Changing Materialities

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Introduction: the material impact of Roman imperialism

Roman Britain stands out. Compared with much of the archaeology of preceding and immediately subsequent periods, many of the material characteristics of the Roman period are strikingly obvious, from the architecture of forts and towns to the abundant pottery, coinage and other finds common to sites of many types (Esmonde Cleary 2009, 198). That Britain's incorporation into the Roman world saw at once the emergence of a new material world can hardly be denied. While many of the popular forms of artefacts in the Roman period had their roots in Iron Age traditions, there were changes to every sphere of material life and major innovations in technologies of all kinds, from those to do with representation and communication to exchange and dining. Of course, change was far from even in time or spatial distribution and, alongside the continuity of pre-conquest materials and practices, this has posed the central question of Roman archaeology in Britain: what effect did the Roman Empire have upon British societies? In spite of well over a century of scholarly research into this question, we are, in many ways, only beginning to sketch out an adequate answer. Indeed, the very material visibility of the Roman period is a significant factor in the slow development of interpretive sophistication within the field, burdening scholars with both a considerable weight of organisational work in bringing order to large assemblages of finds, and with a beguiling narrative of cultural change simply in terms of the apparently obvious appeal of the material trappings of advanced civilization. The latter perspective of course seemed self-evident to scholars in the modern, imperial and materialist society of the 19th and earlier 20th centuries (e.g. Frere 1988, 36; *cf.* Hingley 2000, 130-49; Scott 1993a, 7-8). It is ironic, though, that such a simplistic interpretation of a great wealth of material culture was

also strongly reinforced by readings of a handful of objects of a very particular kind, in the form of the writings of ancient authors (Laurence 2001, 92-5; *cf.* Andrén 1998, 9-25; Storey 1999). Only relatively recently has the material culture of Roman Britain begun to be understood both in sufficient detail, and with more sophisticated theoretical approaches, to enable interpretations of it to break free from these long-standing constraints. In this chapter, my aim is to show that there are now a range of ways of examining the material transformations and continuities of Britain before, during and after the Roman period, all of which open up new possibilities in answering the key question of the impact of Roman imperialism upon Britain (and, indeed, of the role of Britain in the shaping of Roman imperialism). Before looking at these, however, it is necessary to review in a little more detail the character of the dominant answer to that question up until the 1980s.

The historiography of the concept of 'Romanization' is now a fairly well-worn topic (e.g. Hingley 1996; Mattingly 2011, 3-42; Webster 2001, 209-17; *cf.* Millett, this volume), so what I wish to emphasize here is the way in which material culture has fitted into this evolving paradigm. Indeed, it is rather neatly illustrative of how material things can be interpreted in many ways to note that 'Romanization' emerged as a concept precisely to deal with the abundance of provincial archaeology that was emerging in countries like Germany and Britain in the later 19th century. The idea that such material – humble objects, lacking inscriptions – could make a contribution to the historical study of the Roman Empire was, in its way, revolutionary (Freeman 2007, 604; Hingley 2008, 434-7). Francis Haverfield and his mentor Theodor Mommsen thus opened the door to the material study of the Roman Empire, even if for them, and many of their followers, interpretation of the objects was still constrained by the textual record, and was also firmly linked to an essentialist view of culture. In this respect it is a simple matter to align Roman archaeology during this period with other examples of culture-historical research, this approach being common in both

prehistory and various old world historical archaeologies through the later 19th and much of the 20th centuries (Jones 1997, 29-39; Trigger 2006, 216). Indeed, Haverfield himself remarks on the contemporary understanding of the connection between artefacts and culture at the end of his survey of material evidence in *The Romanization of Roman Britain*: "(e)ven among the civilized nations of the present age the recent growth of stronger national feelings has been accompanied by a preference for home-products and home-manufactures and a distaste for foreign surroundings" (Haverfield 1912, 23). Such an approach, in which objects were understood as fairly straightforwardly diagnostic of the norms to which people living in Roman or native cultural realms subscribed, with anything in-between being aspirational of shifting affiliation from the latter to the former (Freeman 1993, 442-4; Jones 1997, 33-6), was to be very persistent in Romano-British archaeology.

Yet we must be aware that even within the "long sleep" of Roman archaeology (to borrow a phrase from Renfrew 1982, 6-7), and its dreams of 'Romanization', there were subtle variations in the understanding of artefacts and their role in narratives about the Roman period. Haverfield's principal direct successor – thanks to the slaughter of World War I – was R.G. Collingwood, who gained greater recognition as a philosopher than Roman archaeologist (Freeman 2007, 536-7). In his work in the latter field, though, he understood that the use of objects of a certain type was not necessarily indicative of cultural norms or aspirations – i.e. that the preference for a new type of object may be functional without being normative (Collingwood and Myres 1937, 222; Hingley 2000, 134). He also placed an emphasis on material culture as independent of textual history; his 'handbook' on *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1930) is organised by site-types and material categories, not chronology (*cf.* Freeman 2007, 604; Reece 1997, 477). While the later edition of this book was revised by Ian Richmond according to the same logic (Collingwood and Richmond 1969), Richmond's own *Roman Britain* (1955) moved to a more synthetic style which placed

military history foremost in the story of Roman Britain. Sheppard Frere's *Britannia* (1987; the first edition was published in 1967) continued in this vein, with over half of the book framed by narrative (military) history. His understanding of material culture also recapitulated the normative approach, common also still in later Iron Age archaeology of the time (Hingley 2000, 140-2; *cf.* e.g. Hodson 1964). Such a view can be found in most textbooks of the 1960s through to the 1980s and even beyond (e.g. Salway 1993; Scullard 1979; there were still exceptions – for example, a somewhat different approach is taken in Liversidge 1968, explicitly eschewing military-historical narrative). This lengthy period of limited theoretical development created the rather stifling environment in Roman archaeology in Britain described by Eleanor Scott (1993b) at the beginning of the 1990s.

