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

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# Summary

The research study "Britons abroad" consists of epigraphic and archaeological analysis of the migration patterns in the Roman Empire focusing on one group of mobile people, i.e. those who moved from the province of Roman Britain to the Continent. Attention is given to the ways ethnic identity might have been projected by the mobile Britons, and the study explores how their identities were recreated and re-used within the host societies. The focus is not only on those who originated from Britain, however: other people who lived in, moved to, or traded with Britain and, at some point in time, chose to return to their native land on the Continent also receive attention in the present work.

The study is divided into three major themes: the service of British auxiliary and *numeri* units, the presence of individuals whose origin has been recorded as British-born, and material culture analysis with a focus on the occurrence of British-made objects on the Continent. It employs three different sources: epigraphic material, ranging from funerary monuments to building inscriptions and military diplomas; literary evidence; and British-made brooches found throughout the Roman provinces.

The first two chapters introduce the theoretical and methodological background of the thesis. Three main theoretical notions of identity, migration, and diaspora are discussed from the perspective of material culture studies, and critical analysis has been made regarding their applications in modern Roman archaeology. I plead for the distinction to be made between diaspora and migration, since they imply totally different experiences of people on the move. These notions should not be used as synonyms and substitutes of each other. In the methodological discussion, a variety of sources has been introduced, and the necessity to use material culture with epigraphic and literary evidence has been emphasised.

In chapter 3, the history of the 15 British auxiliary and 13 *numeri* units is reconstructed using epigraphic, onomastic, and archaeological evidence. The chapter itself is a catalogue of (i) the provinces and garrisons, where units are known to have been stationed, (ii) the soldiers, who are known to have served in the units, and their family members, and (iii) the archaeological finds, recorded on the sites of the military posts. The chapter in general examines the employment of Britons in the British *auxilia* in order to understand the extent to which the Roman Empire relied on manpower from the British tribes.

Regarding British auxiliary units, historical, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence hints at the possibility that the establishment of these units can be connected to various events in the early history of Roman Britain, in particular to the advancement of the Roman army and the subjugation of different territories and peoples. Moreover, it has been proposed that a distinction should be made between units raised during the time of Nero and those in the reign of Vespasian, which is indicative in the differences in the epithets of the British auxiliary units – *Britannica* and *Brittonum/Britannorum*.

The deployment of the units over the period of three centuries shows that the troops were highly mobile in the mid to late first century, being sent to key provinces and participating in all major conflicts of the Roman Empire. In the second and third centuries, though, one can speak of the low mobility, when the garrison of the units remained unchanged for more than half of a century. The units in their majority were stationed on the Danube provinces, with the exception of some troops being garrisoned on the Rhine frontier.

A total of 177 soldiers has been identified, but the origin was possible to establish only for 94 soldiers. Analysis of the employment of British-born recruits into the British auxiliary units has shown that they constituted the majority of the soldiers in the late first

century, while in the second century there was an influx of Pannonians, and in the third century Thracians into the units. On the basis of the evidence, one can conclude that the recruitment policy to the British auxiliary units followed the pattern introduced for other auxiliary units, and the continuous recruitment of Britons to the British auxiliary units was not practiced. Instead, the recruits were summoned from the nearby places where the units were positioned, drafting soldiers from the local population.

A high degree of locally-based recruitment, however, did not influence the picture of plurality of social and ethnic identities and family relations within the troops. There is evidence for the existence of mini-communities in the units, because recruits were not necessarily summoned from one region but might have come from nearby provinces. The interaction of soldiers and civilians constituted one feature of the formation of frontier families, yet there is evidence of families that existed prior to the military career of the soldier. The female partners were, in the majority of these cases, of the same provincial origin as the soldiers and followed their men to various posts on the Roman fringes.

The evidence is scarce for the occurrence of British-made objects on the sites where British units are known to have been stationed, although some objects have been recorded. It does support the epigraphic evidence: the brooches found on such sites are dated to the mid/late first century which coincides with the pattern of recruitment of British-born soldiers into British auxiliary units and hints at the possibility that these brooches arrived overseas with soldiers serving in British troops.

Regarding the British *numeri* units, their origin can be dated to the late first - early second century. It was suggested that originally they were part of the legionary detachments sent from Britain and were convoys for detachments' commanders, later becoming part of the patrolling and controlling forces established on the frontiers of the newly acquired provinces, i.e. Germania and Dacia. These units were positioned near rivers and their tributaries, a suitable place for small mobile infantry units which guarded the river crossings and supervised the transportation of goods in and out the Roman Empire. The locations influenced the units' epithets: there were series named after the rivers which flow near their posts, and geographical features and a series named after the vici near the forts or the forts themselves.

