

Mateusz Fafinski, *Roman Infrastructure in Early Medieval Britain: The Adaptations of the Past in Text and Stone* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021). ISBN: 978-94-6372-753-2.

Focusing on Britain from the end of the fourth century to the middle of the eighth century, Mateusz Fafinski considers how the Roman past was reactivated. To do so, he borrows a wide definition of infrastructure as “material (roads, pipes, sewers, and grids); ... social (institutions, economic systems, and media forms); and ... philosophical (intellectual trajectories: dreamt up by human ingenuity and nailed down in concrete forms (p. 22).” The aim is to move beyond straightforward binaries of continuity and change or one-dimensional ideas of reuse, and to escape a tendency to focus on the ‘city’, issues which are explored in Chapter I, ‘Frameworks’. The approach – drawing on Pierre Bourdieu and on some participants in the Transformation of the Roman World project – is to consider the ways in which elites employed Roman infrastructure as ‘resources of governance’, using them, through ‘activation strategies’, as a form of ‘symbolic capital’ to assert ‘distinction’. As he puts it at the end of the Prologue, ‘One of the chief hypotheses of this book is that the way Roman infrastructure was used and re-used in Britain throughout that time showed on the one hand a high degree of regionalisation, but on the other was also exhibiting similar characteristics to the processes that were similarly happening on the Continent over the same period (p. 19).’ The main body of the book presents two sections organised by types of Roman remains – Chapter II on the reactivation of Roman transport infrastructure and Chapter III on Roman urban spaces – and then a third section organised by institution – Chapter IV on The Church.

A book-length study of this phenomenon is a useful addition to the existing literature. Though Chapter I clearly situates the book within wider approaches it does not offer a critical

review of the historiography on the reactivation of Roman resources in Britain, which would have been valuable, but perhaps difficult. First, because the breadth of the definition of infrastructure would require it to cover so many areas. Second, because there has been a lot of work concerned with different types of evidence and from different perspectives. (Mateusz is aware of much of this in the main body of the analysis.) What he provides for us is a synthetically independent essay in interpretation, rather than an analysis of new evidence, comprehensive studies of particular aspects of that evidence, or novel readings of particular parts of it. That essay pays welcome attention to Continental parallels, especially where they might offer analogies for the developments at particular places or in particular regions that reveal variations in time and space. It also helpfully encourages us to consider together under the banner of Roman infrastructure issues that are often investigated separately – royal rights to Roman ruins, royal obligations connected to roads and bridges, royal ‘tax gathering’ and royal exactions from the salt industry. It provides a useful corrective to our tendency to construct models based on uniformity rather than variation, often rooting the interpretation of evidence in regional rather than general developments.

Since this is an essay in interpretation, individual readers may be unsure of the conceptual framing at some points, or left wanting more in some places, or be more or less persuaded by particular parts of the discussion. Essays in interpretation are there to stimulate. The switch in organising principle, from remains (roads and urban spaces) to an institution (Church), reflects the complex choices that have to be made in tackling a big topic with multiple dimensions. Throughout Chapter IV the Church, as an institution with many competing parts, felt to me too much like a monolithic actor. At times, I missed a comprehensive catalogue of evidence with a map or plan, in relation to Roman roads and place-names (p. 53) or diplomas (pp. 74-8); or to the Hwicce and the salt industry (p. 59); or where the relationship between Roman remains and churches was considered as a more

general pattern (pp. 178-181); or where particular Roman urban spaces and their post-Roman evidence were referred to in Chapters III and IV. A fascinating discussion of *Romanitas* and ecclesiastical sites in Chapter IV seemed to be missing awareness of stone sculpture and studies of the way it reactivated Roman resources.

From the perspective of northern history, the discussion and interpretation of the evidence for a number of sites will be of interest. To give just one example: Drawing on David Mason's great book on Anglo-Saxon Chester, late- and post-Roman Chester seems, with caveats, to be considered an example of an urban space from which the bishop controlled, and continued to control, the salt industry, before the place and that industry passed to the rulers of the Mercians (pp. 121-7). Each piece of the evidence is problematic – two possibly late Roman salt pans with inscriptions which could, but do not have to, refer to a bishop and cleric; the fact that the synod of *Urbs Legionis* perhaps took place at Chester; the idea that the place-name Eccleston reveals a funded sub-Roman ecclesiastical settlement; the blocking of the Chester amphitheatre entrances and *vomitoria* as an act of fortification; and the claim in a twelfth-century Chester chronicle that Æthelred, king of the Mercians in the seventh century, founded a church beside the amphitheatre, near the present site of St John's church. Nonetheless, this is an idea worth keeping in mind as the state of our archaeological evidence for the Roman and post-Roman north west progresses, and the discussion of other northern places offers up equally interesting ideas.

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