Indeed, it is precisely at this point – with the publication of two or three key studies, and the organisation of the first Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) – that we reach the pivotal period for a more decisive shift in the archaeology of Roman Britain, bringing new perspectives on material culture to the fore. Although not particularly engaged with the contemporary discourses in mainstream archaeological theory, Richard Reece's teaching at the Institute of Archaeology, with its firm emphasis on liberating material culture from text-derived categories (an approach summarised in the self-published Reece 1988; *cf.* Reece 1993a; James 2003, 180; Woolf 2004, 419; Millett, this volume), was instrumental in the emergence of a generation of scholars of Roman Britain who would seek out different frameworks. One such was Martin Millett, whose *The Romanization of Britain* (1990) acted as a catalyst for further change. Millett's approach, informed by selected aspects of processual and early post-processual archaeology, as well as some of the debates about Roman society in ancient history, was certainly novel in its explicit shift away from an event-based narrative of Romano-British history into which objects were simply slotted, to a much more analytical investigation (*cf.* Hingley 2001, 112; Woolf 1991). This book built upon

some of the methodological innovations which had been taking place in the 1970s and 1980s in the study of aggregate data-sets and spatial patterning (e.g. Fulford and Hodder 1975; Hodder and Hassall 1971), and thus began to give artefacts their appropriate weight in a synthetic account for the first time. Yet, and in spite of efforts to consider different approaches to the significance of artefacts, Millett's acculturative interpretation of the significance of material change still had at its heart a normative view of culture (Freeman 1993, 442-5; Jones 1997, 34-6). Nonetheless, the impact of Millett's work was enormous, and the debate provoked by it gave huge momentum to the initiation of new approaches to Romano-British material, particularly as played out at further TRACs. Another key development of this period was the publication of Richard Hingley's *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (1989), which turned a spotlight upon non-villa settlement for really the first time. This book helped cement the shift in emphasis away from a history of Roman Britain dominated by the military narrative, a trend reinforced by the emerging results from commercial archaeological fieldwork under the new planning framework beginning at around the same time (PPG16 began to operate in 1990, and prior to its replacement in 2010 led to many new discoveries of rural settlement sites; Fulford and Holbrook 2011).

Over the last two decades or so, therefore, the study of material culture in Romano-British archaeology has broadened considerably – both in terms of the range of sites and objects considered worthy of investigation, and the theoretical and methodological tools applied in doing so. Yet progress has been uneven, perhaps inevitably given both the compressed timescale within which new ideas have been introduced to the field (compared with mainstream archaeological theory and with other disciplines like anthropology) and the embedded conservatism of Roman archaeology as a whole (evident in some reviews of the more innovative publications, e.g. de la Bédoyère 2007; Thomas 1990; *cf.* Laurence 1999; Woolf 2004, 420). Thus, we have seen considerable discussion of more flexible models of

identity than that dictated by the 'Romanization' framework, in many cases influenced by postcolonial theories of the hybrid mixing of cultures in contact situations (e.g. Mattingly 2004; Webster 2001), and in other cases by sociological theories of identity construction (e.g. Gardner 2002; Revell 2009). At the same time, for some, 'identity' has become little more than a trendy synonym for 'Romanization', and lacks some of the critical edge necessary in application (Faulkner 2008; Pitts 2007; *cf.* Gardner 2013). Similarly, a recent move to consider the movement of material culture around the empire, and the interaction of 'global' and local cultures, through the lens of globalization (e.g. Hitchner 2008; Pitts 2008) can fall foul of the same critique (e.g. Naerebout 2007). Other approaches, more squarely focussed around objects, have been eclectic. The most dominant strand encompasses more and more detailed studies of the distribution of artefacts in terms of their contexts of use, sometimes influenced by practice theory or theories of consumption (e.g. Eckardt and Crummy 2008; Gardner 2007; Greene 2008; Pitts 2010; papers in Allason-Jones (ed.) 2011; Lavan *et al.* (eds.) 2007; Hingley and Willis (eds.) 2007). However, semiotic approaches to meaning have not been so widely deployed (except with respect to architecture; Grahame 2000), while evolutionary approaches to material culture transmission, phenomenological perspectives on human engagement with things, or post-humanist approaches to the agency of objects have scarcely been touched upon (rare examples of each are Biddulph 2012; González-Ruibal 2003; Gosden 2005). More will be said on the potential of these kinds of approaches in the next section, but suffice it to say here, in closing this Introduction, that while Roman archaeology in Britain has already moved far beyond the stultifying torpor of the 'Romanization' years, there is still some way to go before we contribute actively to debates about materiality taking place across the social sciences.

Social beings in a material world: From function and meaning to action and practice

'Materiality' is indeed a growing area of interest in a number of disciplines, with scholars in sociology and cultural studies (among others; see Dant 2005; Woodward 2007) picking up particularly on developments in anthropology which have been underway for some time (e.g. Miller 1994). Much of the discussion in this area also draws upon influential philosophers and theorists such as Martin Heidegger, Bruno Latour, Marcel Mauss and Alfred Gell. The role of archaeology in this movement is ambiguous. On the one hand, reference in the wider materiality literature to archaeological studies can be patchy (e.g. the index to Bennett and Joyce (eds.) 2010 has multiple references to anthropology, but none to archaeology), even as archaeologists draw upon this literature themselves. On the other, many of the influential members of the Material Culture group within the Department of Anthropology at UCL (such as Victor Buchli, Daniel Miller and Chris Tilley) have connections with archaeology, and there is no doubt that archaeology has a great wealth of thinking about material culture to contribute to the wider debate (*cf.* Knappett 2012; Silva and Baert, forthcoming). Roman archaeology, too, potentially has a significant part to play in this process (*cf.* Hodder 1993: xviii-xix; James 2003), providing it can both continue to broaden its theoretical frame of reference, and synthesize the complexity of Roman material cultures for inter-disciplinary audiences. In this section, I will address the first of these points, highlighting some of the developments in the theorisation of materiality in archaeology and beyond, and noting where these have had an impact on the interpretation of Romano-British archaeology and, more importantly, where they have not. In the following sections I will make a tentative start on the second task, in light of some of the questions raised by considering different perspectives.

The delayed integration of aspects of mainstream archaeological theory into Roman studies might have had the positive effect of allowing practitioners to avoid previous dead-ends and more readily settle on relevant approaches (as explicitly argued by Scott 1993a, 7).