Particular attention has been paid to the history of the *numeri Brittonum* positioned on the Germania Superior frontier. It has been suggested that there were two phases of mass recruitment from Britain: the first phase falls on the period of the units' transfer from Britain to Germania Superior in the late first century, when units were part of the legionary detachments; the second phase falls on the period after the Lollius Urbicus campaigns in southern Scotland in the mid second century. Both transfers can also be supported by archaeological evidence.

A total of 29 servicemen of British *numeri* have been identified, but the origin was established only for 11 soldiers. While the onomastic and prosopographical analysis has shown that these people were not British-born, the archaeological evidence hints that there was a rather large British contingent present in Germania Superior. The evidence from Dacia restricts the possibility of proposing a similar conclusion for the units garrisoned there.

The occurrence of British-made brooches on the sites known to have been garrisoned by *numeri Brittonum* in Germania Superior is connected to the service of these troops. The late-first century brooches were recorded at the posts where these units were positioned in the late first century. The occurrence of the mid-second century brooches is connected with the second transfer of recruits from Britain to Germania Superior and to the participation of these British-born recruits in the reconstruction of the frontier line in stone.

Another question raised in the section on *numeri Brittonum* related to the construction of the Odenwald-Neckar frontier in Germania Superior because of its particular architectural and artistic style. The analysis of the construction techniques and decorative motifs has shown that these were not dependant on the origin of the people who participated in the construction of the frontier, i.e. Britons. Rather these techniques and imagery were widespread in the Roman Empire, especially in the frontier regions so that the power of the Roman presence could be exhibited.

Chapter 4 looks at the service of British-born soldiers in the non-British auxiliary units of the Roman army and includes in the list civilians who indicated their British ancestry. The initial analysis of the inscriptions and military diplomas where a person used a word starting with the element *brit-*, or where the cognomen of a person was recorded as Britto has shown that these people were neither Britons nor offspring of British people who had migrated to the Continent. The element Britt- was a relatively popular Gaulish Celtic name element widespread in the areas where this branch of Celtic language was spoken. It has been proposed that in order to recognise a genuine Briton, one must look more closely at the text of an inscription and reconstruct the individual's biography with its help. Following this suggestion, a total of 26 men and three, possibly four, women of British descent has been identified. The majority served as legionary and auxiliary soldiers, although there is evidence for the service of British-borns in the fleet and in the Imperial horse guard in Rome. Some soldiers who indicated that they were born in Britain were not of native British stock: they were sons or grandsons of immigrants to Britain in the mid and late first century AD. The epigraphic material shows a considerable degree of variation in the nomenclature of origin which varied from naming a tribe or specific place to the formula *natione Britto*.

Chapter 5 looks at the distribution of British-made brooches and outlines factors relating to their presence on the Continent. In the analysis, the epigraphic material was compared with the archaeological evidence from the sites where these brooches were located to determine possible groups of people with whom the brooches might have reached the sites. The research was done on a 'province-by-province' basis in order to determine whether there are similarities or differences in the distribution patterns of the British-made objects, and brooches in particular. The analysis has shown that there are indeed similar patterns in the distribution that are not confined to particular provinces. Some of these dress accessories were brought by soldiers serving in 15 auxiliary units and their female partners. British-born recruits serving in legionary and auxiliary forces of a different ethnic origin and in the German fleet stationed on the Continent account for another group of people who brought these objects with them. Moreover, epigraphic evidence suggests that the occurrence of British-made brooches can be connected with the movement of various people (whether male or female) of various ethnic origins who travelled from Roman Britain to the Continental Europe during the Roman Empire, especially the returning from Britain veterans of the Roman army and their wives, and craftsmen in training at the Continental workshops. The chapter illustrates the potential of British-made brooches to provide information relating to a personal mobility in the Roman Empire and suggests that the main reason for the brooches' travelling was the purpose of fastening the clothes and personal decoration rather than trade in precious objects.

