

Was there a ‘religious imperialism’ at work in Roman Britain?

According to David Mattingly, empire can be defined as ‘rule over very wide territories and many peoples without their consent.’¹ When Rome invaded Britain in 43 CE we can be sure that it was in order to extend the Roman Empire through domination of the conquered region rather than to form relationships on an equal footing with the inhabitants of Britain. While physically overpowering the country through its superior military might, Rome also had a civilizing mission in mind.² The spread of true civilisation, *humanitas*, outwards from Rome was a noble and righteous project that accompanied Roman imperial expansion³ – the empire was actually doing the barbarians a favour by ‘creating order’.⁴ To this end Roman cultural forms such as town planning⁵ and civic architecture⁶ were exported alongside Imperial administrative structure. Roman religion was an inextricable part of this package. This essay will argue that there was a ‘religious imperialism’ at work in Roman Britain. In order to explore this issue, this paper will begin by situating Roman religion within the wider sphere of Roman imperial power. It will then investigate Roman treatment of British religious officials and the imposition of Roman imperial cult, both of which can be seen as examples of religious imperialism. The essay will then

¹ David Mattingly. *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire*. (London. Penguin. 2007). 13.

² Greg Woolf. “Beyond Romans and Natives.” in *World Archaeology* 28: 3. (Feb., 1997). 339-40.

³ Richard Gordon. “Religion in the Roman Empire: the civic compromise and its limits.” in Mary Beard and John North (Eds.) *Pagan Priests*. (London. Duckworth. 1990). 235-6.

⁴ C.R. Whittaker. “Imperialism and culture: the Roman initiative.” in D.J. Mattingly (Ed). *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism: Power, discourse, and discrepant experience in the Roman Empire*. (Portsmouth. Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series, no. 23.1997. 144.

⁵ W.S. Hanson. “Forces of change and methods of control.” in Mattingly, D.J. (Ed). *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism: Power, discourse, and discrepant experience in the Roman Empire*. (Portsmouth. Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series, no. 23.1997. 75.

⁶ Whittaker. “Imperialism and culture.” 145-7.

examine the less confrontational imperialist practice of *interpretatio romana*, focusing on its epigraphic and iconographic manifestations and distribution. An analysis of the practitioners of *interpretatio* will lead to the conclusion that while there certainly was Roman religious imperialism in Britain, it did not take the form of any sort of forced religious conversion or proselytizing mission. Instead, Roman religious imperialism was part and parcel of the cultural imperialism that accompanied the export of Roman cultural forms alongside the administrative infrastructure of empire.

Roman religion accompanied politics: they were not separate activities but operated in the same sphere,⁷ so when Rome imposed itself upon Britain, Roman religion was part of the general cultural package that accompanied Roman power.⁸ Consequently as Roman governmental forms took over civil administration, so their religious structures incorporated religion. If we want to classify 'religion' as part of 'culture' then cultural overshadowing was part of the package of Roman imperialism. Therefore, in a society where religion and politics intertwined in this way it was to the advantage of colonized peoples who aspired to positions of power under the empire to appear to embrace the official gods of Rome, even if it was only an outward display. While the adoption of Roman culture was encouraged on the one hand, it was not usual Roman practice to, on the other hand, forbid local religion.⁹

⁷ John Scheid. *An Introduction to Roman Religion*. (Bloomington. Indiana University Press. 2003). 129.

⁸ Mattingly. *Imperial Possession*. 7.

⁹ I. P. Haynes. "The Romanisation of Religion in the 'Auxilia' of the Roman Imperial Army from Augustus to Septimus Severus." in *Britannia* 24. (1993). 142.

In Britain, the suppression of the Druids at Anglesey less than twenty years after the Claudian invasion seems on the surface to contradict this (Tacitus *Annals*. 14. 30).¹⁰ Although the Druids were high-status British religious officials¹¹ their oppression was not a matter of specifically ‘religious’ repression but was actually politically driven because of the significant part they played in the British resistance to Rome.¹² So while this can be seen as an example of overt religious imperialism on the part of Rome because the target was an indigenous priestly group, it occurred in the larger context of resistance to Roman political authority. Rome’s argument with the Druids was not directly focused around an expressly ‘religious’ matter, but was part of the larger project of the coercion of native peoples into accepting general imperialism.¹³

Another example of ‘religious imperialism’ that is strongly linked to the whole package of general Roman imperialism can be seen in the cases of actual transplanted Roman cult in *coloniae* such as Colchester, Gloucester and Lincoln where each had a *capitolium* where Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Juno and Minerva were worshipped, as well as in the imposition of the cult of the deified Claudius at Colchester.¹⁴ Both examples were cases of religious imperialism by virtue of their being, in the Roman manner, simultaneously ‘religious’, ‘civic’ and ‘administrative’ aspects of the empire. As mentioned above, it was expected that loyalty to, or willing subjugation under, the Roman Empire would include acceptance of ideological and civic manifestations of the empire. When the temple of the imperial cult became the focus of violent

¹⁰ Tacitus. *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Trans. Michael Grant. (London. Penguin. 1996). 328-9.