To some extent, this has been true of the adoption of post-colonial theory, which has had a distinctive impact in our field. However, partly because theory-building in archaeology is rarely straightforwardly cumulative (Trigger 2006, 5-17, 38-9), this phenomenon has also exacerbated a lack of coherence in approaches to material culture. This is most apparent with respect to the limited impact of processual – and indeed early post-processual – approaches in Roman archaeology. The New Archaeology's emphasis on quantification of assemblages, pattern analysis, functional categorisation of artefacts, and site formation process has, of course, filtered through to Roman archaeology in various ways and over quite a prolonged period of time (e.g. Hodder and Hassall 1971; Peacock 1982; Peña 2007). However, this influence has remained largely methodological throughout, and has not generated the extensive *theoretical* debate that opposed such approaches to culture-historical archaeology and which characterized prehistoric studies in the 1960s (*cf.* Dyson 1989, 146). When this level of debate did open up in Roman archaeology from the end of the 1980s, the approaches drawn into it derived largely from later post-processualism and post-colonial theory. This means that the rejection of 'Romanization' has perhaps most strongly come from a historiographical angle, secondarily from a notion that material culture has multiple meanings, and only tangentially from any substantial reanalysis of the role that material culture plays in human life. While the 'New' or processual archaeologists of the 1960s and 1970s certainly did not have all of the right ideas about this role, they at least grappled with the question, perhaps most consistently and coherently in the 'behavioural archaeology' of Michael Schiffer and colleagues. This approach has moved from the consideration of issues of site formation and the nature of the material record to a more complete system of understanding human-material relations (LaMotta 2012; Skibo and Schiffer 2008; *cf.* Dant 2005, 6-8; Preucel and Mrozowski 2010, 5). Like another consistent thread emerging from the processual era – evolutionary approaches which see material culture as adaptive in

various ways (see e.g. Shennan 2002) – behavioural archaeology has had precious little impact in Roman archaeology. The effects of the more methodological aspects of the processual programme continue to be felt, particularly in quantitative studies of finds (a major driver of which has surely been the processual orientation of much commercial field practice; *cf.* Evans 2001, 27; Lucas 2001, 2; Tyers 1996, 22-3), but the omission of important aspects of the debate over the more fundamental significance of material culture is unfortunate.

The same can be said of the next phase in the development of that debate, revolving around approaches to style, signification and ideology popular in the later 1970s and early 1980s in prehistoric archaeology. As the emphasis of understandings of artefacts shifted from their adaptive or behavioural function to their symbolic meaning during this period – and as some post-processualists took this as a key plank of their platform – so a succession of neo-Marxist, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to the material world came to the fore. These all erred towards a somewhat idealist view of material culture, seeing it as primarily a medium for the negotiation of power (e.g. Leone 1984; Tilley 1984), or as an expressive medium with similarities to language and text (Hodder 1991, 121-55; Tilley 1989; *cf.* Wobst 1977) – but in either case as actively constituting social relations, rather than just reflecting them (Hodder 1985, 3-11). Again, some aspects of these ideas were taken up to a limited extent in Romano-British archaeology (e.g. Millett 1990, 17, 112; Grahame 2000, 24-8), but aside from a generally increasing awareness of the potential multiplicity of material meanings (e.g. Freeman 1993, 443-4), the real convergence between archaeological theory and Roman studies in Britain was only to come with the next stage of the debate. As frustration with the rather non-material approach to 'reading' material culture as if it were a text grew, so the emphasis shifted to theories of practice, action and experience, and the distinctive role of material culture in the interaction between actors and social institutions, such as identities

(e.g. Buchli 1995; Dobres 2000; Hodder 1999, 72-9; Thomas 1996; *cf.* Olsen 2006). This perspective also ushered in a concern with agency, in reaction to the smothering determinisms (whether normative, adaptive or structural) of previous approaches (Barrett 1993, 1-6; Johnson 1989). Particularly as such ideas fit with the already-emerging interest in post-colonial theory in Romano-British archaeology (e.g. Mattingly 1997; Webster 1996), we here approach a moment of synchrony between our field and wider currents in archaeological theory with respect to material culture. Agency, practice and identity became quite dominant interests in the later 1990s and early 2000s, shaping new approaches to the contexts of use of things (e.g. Chadwick 2004; Gardner 2002; Revell 2000; *cf.* Scott 1993a; Webster 1999). However, almost as soon as this moment arrived, those wider currents moved on more swiftly. A new debate about materiality has emerged in the last 10 years from which Roman archaeology again finds itself largely detached. Whether or not these new developments are entirely constructive is an important question, but engaging with them is certainly critical if Roman archaeology is to get closer to understanding the significance of material transformations to the people of Roman Britain.

Materiality in contemporary archaeological thought

A striking aspect of this most recent turn in the way archaeologists approach the material world is that an interest in 'materiality' has begun to draw together a rather eclectic range of approaches and people. United primarily by a commitment to take the role of things in human life more seriously, strands of thought deriving from post-processual influences like continental philosophy and cultural anthropology (some noted already above) can be set alongside those more processual elements such as the cognitive archaeology closely associated with Colin Renfrew (2012) or evolutionary approaches to cultural transmission (Cochrane 2011; Shennan 2012). Indeed, this potentially convergent tendency is explicitly

tackled by Ian Hodder in his recent work on 'human-thing entanglement' (2011; 2012; *cf.* Knappett 2012, 196-9). How successfully approaches such as the material culture studies of the UCL school, 'symmetrical archaeology' (influenced particularly by Latour), behavioural archaeology or evolutionary phylogenetics can be brought into harmony is a moot point, particularly when the internal coherence of some of these approaches is not particularly strong to begin with (*cf.* Johnson 2006, 125). However, what is of primary concern to us here is what these perspectives might offer to the study of the archaeology of Roman Britain. In this section I will briefly summarise the strengths and weaknesses of a couple of salient approaches, and close with some pointers they throw up to consider against the major material trends we can observe in Romano-British archaeology.

The initial phase in the emergence of new approaches to materiality in archaeology was strongly influenced by continental philosophy, primarily phenomenology (e.g. Gosden 1994; Thomas 1996), but more recently the work of anthropologists has taken precedence. In addition to the members of the UCL 'school' of material culture studies mentioned above, especially Tilley in his work on meaning and experience (e.g. 1999) and Miller on the complexity of consumption (e.g. 2008), Alfred Gell, Tim Ingold and Marilyn Strathern have been particularly important. Gell's notion that 'art' objects are not merely representational, but have a form of agency that creates effects in viewers (1998) has been developed by a number of archaeologists and art historians (e.g. Gosden 2005; Meskell 2005; Osborne and Tanner (eds.) 2007). Ingold, meanwhile, has defined an approach to people's dwelling in the world which seeks to explore the varied affordances for action which different materials offer (Ingold 1993; 2007; *cf.* Knappett 2005, 45-57; Thomas 2012, 174-5). Finally, Strathern's work on the different ways in which personhood is conceived in different cultures, and potentially extended to non-humans, including objects (1988), has inspired efforts to interpret aspects of prehistoric material in similar terms and highlight the diversity of human self-

