Myths on the Edge of Empire

Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 132

Myths on the Edge of Empire

How Classical Mythology Spread throughout Roman Britain

Steven Paul Turner

Archaeopress Archaeology

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
13-14 Market Square
Bicester
Oxfordshire OX26 6AD
United Kingdom

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80583-143-3
ISBN 978-1-80583-144-0 (e-Pdf)

Contents

Abbreviations

ADS	Archaeology Data Service
ASPROM	The Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics
CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
CSIR	*Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*
EDCS	*Epigrafik-Datenbank Clauss-Slaby*
EDH	*Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg*
LIMC	*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*
PAS	Portable Antiquities Scheme
RIB	*The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*
RMB	*Roman Mosaics of Britain*
RSRB	The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain
TM	Trismegistos Collections

Introduction

The arrival of the Roman legions in the British Isles in 43 CE would accelerate a complex process leading to the creation of Britannia, a province destined to last for over 350 years. The people on the island would find themselves increasingly becoming part of a wider cultural network and would witness the introduction of new genres of architecture, urbanisation, social structure, language, imagery, and religion. One aspect of this new culture, itself an integral part of so many others, is that of Graeco-Roman mythology. This book is based on my PhD which sought to better understand its proliferation via the examination of extensive physical evidence that names or depicts these gods, heroes, and monsters. Which myths proliferated and which are rarely encountered? Where, how, and why did people interact with them? Did this change over time or at different locations?

Whilst there have been studies of object types or certain deities, this is the first time such questions have been asked and answered using collected evidence of classical mythology at the nationwide level.

Definition and Meaning of Myth

As the primary topic of this research is mythology, it is prudent to first consider why this was an important subject for contemporary people. At its heart, mythology provides a cosmological framework that sets out the deeds of gods and heroes, containing narratives that are models for human life, aiding exploration of the emotions involved in major events such as death, love, and war. Moreover, mythology encourages a shared cultural bond.

These concepts, with their stories of gods, inevitably entail a religious or supernatural dimension, and it must be remembered that, for many people living in Roman Britain, mythological narratives were not necessarily just isolated or amusing parables, but the personages within them were considered as living gods or figures with important historical, sacred, or allegorical components.

Ultimately, this work requires a term to refer to the entities found in these classical narratives. The term 'deity', adequate in many cases, is too restrictive as it excludes those such as Pegasus or heroes such as Ajax. I have decided here to use the simple term 'myth', chosen for its brevity and gravity. It is acknowledged that the term might cause some initial confusion, as it might be assumed to refer to a narrative such as the abduction of Europa. Indeed, artefacts do exist that show such episodes, but here the focus is still on the individual characters that form part of that story, since without them the event would be otherwise unidentifiable.

Models of Cultural Transmission

One primary concern here is how aspects of culture are transmitted. By the 1990s, the long-used term 'Romanisation' began to come under critical scrutiny by many scholars for being a top-down unidirectional process of assimilation, Roman to non-Roman; it precluded mutual

cultural exchange.[1] An additional issue is that this process requires at least two identifiably distinct starting cultures from which to synthesise a new third. This is problematic from the outset, since terms like 'Celt' and 'Roman' represent overlapping cultures that were in no way pure or even easily defined by people who lived within them. Even the religion of Rome, with its plethora of classical deities and rituals, was reshaped by its own multicultural nature. In Britannia, there is no evidence that people living there considered themselves as being part of some larger-scale nation.

We are dealing with a complex system that cannot be fully tamed with simplistic terms. There were so many deities involved, and so many peoples who were Roman by name but hailed from all manner of cultural and geographical origins, each with their own cultural concerns. To further complicate matters, the same icons and rituals can be understood and used in different ways by different people at different times.[2] There is good reason why there have been so many attempts at terminology to describe these processes, yet none have won complete acceptance.

Nevertheless, as this work is focused on material evidence, a term is required to describe the formation of objects that seem to present novel combinations of features known to exist independently elsewhere. For example, there might be a statue that looks just like Minerva and yet the dedicatory inscription on its base may be to an entirely different deity. The term 'hybridisation', adopted from the natural sciences,[3] best fits the requirements here, if employed as an ideologically neutral label. However, it says little about why such objects were made—that is the responsibility of a model that explains such processes.

