

Zitierhinweis

Esmonde Cleary, A. Simon: Rezension über: Robin Fleming, *The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300-525 CE*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021, in: Plekos. Elektronische Zeitschrift für Rezensionen und Berichte zur Erforschung der Spätantike, 24 (2022), S. 317-324, heruntergeladen über Website



copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

Robin Fleming: *The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300–525 CE*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2021. 303 p., 22 ill. \$ 45.00/£ 39.00. ISBN 978-0-8122-5244-6.

This book marks a crucial step forward in understanding how to look at the massive changes wrought during the fifth century AD in the archaeology of what had been the areas of Britain under Roman rule, and consequently in understanding what was going on and why. The core of the work consists in six chapters examining how changing circumstances impacted on various areas of production, animal, vegetable and mineral, and how these in turn fed back into the major changes on the archaeological record in that century. In all these chapters the emphasis is not only on what happened to the production of these classes of material but how human lives and understandings of the world were involved in and shaped by such production and then impacted upon by the socio-economic upheavals in the first half of the century. This all led to the ‘great de-skilling’ and the attempts of various populations to adapt to the changed circumstances and come up with their own new solutions. As such, it shows how to link the high-level political, military and social disruptions through to the daily lives of the bulk of the population, explaining why the collapse of Roman power in the island impacted so profoundly not just upon the elites but upon pretty much everyone else as well, a puzzle which had previously been appreciated but not solved. These chapters will deservedly remain a point of reference for future work on and debates about the period.

An introductory chapter lays out the problems, well-known but still deeply ingrained, of the mis-matches between historians and archaeologists and their evidence types and analyses, and between ‘Romanists’ and ‘Saxonists’ and their evidence types and concerns, so that these groups, ostensibly studying the same area in the same period, often seem to be talking past each other. Fleming, though by training a historian, seeks to use and understand the archaeological evidence, susceptible to more subtle and revealing narratives of the changes to the experiences of all those living during the period than the ‘kings and battles’ narratives of the supposed histories for the period. Her preferred approach is through the discourse of ‘entanglement’, especially that humans and things are so interdependent that major upheavals for either impact equally on the other. People make pots, but equally pots make people and their world; and if people stop making pots then their

world changes and has to be refashioned, in its turn refashioning the people. The introduction ends by outlining a series of questions in chronological order about how people transitioned from the world of abundant Roman-style things; to one marked by their increasing scarcity; to how they created new behaviours and understandings in a world changed utterly. This does mean that some major traditional topics, for instance religion or coinage, get short shrift.

Chapter 1 (pp. 10–33) lays out the ways in which the need of the Roman state for the resources to ensure its own survival shaped the economy of late Roman Britain. Central to this was taxation both in precious metal and in the form of the *annona*, the extraction of agrarian and other resources and their movement from producers to consumers. The assessment, raising, collection and transport of the *annona* was notoriously open to corruption and venality on the part of the servants of the state, military and civil. Deeply imbricated in these structures and processes, often doubling as servants of the state, were the landowning elites, whose cultural formations also conditioned important segments of the economy as they, like the state, extracted resources to maintain their existence and positions. These groups were a small proportion numerically of the population, but dominant in the exercise of power, creating huge inequalities in access to resources. These resources they then spent on culturally conditioned displays of power and wealth. All this is most emblematically embodied in the grand fourth-century villas, with their mosaics, sculpture and silver plate. But it was not just a question of such prestige sites and material; on this economic and socio-cultural system depended equally the creation of the hugely visible archaeology of late Roman Britain, down to widespread and everyday objects, from ceramics to hobnails. The collapse of these systems in the decades after 400 led to an equal collapse in the ways of life and their material expressions that they had sustained. The collapse, though, is rather taken for granted and could have done with more analysis, especially since the other side of the Channel there was by and large no comparable phenomenon. What had made Britain so different that it reacted in these ways?