understandings (e.g. Brück 2001; Fowler 2002). In all of this work, or at least its archaeological application, there is a certain amount of slippage between the notion of some kind of object agency as a heuristic device and the ethnography of animism as a particular world-view (*cf.* Morphy 2009; Sillar 2009). With 'symmetrical archaeology', influenced more by the ideas of Bruno Latour and others in Science and Technology Studies (STS), there is less doubt that not only do things deserve to be placed alongside humans in relations of co-dependence, but also that they are agents in their own right (Latour 1999, 174-215; Olsen 2012; Webmoor and Witmore 2008; *cf.* Martin 2005). In part, this position is an explicit rejection, following Latour, of modernity as an anomaly in human history which has falsely alienated people and things, through conceptual schemas characterized by dichotomies such as mind/body, subject/object, culture/nature and so forth (Latour 1993; Olsen 2012, 210-11; *cf.* Thomas 2004; 2007 for a similar view influenced more by Heidegger's phenomenology). The answer, in this approach, is to identify networks of actors, human and non-human, in the generation of particular constellations of practice; such a perspective has, however, been applied in few systematic studies thus far (but see Martin 2005; Olsen 2010) and, like some of the other recent approaches to materiality, has been challenged for ignoring key somatic aspects of sensory engagement with materials (Hurcombe 2007; Ingold 2007; Knappett 2012, 191-2, 196). These points notwithstanding, very little of this kind of debate has appeared at TRAC (papers by Astrid van Oyen at TRAC 2011 [Van Oyen 2012] and 2013 are rare instances).

Other approaches to the relationships between humans and things are also significant. While there is not space here to explore the vibrant strand of evolutionary theorising which has produced, at times, accounts of material culture transmission that resemble the networks of object-actors just discussed (Gosden 2005, 198; Johnson 2011, 320-1), another school of thought in the processual tradition which overlaps more overtly with recent post-processual

or interpretive work needs to be mentioned. Discussion of material engagement within cognitive-processual archaeology (Renfrew 2012; papers in DeMarrais *et al.* (eds.) 2004; Malafouris and Renfrew (eds.) 2010) revolves around human cognition as a distributed phenomenon, stretching out into the material world. Things are not merely human products, therefore, but components in the evolution of consciousness, with technological change and cognitive change intimately related. As this is a development of processualism, there is an emphasis on the systematic study of long-term process, incorporating fields of expertise such as neuroscience and evolutionary biology (Renfrew 2012, 130), which are lacking in the more particularistic interpretive studies.

The latter might be exemplified further by Hodder's recent forays into materiality, which also set out an approach to the inter-dependence of humans and things (as well as things and things), but are perhaps distinctive in seeking to account for the messy complexity of change in material 'entanglements' (Hodder 2011; 2012). Hodder advocates the idea of object-agency even more strongly than some of the followers of Gell and Latour (Hodder 2012, 213-6, 219; *cf.* Martin 2005: 283-4; Sillar 2009, 368), but also admits that this takes him away from at least traditional understandings of power and institutions. This is a crucial problem, not confined to Hodder's work, and one that is particularly relevant to the ways in which Roman archaeologists might engage with the theories of materiality outlined here. The importance of recent work highlighting the interdependence of people and things and, therefore, the significance of changes in the world of things for the nature not just of human identities but, more fundamentally, the character of human subjectivity in particular cultural settings, is profound. However, it is neither particularly new (having been a feature of pragmatist and symbolic interactionist approaches to social psychology for decades, for example; Silva and Baert, forthcoming; McCarthy 1984; *cf.* Gardner 2003), nor does it particularly help us deal with power in an institutional sense (Gardner 2011, 71-5; cf. Harding

2008, 161). The latter theme, which is surely crucial to understanding Roman imperialism, requires us to consider the variety of structural forces that bear upon human subjectivity, which exist at a variety of scales. Indeed, some have remarked upon a lack of attention to issues of power in recent developments in Roman archaeology (Faulkner 2008; Hingley 2001, 114; Mattingly 2011, 19-26; Pitts 2007, 709), and this concern has partly driven the move towards 'globalisation' theory, though it may be doubted whether this is an appropriate framework for unpicking the particular configuration of structure and agency in the Roman world (Gardner 2013). Certainly, though, an understanding of the impact of changing materiality is necessary to develop this, as in other colonial situations (*cf.* Gosden 2004; O'Hanlon and Washbrook 1992). How this might be done in practice will be explored in the next sections.

Material horizons in Roman Britain

The emergence of Roman Britain: 1ˢᵗ century BC – 1ˢᵗ century AD

The aim of this section is to outline some of the broader patterns in the material transformation of Britain from the later Iron Age through to the 5ᵗʰ century AD. While, of necessity, innovations will dominate the narrative, I will attempt also to highlight particular continuities or retrenchments of traditions. In the following section, the implications of some of these developments on particular practices, identities and subjectivities will be examined, in light of the points just discussed in the context of developments in archaeological theory. One lesson, of course, from thinking more critically about the relationship between material culture and people – including archaeologists – is that we need to be wary of the periodizations which have structured the discipline (Arnold 2012, 86-8). This much is very clear from the archaeology of 'Roman Britain', in which key moments of material change singularly fail to correspond to the established chronological parameters of the period. The

beginning of the incorporation of Britain into the Roman empire in a material sense is particularly fuzzy, as while the evidence of military control increases fairly conspicuously in the mid-1st century AD (though *cf.* Creighton 2006, 46-69 on pre-43 AD evidence of military presence), other key changes either pre-date or post-date that point by a significant margin. Taking a very long view, the beginning of the material impact of the Roman world on Britain needs to be seen in the context of the participation of Iron Age British societies in networks of exchange which brought elite material culture, particularly metalwork styles, to areas in many parts of Britain (Hill 1995, 78-9). Such networks are likely to have mediated the first arrivals of Mediterranean material culture and, perhaps, played a transformative role in the meaning of objects travelling along them.

This is very evident in the case of one of the distinctive innovations which characterise the later Iron Age, with coinage from northern Gaul appearing in the 2nd century BC, to be followed in the 1st centuries BC and AD by coinages created by leaders of several groupings in parts of southern Britain. This later development broadly coincides with the appearance of imports of ceramics and the commodities carried in some of them (particularly wine and other amphora-transported goods), evident in burial and some settlement contexts. These new technologies do not occur in vast numbers but are nonetheless important as material innovations, in the sense that they almost certainly provided novel media for the negotiation of power and the formation of a greater hierarchy among kinship structures in some regions (Hill 1995, 78-89; Mattingly 2006, 58-64; Millett 1990, 12-22, 29; Moore 2011, 350-1). They may also have provided leaders and their followers with a new way of thinking about themselves both as individuals and members of groups. Possibly more striking material change was evident in the landscapes of the new political entities of this dynamic period, with the various large, semi-enclosed sites known as *oppida* being created across south-central Britain (Creighton 2006, 23-4; Hill 1995, 70-72, 85; Millett 1990, 21-9).

