

Roman Britain from the Outside: Comparing Western and Northern Frontier Cultures

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Abstract

Archaeological perspectives on the frontiers of the Roman empire have come a long way from simply describing the installations that supposedly constituted a stark dividing line between two worlds. The dynamic and permeable nature of Roman frontiers is widely recognised, as is the cultural importance of the frontier regions for the development of the empire and its neighbouring polities, and for post-imperial social formations. But how far can we generalise about the kinds of social processes underway in different frontier areas, even within the ‘Atlantic Archipelago’ of Britain and Ireland? The western and northern frontiers of Roman Britain manifested distinct dynamics, and in this paper these will be compared within both the Roman context and that of more contemporary identity politics. The aim is to outline the potential, and the limitations of, the theoretical approaches we might seek to apply in investigating Roman frontier cultures and their legacy.

Introduction: the relevance of frontiers

As with most aspects of Roman archaeology, we tend to see the frontiers we wish to see. Over the last century and a half of Roman frontier archaeology, different approaches to the boundaries of the Roman world have come and gone, influenced by the intimate mixing of new empirical discoveries and the contemporary politics of frontiers. The latter have been highly dynamic over this period, given that since the birth of Roman archaeology in the later 19th century momentous events have shaped and re-shaped ideas about frontiers – the formation of nation-states around the world, two World Wars and a Cold War, and the rise of technologies of instant communication, among a range of others. Indeed, some of the more recent developments in what many see as an accelerating globalisation (Giddens 1999) have led to the argument that frontiers are increasingly irrelevant, and with them traditional notions of society (Osterhammel and Petersson 2005, 8-9; Urry 2000, 32-3). This emphasis on mobility is related to ideas which have begun to shape trends in Roman archaeology (e.g. Laurence 2001, 98-100; Pitts and Versluys (eds.) 2015), yet it is the widespread consequences of the globalisation of communications, media, and markets that provides more pertinent – if often disturbing – food for thought (Bude and Dürschmidt 2010; Newman 2006; Rumford 2006). In a ‘borderless’ world, some borders are still very real, and the depressing resurgence of nationalism in Europe among other trends shows that we have to take seriously the notion that widespread structural features of human societies include a tension or dynamic between boundaries and boundary-crossing (Barth 2000, 27-30; Jenkins 2004, 94-107; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Parker et al. 2009). We cannot go so far as to dissolve the Roman frontiers entirely yet.

Rather, their character and diversity might offer some insights into our own situation – even if the past is partly shaped in our own image, it also offers a distinctive world in which to think through some of the problems of the present (cf. Gardner 2013, 19-20). What might their study have to contribute to contemporary debates? Most obviously, as other papers in this volume document, there are historical connections between Roman frontier identities and modern regional or national identities, and while these may very often have imaginary aspects (cf. Geary 2002, 156-7), they are consequential in the modern world and thus merit critical attention. Furthermore, the legacy of Roman frontiers – or rather of more recent Roman frontier studies – is a discourse of opposition and rivalry that, for all that it may be underpinned by universal tendencies in social interaction, employs quite particular concepts

of civilisation and barbarism, among others (Miller 1996, 158-60; cf. Witcher 2015, 207-19). A more harmonious future depends, in some small way, on archaeologists complicating the past. In a more constructive vein, insight into what is particular and what universal in the dynamics of empires, or indeed of social life itself, requires tacking back and forth between in-depth analyses of specific cultural contexts and wider comparative exercises. The latter have become quite fashionable in recent years, as the study of empires has been given new life by the dominant direction of western foreign policy, and a range of journalists and commentators have joined historians and archaeologists in comparing Rome to the United States or to other more ancient polities (e.g. Holland 2014; see Vasunia 2011 for an excellent overview). Yet the complexity of the Roman world, so important for furnishing a compelling case to challenge received wisdoms of the present (Gardner 2007a, 264-5; Mattingly 2014; Witcher 2015, 216-9), means that even an in-depth particularising study of Roman frontiers can employ a comparative dimension. This is the aim of the present chapter. In the next section, I will summarise some of the major trends in the study of Roman frontiers hitherto, by way of a prelude to a comparison of the northern and western frontier zones of Roman Britain. This will pay particular attention to the tension between boundary-crossing and boundary-drawing already mentioned, and seek to explore some of the paradoxes of identity that frontier regions particularly illuminate (cf. Gardner 2011). In closing I will return to the relationship between past and present to consider the legacy of these frontiers in relation to English and British colonialism in the modern era.

Theorizing the frontiers

The scholarship on Roman frontiers is considerable, international, and – to some – disreputable. The conservatism, particularism and androcentrism of the study of the frontiers and the military was a particular focus of some of the critical energy that sparked the first Theoretical Roman Archaeology conferences (Millett 1990, xv; Scott 1993, 7; 1995, 176), and while much of this disdain was deserved, it has led to some difficulties in re-integrating what remains an important aspect of Roman archaeology into a coherent and theoretically informed programme (see below; cf. Gardner 2013, 9-10; James 2011, 133). In fact, there were some diverse developments in frontier studies around the same time as the beginning of the TRAC movement at the start of the 1990s, but before getting to these it is worth sketching an outline of how the main conceptual parameters of this field became established over the preceding couple of centuries, though there is only space here to consider a few key points and prominent scholars, particularly as pertaining to the British frontiers. My passing reference at the beginning of this section to the close association between the frontiers and the military is of course a dominant feature of frontier study from its inception, and relates not solely to the plentiful evidence that Roman frontiers were significantly militarized. It is also the case that, partly because a good deal of this evidence is located in what have been contested modern frontier regions at various points over the last two or three centuries, much of the description and initial interpretation of this material has been driven by soldiers with a side-line in archaeology or archaeologists who had served as soldiers (James 2002, 10-11). From William Roy, who created some of the early systematic surveys of the Hadrian's Wall installations in the late 18th century, to Eric Birley, who dominated Wall studies in the mid- to late 20th century and had strong connections to German frontier specialists, scholarship of the northern frontiers was led by individuals who had a rather particular view of the nature of those frontiers as fixed, linear military barriers, as examined in considerable depth by Simon James (2002). This was not an intellectual climate well-suited to considering the non-military or the more interactive aspects of frontiers, nor to seeing them from the viewpoint of 'the outside'. As similar ideas were to be found in contemporary French and Italian traditions (Mattingly 1996, 50-7; Whittaker 1994, 3-4), and scholars from all of these various Western

