

Roman Britain III

Life in Roman Britain: Religion, Pax Romana and Ordinary Folk

The Romans had a tricky, ambivalent and polytheistic approach to things divine during our period. Even during the time of the republic (until 49 BCE) there was scepticism among some about the existence of the gods of Olympus and the official state religion based on them, while the quiet and domestic worship of ancestors (Lares and Penates) formed part of most well-ordered Roman households. Cicero summed up the views of the intelligentsia: not even children believe in the gods of Olympus. There was a highly respected philosophy, Epicureanism, followed by some sophisticated Romans, which rejected the notion of gods and underworld entirely, instead propounding an atomic theory of existence.

Despite the various atheistic philosophers (who were, after all, in a minority), formal state religion played a big part in the lives of ordinary people, providing opportunities for mass worship and feasting combined with an act of loyalty to the Roman state. The main triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva) represented the state of Rome as a focus for veneration, and in Britain too there are the remains of many inscriptions with a dedication to Jupiter (see sources in the chapter "Religion"). There is of course much evidence of the importance of the entire Roman pantheon (368-389; **377-401**; 389-415), especially among the military.

Throughout the Roman provinces, from the time of Augustus onwards, the official state worship of the gods was increasingly involved with what is now known as the imperial cult: emperor worship. (See sources: 288-297; **289-298**; 291-300). Priests (Severi Augustales) of this imperial cult were drawn from the native population and were given privileges and prestige. This cult was a very effective tool of imperialism and hastened the process of Romanisation in the pacified areas of Britain and many other provinces. (See 297, 299; **298, 300**; 305,307).

Probably the most famous symbol of the imperial cult was the temple erected to "the divine Claudius" at Colchester, which became the first focus for violence and desecration during the Boudiccan rebellion of 60 CE. (See source 73: "In this respect the temple dedicated to the deified Claudius was looked upon as a stronghold of eternal tyranny, and those chosen as priests were pouring out whole fortunes on the pretext of religion." **Tacitus, Annals, XIV, 31**)

Native religions

Druidism is often regarded as the indigenous religion of the Celts and, although we cannot absolutely refute this idea, there are few literary sources (300, 315; **301,316**; 308, 323) as evidence for the existence of the druids in Britain during our period – and one of these mentions them only because the governor Suetonius Paulinus was busy stamping them out on the island of Anglesey, when Boudicca raised her rebellion (source 73 again). Caesar describes the practice of the Druids in Gaul, which, he says, involved human sacrifice. For this reason, the Romans considered druidism to be a *superstitio prava* (as they were later to describe Christianity). Druidism was made illegal throughout the empire and, it seems (316; **317**; 324), was systematically stamped out.

Devotion to Celtic nature gods was considered harmless, and the Romans were quick to conflate Celtic deities with their own gods, again as an instrument of Romanisation (338-358; **319-338**; 326-345). More interesting is the fact that the Romans clearly adopted the Celtic deities for themselves (318-337; **339-360**; 346-367).

Mystery Religions

State religion was not personal, nor did it hold out the promise of a happy after-life. To fill this spiritual gap in their lives, people in the time of the Roman Empire increasingly turned to what are known now as Mystery Religions, from the east. Egyptian cults (like those of Isis and Serapis), Mithraism (from Persia) and Christianity have all left evidence in Roman Britain. In 325, under the emperor Constantine, Christianity became the state religion of the whole empire.

Ordinary Folk

Ordinary folk, by definition, do not make the headlines: they do not make – or write – history either. In our period - the first hundred years or so of the first millennium of the common era - most “ordinary folk” would have been illiterate. It is therefore difficult to decipher precisely what their lives would have been like, how they thought and what they felt.

Graveyards are a very useful source of information, since the physical remains of people can give us some evidence. Epigraphic evidence can be found on gravestones as well as on curse stones (359-367; **361-376**; 368-388). Gravestones and human remains can give an indication of average life expectancy (about 30 for women and rather more for men, though some people lived to a ripe old age) and the cause of death, which very frequently for women was childbirth or miscarriage with the attendant risk of haemorrhage or sepsis. A significant number of babies did not survive many days beyond birth, with an infancy death rate of about 20-25%, estimated on the basis of human remains found at Silchester.

The fort at Vindolanda (Chesterholm) just south of Hadrian’s Wall has been a rich source of informal writing. Letters handwritten in ink on thin leaves of wood were preserved in mud and, because of the anaerobic conditions, they have (with some expert care) yielded up such things as a birthday invitation from one lady to another (source **522**, 540).

Tombstones can record messages of great affection and indicate touching personal relationships. See sources *503-509*, **582-589**, 607-613 (all from York).

Social mobility

Roman society was highly stratified during the early imperial period. It is perhaps surprising then to find that people could and did change class with such ease – both ways. Roman citizens might become slaves if they could not pay their debts; slaves could become freedmen and, as such rise to the very top of the Roman civil service, even becoming influential advisers to the emperor himself (sources 59 – Narcissus; 79 – Polyclitus). And a beautiful slave woman might find her fortune enhanced by freedom and marriage to a rich man..... (526, **606**, 631).

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