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Britons abroad : the mobility of Britons and the circulation of British-made objects in the Roman Empire

Ivleva, T.A.

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Author: Ivleva, Tatiana Alexandrovna

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Conclusions: “it’s the same as here, but different”³⁹⁸

This study set out to explore ‘Britishness’ abroad in the Roman Empire on a variety of levels: individual (personal migration from Britain) and communal (the occurrence of British military units abroad); human mobility and mobility of artefacts; movement of British-born and Continental-born to and from Britain. It has shown that the archaeological data and epigraphic evidence should not be seen as existing at opposite ends of the spectrum. They do not stand in opposition to each other, but rather complement each other, and in some ways even converge together. By focusing on two types of evidence, a one-sided view was avoided and ‘Britishness’, seemingly elusive, came to light in words and artefacts. Identity/identities took centre stage in the discussion on the British military units (chapter 3), the occurrence of Britons (chapter 4) and British-made artefacts (chapter 5) abroad. Identity/identities are highly variable on every level in terms of the employment of symbols and particularly in terms of the scale of expression. Because identities can be put on and off, like clothes, looking at the expression of ‘Britishness’ on a variety of levels revealed a great deal about the variability and possibilities of the choices one faced and chose from when moving to a new territory.

The study began by outlining the three notions of identity, migration and diaspora and provided a review of the current state of all three terms in Roman studies (chapter 1). The aim was to see how these notions could be approached from the perspective of archaeology. A model was proposed based on ‘the duality of structure’ theory, where each object, artefact, phrase was approached from two sides: essentialised and changeable; the former being static, the latter depending on the environment and contexts. Each part is “the precondition and the product of the other” (Revell 2009, 10). The idea of *habitus* was also introduced to emphasise the shared and unifying ground for all expressed identities, taking into account that each identity is a sum of its duality as well as of acts of routinisation, discourse and evocation. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to summarise how the outlined acts are envisaged in the sources studied and how the notion of ‘Britishness’ operated on the levels of military units, moved individuals and artefacts.

To start with, acts of routinisation, discourse and evocation in the medium of material culture and epigraphy can be observed on an individual level. The formulaic expressions recorded on monuments, such as funerary expression ‘to the spirits of the dead’ or votive ‘gladly, willingly and deservedly fulfilled a vow’, and the fixed phrasing such as mentioning name, age and origin, are routinised acts giving us the first level of information relating to daily-ness and the mundane. The simple recording of a name, age and origin, preceding or followed by traditional epigraphic formulae, is a very commonplace activity, yet it is a result of a fundamental process of self-identification with a particular group and a refusal to be part of another group. In the same way, British-made brooches were brought to the Continent: their commonplace functionality was the main reason they travelled – mobile individuals needed something to pin their clothes with. By changing the social landscape, however, their owners and the objects themselves started to be looked at in a new way, moving to the level of discourse. The process of identification is a part of acts of choosing, refusing and re-inventing, when an individual had a choice in naming his/her origin (i.e. tribal, urban, invented by Romans) and a choice in how a brooch might be used, or whether to use it or put it deliberately to its functional death. The particular associations a person had with an object or the land

³⁹⁸ Olsen 2010, 7 quoting John Travolta’s character in *Pulp Fiction*.

(s)he left influenced the choices made, which brings us to the level of evocation and personal feelings.

Each type of evidence was looked at from two levels, the level of “essentiality”, which transcends meanings, and the level of “changeability”, where practices are transferable and flexible. The former aspect is the physical testimony of the presence of mobile individuals from Britain, which takes the form of inscriptions cut on stone and bronze certificates of Roman citizenship. Their physicality opened for us the biographies and histories of British auxiliary units and *numeri*, provided us with places and sites where one can look for the presence of ‘Britishness’ in symbols, words and artefacts. British-made brooches, as bodies of various cultural, ethnic, gendered, status-related meanings and associations, through their physical aspect of pinning clothes together provided us as well with the places and sites where one can look for mobile individuals. While pinning together clothes, they were also aids in “pinning down the identit[ies]” of their owners, observers, makers and admirers (Pudney 2011), which can be studied by moving onto the second level of changeability.

By looking at the evidence from the first level of analysis, the following conclusions were proposed. The history and development of British auxiliary units and *numeri* did not differ from other units serving during the High Roman Empire: the recruitment policy followed the pattern introduced for other auxiliaries (Holder 1980; Haynes 1999a, 1999b). The result was the decline of the service of British-borns in the British auxiliary units and *numeri* in the early second century. However, while the grand scale analysis showed that the units were conformity in comparison with other troops, on the lower scale each unit provided pictures of various forms of adaptations and social evolution. There is evidence for the existence of a plurality of cultural and ethnic identities within the British troops. The significance of this result lies in the realisation that each unit should be looked at individually, the histories and biographies should be compared and contrasted leading to a picture of ‘diversity within unity’.