Chapter 2 (pp. 34–50) is a virtuoso demonstration of ways to construct arguments as to how the entanglement of humans and other materials, in this case plants and animals, had both created a distinctively ‘Roman’ world and then seen it disappear as a set of consequences of the imperial collapse. For plants, the Roman period in part saw the adaptation of the cultivation of

established cereal staples to respond to increasing state and rentier demands, extensification and intensification. But also the Roman period saw the introduction of a huge new range of plant types, fruits, nuts, vegetables, herbs. By the late Roman period several of these had gained a wide geographical and social spread to become regular features of the landscape and menu, though others remained linked to forts, towns, villas and their inhabitants. Traditionally this has been discussed in terms of the influence of new, often Mediterranean-derived, forms of diet and cuisine, which is true enough so far as it goes. Fleming takes a different approach, looking at how the inputs, especially human, required to cultivate these plants created new types of agriculture, arboriculture and horticulture, with associated tools, and thus new physical and mental landscapes. These necessitated not just specialised landscape areas such as orchards or market gardens, but also new annual rhythms conditioned by the care of these crops from sowing through cultivation to harvest, and then mobilisation. Animal breeding and husbandry also altered to respond to new pressures put upon the principal food (and other products) species, again feeding through into landscape management (e.g. meadows). Introductions were less numerous than with plants, often, as in the case of exotic birds, rabbits and fallow deer, probably linked to status display. Equally there were deleterious introductions such as pests of stored grain (profiting from Roman-style built grain storage facilities) and rats, probably acting as disease vectors. To ensure a constant supply of the desirable plants and animals also involved landscape modification and new year-round working practices. Thus insensibly but profoundly the physical landscape was modified, as were perceptions of it what the world ought to look like and to operate. What Hesiod would have called ‘works and days’ – ‘taskscape’ in the modern jargonscape – altered to enable the new locations and cycles of production, which were probably highly gendered. As Fleming notes, it can seem that was the plants that influenced human lives as much as the humans the plants. The consequences of the disruption of the nexus of demand, production and supply early in the fifth century are clear in the archaeological record: the nexus collapsed. Many introduced species, plant and animal, had not established independent breeding populations and could not survive without specialist human care (again, Britain differs from the Continent where there was greater survival of such things). With the rationale for such care removed by the consumers for the products disappearing, there was no good reason for continuing to produce them. Many introduced species disappeared, some for a millennium and more, and the population now had

access to a much narrower range of nutrients, including much greater resort to wild species. This of course also entailed massive changes in the structuring, management and ‘look’ of the landscape – amongst other things ‘A World without Gardens’. This impacted equally on how humans fitted into that landscape at the level of daily tasks, seasonal practices and the annual cycles and therefore how they saw the world and their lives within it. This approach therefore traces how the imperial collapse did not just concern the Roman-dependent elites, but also fed down right through society as the factors that had created and controlled how lives were constructed and lived altered as a consequence of that collapse.

The arguments of Chapter 2 have been presented in some detail because in many senses they can stand as a paradigm for the four chapters that follow. Chapter 3 (pp. 51–72) and Chapter 4 (pp. 73–94), dealing with pottery and glass, and Chapter 6 (pp. 119–137), dealing with metals, have some similarities both in their *chaîne opératoire* and in what they tell us about what people did as the materials concerned became scarcer and scarcer and again they had to fashion responses to this. The focus is mainly on manufacture and manufactories in the countryside, either exploiting local resources (clays) or recycling (metals and glass). This of course means that there are resonances with the previous chapter since these processes were heat-using and thus required fuels such as wood and charcoal, both involving rural landscapes, labour and specialists. The finished products, pottery being exemplary, needed to be transported, involving more specialists from cart makers to drivers to shipwrights and sailors. The Roman system had created various contexts in which distribution was feasible, from state-engendered supply networks, where some pottery may have contained tax renders and other pottery piggy-backed on the supply lines, to urban markets (often involving low value coinage), to pedlars and chapmen, all profiting from the maintained and secure transport infrastructure. Both production and distribution, above all in the South and East, were on a huge scale and pottery became integrated into all sorts of aspects of life and death, helping define their nature. The rural emphasis of these chapters means that there is unfortunately no place for a detailed analysis of how these trades and traders meshed with and depended on urban places and peoples and how these places in turn depended on such activities, which could have been most illuminating: and crucial for the collapse of the systems of distribution after 400. For pottery,