European nations had ready access to many of the frontiers found in north Africa and the Middle East during these early days of frontier studies, the long shadow of this kind of approach is easy to understand. Its demonstrable empirical contributions must be weighed against equally demonstrable theoretical weaknesses (James 2002, 20-6), and the criticisms put forward by the first TRAC generation were certainly deserved.

Even so, more diverse approaches to the frontiers were developing in the 1970s and 1980s. The isolation of these from the kind of debates which TRAC came to embody may be traced to a deeper-rooted alienation between 'military' and 'civilian' archaeology which is an important element in the developments already described (James 2002, 14-16). Already one alternative view of the nature of frontiers had been developing in the United States, in a tradition stemming from Frederick Jackson Turner in the late 19th century, influenced by the distinctive but certainly highly ethnocentric experience of American pioneers, though perhaps also by Edward Gibbon's account of Roman history (Miller 1996, 161-3; Whittaker 1994, 4-6). This tradition, mixed once again with specific military experiences, gave rise to Edward Luttwak's controversial *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (1976; Whittaker 1994, 6-7; cf. Isaac 1993, 5, 372-418), which for all its faults is at least an attempt to deal more explicitly with the nature of power relationships on the frontiers. Other generalizing and somewhat comparative approaches of the 1970s and 1980s, influenced more by the kinds of issues being discussed under the banner of processual archaeology, such as world-systems theories, included work by Brad Bartel (1980) and Barry Cunliffe (1988), as well as C. R. Whittaker (1994). This sort of approach laid the foundations for a more zonal, interactive notion of Roman frontiers, paying greater attention to the wider social and economic context of their military infrastructure (Miller 1996; see also Barrett et. al. (eds.) 1989; Elton 1996). With the addition of an often more explicitly cultural anthropological dimension in the understanding of the relationships between societies on either side of frontiers (e.g. Ferguson and Whitehead (eds.) 1992; Wells 1980), the ground was laid for a significant revitalisation of frontier and military archaeology by a new generation of scholars in the 1990s and beyond. This is particularly manifest in the 'Roman army as a community' model and other work on military identities (e.g. Gardner 2007a; Haynes and Goldsworthy (eds.) 1999; James 1999a), which places interaction between soldiers and others in frontier zones at the heart of analysis, but also in a burgeoning array of focussed studies on societies 'outside' the frontier (e.g. Cahill Wilson 2014; Hunter 2010; Wells 1999). This kind of work has demonstrably created a bridge between the kinds of agenda set at TRAC meetings in the 1990s and the more traditional form of frontier studies (becoming increasingly manifest at the major meeting-point for this sub-discipline, the *Limeskongressen*, following small inroads in the 1980s; e.g. some papers in Maxfield and Dobson (eds.) 1991), albeit not a perfect one (Collins 2012, 4; cf. Hanson 2014). Ironically, though, some of the most recent developments in theoretical discourse in Roman archaeology continue to avoid the subject of the sometimes violent social dynamics of the frontier zone (Gardner 2013, 10; James 2011, 133). Globalisation approaches, for example, have so far not particularly addressed the frontiers (e.g. Pitts and Versluys (eds.) 2015), perhaps because of the border-transgressing emphasis of their source literature (see above; Witcher 2015 does discuss this). Disjunctions therefore remain between 'military/frontier' and 'civilian' Roman archaeology, and indeed there is perhaps even greater fragmentation of approaches than before. Clearly, then, there is still considerable work to be done to join up the study of frontier interactions with other agendas in Roman archaeology. Hopefully this volume, including this paper, goes some way towards addressing this need.

Comparing frontiers: the north British frontier zone

To proceed with this project, I will now turn to a brief comparison of two of the three frontier zones in Britain. It would be a fool's errand to seek to deal with all of the complex

archaeology and extensive literature on either of these zones in a short paper such as this, so in each case I will highlight some of the major trends in recent work and concentrate on attempting to analyse this and the more well-established characteristics of each region in terms of certain themes including material and human mobility, social structures, and links to other parts of the imperial frontiers. For details of some of the basic archaeological background to each region, the reader is referred to some of the many available syntheses (e.g. Breeze and Dobson 2000; Hodgson 2009 for the north and Burnham and Davies 2010 for the west). Beginning with the north, there has been considerable recent research, including new excavations, finds analyses and broader syntheses, which have added considerably to the range of materials and approaches we have to draw upon in attempting to understand the region of the Hadrian's Wall frontier and its relationships to both north and south. This work is exciting and has much potential to reinvigorate long-standing debates about the nature of this frontier (e.g. Collins and Symonds 2013; cf. Hingley 2008; Hingley 2012, 29-30; Hodgson 2009, 50-1), particularly as it throws up some interesting paradoxes. Thus, on the one hand we have a returning emphasis upon the defensive and preclusive nature of the Wall itself, dividing a more 'provincial' settled landscape to the south from an increasingly abandoned buffer zone immediately to the north – based on a mix of evidence including analyses of the Wall and its associated features (e.g. Bidwell 2008; Hodgson 2009, 25-6, 42-6; Symonds 2013) and new results from rural settlement sites (Hodgson 2009, 46-50; Hodgson et al. 2012; Petts 2013) – though also perhaps tinged with an element of anti-revisionism directed against the zonal model referred to above (Hanson 2014; Hodgson et al. 2012, 217). On the other hand, though, we have increasingly nuanced archaeologies of the dynamics of fort communities on and around the Wall, including important work at Vindolanda (Birley 2013; more generally Collins 2012; Gardner 2007a), as well as new understandings of the societies to the north of the Wall, in modern Scotland, and their political and other links across the frontier (Hunter 2007; 2009; 2010; 2014). Such studies tend to suggest a frontier characterised by interactions, at a range of different scales. A further element in the mix is the question of the extent of interactions with other sectors of the western Roman frontiers, in terms of movements of people or material culture. What are we to make of this complex picture?