Another conspicuous transformation, and similarly one which does not directly involve imported technology, is the so-called '*fibula* event horizon' of the same period, apparently marking a shift in the construction of personal appearance, with much greater numbers of brooches being deposited than previously (Hill 1995, 86; Jundi and Hill 1998). Both of these changes probably had a more immediate effect on a wider range of people than the uses to which coinage or imported wines were put. What that effect was is more difficult to specify. The period from the end of the 2nd century BC was clearly one of increasing flux, into which Roman military presence intruded directly only under Caesar, and then Claudius nearly a century later, but it seems clear that the expansion of Roman political influence in Gaul provides a more constant backdrop to the transformations to both individual and institutional life in some parts of Britain. These produced a range of somewhat unstable social formations, closely tied to charismatic authority, rather than the even pattern of 'tribes' traditionally supposed (on the basis, it must be admitted, of what Roman writers wanted to see in the newly conquered province; Moore 2011, 345-9; *cf.* Millett 1990, 20-3, 29-35), and this pattern of variability was to continue under more direct Roman occupation.

The conquest and its aftermath undoubtedly brought a series of material changes closely linked to imperial institutions, particularly those of military and then civic administration, but these too were drawn out and uneven. The most obvious material markers of the major military campaigns undertaken to impose control are the forts and roads, which obviously tended to follow in the wake of, or precede a new phase of actual movement of troops. While often fairly transient and involved in limited forms of interaction with the wider indigenous population, the fortifications built to house legionary and auxiliary soldiers were often striking impositions on the previous political landscape, whether situated within the sprawling complex of earthworks at Camulodunum, or in the corner of a 'hillfort' like Hod Hill (Mattingly 2006, 90-94, 128-36; Millett 1990, 44-55). Similarly, the roads which

facilitated military logistics conspicuously marked the landscape, no less than the requisitioning of resources and land to support the troops on campaign and then as veteran colonists (Millett 1990, 56-60; Witcher 1998). While the long-term presence of soldiers became a feature of life only in certain regions, some of their early bases were co-opted for urban purposes. Though the mechanisms by which administrative towns were established and their relationship to military authority and personnel remains debated, these certainly represent an architectural development that would have confronted a greater swathe of the population of Roman Britain with a material reminder of political change. Yet this can hardly be said to have been sudden. Embedded as they frequently were within meaningful Iron Age landscapes – which had, in turn, influenced the positioning of forts (Creighton 2006, 123-56; Millett 1990, 69-78; Rogers 2011, 47-72) – the novel material environment of a town took some time to find articulation. Indeed, the appearance of larger masonry houses and fully monumental public buildings in a number of *civitas* capitals is only really a phenomenon of the 2nd century (see below; Burnham *et al.* 2001, 73; Mattingly 2006, 276-86; Millett 1990, 78-91, 102-3, 104-11). Thus we can see that even in the most conspicuous material changes in settlement types there are a mixture of rapid and generational tempos of transformation.

A similar picture can be discerned from some of the main categories of portable objects. We have already seen how coinage was a new technology of the later Iron Age, but the large-scale presence of Roman troops brought with it a much larger pool of coins, embedded in a larger-scale set of economic and ideological structures. Yet, while this wealth became an important draw to people setting up in the fort *vici*, the spread of coinage beyond such environments, and towns, in the 1st century was limited (Mattingly 2006, 497; Millett 1990, 58-9; Reece 1993b). It would be some time – centuries even – before people living on many of the settlements across rural Roman Britain found themselves losing coins in the course of their everyday activities. A rather greater impact, though, was made by changes in

the supply and consumption of pottery. Of course, some key developments preceded the conquest when, alongside imported amphorae and a range of Gallic wares, the technology of the potters' wheel was adopted (Hill 1995, 79; Tyers 1996, 52-6). The immediate impact of the conquest itself was, as in other respects, somewhat muted in the short-term, as soldiers did not carry large quantities of pottery on campaign (Tyers 1996, 56). However, imports of finewares, in particular of Samian ware, picked up rapidly later in the Claudian period, while a number of significant industries became established during the mid-late 1st century AD across southern Britain. There appears to have been considerable exchange at least of ideas between British, Gallic, Germanic and Mediterranean traditions in this period, and while the military was certainly a key driver of the expansion of pottery production, the limitation of new materials to that community that we have observed with coinage did not apply so obviously here. Alongside traditional pottery, new forms and fabrics, in significantly greater quantities, marked a change in scale of material innovation (Mattingly 2006, 513-18; Millett 1990, 98-99, 123-4; Tyers 1996, 56-66; *cf.* Evans, this volume). While limitations of space prohibit discussion of other important categories of artefacts here, it should be clear from the foregoing that the material transformations linked to the initial impact of Roman imperialism upon Britain were complex, being multi-temporal and variable by region, class and other factors. The same is certainly true of later periods too.

Diverse participations: 2nd – 3rd centuries AD

As we move into the mid-Roman period, the question of 'when did Britain become 'Roman?' becomes all the more pressing. This of course requires us to define what becoming 'Roman' means, and even if the military and administrative situation is relatively clear, our material yardsticks for this remain in constant flux. Indeed, the solution seems to be that the moment of 'being Roman' never fully arrives, because the reference points are also always in motion

(*cf.* Barrett 1997). To begin again with the material settings of life in architecture and landscape, the 2nd and 3rd centuries saw urbanism take on new forms in different areas of Britain. The cityscapes of the 'public' towns – the *civitas* capitals, *coloniae* and other administrative centres – were, in some cases, only just becoming complete in terms of their civic identity. The *forum*-basilica complexes at Caerwent and Leicester, for example, were completed in stone towards the middle part of the 2nd century. Curiously, a handful of generations later, such buildings were already undergoing changes in use – or disuse – as at Wroxeter (apparently largely abandoned after a later 3rd century fire) and Silchester (being used as a workshop from the late 3rd century; Fulford and Timby 2000; Millett 1990, 102-3, 130, 137; White and Barker 1998, 73-4, 86). If the building type that encapsulated the material imposition of Roman administration was thus shifting in its importance within the Roman period, so too we must assume the power networks of Roman imperialism were dynamic over time. Meanwhile, the public towns were increasingly manifesting a concentration of wealth in fewer hands, with many of the strip-buildings of the earliest phases being succeeded by larger courtyard-style buildings (observed in excavated sequences in, for example, Silchester and Caerwent; see Mattingly 2006, 284-5; Millett 1990, 134-5). In parallel to this process, the development of new forms of urbanism – settlements often linked to particular economic or religious *foci*, and known collectively as 'small towns' – is indicative of a more long-term process of transformation in the material articulation of colonial experience. The growth of sites like Chelmsford, Kenchester and Water Newton from the 2nd century indicates that settlement nucleation, occurring for a variety of reasons and with a range of attendant material consequences for the people living in these locations (Burnham 1995, 12-14; Mattingly 2006, 286-91; Millett 1990, 143-51), was the product of a new phase of provincial culture-change taking place some time after other innovations had become embedded.

