



## **Paganism in Roman Britain**

### **Professor Ronald Hutton**

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### **Goddesses and Gods**

#### **An Unnecessary Debate**

I shall begin this discussion by considering a totally artificial and unnecessary debate between experts in Roman Britain, carried on at the end of the twentieth century. On one side was the argument that the religion of the native British was carried on almost untouched by Roman civilization, which just dressed it up in stone; adding temples, statues and inscriptions. This was proposed by, among others, Miranda Aldhouse-Green, Graham Webster and Guy de la Bedoyere. On the other was the view that the religion of native Britain had been thoroughly Romanized, held among others by Martin Henig and Joan Alcock. I call this debate unnecessary, despite the high quality of those scholars who conducted it, because in one sense it is insoluble – we just do not have enough evidence - and in another, both sides were clearly right.

One problem in the evidence is that we don't really know what the religion of the native British was like before the Romans arrived. They left no writing, and very few images that might refer to religion. Another is that the Romans honoured the local deities of lands which they conquered. If they knew their names, then they used them when addressing them. If not, they used the expression 'Genius Loci', 'the spirit of this place' to represent whatever divine figure might be in charge there. When a Roman soldier killed a wild boar on what is now Scargill Moor, Yorkshire, he raised an inscription in gratitude to the Roman god of hunting, Silvanus. He realised, however, that the moor was sacred to a local god, Vinotonus, and so he paid respect to this deity on the other side of the inscription.

No religious struggle is visible in the Roman conquest of two-thirds of Britain, only a little pruning of native religion. The religious specialists, the Druids, seem to have been abolished, with the veneration of war deities who had been invoked against Rome, and the occasional destruction of shrines and sacred groves as a punitive measure. Those were the only changes made.

The only way to tell if a temple, statue, inscription or votive offering was made or commissioned by a Roman or a native is if that person left their name on it. However, most do not record the names of those who made them. Those which do feature are mostly Roman; but ambitious natives could take Roman names.

#### **Romano-British Deities: The Evidence**

So what is the actual evidence for goddesses and gods during the time of Roman Britain, which lasted from AD or CE 43 to 410? Roman deities are well represented in Britain, especially Jupiter, Mars and Mercury, who cover between them most human concerns: government, weather, trading, travel, communication, farming and war. They are especially recorded in the south-east, and on the northern military frontier – the most Romanized areas – but are found throughout the province.

The imperial cult is also well represented. It was not the worship of the current emperor. Instead Romans believed that every human being has a divine opposite number, a guardian spirit called a genius in the case of a man and a juno in the case of a woman. The cult was to encourage the genius of the emperor to help him rule well.

Emperors who did spectacularly well were believed to unite with their genius on dying, and could then be honoured as gods. If they ruled very badly then they were thought to have gone adrift from their genius. They were usually murdered, and then their memory subjected to official damnation.

The encouragement paid to the current emperor's genius in Britain was commemorated by colleges at London, York and Lincoln; a massive temple to Claudius, the emperor who conquered Britain, at Colchester, and small busts of rulers in eastern England.

There are also extensive traces of mystery religions which arrived under Roman rule from other parts of the empire. These were closed initiatory groups dedicated to the worship of one or two special deities. They suited different tastes. The mystery cult of Cybele and Atys was ecstatic, that of Isis and Serapis more stately, and that of Mithras confined to men, especially soldiers. The most popular was apparently that of Bacchus, which could be ecstatic but was also associated with pleasure, especially food and drink.

There were also lots of deities brought in from the other north-western provinces of Rome's empire, which were both closest to the British and spoke similar, Celtic, languages. They include goddesses of protection and plenty, Rosmerta and the Matres, and Epona, patroness of horses and their riders.

Native deities also continued to be honoured in Roman Britain, by both the British themselves and by Romans. Roman culture gave them names and faces for the first time, by according them inscriptions and statues.

A charismatic chain of them stretches across the zone of Hadrian's Wall on the northern frontier. One was Belatucadros, a horned and phallic war god from Cumbria. Also with horns, but more cultured and composed, was Antenocitus, at Benwell near Newcastle. On the moorland of Carrawburgh between was a spring sacred to the water goddess Coventina.

Running through all the native cults was a tremendous localism. Many deities were found only in one small district, and the names and natures of most of these have been lost. Those of whom we know are often only represented by one inscription.

On the whole, native gods stood for human activities and functions, such as war, leadership, trade and travel. Goddesses were more associated with the land: with hills, rivers and wells. This is not however a rigid pattern. A goddess of love, who was identified with the Roman Venus, was very common, and there were gods of rivers, including the Thames, Tyne and Wear, and of woods, such as the one called Rigonemetis in Lincolnshire.

In addition the Romans or their colonial subjects often twinned native deities with those of Rome, much as British towns were often twinned with French or German counterparts in recent decades. As a famous example, the native goddess of the hot spring at Bath, Sulis, got paired with Minerva, the major Roman goddess of war and crafts.