Before addressing this question, a few more details of these trends should be summarised. In terms of the arguments that the Wall was a real barrier to movement, there are two lines of evidence that, while quite distinct, have become intimately linked in debate over the function of the frontier for the last 50 years. Key elements behind the impetus for a more zonal and interactive notion of the Hadrian's Wall region from the 1970s were the surveys of indigenous sites in the vicinity of the Wall line by George Jobey (e.g. 1960) and the interpretation of features like the milecastle gateways as indicative of a system designed for supervision, not prevention, of mobility (Breeze and Dobson 2000, 40-1, 149). Now, new discoveries and re-interpretations continue to tie both rural settlement data and aspects of the Wall defences into a narrative stressing the reverse (e.g. Hanson 2014, 8; Hodgson 2009, 49-50; 2012, 217-8). In the latter regard, it has been observed that while the Vallum served to demarcate and control a continuous militarised strip once the forts were moved up to the curtain, even when this feature was substantially decommissioned on the move to the Antonine Wall, the gateways through the Wall at the milecastles were often narrowed or blocked later in the 2nd century, following the move back south (Hanson 2014, 8; Hodgson 2009, 23-4, 28-9, 49-50; Symonds 2013, 62-6; Wilmott 2008, 119, 124-7). Thus, even if there was some intention to facilitate movement in the original plan for the Wall, then this capacity diminished over time (Hodgson 2009, 24; Symonds 2013, 65; Welfare 2000). The impression of a defensive mentality is further reinforced by recent discoveries of evidence for entangling obstacles on the north side of the Wall, and strong arguments in favour of the much-debated

curtain wall-walk (Bidwell 2008; Hodgson 2009, 25-6, 42-6). Evidence for such features in the 4th century is not so clear, but wall repair and gate-blocking, at forts also, certainly continued (Collins 2012, 25, 30; Gardner 2007a, 245).

Beyond these indications of the relative impermeability of the Wall itself, considerable new evidence of the rural settlement pattern has also emerged in recent years, especially on the eastern side of the frontier. The nature of this work – open area excavation compared to the combination of aerial survey and limited excavation which underpinned the picture from Jobey's time until c.2000 – has overcome some of the dating problems which beset earlier work (Hodgson 2014a, 20). The indications from sites like Blagdon Park and East and West Brunton, all just to the north of Newcastle upon Tyne, are that complex enclosed settlements developed in the LPRIA but were abandoned in the mid-2nd century (Hodgson 2009, 46-9; 2014a, 22-4). What had been thought a frontier settlement zone, albeit with limited material engagement with the Roman world, now seems to be a possibly deliberately depopulated area north of the Wall (Hodgson et al. 2012, 211-20; 2014a, 25; cf. e.g. Allason-Jones 2009; James 2001, 88). Simultaneously, more indications of a developing villa-economy have been discovered in the southern hinterland of the Wall, again particularly on the eastern side of the country, at locations such as Faverdale and Ingleby Barwick (Hodgson et al. 2012, 216-7; 2014a, 24; Petts 2013, 324-8). A socially consequential boundary between province and '*barbaricum*' seems thus to have been created.

The contrary evidence, suggesting that boundaries are almost always cross-able, comes from different kinds of contexts, but is equally clear. Again there are a couple of major trends encompassing different scales of phenomena. Just as with the chronology and function of different features of the Wall and its smaller installations, so the archaeology of the occupation of the forts of Hadrian's Wall has been interpreted from a wide range of perspectives over time. The notion that the fort boundary was permeable to non-combatants was initially linked to ideas of later Roman 'decline' in the mid- to late 20th century (e.g. Daniels 1980, 189-91), then rather less chauvinistically shown to be part of the normal development of military communities in post for any length of time, and beginning from quite an early point in the history of the frontier (Driel-Murray 1995; James 2001; see now Allison 2013). At the same time, other aspects of the thesis that fort communities became less effective militarily in the 4th century have also been challenged (Hodgson and Bidwell 2004, 147-55; Hodgson 2009, 36-7), amid wider appreciation of the complex nature of transformation in late Roman society in Britain (Collins 2012; Gardner 2007a; Gerrard 2013). While details of the number of non-combatants, especially women, in and around forts remain debated (Greene 2014; Hodgson 2014b), it is quite clear from detailed studies of artefact distributions at sites like Vindolanda (Birley 2013) that certainly through the 3rd and 4th centuries there were multi-faceted relationships between soldiers and non-soldiers in the major frontier bases. The boundary between 'military' and 'civilian' was highly dynamic and frequently blurred, and through a series of developments such as the abandonment of the *vici* in the later 3rd century, the appearance of markets at many fort-gates in the early 4th century, and more distinctive structural changes in the later 4th century (Birley 2013; Gardner 2007a, 243-61; Hodgson 2009, 35-41) it is possible to discern a pattern of fragmentation or localisation over the long term (Gardner 2007a, 260-1; cf. Collins 2012, 152-3, 168-9). This is arguably part of the wider process of the development of cultural forms on the frontiers of the empire which come to dominate the former imperial 'core' in late antiquity (Gardner 2007b; James 1999a; 2014). It is hard to see how this kind of thing could have happened if the garrisons on the Wall were cut off from outside influences.

