Editorial

The study and enjoyment of Roman Britain are a highly political affair, in the sense that the determination of the allocation of resources to conserve and record its physical remains at national and local level, and the formation of opinion, in terms of educational policy, on the importance and relevance of developing our understanding of a long past imperial society in a post-imperial Britain are political issues. As we come to the end of the century it is appropriate to reflect on the strength and fragility of our current situation.

In the case of relevance, for example, should we suppose that the celebration of the millennium has no place in the study of Roman Britain, we might reflect that events about two thousand years ago were shaping the origins of the cities of Canterbury, Colchester and St Albans, and providing a context for the invasion of A.D. 43. That, and the subsequent Roman conquest of Britain, have left their mark in many ways, not least perhaps in the origin of the kingdoms of England and Scotland and the principality of Wales. It is still too early to discern what impact, if any, the creation of the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly will have on the formation of new national identities and the treatment of the Roman occupation. Will there be a greater interest in the indigenous past, say in prehistory and the formation of the early medieval kingdoms, than in the Roman imperial interlude? At the same time we may speculate whether regionalisation will have a similar impact, or lead to a fragmentation of the treatment of the English past.

More retrospectively, at the end of the century it is certainly worth reflecting on how far the subject of Roman Britain has moved forward in the last hundred years. At the beginning of the century large-scale excavations, such as those of southern towns at Silchester and Caerwent, or of military sites in the north at Corbridge or Newstead, were beginning to characterise the period and shape our understanding of the Roman past. Much of the century has been pre-occupied with the political and military history of the province, in trying to make sense of the written sources of whatever kind in relation to the material record. Archaeological inquiry in Roman Britain was, to a considerable extent, subservient to those scant sources, with considerable efforts extended to engage a closer rapprochement between sometimes irreconcilable sources. The second half of the century has seen the development of a greater variety of approaches, and new methodologies and influences have revolutionised the quality and character of information that has been, and can be, obtained. Rescue archaeology has played a major part in this revolution, not least in drawing our attention to the richness and diversity of the evidence, and to the native rather than the Roman resplendent in villa or town-house. The celebration of thirty years of *Britannia* is a testimony in itself to the exponential growth of knowledge and understanding of Roman Britain.

In the wake of this expansion, we now seek ways to regulate our acquisition of knowledge, and we endeavour to prioritise our research. In the 1970s the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments first sought advice of this Society on what it perceived to be the priorities in relation to the work the state might fund through its rescue programme. Too much was being discovered in advance of destruction through developments of varying kinds for it all to be adequately treated and more focus had to be given to ensure that some sites were more thoroughly examined than others. That adequate treatment inevitably threw up large amounts of new information relating to diet, environment, material culture, technology, etc. and new questions over their interpretation. Thus further thought had to be given to priorities in the preparation of sites and their associated material and environmental assemblages for publication. Concerns over the cost to the state of all aspects of rescue archaeology led in 1990 to the development of PPG 16 and the philosophy that the developer should pay for resulting damage to the environment. While at first sight this might have seemed an answer to the crisis of funding, in that

