ABSTRACT

Conquering imperial powers often use religion to control indigenous populations. I argue that religion served this purpose in Roman Britain, while simultaneously fulfilling Britons' practical and spiritual requirements. Rome's State and Imperial Cults were overt instruments of social control, fostering awareness of Britain's subjugation and sanctifying Roman rule. Yet Roman and Celtic polytheism coalesced to allow considerable religious freedom outside the official Cults' bounds. Thus Romano-British religion benefited not only society, but also the individual.

BIOGRAPHY

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BETWEEN SOCIETY AND SPIRIT: THE POLITICAL, PRACTICAL AND PERSONAL ROLES OF RELIGION IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Religion in Roman Britain simultaneously served the practical and spiritual needs of its people while also strengthening Roman rule. Comparatively speaking, the Druids had been far more overt than Rome in using religion to exert power. Yet it should be noted that this opinion is of itself the result of Rome’s manipulation of religion to politically sully the Druids’ name. The State and Imperial Cults represent Rome’s clearest employment of religion to control the Romano-British. However even within this sphere of influence there lay potential for spiritual fulfilment. For a variety of reasons, the State and Imperial Cults likely held little sway over the Romano-British. Roman and Celtic religious precepts permitted, and even encouraged participation in multiple cults: these could provide spiritually for the devotee. Individuals’ practical needs also were addressed by maintaining the Pax Deorum, as demonstrated by the proliferation of Curse Tablets throughout the province. Religion in Roman Britain also addressed its inhabitants’ afterlife beliefs. In the Romano-British mindset, religion thus served people’s needs in daily life and also beyond the grave.

SOURCE PROBLEMS

 Archaeology

Before examining Romano-British religion, it is worthwhile highlighting some of the source problems. First, investigation of Romano-British religion is largely archaeological. This may create a misleading impression of religious life in Britain, as the bulk of excavations concentrate upon urban areas. Since the majority of Britain’s population was rural, archaeologists thus mostly examine the remains of religious practice for a tiny proportion of Britain’s population: the ‘Romanised’ city dwellers. Archaeologists examine only the physical manifestations of religion which have survived to the present day: this precludes knowledge of religious practices which leave none. Moreover, physical remains allow only a superficial glimpse into the nature of personal belief, which is often unique to individuals. Interpretation is another problem inherent to archaeology: modern conceptualisations of belief and religion influence perceptions of religious artefacts, and the ritual significance of many artefacts is unknown. With scant written evidence to re-enforce the archaeological record, these are largely open to conjecture.

 Epigraphy

Inscriptions too only provide a partial glimpse into religious life in Roman Britain. The materials and labour required for the erection of inscriptions were costly. They therefore give little evidence for the religious lives of the poor or slaves. Being found at predominantly urban military sites, inscriptions often carry martial overtones. This undermines contemporary understanding of Romano-British civilian religion. Moreover, inscriptions are often formulaic: they perhaps therefore reflect observance of religious conservatism, rather than personal spiritual fervour.

 Literary Sources

As with other areas of study concerning Roman Britain, literary sources yield relatively little evidence regarding religion. Tacitus’ Agricola contains a sliver of information regarding the construction of Roman templae. His Annals holds religious information for Britain only at its fringes. Besides this, however, early medieval Christian sources, including Gildas and Bede, are the only literary accounts which refer in detail to Romano-British religion. Though their Christianity does not make them inherently bad sources, they are nonetheless heavily biased against British paganism and therefore portray it negatively. Gildas, for instance, compares British paganism to that of Egypt, the Biblical pasture of demons and the possessed. Bede similarly uses tales of Christian martyrdom, such as that of St. Alban, to demonise paganism. Thus not only are Gildas and Bede removed temporally from the Roman period, but they also write through the lens of pietism. The overall silence of the literary record thus hampers scholarly inquiry regarding Romano-British religion.

THE DRUIDS

Rome’s employment of religion as an instrument of social control was arguably less overt than that of the Druids beforehand. It should be considered that the historical record of Druidism remains unclear, particularly so in Britain. Besides its exclusively Graeco-Roman viewpoint, literary evidence on Druidism almost solely refers to Gaul. Several sources suggest that the Druids shared religious power with other intellectual classes, including the Bards and the Vates. There is little evidence for the extent to which religious power was shared...
between these classes. Some sources refer to Druids only as teachers or philosophers.\textsuperscript{xxiv} Evidence for their religious role beyond this capacity is limited.\textsuperscript{xxv} Compounding the problem, Druidism is difficult to pinpoint within the archaeological record.\textsuperscript{xxvi} The extent to which Druidism framed pre-conquest British religion is thus open to conjecture.