Recent models of cultural transmission take a wide view whose key observation is that cultures are rarely truly isolated but are influenced and influence others; this is one of the key tenets of transculturalism wherein a culture is constituted by processes of interaction and change, allowing far more nuance and possibility. Cultures, then, should not be treated as being immutable and isolated. In turn, aspects of cultures can be viewed as forming part of a wider network, a model that can be extended as geographically far as required; this is essentially the viewpoint of globalisation in which local and global culture are not treated as opposing forces but are interdependent. As large as the Roman world was, it still sits within an even wider global network and could still affect and be affected by those it touched directly or indirectly. Thus, thinking in terms of globalisation when discussing Roman Britain allows us to view its inhabitants as more than semi-isolated islanders, but rather as part of something much bigger, affected by other members of that network and in turn affecting them. This perspective moves beyond the provincial level, enabling us to better identify patterns of unity or diversity,[4] and understand the interactions that produced new cults that were simultaneously local and Roman.[5] Note also that changes need not be caused by an external influencing source, but from some internal trigger; a change can be seeded from just one person's individual understanding of a myth.

---

[1] See, among others, Millett 1990a, Webster 1997, Barrett 1997, Watts 1998, Woolf 1998, Green 1998: 19, Pitts 2017: 56, Revell 2008: 193.
[2] Burnham 1995: 121.
[3] Hodos 2017: 5.
[4] Witcher 2017: 645.
[5] Rives 2000: 271.

Globalisation should not, then, be thought of as meaning everyone so affected becoming culturally homogenous. Rather, local concerns with identity can become amplified by a growing awareness that one's culture is different from others within your wider network, creating tension between the desire to feel included and the fear of losing what is considered one's own. Thus, globalisation can produce hybridisation.[6] For example, even before the Roman invasion, the Trinovantian aristocracy had already interfaced with a wider mainland network, adopting some forms of material culture to signify status and identity, which included Gallo-Belgic drinking beakers, new burial practices, and coin minting.[7] There are also categories of people who purposely or passively promote transculturality, such as traders, migrants, seafarers, or even those with highly specialised professions such as interpreters,[8] any of whom might perceive or gain an advantage in following that path.[9] There are even historical precedents for the deliberate creation and dissemination of such cultural phenomena: the Ptolemaic dynasty actively constructed and promoted the cult of Serapis, a deity synthesised from Greek and Egyptian elements, in an attempt to unite different peoples. There is no reason to believe that the Romans would not have taken full advantage of this approach.

To some extent, these networks were physical, built of roads, ports, and towns; they also encompass conceptual aspects such as religious or political linkages.[10] The Roman Empire, by virtue of its size and multiculturality, enabled this process more than ever. Globalisation also models the inclusion of religion and myths that were neither local nor Roman, such as the cult of Isis, whose roots remained firmly in Egypt yet made it to Britain.[11]

For these reasons, and for their adaptability and ability to model complexity, the concepts of globalisation and transculturalism were deemed eminently suitable here. Another theory, Darwinism, will also be occasionally alluded to, as it is a helpful mechanism for describing changes over time. This theory is gaining more traction in the field of archaeology, but it is still relatively new.[12] Darwinism can be adapted to model cultural transmission by considering the variation and similarity in artefacts as being attributable to an exchange of information using non-genetic mechanisms—that is to say their characteristics are inherited in ways other than DNA.[13] Humans have cumulative cultural adaptation, meaning that things can be learned, then altered and transmitted to others, including future generations; thus, they can survive successfully, go extinct, or 'mutate' into something novel.[14] The wider cultural space is treated rather like an ecosystem. Our artefacts are the fossil record, frozen moments of evolution in a continuous process that has no goal or endpoint; they can be grouped into sets or classes, tracked through time, and any persistent lineages explored to produce an historical narrative.[15] The challenge for any model of evolutionary archaeology is that it needs enough time for any differences to evolve and become apparent. Fortunately, Britannia was