either side of 400 the major production centres and the widespread distribution of their products went into terminal recession; metalwork looks to have been on the same trajectory. The concentration of much late-fourth-century ceramics production in fewer and larger supra-regional centres may have seemed like a good idea at the time, but their 'business model' depended on the demand and on the security and the physical and economic infrastructures assured by the imperial system. Once the system could no longer assure these, the flaws in the model became apparent and the industries could not be sustained. So what were populations long habituated to pottery and metalwork and their places in their lives and deaths to do? Two major stages of response are manifest. The first was that once pottery was no longer made, existing vessels were curated and scavenged. This can be seen in the continuing presence of later Romano-British ceramics on sites that continued to be occupied down into the fifth century or were newly created. Alternatively, vessels could be scavenged; earlier cemeteries were good sources for intact vessels, accounting for first- or second-century vessels on fifth-century sites. Both curated and scavenged items were used in a variety of ways both traditional and innovative. But eventually this could not be sustained. The obvious response was to start making pottery again, however, the loss of ceramics technologies with the collapse of the major fourth-century industries and the 'great de-skilling' meant such vessels were rare and unsophisticated. Metals seem to be similar, with analyses showing that the limited range of objects of fifth- and sixth-century date was overwhelmingly produced from recycled Roman-period iron rather than new-smelted ores. So again the collapse of the imperial system radically altered the experiences of the populations, leading to very different lives in very different thought worlds. Chapter 5 (pp. 95–118) on 'Roman' building materials, principally stone and brick/tile in part tells a similar story of gradual deskilling in the later fourth century then the collapse (sometimes literally) of such structures and skills, with earlier materials being recycled and repurposed. The chapter also has an excursus on the place, literal and conceptual, of Romano-British building materials in 'structured deposits', such as those found in wells. So Chapters 2 to 6 all hang together to show how agriculture and industries in the Roman period had created complex and interdependent meshes and nexuses of practice and experience, which with the collapse of the imperial system became unsustainable, so the lives and worlds they had created disappeared and had to be refashioned into something new, generally much simplified and massively different for all levels of society.

The next two chapters seem to have wandered in from another work altogether and do not really sit well with the preceding six. Both are quite brief and there is a bit of a sense that they serve as makeweights in what is overall a fairly short work. Chapter 7 (pp. 138–156) concerns itself with the evidence for the burial of infants, and to a lesser extent children, in the Roman and post-Roman periods. The focus is on five specific sites with a good representation of neonates and infants, including one site where the corpses were incorporated into the ‘structured deposits’ infilling thirteen shafts. The other four sites generally show that such burials were associated with structures inhabited or used by the living. Perhaps the ‘take away’ lesson from this chapter is that whilst neonates and infants are very visible in Romano-British burial practices, children are almost entirely absent. In the post-Roman period this starts to change, with children becoming more usual components of the burial record while the very young become very rare. This clearly raises interesting questions about what was going on, especially for the Roman period. Chapter 8 (pp. 157–175) looks at questions relating to ‘Anglo-Saxon’ burial practices, especially as relates to women. This is both as a counterweight to male dominated texts and traditional archaeological studies, and in an attempt to get away from simple ethnic identifications and explanations of changing rites and grave furnishings, especially dress. The arguments make much use of recent advances in scientific analyses, in particular stable isotopes, to show that simple ‘ethnic’ explanations of the direction of travel of influences in burial rites and furnishings are far too simple and can be actively misleading. The stable isotope analyses set against the dress items suggest far more interesting life courses and agency for many women. Material girls. Of course, stable isotope analyses depend on suitably preserved bone, so can only really be used on some inhumation cemeteries and burials; the number and distinctiveness of cremation burials and their grave-goods after 400 is a major problem. The techniques are also fast evolving, so this chapter can only be an interim statement. Given the deep ‘entanglement’ of human females and males throughout their lives and in death, analyses considering both sexes and examining their relations to each other would have been interesting; instead this chapter rather responds to the traditional approach of privileging one sex over the other, even if this time it is women rather than men. In terms of the book overall, perhaps the most relevant message from these two chapters is that here again the fifth century saw major changes in the archaeological record and its meanings.