Material change in rural lifestyles – both in terms of form and of tempo – varied by region and class, but generally was a phenomenon of the mid-Roman period too. The conspicuous architectural innovation of the 'villa' – in reality a constellation of elements including a range of layouts, construction materials, particular facilities like baths and decorative features – is manifest in restricted areas from the later 1st century AD, but became more widespread in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Mattingly 2006, 369-75; Millett 1990, 91-8, 117-120). These are convincingly connected to the towns and to the wealth display of those who held high status in both urban and rural contexts, but whether they represent "the Roman aspirations of their owners" (Millett 1990, 119) – a small but growing minority of country-dwellers – can only be established by a rather more in-depth study of the meanings of these material forms and the compromises of colonial culture than has hitherto been undertaken (*cf.* Rippengal 1993). Nor is it the case that the apparently more continuous traditions of the majority of farmers in rural Roman Britain became fossilised through lack of opportunity (or aspiration) and showed no material change. Again, regionality is a key feature of the archaeological patterning, but alongside the quite deliberate material manifestation of long-term rootedness (as evinced, for example, by burials in relation to prehistoric monuments at Cotswold Community; Smith and Powell 2010, 136-8, 165), comparison of sites within particular landscapes can reveal significant episodes of change. In the upper Thames valley, for example, there are widespread instances of settlement re-planning in the early 2nd century indicative of evolving institutional circumstances mediated by subtle material transformation (Smith 2007; *cf.* Taylor 2001, 49-52; 2007). These are as much a part of colonial experience as the more obvious creation of 'villa' lifestyles.

Alongside these fairly gradual trends affecting the physical settings of Romano-British life, there are, of course, key thresholds in the trajectories of a wide range of artefacts in the mid-Roman period. Coinage underwent almost as profound a change in its use in the

3rd century AD as it had in the 1st, thanks largely to the more direct way it manifest the vagaries of imperial fortunes on the broadest scale. Devaluation of the silver coinage in particular, followed by currency reform and the production of much larger quantities of bronze coinage (both officially and as copies), along with the use of coins by leaders of the various breakaway polities in the mid to late 3rd century, all contributed to significant changes in the form, abundance and ideological content of coins. As a result of at least some of these factors, these objects became much more commonly lost on a wide range of sites from the third quarter of the 3rd century (Reece 2002, 46-57). Use of pottery also saw some interesting changes in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (*cf.* Evans, this volume). Insular production centres saw growth in the 2nd century, at least partly as a result of the establishment of long-term supply arrangements to the garrison which was then beginning to settle down in the north; Dorset Black Burnished Ware (BB1), a fabric with strong Iron Age technological roots, was particularly successful in this context. Fine-ware producers also emerged which, in the 3rd century, were well-placed to take over from the demise of the Samian industry, in many cases – particularly the Oxfordshire potteries – copying several Samian forms (Tyers 1996, 66-72). Although a range of imports continued to appear, people were more likely to obtain all of their pottery from sources in Britain during this period, including both local products and inter-regional imports (Mattingly 2006, 516-7). Whether this meant much in terms of identity, and what differences existed between perceptions of very local, non-local and non-British products is a more challenging question; a more pertinent material shift may have been the diminution of overall quantities of new vessels available in the mid-3rd century (although this might simply be a result of problems with dating conservative styles; Tyers 1996, 70-1; *cf.* Cooper 1996; Going 1992, 99-100). From these selected examples of archaeological patterning it should be apparent that the material world of Roman Britain had far from 'settled down' after the invasion period.

The fragmenting of Roman Britain: 4th – 5th centuries AD

The materiality of 4th century Britain was, as a result of the changes just discussed and others which we will examine next, very different from that of the later 1st century. Which, then, was the real 'Roman Britain'? And what should we make of the further changes at the beginning of the 5th century? In the last part of this outline of changing materialities, I will first look at the portable objects and then the inhabited environment, as in this period more than others the identification of transformation in the latter is dependent on trends in the former. With coinage and pottery, most of the 4th century is a period of relative stability. The increased circulation of coinage apparent from the later 3rd century continues, with perhaps the most notable shift in distribution being the decreasing incidence of coin-finds at military sites, as the structure of army payment was changed (Brickstock 2010). The larger pottery industries that became important in the 3rd century remained so, though there are some signs of stagnation in the later 4th century (particularly a reduction in formal repertoire) as well as the emergence of a new generation of distinctive shell- or calcite-tempered wares produced by a series of small manufacturers (Mattingly 2006, 518-9; Millett 1990, 157-74, 178-80, 224-7; Tyers 1996, 77-8; *cf.* Evans, this volume). However, by sometime in the first quarter of the 5th century, much had changed. Imperial coinage supplies to Britain stopped in the first decade of that century and the pottery industries stopped production seemingly soon after (Going 1992, 102-3; Millett 1990, 224-7). This is not the place to go into the causes of this apparently dramatic shift (though below aspects of it which are prefigured much earlier will be highlighted). What is striking, though, is that, as much as those causes appear to lie in the gradual administrative fragmentation of the later Roman empire, they must also pertain to something cultural. This can be argued simply because, while previous periods of diminished supply had not been terminal and had even been made good with copies of, for example,

coinage (Millett 1990, 226-7; Reece 2002, 62), this time the technological change was definitive. However, it would be ironic if, after the quite prolonged and gradual series of material changes outlined above, which shaped 'Roman Britain' in a piecemeal fashion, the end was entirely more sudden. Is this really the case?