Apart from the everyday interactions between the different kinds of people living in and around the forts, two other mechanisms of boundary-crossing can be more clearly discerned now, both involving longer-distance relationships. The first is the connections

between the army of northern Britain and other frontier sectors, particularly but not only those in the western empire. As revealed by evidence for soldiers being brought into Britain, and more generally by the affinities between military equipment across the frontier zones, these were persistent and important right up to the end of the Roman period, but did not override regionally distinctive developments. During the long period of settled garrisoning of the Wall (Hodgson 2009, 37), soldiers in at least parts of the frontier region stayed in touch with some wider fashions in things like the distinctive belt-fittings of the late Roman period, though there are also signs of some conservatism, reinforced by studies of 4th century brooches (Collins 2010, 73; Coulston 2010, 59; cf. Swift 2000, 99-117). Architecture presents a similarly mixed picture of tradition and innovation (Hodgson 2009, 37; cf. Gardner 2007a, 247-50), and so while it is possible to identify vectors for communication in the form of movements of Germanic or Danubian personnel in the 3rd and 4th centuries (Allason-Jones 2010, 85; Hodgson 2009, 33-4; cf. Eckardt 2014, 59-62), the impact of these clearly needs to be seen in a local context. In terms of movement of objects and/or people across, rather than along, the frontier, Fraser Hunter's recent work is particularly important. Through detailed studies of a range of artefact types (Hunter 2010; 2014) and key sites from the southern Scottish hillfort of Traprain Law to smaller-scale settlements much further north (Hunter 2009; 2012), Hunter has demonstrated the dynamic range of interactions that both crossed the frontier region, and developed within its milieu. Again phenomena of different scales are evident, particularly in the late Roman period; from more routine trade, often playing into strategies of social differentiation within northern groups (analogously to pre-conquest southern Britain; e.g. Creighton 2006, 14-69), to evidence of Roman diplomatic gifts to the north, and possibly of people travelling south as mercenaries (Hunter 2009, 234-7; 2010). While these aspects speak to the now familiar idea of the edge-of-empire effect on societies beyond the frontier, encouraging consolidation by one means or another (Hunter 2007, 54; cf. e.g. Ferguson and Whitehead (eds.) 1992; Wells 1999, esp. 259-66), other features of the material Hunter has examined hints at the development of distinctive forms of cultural hybridity, manifest in bangles of jet and similar materials appearing along the Antonine frontier line, to particular brooch forms, terrets and so on with wider distributions, even well into the south in late Roman times (Hunter 2010, 100-4; 2009, 234; 2014). Such material would seem to reaffirm the idea of a zonal approach to frontiers, if this is understood not simply as a continuum of graduated cultural change (e.g. Hodgson 2009, 49), but rather as a flexible approach to the overlapping patterns of interaction evident at different scales (cf. Collins 2012, 4; Elton 1996, 8-9). That these interactions must also be seen as distinctive patterns of 'bordering practice' will be a key conclusion of this paper.

For the moment, to briefly summarise this section, there is a complex picture in the north. This should not be surprising, because greater empirical complexity is the usual product of increasing archaeological research, and from this arises the need for greater theoretical sophistication (cf. Trigger 2006, 508). What has been discussed so far is a bewildering mix of boundary-making and boundary-crossing practices, and not all instigated from the 'Roman' side of the frontier. The Wall allowed movement, but was clearly maintained as a formidable barrier, and had a disruptive impact, perhaps deliberately so, on the settlement pattern immediately to its north. Yet dynamic frontier communities developed in the forts on this wall, and a wide range of connections managed to cross it, which cumulatively contributed to a transformative process in Britain as a frontier province (cf. Wells 1999, 187-223). What are we to make of these apparent paradoxes? A simple explanation would be that some of the spatial and chronological variation in material patterns is commensurate with different functions or kinds of interaction at different times or in different sub-regions (cf. Collins 2012, 3; Whittaker 1994, 9), and such an assumption is indeed part of the impetus for the comparative exercise pursued in this paper. Yet lest the

pendulum constantly swing between fragmentation and synthesis in our narratives of the Roman-period world (cf. Woolf 2004, 422-4), it would be both more constructive and offer a more penetrating analysis to consider the paradoxes of identity dynamics in practice. Part of this is acknowledging that what we are picking up on is not simply variation in particularities, but a mesh of different trends at different scales, encompassing the consequences of practices within the macro-institutional context of Roman and indigenous power structures (e.g. the construction of the Wall itself, diplomatic contacts across it) but also those conducted within the micro-institutions of commerce and kinship (e.g. developments within fort communities, small-scale movements of goods). To gain more leverage with this perspective we now need to turn to the western frontier zone of Roman Britain.

Comparing frontiers: the western frontier zone

It is not difficult to see the Irish Sea zone as a very different kind of frontier to the northern region we have just been examining. The two regions have quite distinct histories of Roman military involvement, even if we leave aside the obvious but perhaps overly deterministic distinction between a maritime and a land border to the province, and thus between a 'natural' and an 'artificial' frontier (a debatable categorisation which still plays a significant role in frontier studies; e.g. Breeze 2011; Hanson 2014; cf. Newman 2006, 174-5 on such classifications in a broader context). This difference is such that there is more ambiguity about what kind of frontier that in the west – stretching from Cumbria to Cornwall but firmly centred on Wales, on which I will focus – might have been (e.g. Rance 2001, 267). Arguably, for much of the Roman period, military control of Wales was more of an analogy to the earlier Flavian-period pattern in what is now northern England, directed at 'internal' control of conquered territory with forts and roads rather than engagement with any 'external' group(s) (cf. Hanson 1987, 54-68). The relatively dense network of installations of the late 1st and early 2nd centuries in Wales was thinned out quite rapidly in the mid-2nd century, and despite localised changes in the rest of the settlement pattern, such as the establishment of towns at Caerwent, Carmarthen and Kenchester (Burnham and Davies 2010, 22, 42, 48-57), there is a strong element of continuity in the archaeology of the region. Things do get more complex in the later Roman period, though, and it is here that my focus will lie – though of course exploring why this pattern of change occurred at the time that it did is also important in terms of understanding the visibility of different frontier dynamics. In common with what we have seen in the north, the west in the late Roman period has evidence both for boundary-making, with new coastal military installations on the Irish Sea, but also new types – or at least newly visible types – of boundary-crossing. Although there has not been quite such a volume of new work in this region as around Hadrian's Wall, there are still some very important research projects which have recently been shedding new light on aspects of the western frontier zone, such as the LIARI programme in Dublin (Cahill Wilson 2014; this volume), which can inform the short discussion here.

