Introduction

Martin Henig’s intention in writing this book was to champion the contribution of the Britons to the creation and perpetuation of Roman Britain. He focuses on the southern part of Britain, particularly the elites, exploring their relationship with the culture and literature of Rome. He clearly distances himself from those who traditionally have understood Britain as an essentially military province. Henig is not alone in wanting to better grasp the Britons before, during and after the Roman conquest and to investigate the choices they made in embracing and adapting foreign ways and ideas. In this regard a departure from concentrating on forts, soldiers and military equipment as the essence of Roman Britain is not a bad idea, although the army and its impact cannot be totally ignored, as it is here. Henig has peopled his book with heroines and heroes, ‘reconstructing’ conversations and letters exchanged between historical and fictional characters. In this he is only partially successful, and, in fact, the book is a curious mixture of erudite analysis of archaeological and historical evidence and sometimes uncomfortably naïve narratives.

The text

Henig commences with an examination of the so-called friendly kings of the late Iron Age in southern and south-eastern Britain, looking at their diplomatic and economic contacts with Rome. His main character, known only through Roman sources and his Roman-style coinage, is Verica, king of the Atrebates and client king of Rome. Power struggles and territorial disputes between pro-Roman and anti-Roman dynasts resulted not only in the Roman invasion of A.D. 43, but also in the consolidation and expansion of the kingdom of Verica’s heir, Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus, a Roman citizen granted the title Rex Magnus Britanniae. Henig, by means of imaginary letters and conversations, weaves a story of Verica’s expulsion from Britain, his asylum in Rome and Togidubnus’ upbringing and education in Rome into his examination of the rather more meagre and ‘factual’ Roman sources. In effect, he downplays the ‘invasion’, which was used in Roman propaganda to legitimise the emperor Claudius’ position in Rome, and he suggests that it was the king and his people who played a ‘key role in protecting the land for the Roman Empire’ (p. 54).

Henig then explores how the land became Roman, citing civilian building programmes at Chichester, Fishbourne, Bath, Bosham and Hayling Island in the 1st century A.D. as indications of indigenous efforts, in large part through dynastic patronage, to create a Romanised environment. The cultural inheritance of the commonwealth of the Empire, according to Henig, was eagerly embraced by later generations in southern Britain. Inscriptions, writing tablets and graffiti are used to explore the spread of literacy and to explain the extent to which Latin literature and rhetoric was a part of British education. Likewise, literary and iconographic themes displayed in figural mosaic pavements are interpreted as a sign of deep and widespread Graeco-Roman erudition. This section of the book contains more imaginary conversations between a British youth and his Greek teacher, the two of them wandering around Corinium (Cirencester) and discussing literature and art in the mid-3rd century.

Henig sees no reason why, as long as the province flourished in the high Empire, the owner of an estate or a successful merchant would have opposed the rule of a state which allowed and facilitated participation in the benefits of a larger whole. Rival Roman emperors, barbarian incursions in the west and
general instability, however, prompted the British ruling class in A.D. 286, presumably in their own perceived ‘best interests’ to support Carausius, and later Allectus, who set up a power base in northern Gaul and Britain. Henig sketches a plausible picture of imperial reprisals against Britain after 296, particularly by the members of the house of Constantine, which led to the disaffection of the British elites with the central government in the 4th century. Nevertheless, he sees the 4th century as a golden age for Britain. In continuing the theme of the cultivated British elites having thoroughly internalised Roman culture and literature, the imagery of late Roman mosaic pavements alluding to religion, mystery cults and classical philosophy is given an in-depth analysis. These pavements are largely mythological in theme, reflecting the familiarity with and popularity of Ovid, Vergil, Hyginus and other Roman authors amongst a select group of society ‘who shared an education, social structure and belief system’ (p. 108). A bit of fiction again is stuck in the middle of this section, a religious and erotic encounter between two couples in a grove near Stonesfield villa. The couples talk about mosaics, quote poetry, sing and dance to Venus and Bacchus to the point of physical release, and discuss Plato, the Neoplatonist Plotinus and philosophy.

The survival of the Roman educational system and the pride in Romanitas amongst the Christian ruling classes from the 5th century is seen by Henig as an element of continuity. The Church was the institution that had ‘the same sort of supra-national organisation as the Roman Empire’ (p. 131), and through it some form of allegiance to Rome was maintained. Although the unity of the Church was threatened, the British ‘brand’ of Christianity, which he refers to as the Celtic Church, was eventually reconciled with the Roman Church after the mission of St. Augustine to Britain in A.D. 601.

In order to bring his story to an end, Henig closes with a last imaginary conversation between King Arthur and Guinn (or Asser) in Winchester in A.D. 893. In this conversation, Asser compares Arthur to Togidubnus, both men having brought culture and literature to their people and thereby safeguarded humanitas. King Alfred is portrayed by Henig as the ultimate heir to Verica and Togidubnus.

\section*{Conclusion}

This book, quite honestly, has been difficult to review, although it contains some very plausible alternative interpretations of the material and historical record. For one thing, because of its style it is not clear for what audience the book has been written. One might also ask how valid his conclusions are for Britain as a whole (Britain is in the title), if his focus is a select group of people in the south. Furthermore, in view of recent debates on the populations of Iron Age and Roman Britain, the use of the term ‘Celtic’ is somewhat suspect, or at least it needs some justification. Tribal names and territories are used as if they accurately relate to real pre-Roman groups and areas with defined borders, although it is quite clear that many, if not most, of them were Roman constructs that did not truly reflect the fluidity of the situation. The figures are scattered throughout the book without any reference in the text, so that one is never sure whether there will be a photograph or drawing somewhere in the next couple pages that illustrates a point. On the subject of illustrations, it is jarring to see an out of focus photograph as the image on the front cover. Finally, the fictional parts of the book pale in comparison to the good story telling of authors, such as Lindsey Davis, who make people and history come alive with more success.

\textbf{Maureen Caroll}

Maureen Carroll is Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Sheffield. Her research interests include the archaeology of Roman Europe, especially Germany and Gaul, and the archaeology of ancient gardens. She can be contacted at: p.m.carroll@sheffield.ac.uk

© Carroll 2003
© assemblage 2003