Nonetheless, the available evidence suggests that Druids probably formed a religious intelligentsia in Gaul.\textsuperscript{xxvii} The same may be true in Britain. Druids likely held strong influence over public religion by overseeing sacrifice and divination among the Gallic tribes.\textsuperscript{xxviii} According to Caesar, Druids also enjoyed several political privileges as teachers of divination and religious lore, to the extent of immunity from army service or taxation.\textsuperscript{xxix} They likely held sway over intertribal affairs, and had the ability to traverse tribal boundaries unhindered.\textsuperscript{xxx} Considering the strong cultural and economic ties between Britain and Gaul, there is little reason to suppose British Druids did not exercise these privileges.\textsuperscript{xxxi} Certainly, the Druids would present a political threat to Roman order in Britain and Gaul sufficient to warrant Claudius’ proscription of Druidism and Suetonius Paulinus’ attack on the Druid stronghold at Anglesey.\textsuperscript{xxxii}

Furthermore, Druidic practice of human sacrifice perhaps gave them powers of life and death over Britons.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} This is a considerably more explicit political use of religion than Rome’s. Caesar suggests that Gallic ignorance of Druidic rulings was criminal, and that criminals under Druidic law were used as sacrificial victims.\textsuperscript{xxxiv} On the other hand, the extravagances of his and Strabo’s claims regarding the ‘wicker man’ and the many inaccuracies in the Bellum Gallicum regarding Gallo-British tribes necessitate caution.\textsuperscript{xxxv} Though Druidic human sacrifice is not unlikely, Caesar may exaggerate the extent to which Druids employed these powers.\textsuperscript{xxxvi} Archaeological evidence for Druidic human sacrifice is also questionable, as scholars perhaps impress the literary record of Druidism upon the archaeological. Yet possible evidence for human sacrifice exists. For instance, the stomach contents of ‘Lindow Man’ included mistletoe pollen.\textsuperscript{xxxvii} Pliny the Elder records that Druids “hold nothing more sacred than mistletoe,” and details its Druidic ritual significance.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} Lindow Man may thus represent an archaeological record of Druidic human sacrifice, perhaps consuming a ritual meal as part of a human sacrificial rite.\textsuperscript{xxxix} If Druids held such extraordinary religious clout in pre-Roman Britain, Rome appears comparatively open in its religious precepts.

Yet it must be acknowledged that these opinions are informed by the bias of Roman literary sources, which use human sacrifice rhetorically to illustrate Druids’ perceived barbarity.\textsuperscript{xli} This in itself reflects Rome’s political manipulation of religion. Blackening the Druids’ name served Rome’s purposes as the new masters of Britain, as Druids likely obstructed early Roman rule.\textsuperscript{xliii} They may have been instrumental in rallying anti-Roman fervour as suggested by their possible harbouring of fugitives from Caratacus’ rebellion, though Druidic resistance hardly constituted widespread revolt.\textsuperscript{xliii} Typically, Rome would show substantial leniency in dealing with provincial cults, so long as they did not reject the Roman State or Imperial Cults or act against Roman interests.\textsuperscript{xliii} The Druids may have done so. It was a similar rejection which provoked Rome’s first century Judean conflict, the only other case where Rome actively attempted to eradicate a native cult.\textsuperscript{xliii} Being formulated exclusively from Roman standpoints, it is therefore perhaps inevitable that Rome should appear more enlightened in the historical record when compared to Druids, as ancient commentators on Druidism are working from a hostile tradition.