An interesting phenomenon is the major decline of the service of British-borns in British auxiliary units and *numeri* in the second century (chapter 3), but a rather dramatic increase in the presence of British-borns as servicemen abroad in other legionary and auxiliary troops in the same period (chapter 4). While the Roman administration stopped replenishing the British auxiliary units with British recruits, Britons themselves took their military careers in their own hands: there may have been voluntarily enlistment for the service abroad. However, the low number of surviving monuments erected by soldiers of British descent and their relatives serving in British units might be connected with the irrelevancy of mentioning their tribal affiliation, as their ancestry was perfectly obvious to all (cf. Oltean 2009 and van Driel-Murray 2009).

British-born civilians are fairly absent from the epigraphic record in any periods, although their mobility should not be excluded. Some may not have wished to show their origin and in some cases, in the absence of a clear origin indicator on their monument, the onomastic analysis of a person’s name suggested the geographical origin of the bearer. It is unclear what made these people neglect their origin but it may have been the custom not to mention one’s place of birth. In the British case, a lack of such a custom or a total lack of ‘epigraphic habit’ was suggested, with other forms of display being preferred to inscriptions. Whenever the choice fell on recording origin, ethnic identification was not only confined to the identification by tribe, town or province, but the label *natione Britto* was introduced. The use of this label started to increase in the early second century and became the ethnic label for the second-generation of migrants, in the absence of pre-existing one.

British-made brooches are not different in their mobility to the movement of other personal accessories in time and space. The occurrence of British-made brooches imported to the Continent “need not be taken at face value in every case. Their

distribution may not always reflect straightforward determinants such as trade, but may stem from more complex circumstances” (Swan 2009b, 90 on the pottery imported into Britain with my modification). In the present study a correlation between the presence of migrants from Britain and British-made brooches overseas was detected, leading to the suggestion that the jewellery items travelled to the mainland with their owners. They arrived at their final destinations “with the person wearing the objects” or as part of the personal possessions; in most cases such persons were usually army followers or soldiers themselves (Swift 2000, 208 reached the same conclusion for fourth-century dress accessories).

Through this study the necessity to approach the evidence from the level of changing meanings has been made clear. Objects and words cannot be used to simply ‘read off’ what they stood for. Naming an origin on an inscription is an important and significant, yet, ultimate and final act; a person might have had a variety of ‘origins’ and ‘ethnicities’ during his or her lifetime (Collins 2008), while at the very end the *choice* fell on but one out of many. The question *why* this particular origin was chosen is another issue (chapter 6). British-made brooches are not evidence of British ethnicity or any ethnicity for that matter, yet, their ‘made in Britain’ quality gave us the opportunity to speak of ‘material ethnicity resonance’ (chapter 6).

One of the most valuable aspects of this research has been the opportunity it gave to prove that “brooches are more than meets the eye” (Jundi and Hill 1998). By looking on a site-by-site basis and reconstructing the biographies of each object, in some cases groups of artefacts, it became possible to see that these personal objects were used in a variety of ways, moving from the status of being dress accessories to embodiments of past and memories, values and ideas. The investigation of the contexts these artefacts ended up in and the ways they were used has shown the variety of responses and relationships individuals might have had with these items of personal adornment. Changing situations, i.e. movement to another territory, had a major impact on the dialectical relationships between humans and objects, enhancing particular identities as well as suppressing others. It has been suggested here that while wearing British brooches could have helped some mobile Britons to reinforce their ‘Britishness’, other identities and messages could have been projected as well. Although possible interpretations as to the meanings behind these messages and symbols are open to debate, the validity of using material culture (cautiously and critically) in the interpretation of ethnic origin has been demonstrated, since some migrants, in certain situational contexts, may have used it as an ethnic marker.

One of the aspects of this research was to observe the shared angle of *habitus*, which was ‘Britishness’, for the individuals, communities and artefacts. British auxiliary units at the outset raised from the province of Britain, though from different tribes and peoples (Continental recruits in *ala* and *cohors I Britannica* or *Belgus* and *Coritanus* in *cohors I Ulpia Brittonum*), were a combination of cultures, ethnicities and identities when stationed overseas. The *numeri Brittonum* had a similar destiny: units started to accept local recruits the moment they arrived at their posts in Germania Superior and Dacia, although at the early stage the units were filled with recruits from Britain. In other words, ‘Britishness’ existed here in all but name: particular ethnic symbolisms as is evident in a Dacian unit stationed on the Birdoswald post on Hadrian’s Wall (Wilmott 2001), are absent for British units. The reason is the name of the units itself: the artificial term imposed by the Romans ‘*Brittones*’ might not have caught on with the native population of Britain, considering that they were “an assortment of tribes” (Mattingly 2004, 10) without any sense of a unified cultural identity. The creation of this artificial cultural unity by the Roman administration might have been the result of a conscious decision to enhance the formation of a new pan-British military identity (chapter 3), although it seems that they did not go further than labeling this group: symbols of new