¹¹ Martin Henig. *Religion in Roman Britain*. (London. B.T. Batsford. 1984). 206.

¹² Mattingly. *Imperial Possession*. 105.

¹³ Jane Webster. “‘Interpretatio’: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods.” in *Britannia* 26. (1995). 160.

¹⁴ Martin Henig. “Roman Religion and Roman Culture in Britain.” in Malcolm Todd (Ed.) *A Companion to Roman Britain*. (Malden. Blackwell. 2007). 220.

clashes between Britons and Romans the reasons were more a case of objections to the enforced participation in the whole parcel of imperialism (Tacitus *Ann.* 14. 31)¹⁵ including the religious aspect which in this case manifested in local elites having to contribute financially to the temple.¹⁶

Actual transported Roman cult in Britain was the exception rather than the rule.¹⁷ The majority of Roman religious imperialism happened in a more subtle way through the practice of *interpretatio romana* or ‘Roman translation’, ‘the interpretation of alien deities and of the rites associated with them’ (Tacitus. *Germania* 43.4).¹⁸ *Interpretatio romana* in a British context denotes the identifying or pairing of one or more British gods with a Roman equivalent, probably the most famous example being the conflation of the British deity Sulis with the Roman Minerva at Bath. *Interpretatio* is an example of Roman religious imperialism in Britain because not only does it manifest in specifically Roman cultural forms such as engraved writing and monumental Classical-style sculpture and architecture - absent in Britain until they were brought by the Romans - the pairing of native deities with Roman ones functions as a creeping cultural imperialism that leads to their submergence and replacement.¹⁹ The recording on an altar in which the Roman name Silvanus is used in the context of thanksgiving for a hunt instead of a local deity is such an example.²⁰ If, as Cicero suggests, the gods have different names in different

¹⁵ Tacitus. *Annals*. 328.

¹⁶ Henig. *Religion Roman Britain*. 70.

¹⁷ Henig. “Religion and Culture.” 220.

¹⁸ Tacitus. *The Agricola and the Germania*. Trans. H. Mattingly; S.A. Handford. (London. Penguin. 1984). 137.

¹⁹ Mattingly. *Imperial Possession*. 309-10.

²⁰ Henig. *Religion Roman Britain*. 59.

countries, then there is no need to use Roman names for British deities who already have a name (*De natura deorum* 1.83-4).²¹ In addition, if Roman deities were Roman-centric and tied to the landscape around Rome, then it could not have been Silvanus who helped with a hunt in Britain anyway.²²

The fact that many British gods share a single Roman ‘equivalent’, such as the case of Mars who has sixteen Celtic counterparts in Britain, is an example of the generalizing approach of *interpretatio*. If *interpretatio* was precise, then a single British god such as Cocidius would not be paired with two Roman deities such as Mars and Silvanus who in Roman religion were two different deities, not epithets or interchangeable versions of each other.²³ It shows a misunderstanding of the British deity and perhaps a lack of interest in precise definition of the identity of local gods, as contrasted against the concern for specificity evident in Roman religion.²⁴ *Interpretatio* was not merely a simple matter of translating a British deity for a Roman audience or preferring Roman cultural forms such as writing and stone sculpture for religious purposes, but was an actual subsuming of the native gods under the Roman.²⁵ As Webster suggests, *interpretatio* is not a mutual reconciliation of religious practice between two societies resulting in a consensual syncretism, but an asymmetrical colonial act by a ruling power.²⁶ This is evident in that it is primarily performed by higher-status members of Romano-British society –

²¹ Cited in: Clifford Ando. “Interpretatio Romana.” in *Classical Philology* 100. (2005). 43.

²² Clifford Ando. “A Religion for the Empire.” In Clifford Ando (Ed). *Roman Religion*. (Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press. 2003). 228-34 ff.

²³ Webster. “Interpretatio.” 155.

²⁴ Scheid. *Roman Religion*. 158.

²⁵ Webster. “Interpretatio.” 156.

²⁶ Ibid. 157.

either those who were already 'Roman' such as the military or those who were 'Romanised' such as members of the indigenous elite.²⁷ It was to the advantage of both these groups to promote Roman religious structures over British through the syncretistic model offered by *interpretatio* because each had an investment in the empire.²⁸ Consequently both groups contributed to Roman religious imperialism in Britain because each approached Roman religion in its British context in a Rome-privileging manner.

