed to rule a city-state, not a far-flung empire; also state had no written constitution
 - Reforms would have hurt interests of senatorial class
 - Resisted/repealed all attempts at reform
- Civil Wars 133 BC – 27 BC: control of military went from the senate, to the generals, to the Emperor
- Octavian (44 BC – 27 BC) / Augustus (27 BC to AD 14)
 - Made necessary reforms at expense of republican government
 - Established a monarchy backed by power of army
 - Gathered all the strands of “separation of powers” into his own hands
 - Expansion/consolidation of territory; established boundaries to empire

The Romans in Britain

- Celtic Britain in LPRIA fell within the economic influence of the Roman State long before the Roman military arrived
- Evidence of trade w/Roman merchants
- Proto-urban settlements with increasing levels social stratification in areas closest to mainland Europe
- Julius Caesar and his soldiers arrives in 55-54 BC
 - placed the island (the SE region anyway) firmly in the sphere of Roman influence

Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*

- The conquest of Gaul are described by Julius Caesar in his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*
- In English, *The Gallic Wars* - a series of eight books which are the most important historical source regarding the conflict
- The Gallic Wars were a series of military campaigns waged by the Roman governor and general Julius Caesar against the Gallic peoples to the area north of Transalpine Gaul, one of the provinces assigned to Caesar to govern in 59 BC.
 - The war lasted from 58 BC to 50 BC and culminated in a complete Roman victory, resulting in the expansion of the Roman Republic over the whole of Gaul (present day France and Belgium)
 - The wars paved the way for Julius Caesar to become the sole ruler of the Roman Republic

Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*

- Although Caesar portrayed this invasion as being a preemptive and defensive action, most historians agree that the wars were fought primarily to boost Caesar's political career and to pay off his massive debts.
 - Still, Gaul was of significant military importance, as Italy had been invaded several times by native tribes both indigenous to Gaul and farther to the north
 - Conquering Gaul allowed Rome to secure the natural border of the river Rhine
 - Books 4 and 5 detail Caesar's invasions of the Britain in 55 and 54 BC

Book IV: Caesar's first invasion of Britain - 55 BC

- *Caesar invaded Britain to punish the Celts there for aiding rebellions among the Gauls. Although the ships carrying the Roman infantry succeeded in crossing the English Channel, the cavalry did not.*
- *The Britons were waiting in force and attacked the Romans as they disembarked, but they were routed by the Roman infantry. The Britons submitted to the Romans and dispersed.*
- *However, a storm damaged Caesar's fleet; the Romans were stranded and lacked sufficient provisions.*
- *The Britons attacked the Romans again and caught them off guard, but the legions recovered and drove the Britons inland yet again.*
- *The Romans cross back over to the Channel to Gaul to their winter quarters*
- *When Caesar's exploits were reported back in Rome, the Senate rewarded him with unprecedented twenty-day long thanksgiving.*

Book V: Caesar's second invasion of Britain - 54 BC

- Caesar commands that as many boats as possible be prepared during the winter for a campaign against Britain in the Spring. He orders all boats to assemble at Portus Itius (near modern day Boulogne-sur-Mer).
- The Romans sail to Britain to begin their campaign. There are some skirmishes between the Romans and the Britons, and a storm destroys many of the Roman boats.
- The British tribes, although previously at war with one another, band together to face the Roman threat with Cassivellaunus as their commander in chief. Caesar discovers the stronghold of Cassivellaunus near the Thames River and routs the Britons there.
- The Trinovantes, a powerful tribe, offer to become Rome's allies, and several other British tribes follow suit. From these tribes Caesar learns the location of Cassivellaunus and successfully attacks him there.
- Cassivellaunus orders the tribes in Kent to attack the British ships, but they are defeated. Cassivellaunus surrenders to Caesar, enabling Caesar to quickly return to the continent before winter arrives.

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