unified culture were not (re-)invented. The term, however, was taken up by the second generation of mobile Britons to emphasise their shared past and ancestry (chapter 6), which can be regarded as an indication of a sort of success in the act of “superficial homogenisation” (Matthews 1999, 29). As such, ‘British’ is a cultural construct imposed by Rome in order to form a new cultural unity within the diversity of cultural forms, a process which failed in Britain, but took off among Britons settling abroad. There the artificially created cultural unity started to take the form of an ethnic label; as such, imposed culture became an invented ethnicity for an imagined community.

Enhancing the exhibition of ethnic origin and past has been noted on many occasions for communities settling outside the area of their birth (Oltean 2009; Rothe 2009). In other words, as an example, a person is more Russian in Western Europe, than the Russians in Russia. Ethnicity becomes a by-product of the relationship between hosts and newcomers: the uniqueness and particularity of the situations and awareness of the *differences* might enhance the expressions of ethnic identity. British ethnicity is a created cultural idea formed by “shared ways of doing things” (Lucy 2005b, 101) and formulated through the opposition between newcomers and hosts. While settling on the Continent, the realisation of differences which were usually embedded within routinised aspects of appearance, foodways, construction and division of space, and consumption (Hill 2001), might have triggered in some British-born individuals the desire “to do like the British do”, i.e. as things were done back home. The movement overseas could have triggered in some Britons a desire to dress in the same way as their ancestors, reinforcing a desire to express the differences between them and the host population – differences in origin, ways of dressing or wearing brooches. That some of the mobile communities continued to exploit their shared *habitus* of food preparation abroad has been proved for the Gauls and North Africans living outside their homelands but continuing to cook as back home (Swan 1999, 2009a). Because the mobile British community had to, in the first place, overcome their inner differences, i.e. different cultural norms existing within a variety of tribal formations, they found their unity in the created notion of the *natione Britto*. As such what was artificially imposed and cultivated as a tradition, through the act of discourse, i.e. realisation and understanding of difference, became the shared (re-) invented *habitus*. This brings us to the level ‘beyond ethnicity’ where an ethnic indicator is simply a semantic construction, where an origin is reflected in social practices and in invented but shared *habitus*. On this level, i.e. looking beyond the labeling, the community of mobile Britons becomes an invented community in itself. While sharing practices and ‘ways of doing’, this community might have used ((un)consciously) a variety of scenarios in a variety of contexts making them one time appear as ‘emigrants’, in another context and circumstances as a ‘diaspora’. In the end, it becomes impossible to construct an experience of ‘being Briton’ in the context of the wider Roman Empire, because it is unnecessary: ‘being Briton’ in Britain and ‘being Briton’ on the Continent was always different and played out in different contexts (Revell 2009, xii on unnecessary of ‘being Roman’). Yet, because the moved individuals routinised identities are expressed in ‘shared ways of doing things’, members of ‘the invented British community’ might at particular times or in particular situational circumstances have acted ‘more British’ through their appearance. As such, acting in one way or another revealed them as an entity constructed and made up of myriad symbols within their shared *habitus*.

While the focus here is on Britons, other communities living in and then leaving Britain should not be forgotten, because they present yet another picture. What they shared with mobile Britons was their ‘dwelling in displacement’ experiences and

material culture to some extent³⁹⁹. For them, it seems, the invented cultural unity, i.e. *Brittones*, was part of their memories and associations. That is to say that the label 'Britishness' may have been associated with the new cultural framework they had experience of while living in Britain and, when they moved back to the Continent, was imbued with memories of the past. Being of different cultural as well as ethnic stock, growing up in other spheres of *habitus*, such immigrants absorbed elements of 'Britishness' and brought them over to the Continent, where these elements served the immigrants' own needs and cultural practices. For many such mobile individuals expressing this artificial 'Britishness' within the framework of the Roman Empire while encountering new values and absorbing new cultures and practices on a daily basis would be connected with the personal needs embedded within the act of evocation of the past.

³⁹⁹ Stationed on the Antonine Wall, North Africans, who, as just noted, preferred to cook and eat in the same fashion as back home, as Swan 1992, 1999 shows, probably still wore brooches made by local craftsmen.