Understanding the nature and purpose of the military garrison of Wales may be rather a different problem to the interpretation of Hadrian's Wall and associated installations in the north, but a problem it most certainly is. The basic pattern is fairly clear, but there are several questions, many of which revolve around issues of archaeological visibility, compounded by a lack of relevant textual material. To expand upon the outline above, the relatively dense network of roads, forts and the fortresses at Caerleon and Chester established in the late 1st century AD was maintained until the Hadrianic period, when a phase of reduction began lasting through the mid-2nd century. The remaining forts in occupation during and after this period seem still to have been internally-directed at administration or policing roles (Burnham and Davies 2010, 42-57). While the size of the garrison of Wales probably reached a low-point during the mid-3rd century, it received renewed attention in the later 3rd and 4th

centuries, with somewhat parallel developments to those in eastern Britain on the ‘Saxon Shore’, most conspicuously involving the building of a new fort at Cardiff, as well as refurbishment at Chester in the 4th century and provision of new, small installations in the north-west (Burnham and Davies 2010, 57-62; Casey 2010, 62-4; White 2007, 59-71). While it has long been thought that Caerleon was abandoned at the end of the 3rd century, there is tantalising evidence – characteristic of the archaeology of late Roman military sites (Casey 2010; cf. Collins 2012, 74-81; Hodgson 2009, 36-7) – for continued activity here in a reduced part of the fortress, at least until the mid-late 4th century (Gardner 2002; Gardner and Guest 2012). The evidence of occupation in the fortress *canabae* through this period (Evans 2000, 484-6) suggests that this was not simply relocation of extra-mural inhabitants, but a continuing military community. Whether these various, and still somewhat scattered, frontier posts constituted a lost frontier command – White has argued this is the *comes tractus maritimus* mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus (2007, 57-9) – or has more to do with the fleet (Rance 2001, 257-8), the maintenance of a dispersed frontier garrison, now oriented more to the Irish Sea, up until very late in the 4th century (Casey 2010, 64-6) at least, is certainly a feature of western Britain at this time. How connected this was to the military culture of the wider empire is more debatable; while there are finds of belt-fittings and the like at sites in this region, they are more numerous in urban centres like Caerwent and Wroxeter. This highlights the familiar problems of attributing such objects definitively to either soldiers or state officials (Gardner 2007a, 224-9; White 2007, 68-72; Leahy 2007; cf. Coulston 2010, 52-6), while perhaps also hinting at a changing orientation of Wales as a frontier region.

That this frontier may ultimately have been ceded to the people from the west at whom it was directed, from the Roman point of view, has long been suggested by the evidence of inscribed stones, place-names and rather later written sources, and this case has recently been argued strongly by Rance (2001). What is interesting to consider here is the role of interaction between Wales and Ireland as elements of a dynamic frontier region, with – as in the north – varied, overlapping patterns at different scales. Just as social change in Ireland, in relation to the Roman world (e.g. Edwards 1990, 1-5; Mytum 1992, 23-52; Newman 1998, 132-4), might have created the conditions for increased raiding in the late 3rd/4th centuries, so the heightened conflict of this later period somehow generated even stronger connections across the Irish Sea than already existed (Rance 2001, 256-9). When combined with the effects of shifting trade routes linked to events further east in the 5th century (Campbell 2007, 125-39; White 2007, 151-68) these facilitated the emergence of a new series of societies, still making reference to Rome – as so many Medieval and later societies did (e.g. Hingley 2001, 9; White 2007, 209-14; cf. Holland 2014; Wickham 2009, 199-202) – within a frontier zone that had effectively been turned inside-out (cf. White 2007, 152). There are actually few better illustrations of the long-term process of how frontier cultures – in spite of the violence of these militarised regions – developed independent and locally-rooted cultures that yet looked to Roman ideals of power relations. These are of course manifest in a range of ways, from the inscribed ogham and Latin stones of the 4th – 6th century Irish Sea region to the occurrence of forms of Roman titles and names in later Medieval Irish and Welsh poetry, genealogies, and king-lists (Fulford et al. 2000; Mytum 1992, 30-5; Rance 2001, 251-66). While some of this evidence is long-known and much debated, something like the sort of narrative referred to above also seems to fit with more recent studies of material from Ireland, which give new context to the widespread scatter of objects indicative of Romano-British connections, as well as key sites like the early ‘emporium’ at Drumanagh (Cahill Wilson 2014, 25-8; O’Sullivan and Breen 2007, 105-8). Comparing the dynamics underlying the observable patterns in both of our case-study frontier regions, and understanding them in social terms, is the goal of the final part of this paper.