[6] Hodos 2017: 5–6.
[7] Witcher 2017: 637; Rives 2000: 269; Eckardt 2000: 8.
[8] Michaels 2019: 4.
[9] Shennon 2002: 56–58.
[10] Witcher 2017: 641–642.
[11] Rives 2000: 271.
[12] O'Brien and Lyman 2000: 71.
[13] Eerkens and Lipo 2007: 240–242.
[14] Boyd and Richerson 2005: 3–4.
[15] O'Brien and Lyman 2000: 77.

not a fleeting concern, but one with a lifespan of over 350 years, and one that has left behind numerous artefacts.

Outline of the Material Culture of Roman Britain

The most practical way to ascertain more about the topic is by engaging with surviving artefactual evidence. The sources of data used here were numerous, ranging from repositories of archaeological data to works on specific themes or groups of objects[16] This section presents an overview of the most common types of surviving objects that are known to depict or name mythology.

Altars

An altar was a physical focus for veneration of the sacred, sculpted from a single slab of stone and often topped with a flat surface for the placement of ritual objects or offerings. Most of these hefty objects fall in the 30–130cm height range, providing ample surfaces for inscribed vows, mythological imagery, or carvings of tools pertaining to ritual praxis such as a *patera* (libation bowl), blade, or jug.

Figurines

These are small representations of deities and heroes, differentiated from statues by being designed to be portable and usually made from copper alloy or ceramic rather than stone. These small objects could be placed in shrines or moved as required for ritual or display purposes. Figurines are amongst the most prevalent mythologically-themed objects from Roman Britain, with newly discovered examples being reported almost every week. Note that this grouping does not include small busts of mythological characters designed to be part of a larger object as a fitting or a mount for a piece of furniture, chest, or door.

Jewellery

Personal objects made from precious, semi-precious, or otherwise desirable materials such as jet, or even common material such as bone given value by being intricately carved. Collectively, this group is the most common type of object to depict mythology. Objects known to depict mythology include bracelets, finger-rings, amulets, brooch, necklaces, pins, pendants, and engraved gems (intaglios); some of the latter were housed in rings and may have been used as signet devices. These personal objects likely fulfilled many roles, and these include being an item of fashion, a display of status, a signifier of one's association with those things considered Roman (*romanitas*), or as a protective amulet against evil influence or bad luck (apotropaic).

[16] The most frequently used include The Archaeology Data Service (ADS), Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), Historic England, and major museums such as the British Museum, Ashmolean, Museum of London, Museum of Scotland, the National Museums of Wales.*Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* (*CSIR*), *Roman Mosaics of Britain* (*RMB*), *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (*RIB*), *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (*LIMC*), and *Epigrafik-Datenbank Clauss-Slaby* (*EDCS*), The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain (RSRB), and Museums focused solely on Roman Britain such as the Roman Baths Museum, Verulamium Museum, and Corinium Museum. Also, key journals such as *Britannia*, *The Bulletin of The Association for Roman Archaeology* (*ARA*), *Mosaic*, and archeological reports and other specialist publications.

Jewellery is also often discovered as part of a hoard, which is a collection of objects sometimes purposely buried by its owner, presumably to avoid theft by hostile agents. A good example is the Snettisham Jeweller›s Hoard, which includes over a hundred engraved gems.

Mosaics

Large permanent floor or pavement decorations composed from thousands of small, colourful pieces (*tesserae*) made of stone, ceramic, or other hard materials. Their large size allows the display of geometric designs but also extensive mythological scenes that are not feasible on other objects, which are sometimes thematically connected with other mosaics nearby. Clearly, these objects where time consuming to construct and therefore expensive; hence, they are only found in larger settlements or private villas. As will be seen, many Romano-British mosaics deviate from what can be considered a classical style, both in terms of artistic interpretation, execution, and subject matter. It is this aspect that makes mosaics particularly relevant to the theme of this work, and thus mosaics will be touched on in most chapters.