The Introduction and Chapters 1 to 9 comprise 191 pages. There are then 101 pages, fully a third of the book, consisting of Notes, effectively an annotated bibliography. The scope of Fleming's reading is prodigious and most remarkable, ranging from detailed specialist reports in excavation publications to wide-ranging syntheses on human behaviours. This has made the book the major contribution it undoubtedly is and merits full recognition and congratulations. It has to be said, though, that the format of these Notes is very user-unfriendly. Most of the entries simply consist of bibliographic information, but there is a really unhelpful convention that for each chapter, once a reference has been given then subsequent notes only give an abbreviated version, meaning that the reader coming upon such a reference has to search backwards to find the full reference, which can be pages back. This is irritating, breaking concentration on the arguments being expounded in the main text. Also, there is the maxim 'if you want to say something, say it in the main text', rather than introducing further information or proposing caveats in the small print of the Notes: this is a useful discipline on the author. No bibliographic system is perfect, but this one seems more imperfect than most. There is an Index, but it is pretty vestigial, consisting largely of site and other geographical names, with little to help the reader with more thematic topics (for instance, there is no entry for 'entanglement'). The reader would also have been helped by more illustrations, especially maps together with plans of sites being discussed. One can but hope that the University of Pennsylvania Press will in future have more regard to its readers (customers).

As stated at the outset, the core of this book is the first six chapters, with their main arguments reprised and précised in the final Chapter 9 (pp. 176–191 including, rather puzzlingly, an excursus on 'Frankish' material culture present in Britain). This summarises the arguments about the nature of late Roman economic and social formations in Britain and the determining role in them of the late Roman state and its agents and dependents, and how all this impacted on the generality of the population, not just the elites. With the withdrawal of the Roman state and the collapse of the networks it had engendered, both within Britain and across the Channel, came the redundancy and dissolution of the landscapes of production to which the state and its demands, as well as those of the rentier classes, had given rise. With this went the need to follow these established practices and perspectives for those who had lived and worked in these landscapes, women and men and

children, and their need to create new lives, lives whose economic and cognitive frameworks were now profoundly different to what had gone before. In due course these peoples, indigenous and incomers, were to create a whole new material world, one most visible in the South and East, the old home of visible Romano-British culture. This book is a very substantial achievement and will become a standard resource for ideas and information at all academic levels. In terms of the dialogues of the hard of hearing between historians and archaeologists and ‘Romanists’ and ‘Saxonists’, what it does is point us to the archaeology and to avoiding the dead hand of ‘ethnicity’. Instead, implicit throughout is the proposition that the proper study of this period, the fifth century above all, is a focus on the massive changes in the archaeological record and how these were created by, impacted on, and what they meant for people at the time.

Simon Esmonde Cleary, University of Birmingham
Professor Emeritus of Roman Archaeology
a.s.esmonde_cleary@bham.ac.uk

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Simon Esmonde Cleary: Rezension zu: Robin Fleming: *The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300–525 CE*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2021. In: *Plekos* 24, 2022, S. 317–324 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2022/r-fleming.pdf>).