The distribution of British brooch types does not show that particular types are more frequent on particular sites. However, the contexts in which various brooch types were found depends on the circumstances under which brooches reached sites. There are indications that returning veterans incorporated foreign objects into their own social practices, for example by putting exotic objects in their grave, while soldiers tended to discard their brooches near their military posts. This allows for a relatively clear distinction to be made between sites with high and low potential for evidence for a

British presence, i.e. military as opposed to civilian, although a British presence on civilian sites should not be ruled out.

Chapter 6 provides a comparison of the results from chapters 3, 4, and 5 so that the findings from these chapters can be linked to assess the following: (i) how 'British-ness' operated on the levels of communal and individual identity; (ii) what is the relation between contexts in which British brooches appear; and (iii) what is the meaning behind the diversity of the evocations of the 'British-ness' as expressed in the words and artefacts.

The first section of chapter 6 provides an analysis of the epigraphic evidence to determine how Britons living on the Continent perceived the land they left. The data shows a considerable degree of variation in naming origin and that various choices were being made to express descent, although, in general, mobile British individuals still felt themselves to be connected with the province of their birth. The exhibition of tribal and provincial *origo*, together with an indication of the possession of citizenship, seems to be an important factor for the Britons living abroad in the late first century. From inscriptions and diplomas dated to the second century, another pattern can be determined: those who were not born in Britain but whose parents belonged to one of the British tribes preferred to denote their descent as *natione Britto*, in contrast to those who emigrated directly from Britain overseas and preferred to name a British tribe or city. The third-century and later inscriptions show the tendency towards naming the province as origin, which is possibly an indication of the importance of national identity.

A dynamic picture of reinvention of ethnic identity by mobile Britons can be seen in the adoption of a Roman construct, the ethnic marker *Brittones*. This label was used by the second generation group in order to distinguish themselves from other communities, but later on, its usage increased. The Roman construct with little self-ascriptive value was adopted by mobile individuals, and as a result one can talk of the emergence of the self-awareness within the British communities living abroad.

The second section of chapter 6 deals with the variety of contexts in which British brooches appear and analyses whether these contexts reflect the diversity of their meanings and associations which emanated through their usage, considering that brooches are not evidence of the ethnicity of their users and wearers.

The analysis conducted regarding the contexts and possible meanings behind including brooches in burials indicates that they were placed for their functionality, to fasten a piece of clothing containing the remains of deceased. Deliberateness in the inclusion of these particular British-made brooches, however, suggests that they had important connotations for the deceased whose remains they were supposed to secure as well as for the relatives, whose choice of a particular brooch may have been a defined act. The brooches in burials are confined to areas where there is evidence for the presence of veterans having returned from Britain. Brooches, therefore, could have been valued by their owners and, later, by the relatives of the deceased for their associations with the past, indicating the (dead) owner's experience in Britain.

British-made brooches were also found in votive deposits. The analysis has shown that British-made brooches found on the Continent within a sanctuary context were brought by families of returning veterans or by veterans themselves. The inclusion of British-made brooches as votive offerings suggests a possible act of a vow fulfilment or an act of thanksgiving for protection. That the choice of gift fell on British-made brooches might indicate their symbolic value as an embodiment of a 'British' military past.

Brooches were also recorded as having been found in urban, military, and civilian contexts in rubbish pits and as surface finds, an indication that they were 'thrown away and accidentally lost'. Such actions had consequences for the projection of any form of identities and the label 'Britishness' that brooches held in them, i.e. as products of

Britain, together with all other identities the owners had and projected through wearing them, was ‘thrown away’ or ‘lost’. This suggests that some British-made brooches were not regarded as important or special, because of their availability and of the routine of wearing them on a daily basis.

Chapter 6 has shown that the past was an important matter. The desire to forget, re-invent, evoke, or project the past attests to the importance and value of memory when British-made brooches were put in specific contexts abroad. The aspect of remembrance and evocation also existed in the inscriptions erected by mobile Britons, though here it was confined to the idea of a homeland and place of birth.

By looking at the communities of Britons living abroad and taking into account the findings of epigraphic and artefact analysis, it was proposed to look at mobile Britons neither as a solid entity nor to label them with notions of emigrants or diaspora. These notions outline for us the variety of scenarios a person might have wished to choose from when being transferred or moved to a new territory. Communities of mobile Britons consisted of a variety of patches of individuals and personhoods, employing a variety of symbols and scenarios in a variety of contexts. Sometimes members of these communities appear as ‘emigrants’, and in other contexts and circumstances as a ‘diaspora’. I have suggested that these communities can be called ‘imagined’, a notion that trespasses any ‘semantic’ boundaries.