Sculpture

This label is used to describe a broad category of objects that are relatively heavy, and generally immovable. Included are architectural features such as pillars and archways, statues, carved reliefs, and slabs, mostly made from stone, but sometimes copper-alloy in the case of statuettes.

These appear primarily in larger settlements and military bases and are an impressive visual metaphor for the idea that the gods are everywhere. About a third of these objects contain inscriptive evidence in the form of dedications to deities, many of which were made by or on behalf of military units.

Tools

These are small objects that fulfilled a functional purpose such as razor blades, spoons, weights used for measuring commodities, and all manner of other useful devices. Very often just the bronze handle of a tool survives, with any iron blade lost to time, but it is the handle that incorporates mythological imagery. Despite their apparent mundane nature, many of them may have fulfilled a ritualistic role.

Votives

This is something of an umbrella term that includes the myriad physical objects offered to the gods in the hope of gaining divine aid. Sometimes they are in the form of votive plaques, which can be a rich source of epigraphical evidence and reveal much about the owner's life and concerns. They might contain an image of the god being petitioned with an accompanying inscription. There are also many surviving curse tablets (*defixiones*), which are sheets of lead or other material, inscribed with a request to do harm to someone for a wrongdoing. There is

debate as to whether a curse tablet is a type of votive,[17] but ultimately, as they also represent an interaction with the divine in the hope of gaining some benefit, they form a natural sub-category here.

Portability

In addition to type, artefacts are further delineated in terms of their overall size and movability, as it was reasoned these physical properties would have influenced or defined their usage and therefore might contribute to a better understanding of its employment. Larger items intended for permanent or semi-permanent placement may have been viewed by more people and thus had a longer-term influence, whereas personal items might better reflect the personal choices and beliefs of individuals. The label 'portable' is applied throughout for smaller items such as jewellery, curse tablets, or figurines. The label 'structural' was used for artefacts that are primarily intended for semi-permanent or permanent placements which tended to be architectural in nature and includes archways, altars, mosaics, and dedication plaques

Excluded types

Note that coins and pottery were not included, for several reasons. Firstly, as one focus of this work is determining people's choices and perceptions of myths, these common products received as part of daily life can be justifiably excluded. Secondly, these items were often produced *en masse* externally to the province and thus say more about agendas and practices more applicable to their place of origin. In the case of pottery, most of it is cheap and functional, and any accompanying imagery is less relevant than that found on other media,[18] likely playing a simple decorative role whose details are easily overlooked by observers.[19] Thirdly, cataloguing such items would be a mammoth undertaking subject to constant update and change due to the sheer number of items found. Finally, and related to the previous point, the vast numbers of such items would swamp and skew any emergent data patterns in comparison with other types of artefacts.

Data Overview

By way of introduction, the entire set of almost 1900 objects is visualised as a heat map, overlaid with the Roman road network and centres of interest such as towns and some key temples sometimes referenced in this book (Figure 1). From this plot, major sites of archaeological and historical interest can easily be seen, with the highest concentrations of finds along the militarised northern border, in towns in the southeast, and at sacred sites in the west such as *Aquae Sulis* and Uley. The rest of this book will be concerned with investigating and explaining these patterns.

[17] The question as to what extent a curse tablet can be considered a votive is raised and discussed in an online article by Graham 2017.
[18] Millett 1990a: 157.
[19] Webster 1986b: 83–84.