If we turn to the material fabric within which people lived in the 4th century, it is apparent that the transformation of people's engagement with those built spaces emerged from earlier trends. The continual process of transmutation that marked the major towns continued in the 4th century with more and more public or civic spaces changing their function; from the basilica at Caerwent becoming a workshop in the 330s to the refuse-disposal and 'market stalls' in the baths complex at Canterbury in the middle part of the century (Blockley *et al.* 1995, 461; Brewer and Guest, forthcoming). In a similar fashion, changes to the uses of buildings within military sites are also commonplace in the mid- to late 4th century, with workshop activity in the *principia* at Housesteads, and butchery in the *praetorium* at Binchester (Crow 2004, 96-8; Ferris 2010, 553-4). Notably, these and other examples are derived from archaeological sequences which simultaneously indicate material continuity and change: continuity in the use of various technologies and the disposal of their products (e.g. livestock, ceramics, metals), but change in the location of activity and thus the use of certain types of built space. Within the 'official' contexts of fort or town, this is surely significant for the relationship between people performing these actions and the institutional structures of later Roman imperialism (Gardner 2007, 243-64). On rural sites, such processes are less pronounced. The early 4th century sees continuing trends in settlement nucleation and the expansion of 'villas' both numerically and, in some cases, on an individual scale, but in the second half of the century, numbers of sites occupied seem to decline, because the material markers of occupation – pottery and coins in particular – dwindle (Mattingly 2006, 374-5, 534; Millett 1990, 186-211, 219, 223-4). Whatever these changes mean for the

presence, absence or movement of people, they are indicative that the material world of Roman Britain was in flux for some time before 'the end' – so again, defining the 'Roman-ness' which came to an end is not entirely straightforward.

There are other innovations and retrenchments in the 4th century that deserve to be noted – including new means of personal adornment, changes in agricultural technology, the apparent end of the practice of inscribing stone monuments, and important changes in religious practice – but, in concluding this section, I will turn to those notable material horizons which may post-date 410 AD but are significant in understanding the varied responses of people across Britain to the seeming material vacuum in which they found themselves. For however long the fragmentation of Roman Britain took through the 4th century and however prolonged the use of available pots, coins and other objects into the 5th century might have been (see e.g. Dark 1994, 200-206), there were two further major material transformations in the 5th century that were initiated, or accepted by, formerly Roman citizens. One was the creation, in the eastern part of Britain, of a new, highly visible material world defined by new burial practices, styles of metalwork and pottery and forms of timber architecture. Whilst traditionally interpreted simply as the material culture of Anglo-Saxon migrants, the more recent debate as to whether the people using these objects were Germanic or Romano-British in origin continues, though this still risks perpetuating a misleading link between birthplace and culture (*cf.* Arnold 1997, 19-33; Hills 2003). Wherever they were born, people using this suite of objects were creating a new materiality for Britain but, ironically, they were doing so with the kinds of things that had been shaped by the particular cultural environment of a place just beyond the Roman frontier, which had experienced a similar dynamic mixing of traditions as parts of Britain (Hills 2003, 74-5; Swift 2000, 88-136). The second horizon is the appearance of new suites of imported Mediterranean pottery and Latin-inscribed stones (particularly burial markers) in western Britain, an area which had

shown rather little material change in the Roman period as conventionally defined. Whether this is entirely to do with the continuation of a Christian milieu here or also has to do with the political legacy of Roman imperialism, is unclear (Mattingly 2006, 534-9; White 2007, 195-207). What is clear, however, is that both of these material transformations on the littoral margins of Britain give the archaeologist more to work with than the materially-invisible people living in-between, which reminds us that the interpretation of changing materialities is always going to be a very partial affair (*cf.* Esmonde Cleary 2001, 90-1). At the same time, the need for deeper theorisation of the relationship between people and things is made all the more apparent by the series of remarkable changes in the 4th and 5th centuries.

Changing materialities, changing people?

This survey of material trends in Roman Britain has necessarily been both selective and simplified. Yet it gives an appropriate picture of a fluid constellation of materialities in which something was always moving. At different moments, and in different places, traditions of using certain things were bent or broken, and new traditions established. We must be aware, though, that this picture may be misleading in at least a couple of ways. The first is that, in highlighting changing materialities, we perhaps miss ways of life which did not change at all – and we know that evidence for these can be found in the southern parts of Britain (e.g. the continuation of roundhouse construction in the East Midlands; Taylor 2001, 49-52), as much as in the areas outside of the Roman province where they might be expected. These can certainly not be ignored and, indeed, the persistence of certain technologies within a dynamic context gives such things the potential for new meanings. A second issue has to do with the relationship between temporal scale and concepts of novelty. Here the weakness of archaeological chronologies comes to the fore, in terms of tracking the speed of change in relation to the pace that would have been perceived by contemporaries. Albeit in a world of

fairly slow communications and transport of ideas and things, novel technologies may have changed their significance within time-frames that we simply cannot see. However, comparison between different fields of practice and different sites and regions at least gives us an insight into the relative scale of different transformations (*cf.* Gardner 2012). With these points in mind, we can begin to examine the ways in which some of the theoretical perspectives discussed above might enable us to draw more out of the material patterns in Roman Britain.

One of the common threads among the diverse recent approaches to materiality has been a diminution, at least, of the role of human agency in social life and an advocacy of the power of objects. This argument, in my view, represents a troubling return to a form of material determinism that was rejected in the earliest stages of post-processualism and which leaves a lot to be desired in accounting for power relationships in any context, let alone one like the Roman empire (see below; *cf.* Gardner 2011; Hodder 2012, 208). However, the rhetorical device of switching our perspective to that of the objects we study raises some important issues to do with tradition and choice. These concepts are central, in different ways, to both evolutionary and the more eclectic actor-network/object-agency/entanglement approaches that currently dominate debate about materiality (e.g. Gosden 2005; Shennan 2011). They are linked in as much as the weight of traditions in artefact production and design is often seen as bearing down upon people, drawing in different influences over generations, educating people into a particular cultural world as they are socialized, and thus ultimately channelling their action down particular paths. Relationships between objects have been highlighted as constituting the fabric of particular traditions, or the assemblages of things that afford particular sets of activities, like hunting (Gosden 2005, Hodder 2011, 157-9; Olsen 2010, 129-49; *cf.* Johnson 2004, 243-6; Pauketat 2001). In such a fashion, choice becomes a rather ephemeral notion, reduced to the register of selective advantage, or

problem-solving when an established way of doing things is confronted, often when things break down or fail (Hodder 2011, 159-68; Shennan 2011, 327-8). While limited in certain crucial ways, such a line of reasoning sheds some new light on a key problem within Romano-British archaeology – albeit one only rarely explicitly recognised as such. The 'Romanization' paradigm was built on the premise that, when presented with the opportunity, people would choose to be as 'Roman' as possible (e.g. Millett 1990, 119). One problem with this premise is that – partly because of the inattention to theories of material meaning – we don't really know which artefacts meant 'Roman' at any particular time or place (cf. Freeman 1993, 443-4; Gosden 2005: 197-9, 208-9; Mattingly 2004, 9-10). An alternative line, pursued subsequently, has been to avoid the language of being or becoming 'Roman' and simply regard the material transformations of Roman Britain as in themselves presenting people with a limited range of choices of things – they may or may not have been seen as 'Roman', or some other category, but they were consumed because they were available (Cooper 1996; *cf.* Greene 2008). Following up the implications of this position in more depth might be one way in which some of the archaeological patterning in Roman Britain might be accounted for by taking materiality seriously. However, to pursue this more creatively I think we need to return to people, and to the interaction between differently-situated actors as mediated by things.