Mars, Roman god of war, healing, farming and community protection, was twinned with 21 known British gods. The divine Celtic musician Maponus was paired off with his Roman counterpart Apollo. Silvanus, Roman patron of hunting, was twinned with three native gods and Mercury, Roman god of communication, commerce and travel, with one. My personal favourite is a British god of hounds, Cunomaglus, at Nettleton Shrub in Wiltshire, who was paired with the Roman Apollo, who was also adog-lover.

There was no standard system for this exercise, which seems both local and ad-hoc- some native gods got twinned with both Mars and Silvanus. What we don't know is what it actually meant. It could be that the process was driven by natives, who wanted to connect their favourite traditional deities with Roman counterparts. It could however also have been the work of Roman officials, seeking to impose Romanization on conquered Britons. Or both.

## **The Nature of Romano-British Religion**

The great central act of this religion, as for pretty well all of those in pre-Christian Europe, was sacrifice- the offering of gifts to deities to keep them happy and responsive. It suited a life experience in which the natural world was overwhelmingly powerful, and largely baffling and unpredictable, and human life and civilization were fragile and transitory. It was necessary to try to ensure that the deities who controlled the powers of nature and human potential were kept in as good a mood as possible.

Religion was not however limited to official pantheons and cults. Anybody could start a new one if it did not break the law or outrage public morals. If somebody wanted to do so for the general public, they asked for

permission from the Roman Senate. If they were content to practice it in private, they just got on with it.

The one required act from all Roman subjects was to offer sacrifice when asked – if only a pinch of incense – to the current emperor's genius. This was equivalent to affirming loyalty to the empire itself. Unfortunately, Christians often believed that they could not do it, because it involved recognizing another divinity in addition to their own. When they refused, they could be punished as traitors, sometimes with death. This did not happen often, widespread persecutions of Christianity occurring in only about thirty of the three hundred years of the pagan Roman Empire. They tended to get more frequent towards the end, however, and claimed at least three probable British martyrs.

Roman paganism had no theology, meaning no officially prescribed systems of thought to explain the nature of the world and of the divine. Speculation about this was left to philosophers, who had no official status, and who disagreed amongst themselves over the answers. In religion, the vital component was not theology but ritual, meaning staged and formal actions to catch the attention and approval of a deity.

It is worth asking how people could cope with a potentially limitless number of goddesses and gods, and an existing huge crowd of them, in the empire. The Romans themselves recognized the problem, coining the term 'superstitio', the root of our word 'superstition', to mean excessive anxiety about the divine.

The solution found was to believe that deities were not actually very interested in individual people and didn't give humans commandments, or monitor their performance. They required respect from them, embodied in shrines and rites of worship. Temples were therefore built for them with public or private money, at which magistrates, or sometimes full-time priests or priestesses, performed rites to honour them. These were especially concentrated at colourful seasonal festivals, which the public could enjoy.

At home, people honoured ancestors and spirits of the house – called lares and penates – for whom food and drink were left out. Ordinary people needed to attract the attention of deities, with offers of future honour in exchange for present assistance. If that assistance seemed to be granted, then the promise to them was expected to be kept. Truly religious individuals established their own shrines or joined mystery cults.

The result was a pluralistic, multi-faith, multi-ethnic society, similar to our own. Even one of its seemingly most alien customs, animal sacrifice, is not so strange on inspection. The animals offered were expected to go to their deaths without fear and to die immediately and without pain. Only their inedible parts were then offered to deities (by being burned). The rest were cooked and eaten by worshippers. In a society in which most people could not afford to eat meat most of the time, animal sacrifice therefore added up to a seasonal barbeque or roast, with the victims very humanely despatched.

Deities could be very specialized. Cereal farming was under the patronage of ten different aspects of the goddess Ceres, or perhaps ten different goddesses, distinguished as the 'plougher', 'harrower', 'sower', 'fertiliser', 'weeder', 'reaper', 'raker', 'sheaf-binder', 'storer' and 'distributor'. In addition, the goddess Terra Mater dealt with the fertilization of seeds, the god Promitor looked after the granary, and Sterculinus was the god in charge of the manure heap.

## Temples

So far around 140 Romano-British temples are known, of many different styles and shapes. Most are small – having room for only about a dozen people inside – and so functioned as houses for the deities and places for private prayer. The big public festivities happened in the open space in front of them.

From the start they were found in both town and country. In the third and fourth centuries, however, a special kind of rural pilgrimage temple spread across the south of the province. It was built in remote and usually beautiful countryside, requiring some effort to reach it, and was set up for the benefit of travellers who had journeyed to it. Its compound usually included amenities for them such as a hotel, baths, and a shop that sold offerings and souvenirs. They were a source of income, prestige and presumed divine favour for their owners, and perhaps were also secluded from clashes with Christians.