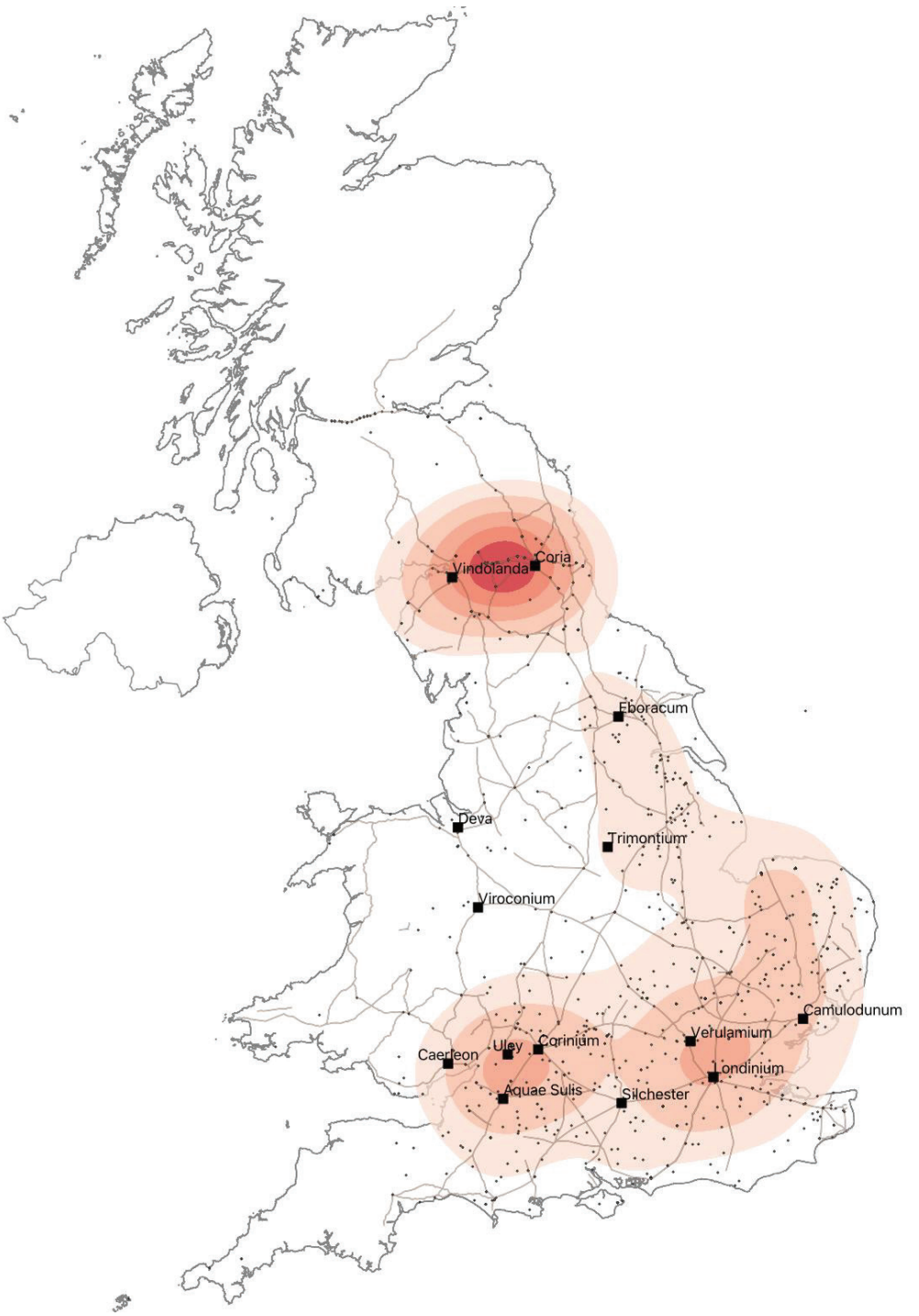

Figure 1 Plot of the entire database overlaid with the Roman road network and key sites. Sample size 1,897.

The Findings

Three major sections, each building on those before it, will gradually work towards giving a fuller picture of classical mythology in Roman Britain.

1. Case studies. Each will focus on a single mythological entity (deity, hero, or monster) and examine its occurrences throughout the era.
2. Thematic studies. The discussion will then move on to wider patterns found with myths in military and urban contexts. There will also be an investigation into the idea of myths occurring in combination.
3. Final syntheses. This will present an extensive survey of the appearances of myths within different media, including special consideration of epigraphical evidence. It will present a summary of every myth that occurred with any significant frequency in Roman Britain, presented as a 'data panel' with spatial distributions, frequencies, and a timeline. Finally, there will be a catalogue of the means (or routes) by which mythology was transmitted across Britannia.