The Roman military presence in Britain - which was so large that at its peak it numbered more than one tenth of the available forces of the empire²⁹ - could not help but be an omnipresent source and promoter of Roman religion. Every Roman fort was regarded as an image of Rome in microcosm with a Roman festival calendar, symbolic *capitolium* (shrine of the standards) and *pomerium* (fortifications).³⁰ The military account for a much wider range of named divinities than are encountered in other parts of Britain ranging from mainstream Roman deities, the imperial cult and eastern cults, to other provincial deities imported to Britain, spirits of place and localized British gods.³¹ That the Roman army was the main source of epigraphic data is evidenced by the fact that the majority of inscribed religious altars of traditional Roman type in Britain come from military sites.³² In the case of epigraphic *interpretatio*, there are approximately eighty-five references to 'Mars' in Roman Britain, thirty-six of which are paired

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 156.

²⁹ Mattingly. *Imperial Possession*. 20.

³⁰ Henig. *Religion Roman Britain*. 88.

³¹ Webster. "Interpretatio." 156.

³² Ibid.

with a non-Roman deity while in the remaining forty-nine cases the native deity is entirely subsumed under the title of the Roman god.³³ Name-pairing *interpretatio* was used more frequently by those of higher military rank than by those of lower ranks and civilians³⁴ such as in the case of an altar dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus Taranis by a senior centurion.³⁵ There are nine instances in which Imperial *numina* are cited in epigraphic relationship with native deities and the dedicants were mostly military detachments or individual soldiers of centurion or higher status with only one of indigenous status.³⁶ Out of seven name-paired epigraphic examples concerning Apollo, while the status of two of the dedicants making the pairings is unknown, the others were all of high status: an imperial procurator, a prefect, a tribune and two centurions. Thus it seems that within the ‘mini Rome’ that was the army it was higher status members who participated in *interpretatio*. Lower, non-Italian ranks within the army tended not to pair the gods they encountered in Britain with Roman deities, perhaps because they were not particularly familiar with either the Roman deities or with British ones.³⁷

When it came to the Britons themselves, not all sectors of tribal society rebelled against Rome.³⁸ Native elites, if they knew what was good for them, adopted Roman cultural forms (Tacitus *Agr.* 21),³⁹ if even only on the surface. The Roman state contained mechanisms to reward people who submitted to its authority and showed a capacity to be reconciled to Roman rule after their

³³ Ibid. 154.

³⁴ Ibid. 159.

³⁵ Henig. *Religion Roman Britain*. 59.

³⁶ Webster. “Interpretatio. 156.

³⁷ Ibid. 160.

³⁸ Henig. “Religion and Culture.” 222.

³⁹ Tacitus. *Agricola*. 72-3.

subjugation,⁴⁰ so self-Romanisation would have been a strategy employed by local elites in order to win a share of the proceeds of empire.⁴¹ Participation in Roman-style religious rituals was part of the process whereby ambitious Britons adopted Roman values.⁴² According to Beard, North and Price it was common across the empire for local elites to display less interest in local indigenous cults than in the universal deities associated with the Roman Empire.⁴³ In the civilian south-east of Britain the Roman practice of stone sculptural representation of the gods was more prevalent than inscriptions.⁴⁴ Classical imagery may have depicted a range of British deities. Sometimes the deities portrayed are explicitly identified with a Roman god such as Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Diana or Silvanus, others display instances of name-pairing *interpretatio* such as the statue of Mars Lenus also known as Ocelus Vellaunos.⁴⁵ In the case of the nineteen votive plaques from Baldock, while Minerva is represented iconographically, thirteen of the plaques give her the name of the British goddess, Senua.⁴⁶ Conversely, Celticised figures such as the statue of Mercury wearing a neck torque were explicitly identified as Roman gods.⁴⁷ Pre-conquest Celtic religion was primarily aniconic⁴⁸ and so the fact that the first images of local

⁴⁰ Mattingly. *Imperial Possession*. 7.

⁴¹ Woolf. "Beyond Romans." 339-40.

⁴² Martin Millett. *Roman Britain*. (London. B.T. Batsford / English Heritage. 1995). 115.

⁴³ Mary Beard; John North and Simon Price. *Religions of Rome. Volume 1: A History*. (Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1998). 338.

⁴⁴ Millett. *Roman Britain*. 109.

⁴⁵ Mattingly. *Imperial Possession*. 483.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 484.

⁴⁷ Henig. *Religion Roman Britain*. 50.

⁴⁸ Anthony King. "The Emergence of Romano-Celtic Religion." in Blagg, Thomas and Millett, Martin. (Eds). *The Early Roman Empire in the West*. (Oxford. Oxbow. 1990). 229.

deities to appear do so in a Classical style accompanied by Roman names is evidence of the imperialist nature of iconographic *interpretatio*.