One of these, the ruins of which can still be visited by the public in season, is at Lydney in Gloucestershire's Forest of Dean, overlooking the River Severn. It was excavated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who said it had been a temple of the native healer god Nodens, whom the Romans twinned with Mars.

He identified baths, a guest house and a set of cubicles in which pilgrims could sleep and receive meaningful dreams. He also found many statues of dogs, which he decided were sacred hounds kept to lick the afflicted parts of the sick and cure them. The problem with all this is that while it is possible, it is modelled on ancient

Greek practices, and there are other interpretations of the same evidence. The cubicles may not have been for dreams, but for private worship, or different deities, or insulation, or may even have been a later, Christian, addition. The dogs may have been symbols of hunting or of the Underworld. Healing may not have been the main function of the temple, and Nodens may not have been the main deity (he was certainly not the only one honoured there).

Another of the rural pilgrimage temples was high on the edge of the Cotswold Hills, at Uley in Gloucestershire. It was built over a shrine to a native war god, but the main Roman deity to be worshipped there was Mercury, patron of travellers, merchants and thieves. He could be turned against thieves as well as protecting them, and 140 prayers written on tablets were left there asking him to curse them on behalf of particular victims. There were also votive offerings of miniature legs, perhaps to bless travellers on foot, 3000 coins, and sacrifices of Mercury's special animals, cockerels and goats. As usual, Mercury was only the chief deity, with the main cult statue, and Mars, Silvanus, Sol, Jupiter, Cupid and Bacchus also received worship there.

One of the greatest urban temples was that constructed for the goddess of the hot spring at Bath, Sulis Minerva. Once more, she gave hospitality to many other deities within her precinct, but she had the main statue and altar, and she had the spring. At first that was open and easily accessible, but later it was roofed over and approached along a narrow passage. That made it darker and more atmospheric, and allowed only a few people to go there at a time, heightening the experience for them. Why they went there is more of a puzzle. The waters have undoubted mineral properties of healing, but there is no certain evidence of that in Roman times. Instead the offerings suggest a goddess noted for anger and aggression, perhaps embodied in the heat in the water. People asked her to curse their enemies, leaving 120 messages, and there was also a miniature war catapult. Sulis was clearly a very fierce lady.

## What We Have Lost- and What We Retain

There is therefore much that remains mysterious about particular places and divinities in Roman Britain, and also much that is so about Romano-British religion in general. We have only the foundations of temples and shrines, and so cannot know their height, the number of their windows, or how they were lit. We can only speculate about draperies, incense burners, lamps, paintings, flowers or reflecting surfaces (for example, the cult statue of Mercury at Uley stood behind a pool of water which may have acted as a mirror). We have to use our imaginations to reconstruct conjecturally the ceremonies and religious plays that took place there, the people who staffed them, and the probable presence of stalls to sell votive offerings and souvenirs, of the kind that still populate Hindu temples in India. At the rural temples there was probably some kind of formal reception offered to newly arrived pilgrims, and yet once again we can only dream of what such events would have been like.

Having said all this, there are moments at which the surviving evidence does seem to bring us startlingly close to the Romano-British, even as individuals. One of the visitors to the Uley pilgrimage temple was a woman called Saturnina. She must have been quite poor, because she had only one name, and because one of her most precious possessions had been a linen cloth. Somebody had stolen it, perhaps from her washing line, and she climbed up the hill to the temple to ask its god to curse the culprit. She obviously knew that he could be invoked against thieves, but not actually who he was. We know this because when somebody gave her a lead tablet and a pen, she addressed the god first as Mars, and then as Silvanus, and only the third time as Mercury. Then, however, she clearly became certain that she had got it right, because she wrote a passionate curse. Her tablet was then rolled up in a machine and nailed to the wall of the temple for Mercury to collect when he next flew by, and it was buried in its ruins at the end of the Roman period. It remained there until another woman, the archaeologist Ann Woodward, found it in the red Cotswold soil in the 1970s.

Even dearer to me personally is the inscription on a tombstone at Bath: 'To the protection of the divine: Mercatilla, freedwoman and foster-daughter of Magnus, lived one year, six months and twelve days.' So what can we learn from that? First, that Magnus was a commoner who had made money, because he had one name but could afford to commission a tombstone and own slaves. One of those slaves must have been Mercatilla's mother, with whom he seems to have fallen in love, because he gave her her freedom after the baby was born, so granting the child herself the same status, and adopted Mercatilla as his own daughter.

It was in vain, however, because the little girl died when a toddler, and the grieving Magnus gave her the very unusual honour, for an infant, of her own memorial. Perhaps he had brought her to Bath to try to heal her. So this small stone is a testimony to very powerful love, and that struck me the harder because when I first saw it, my own daughter was exactly the age at which the little Romano-Briton had been when she died.

In such manner, the pagans of the Roman province still have the capacity to reach out to us, after almost two millennia.

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## Further Reading

De la Bedoyere, Guy. *Gods with Thunderbolts*. 2002.

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Aldhouse-Green, M. *Sacred Britannia*. 2018