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the application of policy offered the prospect of safeguarding either by preservation *in situ*, or by record through field investigation, there is little doubt that problems not so dissimilar to those which surrounded rescue archaeology between the 1960s and 1980s prevail today. The competitive environment of post-PPG16 archaeology undoubtedly introduces problems associated with both adequate funding of rescue fieldwork and of subsequent post-excavation and publication. It is salutory to reflect that of the fifty or so major papers published in the journal in the last five years only some ten per cent represent final publication of post-PPG 16 fieldwork. The need to clarify academic objectives for justification of work carried out at each and every stage remains exactly the same as in pre-PPG 16 days. Moreover, the need to retain a firm overview of all that is happening to understand how it contributes to the wider picture is more pressing than ever. While individual desk-top and field evaluations may seem to be contributing little, in a wider context the positive and negative evidence that each provides does serve to inform a wider canvas. The volume of archaeological work being undertaken at the close of the millennium across Britain is enormous, but we have very little sense of its collective value, whether at a regional or national level. Debate at national level on research agendas, such as at the recent Roman Archaeology Conference in Durham (to inform the work of English Heritage), or within the regions, is a vital part of continuing effort to identify priorities, and develop new areas of interest. Such a process increases the tension within the national agencies of Cadw, English Heritage and Historic Scotland creating stark contrasts between the funding of projects which outstrip resources derived from the developer and developing research frameworks and syntheses which provide the templates against which new work can be measured. And there is so much to be done: to develop our understanding of the changing rhythms of daily life, the changing role of material culture in society, the tensions between Roman and native, the transitions from Iron Age to Roman, or Roman to Anglo-Saxon, the changing nature of urbanisation or of rural society, and so on. Our priorities continue to evolve or be re-asserted.

Much of the thrust of rescue archaeology is towards sites which enjoy no protection, either because they are not recognised as a category deserving of protection, or because they are relatively common. It is extremely welcome that the establishment in late 1998 of the Arts and Humanities Research Board, by the funding authorities for higher education for Britain and Northern Ireland, offers the possibility of competing for research funds to investigate problems which would not otherwise attract resources to them. These might include researching unthreatened sites or developing generic projects of an analytical or synthetic character. In the new arrangements it is possible to apply for funds up to £100,000 in any one year for a maximum of five years. The competition will undoubtedly be stiff, but the new body offers the prospect of undertaking original research on a scale previously inconceivable.

Notwithstanding the abundance of new information and ideas and their richness and variety, the University sector, which, technically, can provide the resource through academics' research time, has substantially broadened its profile of teaching and research in archaeology; prehistory is significantly more popular than historic archaeology. Driven by the Higher Education Funding Councils' need to demonstrate accountability in respect of research through the quinquennial Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), University departments have increasingly looked overseas for their research basis. The reasons for this are complex: in part a need in other sectors of Europe and the Mediterranean to engage British-trained expertise in local problems, in part a mistaken perception that the recognition of international quality—an essential requisite to obtain a high rating in the exercise—can only be enhanced through research carried out beyond these shores, in part the relative ease with which it is possible to make a substantial contribution with limited resources overseas rather than at home, and so on. Preparations are now underway for the RAE 2001. It will be interesting to see how many publications are listed[1] which relate to Roman Britain,

[1] Each individual entered in the exercise in arts and humanities subject areas can list no more than four items of research output for the period between 1 January 1994 and 30 December 2000.

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or to Britain between the late Iron Age and the sub-Roman/early medieval period. There is no doubt that the RAE has focused Universities' attention on appointing the best researchers, and not necessarily in relation to any policy that requires certain subject areas to be covered by degree programmes. There is no doubt, too, that, with the expansion of the subject in terms of interest in European and Mediterranean, but also in aspects of 'World' archaeology, as well as in scientific approaches, insular archaeology and especially historic archaeology, whether Roman or Medieval, has become less important in the narrow context of archaeological funding within the Universities. Nevertheless, Romano-British archaeology continues to be part of a much broader and thriving study of the classical tradition, while medieval archaeology contributes to a vigorous interest in the wider world of medieval studies. In a narrow context we need to be alert to the possibility of certain subject areas becoming minority interests in Universities within the next few years, and of the need for active campaigning to keep them alive, while being confident of their place in a wider framework. It will be interesting to see what emphasis, if any, is placed on specific subject areas, as the Quality Assurance Agency (set up to monitor and raise standards in Further and Higher Education) proceeds to the establishment of benchmark standards for archaeology at first degree level. The next few years will be challenging for all of us, but it is vital that the 'user' community of our subject area—national agencies, professional units, local societies, amateurs—is active and coherent in its demands for what it perceives to be appropriate for carrying forward our subject in the national interest.

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