‘Frontiers’ as social practices

In the preceding sections, I have attempted to summarise key features of the archaeology of the northern and western frontiers in Roman Britain, with an emphasis on new work. Both regions have evidence for forms of boundary-making and boundary-crossing at multiple scales. In detail, there are similarities and differences between them and these will be briefly discussed before returning to those broader patterns and offering some further analyses of them. The distinctive features are in some ways more obvious, from the manifest variations in the physical structures of the Roman military presence to the emerging evidence for markedly divergent trajectories in settlement pattern in the Hadrian’s Wall zone, which is not found in the Irish Sea region. Also notable is the different rhythms of the two regions; while both had somewhat similar histories, in terms of military involvement, in the period between the 50s and 80s AD, after this point there is rather greater and more continuous activity in the north, including major imperial campaigns, than in the west, where active conflict re-emerges only in the later Roman period (see e.g. Mattingly 2006, 101-27 for a summary). There are also some notable regional traditions in material culture, including the ogham stones of the west, and perhaps indications from these – among other material – of a greater level of population movement across this more ‘open’ frontier region (if we disregard the tale of the Votadini moving from southern Scotland to Wales; Cahill Wilson et al. 2014; Rance 2001, 256-9; White 2007, 199-201). Yet there are also, among the features common to both regions, material links and overlaps. For example, while ogham stones as such are certainly a feature of the Irish Sea, similar late monuments with Latin inscriptions only are known in northern Britain, particularly from forts, and there may also be similar mechanisms of influence at work in the development of Pictish sculpture (Hunter 2007, 38-40; O’Brien 2010, 111-2; cf. Wells 1999, 256). Other objects, such as some of the ‘indigenous’ items identified by Hunter, like beaded pin variants, have distributions across both frontier zones but not to the south-east of Britain (Hunter 2010, 100-103). Other similarities between the northern and western zones include more broadly the clear evidence of material movement across the frontier in both directions, and also parallel pathways in the transformation of the military communities over time, as evidenced in the later Roman sequences at forts and fortresses in Wales and in the north (Gardner 2007a; cf. Collins 2012). In both regions, it is possible to see this transformation as a microcosm of the broadest processes of institutional change in the empire as a whole, whereby local trends ultimately surpass ‘global’ ones; in pottery supply to the forts, for example, wares produced in southern Britain or on the continent in the earlier empire and shipped to Wales and the Wall give way to more locally produced later fabrics (Gardner 2007a, 158; cf. Miller 1996, 163-9; Whittaker 1994, 223). The frontiers are absolutely at the heart of the action in the grand narrative of the Roman empire. The question is, how can they be fulfilling this role while also being, at least in some senses and at some of the time, meaningful boundaries?

The answer surely lies in the complex nature of ‘bordering practices’ (Parker and Vaughan-Williams et al. 2009, 586), and in the frontiers as practices in themselves. An approach to the nature of Roman frontiers rooted in the broad tradition of practice theory, which I have argued for as an appropriate archaeological framework elsewhere (Gardner 2007a, 35-61; 2013, 9-11; cf. also, *inter alia*, Fewster 2014; Lightfoot, Martinez and Schiff 1998; Nicolini 2012), is preferable to one based in a more generalising framework such as world-systems theory (e.g. Cunliffe 1988, 1-11; Miller 1996, 170; cf. Dietler 2005, 57-61), as it is sensitive to the high degree of local variability – some of which has been demonstrated in the foregoing – yet also offers general principles for understanding how these play out, based on placing everyday activities at the centre of analysis. In recent years, as part of the ongoing critical debate around contemporary ‘globalisation’ touched upon in the Introduction, attention to the relevance of borders and ‘bordering’ as a process or practice has been

reinvigorated (e.g. Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010; Rumford 2006; cf. Witcher 2015, 207-8). As with 'globalisation theory' itself, the relevance of some of this debate to the Roman world can be questioned (cf. Gardner 2013, 6-9), but equally there are many points of contact, in terms of some of the macro-scale discussion concerning the relationships between frontiers, borders and empires (e.g. Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006), which I will return to below, and also more micro-scale approaches to the interactive complexities of borderlands (e.g. Newman 2006). Interestingly, and as a further argument for their relevance to the Roman world, these link up with well-established bodies of theory that have proven helpful in understanding the negotiation of identities in practice. Insofar as it relates to identification at both individual and group levels, bordering is arguably a fundamental aspect of human social cognition (May 2013, 98-100; Mezzadra and Nielson 2013, 16-17). Richard Jenkins is among the clearest exponents of how this works, in detail, through practice (2004). One of the key principles he discusses is the internal-external dialectic of identification. This explains how life is a more-or-less constant process of comparison and negotiation, articulated by boundaries which are "definitively relational, simultaneously connecting and separating one side and another" (Jenkins 2004, 118; also 76-8, 117-20; cf. Barth 2000; Wenger 1998, 207-13). Of course this process is not 'free', but rather strongly influenced by power dynamics which often close down the potential for fluidity or hybridity and rather enforce or encourage greater essentialism (Newman 2006, 175-6; Verkuyten 2005, 123-81); close analysis of diverse practices in a given context is required to unpick these potentially highly entangled threads. Such an approach to the relationships between bordering, identity and practice is manifestly relevant to the Roman world; while we need to scrutinise our own perspective on some of these issues (see below; cf. Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006), the evidence for practices which explicitly, let alone implicitly, define identities in these terms from Roman contexts has been thoroughly demonstrated (e.g. Gardner 2007a; Mattingly 2004; Revell 2009; Woolf 2011). On this basis, one would expect that the dialectic at the heart of human identification will be a particularly prominent part of life on the frontiers of the empire.

These insights help us account for many of the features of the empirical patterns discussed above at a broad level, and in a fairly straightforward way. At one level, then, the differences between the two regions relate to different frontier dynamics, with more of an emphasis on boundary-making in the north, and more of an emphasis on boundary-crossing in the west. Whether due to the physical structures of the landscape or the military installations, or less deterministically the social bordering practices that these were part of and facilitated (Cooper and Perkins 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 4-9; Newman 2006, 174-5; cf. Cool 2010, 8), one frontier enabled relatively conflict-free links to build gradually, in an area of considerable existing cultural continuity, such that even when aspects of the situation became more confrontational the resolution was further boundary-crossing and hybridity. Evidence for this, in the form of Latin/ogham stones, suggests that drawing upon Roman references in the creation of new, perhaps more essentialised ethnic identities that emerged in the early Middle Ages was not particularly problematic (cf. Casey 2010, 65; White 2007, 202-7). On the other frontier, a stronger boundary which gained traction in more dimensions of practice over time (manifest in the divergent trends in settlement pattern) and was punctuated by sharper episodes of conflict led only to more mutual recognition of the importance of that boundary, and thus less interest in the Pictish north of strong Roman referents in their own newly 'ethnicised' culture of the late and post-Roman period (cf. Hunter 2007, 50-4; Newman 2006, 181). This account, which provides an underlying mechanism for what might traditionally be explained simply in terms of the vagaries of imperial policy or native hostility, is satisfactory but needs to be pushed further in two respects. One is that we must drill down more deeply to understand the spatial and temporal variation within these trends, and this is particularly necessary to address the bordering