This means that, while it is vital to take seriously the role of things in shaping humans as actors, the distinction between the motive force of human interests and intentions and the mediating role of objects needs to be sustained if we are to give power its due. This is true when analysing the workings of any society, but clearly is particularly important in one defined by a particular set of power relationships and inequalities (*cf.* Hingley 2001, 114; Mattingly 2011, 19-26). While very few of the material patterns outlined in the previous section had much to do with the actors situated at the top of Roman imperial society, they have certainly been interpreted in relation to the choices of actors situated within particular

provincial institutions – the civic aristocracy, the military – holding relatively high degrees of wealth, status and power. This much is indeed the bread-and-butter of 'Romanization'. Yet alongside the problem of what 'Roman' means (and closely connected to it) can be placed the notion that changing materialities are both sources and outcomes of tension within different groups and different individuals. Structure (which encompasses the material world in a Giddensian sense; *cf.* Gardner 2007, 18, following Giddens 1984) is always enabling and constraining – shaping choices, somewhat as discussed above, but also affording them in multiple ways. Just as 'becoming Roman' never meant only one thing, so the changing spectrum of practices which all of the artefacts and spaces of Roman Britain were part of never simply enabled or oppressed (*cf.* Witcher, forthcoming). I would argue that this dynamic tension is the underlying cause of the continually mobile empirical patterning that I have outlined above.

On the one hand, becoming a soldier, shaped by the material environment of fort, equipment and state-brokered supplies, was to become a different kind of colonial subject to a farmer, but a subject nonetheless. On the other, the farmers who acquired new red pottery in the later 1st century, or new coin in the later 3rd, need not have thought of this as 'Roman' to enjoy new possibilities for action even as they participated in the structures of the provincial or imperial economy. Imperial structures offered freedoms and constraints which shaped new colonial people (*cf.* Hill 2001, 15). But the people also shaped the structures and perhaps, in the long run, through choosing to prioritise the local, contributed to their fragmentation (Gardner 2007, 256-7). I would argue, therefore, that the archaeology of Roman Britain can show us what material change means in terms of the detaching of people from the sources of wealth and power as the scale and tempo of material connections increase, perhaps offset by the beguiling effects of consumption. Yet it can also show us that structures can be remade, even inadvertently levelled, at least to the point where power is deprived of persistent

material expression. This is only one way of putting the pieces together, though, and the aim of this chapter has been more broadly to show that thinking about the archaeology of Roman Britain in terms of changing materialities – meanings, practices, traditions, innovations, networks, tempos, agencies, structures, even genealogies and entanglements – means thinking about the irreducible complexity of colonial experience. As such it is entirely appropriate to reflect upon the continued relevance of the Roman world to the materialities, and the politics, of the present day.

Conclusion: a confrontation with Roman materialism

The physical presence of the Roman Empire, particularly its distinctive scale and diversity, has played a major part in the way subsequent generations have projected their own political desires in material ways. From the evocation of Roman materialities directly in architecture (e.g. Edward I's castle at Caernarfon, the monumental buildings of imperial London or republican Washington) or portable material culture (the coins of Medieval and modern Europe), to the writing of Roman material culture as the inherently superior technology of an ancestral culture (Frere 1987, 295-312; Wilkinson 2000), the symbolic value of Roman things in strategies of legitimation has been immense. The process of academic, political and popular use of images of Rome has of course not ceased – indeed, part of the argument for introducing theories of globalization into Roman archaeology has been that it at least has the virtue of placing the contemporary context which influences practitioners explicitly in the frame, rather than remaining as a more or less well-hidden backcloth (Hingley, forthcoming; Witcher, forthcoming). Among other views, which also make their framing perspective quite explicit, are the contrasting interpretations of Rome's material impact in Britain as indicative of the success of a free-market economic system (Selkirk 2006), or of the brute hand of exploitative and violent imperialism (Faulkner 2000, 11-12). Also notable is the idea that

there is a political edge to the issue of archaeological visibility – in the sense that either archaeology is the primary means of recovering the voices of the forgotten people of history (Given 2004, 3-4; Hingley 1989, 1-5; Webster 2001, 223), or conversely that archaeologists have been right to focus on the most conspicuous material changes, as only the people who could participate in these are important enough to make a difference in society and thus characterise it (Thomas 1990; de la Bédoyère 1999, 9). The apparent fragility of the imperial system in the 5th century is generally less exemplary now, except for those with a more negative political (Faulkner 2000) or ecological (McAnany and Yoffee 2010) view of complex societies like Rome. Taking all of these examples into account, though, it is difficult to see how understanding Roman materiality in Britain can avoid being politicised. Where do new approaches to materiality fit into this matrix?

In a general sense, approaches that have emerged from more interpretive traditions, such as those informed by Latour's Actor-Network Theory or the work of Alfred Gell, tend to be fairly explicit in advocating a commitment to respect for objects as an ethical move in a world where there are increasing debates about both biotechnology, and the need to confer rights on animals or environments in order to challenge human-induced environmental disaster (in line, perhaps, with an animist view of human-nature balance; Hodder 2012, 220-1; Olsen 2012, 217-21; Sillar 2009). Yet in terms of the politics of institutions, like those of an empire, such approaches have relatively little to say – already noted above as a challenge in using them to understand the archaeology of Roman Britain. However other approaches to the ways in which the material world mediates between actors or subjects and institutional networks of power certainly do invite comparison between the politics of materiality in the Roman and contemporary worlds. Postcolonial and globalization approaches have been taking us in the right direction here (Mattingly 2011; Witcher 2000), but need to take on board more of the facets of material engagement that might be investigated, as discussed

above (though *cf.* Nesbitt and Tolia-Kelly 2009; Witcher forthcoming, focussing on the reception of the Roman past). While comparative work on the materiality of colonialism has become more commonplace (Given 2004; Gosden 2004; Stein (ed.) 2004), a Romanist view of the relationship between changing materialities and the ideologies, opportunities and inequalities of imperial power has yet to be written. There is no better time to re-engage with the theoretical debate in the broader field of archaeology, as in this case Romanists really do have the material to hand to drive that debate forward.

Acknowledgements

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