Stone sculpture usually appears in the context of temples.⁴⁹ The temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath is a good example of syncretistic iconographic *interpretatio*. Probably initially commissioned by the British client king Togidubnus - a Briton with investment in Romanisation, even if this was only an outward appearance and masked the hope of maintaining his own position of power⁵⁰ – Bath is an example of Roman religious imperialism because it is a predominantly Classical-style temple built over the site of what was formerly a British sacred spring. In addition, the deity of the spring, Sulis, was equated through *interpretatio* with the Roman goddess Minerva. While the iconographic program of the temple combined Roman and British religious themes, in the main it was of Classical format including a Roman-style bronze cult statue of Minerva and courtyard altar.⁵¹ Sulis, the original deity of the spring,⁵² appearing on the temple pediment as a Neptunian-solar full frontal face in the Celtic style, is conflated with the Medusa head worn on Minerva's breastplate and is therefore essentially merely an 'ornament' gracing the larger (more important) presence of the Roman goddess. Other imagery such as Victories and Tritons may allude to the successful Roman invasion of Britain and a star in the pediment to the deification of Claudius

⁴⁹ Catherine Johns. "Art, Romanisation, and Competence." in Sarah Scott and Jane Webster (Eds.) *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art*. (Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 2003). 17.

⁵⁰ Martin Henig. "The Captains and the Kings Depart." in Sarah Scott and Jane Webster (Eds.) *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art*. (Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 2003). 127.

⁵¹ Henig. "Religion and Culture." 224.

⁵² Who may have been conceived of as male, according to Barry Cunliffe and Peter Davenport. *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath. Volume 1: The Site*. (Oxford. Oxford University Committee for Archaeology. Monograph No. 7. 1985). 116.

and Vespasian and hence Imperial Cult.⁵³ The temple attracted Roman-style cult officials, a *sacerdos* who was a Roman citizen and a *haruspex*⁵⁴ and, as in the north-east, a predominance of high status dedicants invoked paired divinities.⁵⁵ While at Bath the British deity was still present, albeit it in a secondary position to the Roman one, at other sites the god was completely subsumed. The temple at Uley was of a Romano-Celtic style built over a previous Iron Age ritual complex⁵⁶ and although more indigenous in its architecture, the cult statue of the deity was a Classical-style sculpture of the Roman Mercury, showing that this deity had completely replaced whatever local god originally inhabited the place.⁵⁷

In conclusion, it is evident that there was a ‘religious imperialism’ at work in Roman Britain, but the nature of Roman religion meant that this need not be isolated from the broader project of Roman imperialism. While manifesting to a certain extent as part of civic structure and imperial cult, Roman religious imperialism in Britain was more successfully pervasive when it was part of the translation process of epigraphic and iconographic *interpretatio romana* because of the tendency of this method to privilege Roman deities over British. The evidence for *interpretatio* which tends to be most abundant in higher-status forms such as Roman-style stone engraving, monumental sculpture and architecture indicate its utilization by those higher up on the social

⁵³ Henig. “Religion and Culture.” 223-4.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 224. Although Georgia L. Irby-Massie. *Military Religion in Roman Britain*. (Leiden. Brill. 1999). 167. suggests he may have only been visiting rather than a permanent temple official.

⁵⁵ Mattingly. *Imperial Possession*. 308-9. According to Barry Cunliffe. *Roman Bath*. (London. B.T. Batsford / English Heritage. 1995). 108, 54. The amount of inscriptions at Bath are unparalleled anywhere else in Britain except in the military north. Although curse tablet evidence shows that lower status people also frequented the temple.

⁵⁶ Ann Woodward. *Shrines and Sacrifice*. (London. B.T. Batsford / English Heritage. 1992). 21.

⁵⁷ Henig. “Religion and Culture.” 224.

scale of Romano-British society. This tends therefore to reflect elite concerns and suggests that those with an investment in the Roman Empire were more than willing to favour Roman religious names and forms over the local. It is less clear, because of lack of evidence, how much those lower down on the social scale accepted the Roman cultural package and hence Roman religion. Future research could concentrate on the extent to which Romanisation was a veneer confined to the top layer of Romano-British society – the already-Roman and the British elites in the process of Romanisation – and how much this trickled down to the general populace. As the evidence for the adoption of Roman religion currently stands however, one can only conclude that the powerful within Romano-British society were only too willing to promote Roman-style religious forms in order to demonstrate their support for what was, in the end, a much stronger and overwhelming imperial force. On the part of the empire, while specifically religious imperialism may not have been a conscious strategy, the spreading of *humanitas* along with the expansion of empire was.

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