practices evident at military sites which are common to both regions. These are complex spaces because they not only manifest dialectical relations between soldiers and non-soldiers, but also between distinct strands within Roman culture (James 2014), bound up also with issues of gender and class. While Haynes has recently stressed the ‘incorporation’ of auxiliary soldiers into a Roman military community in the earlier empire, it is clear that in the later empire the boundary this process created was increasingly cut across by the other interactions which had always also been present (Haynes 2013, 369-81; cf. Gardner 2007a). It is tempting to see here the changing practices of the soldiers in frontier installations as manifesting an increasing gap between their roles as imperial enforcers and imperial subjects that was a persistent tension within their institutional context (cf. Gardner 2013, 11-14). This could, but need not, have involved extensive relationships across the border; what it did require was a greater sense that the orientation of the border had shifted. As borderlands by their nature face in two directions at once (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 3-4), this was not an unlikely outcome.

Building on this point, the other key issue that needs to be pushed much further is that of the position of our perspective on Rome’s ‘edges’. Throughout this paper I have used the terms ‘border’ and ‘frontier’ freely and interchangeably, but they are often distinguished (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 14-16; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 205-6; Newman 2006, 179-80), and in an important way. The notion of frontiers, in the modern world and to some extent in the Roman world, is often linked to an idea of even more significant difference between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ than is usual in bordering situations. Frontiers imply space beyond which is empty, or at least only populated by barbarians who might be demonized but can be readily dispossessed (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 15; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 205-6; cf. Gosden 2004, 24-33; Woolf 2011). When we refer to the ‘Roman frontiers’, therefore, we continue to adopt a Romano-centric view, one which post-colonial perspectives should have allowed us to reject some time ago (e.g. Webster 1996). That we have not done so is perhaps because it is incredibly difficult to do this when our own culture is so utterly constructed on imperial foundations, which are themselves shot through with Romano-centric/empire-centric ontologies and epistemologies (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Dietler 2005, 33-49). To begin to really transform our discipline, then, and move it away from its problematic past, we need to start thinking and theorizing from the borderlands (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). This means considering not only the range of different experiences of empire at local levels, important as this is (e.g. Mattingly 2014), but also the ways in which the populations of (in this case) Britain and Ireland in the Roman period – whether inside or outside the provincial boundary – experienced subaltern lives, with their distinctive form of agency (O’Hanlon and Washbrook 1992, 152-3). This led them to be faced with challenging choices of how to continue to live, and also to have to reconcile the ‘double consciousness’ of the colonial subject (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 211-3; cf. Gardner 2013, 5-6; Given 2004, 8-25). We know that, over the long term, the polarity of power was reversed and the colonial subalterns – as well as their erstwhile rulers – became members of fragmented ethnic communities. This is one narrative of late antiquity, referred to several times in the foregoing paper, but it may also be a narrative of the future. Understanding the violence as well as the reconciliations of life in the Roman empire at the level of individual actors and their own everyday border-making may be a project that has value in the effort to create a more equal and pluralistic world in that future today.

Conclusions

For all that this future-oriented note which I have arrived at may appear overly idealistic, and for all that comparison between ancient and modern imperialism is fraught with problems in principle and practice (Stein 2005, 26-7; Vasunia 2011, 224-5), this is a point I do wish to

expand upon in concluding this paper. The editors of this volume have encouraged contributors to explore some of the connections between frontier dynamics in the Roman world and the present, and because of both the predilections of human psychology and the availability of specific historical citations in later bordering practices within Britain, such connections certainly can be made. The dialectical nature of borders at different scales, the complexity of power relations embedded in bordering practices, and the tension between hybridity and essentialism that are manifest in the Roman period and its transition into the early Middle Ages can all be explored in the trajectory of English, then British imperialism and its subsequent fragmentation. This is of course a vast subject which, even more than what has been discussed in the foregoing, cannot be very effectively summarised here. A couple of points stand out, however. The role of both internal and external imperial borders in begetting ethnicities is well known in the ancient and modern contexts (e.g. Anderson 1991, 113-40; Geary 2002, 155-74; Lomas, Gardner and Herring 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 15-16; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 209-11, 219). Certainly this is a phenomenon we can document over the long-term in Britain. Mention has already been made of the increasingly 'ethnic' social groups of the late and post-Roman period, and the rise of more essentialised perceptions of identity through the impact of Roman administration in the province, and influence beyond it, has been charted elsewhere (e.g. Matthews 1999; cf. Wells 1999, 255-8). A notable example in this regard is the way in which Gildas, in the 6th century, thinks of the Romans themselves as an ethnic group in his narrative of recent history (Jones 1996, 123), neatly illustrating how a composite and hybrid imperial identity had itself become essentialised in late antiquity (cf. Wickham 2009, 200). With the rise of English expansionism in the later Middle Ages, the cycle can be seen to begin again, with clear moves employing a range of ideological strategies to appropriate British – formerly non-English – identity to a more inclusive but English-led pattern (e.g. Davies 2000, 31-53; cf. Gardner 2011). This served the purpose both of linking the nascent British kingdom to Rome and the ideal of rule it represented (White 2007, 213-4), and more simply of cementing a position of English dominance within a united political landscape (Davies 2000, 50-3). From this point, the process of further expansion is far from continuous and should not be read as pre-ordained (cf. Dietler 2005, 61), but the ingredients were in place for a rather similar story to unfold at a larger scale.