**Rome’s Political Use of Religion in Britain**

Rome’s Imperial Cult is the most explicit example of Rome’s use of religious authority as a means of social control in Britain. The Cult was most visible in the construction of Classical-style temples.\textsuperscript{xlii} As shrines to Britain’s imperial rulers, temples of the Imperial Cult reminded urban Britons of Roman power, and provided an excellent means by which Britons could publicly demonstrate their loyalty to Rome.\textsuperscript{xliii} In Colchester, Claudius’ temple appears to have been the first substantive building erected. Its architectural sophistication and heavy cost thus provided Britons an early demonstration of Roman magnanimity.\textsuperscript{xliii} Like many other Roman temples, it probably served as a centre for municipal commerce.\textsuperscript{xliii} As London grew to become the provincial capital, so too the Imperial Cult likely shifted to the new British seat of Imperial power.\textsuperscript{xlii} The presence of these temples fostered awareness of Britain’s place within the greater imperial community, and the responsibilities this entailed.

The political influence of the Imperial Cult extended beyond the construction of temples. Many religious inscriptions are at least partially dedicated to the Emperor, or to some aspect of his being.\textsuperscript{xlii} This is unsurprising, considering Britain’s heavy legionary concentration.\textsuperscript{xlii} Many dedications are set up on behalf of the Emperor, rather than directly addressing his deified form by name.\textsuperscript{xlii} Similarly, many were set up to the institution of the Emperor, rather than any Emperor in particular.\textsuperscript{xlii} Numerous inscriptions of the Imperial Cult also conflate him
with other deities, many of which are native. However, these dedications do not necessarily reflect a wholly political manipulation of religion by Romans. Though dedications to the Emperor no doubt demonstrate loyalty, they may also be intended to foster peace and security for greater society. This serves not only the state’s interest but also the individual’s.

Some moderating factors should also be considered before dismissing the Imperial and State Cults as purely instruments of social control. It is often argued that participation in these was sterile and spiritually unfulfilling. Yet to some extent, they could fulfil the spiritual needs of Britain’s populace. This is evident in RIB 1791, where military officer Marcus Caecilius Donatius seeks an epiphanic revelation from the deified Empress Julia Domna.

The Virgin in her heavenly place rides upon the lion, bearer of corn, inventor of law, founder of cities, by whose gift it is our good fortune to know the gods; therefore she is Mother of the gods, Peace, Virtue, Ceres, the Syrian goddess, weighing life and laws in her balance. Syria has sent the constellation seen in the heavens to Libya to be worshipped. From this we have all learned. Thus, led by thy godhead, Marcus Caecilius Donatianus has understood, serving as Tribune in the post of Prefect by the Emperor’s gift.

Even with the overtones of the Imperial Cult, it is worth noting that he seeks the deified Empress’ help in a personal matter. He does not simply demonstrate imperial loyalty, but rather yearns for spiritual fulfilment expressed through syncretism with Eastern deities. Through such syncretism, the Imperial Cult could provide some degree of spiritual fulfilment.

British observance of Rome’s official cults also politically reinforced Roman authority. Dedications to the Capitoline Triad (along with their local equivalents) are prominent on Roman inscriptions, especially military ones. These served to support the wellbeing of Roman society. Since engagement in the State Cults involved attendance of public sacrifices, it impacted socially upon the public lives of the urban British. British domestic shrines to the Lares and gods of the hearth such as those found at Brandon, Suffolk, imply that the same held true in private spheres also. Their existence may imply willing acceptance of Rome even outside public view, or demonstration of one’s status in the Roman world. Since Lararia predominantly appear in wealthy villas, the latter may be the case. Conversely, while observance of the State Cults in the home could strengthen the securitas of Romano-British society, it also served to ensure domestic peace and evade fiscal disaster. Though not a British source, the Roman conceptualisation of the principle is best illustrated by Plautus’ Aulularia. Domestic observance of the State Cults was not therefore wholly political, as it tended Britons’ parochial necessities also.

It is also questionable how much influence the State Cults actually had over the Britons. Though physical evidence for the State Cult’s presence abounds, it appears largely fused with native Celtic practice. Classical-style temples are few in Britain: architecturally most British temples are influenced by native tradition. The State Cults certainly influenced the urban Romanised populace, as may be seen through Togidubnus’ early construction of temples to Neptune and Minerva at Verulamium. Yet beyond municipal boundaries, it is unlikely to have affected the daily lives of native pastoral labourers who make up the bulk of the British population. Indeed, even within city walls, the Cults perhaps exerted only limited influence over daily life. Being orthopraxic, State and Imperial Cults arguably did little to sway everyday decisions so long as their gods were placated by sacrifice. Moreover, Roman deities were frequently conflated with native ones through the process of interpretatio Romana. Arguably, this suggests these native practices held greater prevalence in Britain, particularly at traditional native cult centres such as that of Sulis at Bath.

PRACTICAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF RELIGION IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Placing the gods also served pragmatic purposes, maintaining material wellbeing in everyday life. Crucially, prayers invoked upon Curse tablets served the needs of the individual, rather than the state. Many are intended to secure deities’ help in recovering stolen or lost items, and invoke divine vengeance upon others for personal wrongs. A good example is RIB 306: ‘To the god Nodens. Silvianus has lost a ring. He has dedicated half of it to Nodens. Among those with the name Senicianus, grant no health until he brings it to the temple of Nodens.’ Since they were often hidden, Curse tablets were not generally intended for public viewing. This suggests that private contractual relationships existed between gods and humans in Britain, which went beyond underpinning Rome’s welfare. Many invoke the names of local deities. A handful of these are written in native Brythonic language (albeit employing Latin script), and many are inscribed with native British names. From this one may interpret that even Britons outside Roman influence or who clung conservatively to Celtic cultures, pursued this reciprocal relationship.
Furthermore, observance of Rome’s State religion did not preclude membership in other cults. In fact, the concept of syncretism encouraged engagement with multiple deities as varied manifestations of a greater unified spiritual plane, including imported foreign Mystery Cults.\textsuperscript{lixxi} The individual’s role in Mystery Cults was central to their practice, as perhaps best expressed in Apuleius’ \textit{Golden Ass}.\textsuperscript{lixxii} Through personal relationships with the gods, such as Mithras, Isis, Serapis and the Judeo-Christian God, devotees sought revelation of divine mysteries.\textsuperscript{lixxiii} Whether or not revelation was gained, these religions could potentially give whatever spiritual sustenance the Romano-British required, providing the devotee a place in the afterlife and moral guidance for daily routines.\textsuperscript{lixxiv} The modern scholar living in secular post-enlightenment society can construe adherence to orthodox moral codes as social control. Yet participation in Mystery Cults was voluntary; it was the devotee’s choice to live by their principles. Once more, however, it can be argued that practice of the Mystery Cults was confined to Britain’s urban wealthy, with the possible exception of Christianity.\textsuperscript{lixxv} Indeed, it is difficult to gauge the extent of their influence across the province. Nevertheless, the wide spread of Eastern cultic artefacts and possible temples throughout settled areas of Britain attests their practice and acceptance.\textsuperscript{lixxvi}

Moreover, religion in Roman Britain also served the afterlife beliefs of its people both intra and extramural.\textsuperscript{lixxvii} Religion in Britain thus served individuals’ welfare in both mortal and otherworldly realms.\textsuperscript{lixxviii} Afterlife beliefs are perhaps intrinsic to human existence; it was for this reason that RIB 292 (a Christian funerary monument) urges the interred: “Live in God.”\textsuperscript{lixxix} The influence of religion upon afterlife beliefs is further attested by the provision of grave goods by the living for the dead in ancient British burial.\textsuperscript{lxxxi} The inclusion of artefacts including (but not limited to) animal remains, amulets, weapons, and provisions for the feast of the dead in British graves attests to their requirement in the next life.\textsuperscript{lxxxi} Indeed, literary evidence suggests parallel belief in the immortal soul between Druids and Romans.\textsuperscript{lxxx} Post mortem decapitation in burials testifies archaeologically that this belief was shared between Romans and native Britons, and suggests the Head Cult’s continuity from the late Iron Age throughout the Roman period.\textsuperscript{lxxxi} Rome’s political use of religion therefore likely did not affect native belief in the afterlife, since the Britons believed that the human soul was encased in the cranium.

CONCLUSION

Religion in Roman Britain fulfilled the needs of both Romano-British society and the individual within it. Rome was arguably less overt than the Druids had been in employing religion as a means of social control. The State and Imperial Cults represent Rome’s most clear employment of religion to control the Romano-British. Yet even they could cater to the individual’s spiritual wants. The State and Imperial Cults likely held little sway over the Romano-British. Roman and Celtic polytheism allowed participation in whatever rituals the devotee required for spiritual solace. Curse Tablets show that the \textit{Pax Deorum} also served individuals’ daily requirements beyond those of the state. While serving the Roman institution, British religion also succoured the personal needs of its people in life and death.

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