This is not the place to describe the growth of the British empire, but suffice it to say that the model of Britishness which defined – and was defined by – that imperialism was similar in some senses to the hybrid form of Roman-ness mentioned above (Lawrence 2003; cf. Gosden 2004, 104-10). Certainly there are major differences, such as the potency of concepts like 'race' and also the context of interacting powers from other European states to the EU, but it is striking that, evoking parallels with the Roman empire, countless different bordering processes around the world transformed Britishness into something defined in its core by consumption of products from places like India (Lawrence 2003, 5-9; cf. Colls 2002, 99; Porter 2004; Preston 2004), while also disseminating an expansive cultural and political identity that enabled post-war migration to the UK (May 2013, 98; Ward 2004). With decolonization and fragmentation, British identity has been, and still is being, re-bordered. Recent census data reveals that, within the mainland UK, self-identification as British is increasingly strong among urban and second- and third-generation migrant communities, while the more local ethnic nationalisms of England, Scotland and Wales gain ground elsewhere (Easton 2013; Ichijo 2004, 121). Needless to say, these latter are manifest in the most public political fora, from the Scottish referendum to the ensuing debate about English devolution. While these sorts of patterns are repeated to some extent across Europe and beyond, and are in part a predictable response to globalisation (cf. Giddens 1999, 6-19), given that Britain was one of the major imperial powers that drove globalisation to begin with this

is an interesting situation. The question we face now, then, is whether there only these two possibilities: national/ethnic fragmentation, or imperialism and colonialism, linked in an inevitable historical cycle. This would be depressing, but that doesn't mean it isn't the case. If we wish to be optimistic, though, and work towards a more cosmopolitan and pluralistic world (Rumford 2006, 166-7; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 209-10), we have to promote greater understanding of the role of bordering practices in human social life. The archaeology of the Roman frontiers and the interactions across them has come a long way, but there is still far to go to contribute to a long-term picture of the impact of imperialism on our world (cf. Dietler 2005, 48-51). Indeed, in some ways we have to start the journey all over again; having begun at the centre and worked our way to the borders over the last century and a half, we now need to turn around and see the Roman world not from the inside – from the perspective of Roman/European conquerors – but from the outside.

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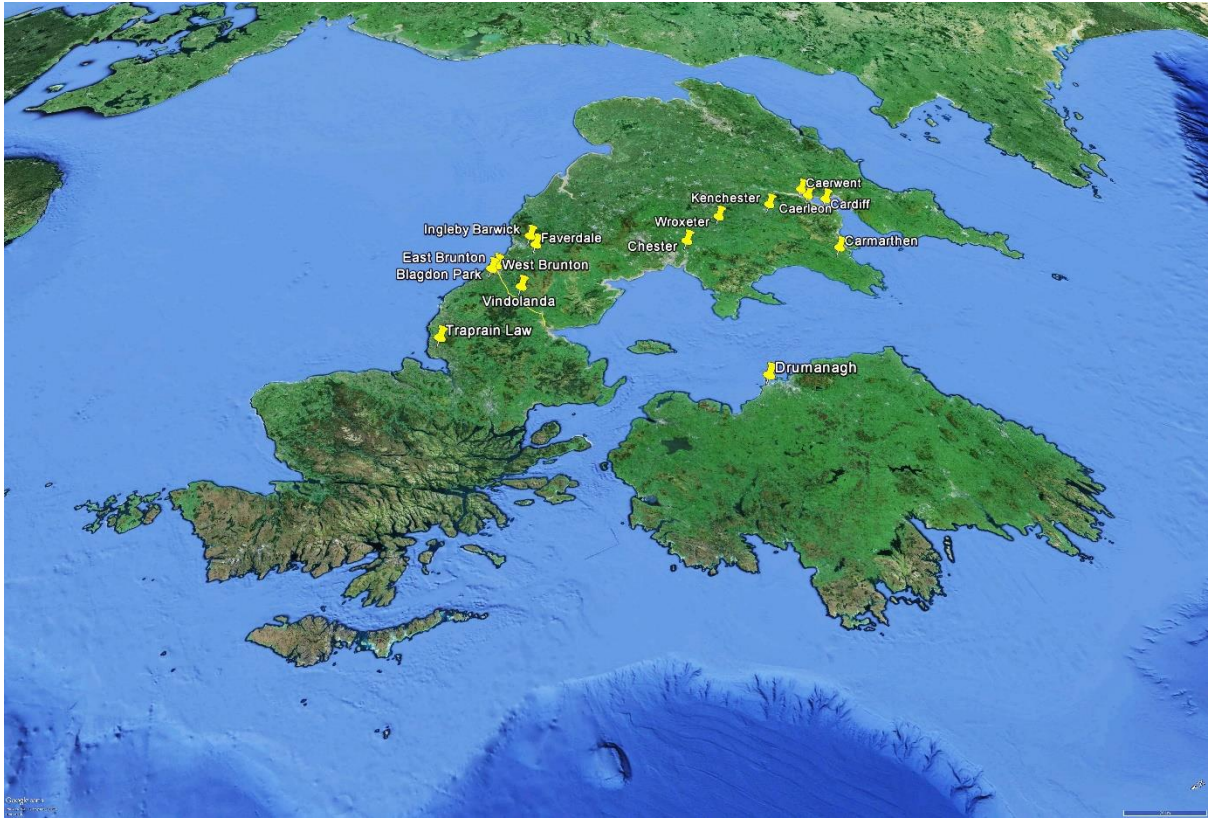


Figure 1. Roman Britain viewed from the frontiers; approximate locations of sites mentioned in the text, and the line of Hadrian's Wall, indicated. Image created in Google Earth Pro (Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, Image Landsat); inspired by James 1999b: Fig. 2.