

Anthropological Study of Religious Syncretism in Romano-Britain **Michaela Brough, Class of 2027**

The purpose of this project was to explore religious syncretism within the Roman province of Britannia. Specifically, I wanted to gain insight into how the understanding of divinity and appropriate ritual practice changed in the British Isles between the 1st and 5th centuries CE, due to Roman occupation in this period. I began my research by focusing on how religion developed in the city of Rome and manifested itself in Roman culture before the occupation of Britain. Using primary and secondary sources, I explored both the public, State-sanctioned, ritualist manifestation of religion in Rome and the private practices of day-to-day life. Then, I broadened my research to look at how these practices adapted as the Roman Empire grew, bringing in new societies and religions.

In the next phase of my project, I focused on the religion of the British Isles, before and during the Roman occupation. This is a contentious topic due to the lack of primary accounts by the Celts themselves, as well as the limited and vastly inconsistent archaeological record they left behind. Therefore, rather than trying to gain a complete understanding of one possible theory, I analysed several of the most popular interpretations of the archaeological evidence and the few Roman accounts that exist about indigenous religion in Britannia. My aim in this part of my research was to analyse how these multiple theories suggest Roman religion impacted that of Britannia, and how their evidence could be interpreted differently.

From my research, and analysing my findings alongside Professor Boyd, I concluded that at this point in scholarship concerning Roman Britain, it is impossible to gauge the true impact the Roman occupation had on religion in the Province. However, several interactions can be observed that suggest varying levels of syncretism and adaptation across the Isles. By the time Rome invaded Britain, the Empire had a long-established practice of allowing groups to continue worshipping their ancestral deities alongside the State-sanctioned “Imperial Cult”. Furthermore, Roman soldiers stationed in the outer provinces often worshipped Roman deities alongside the local deities and land spirits where they were stationed. These practices continued in Britannia, as reflected by the numerous Latin inscriptions invoking Celtic deities at Roman military installations, especially along Hadrian’s Wall. Archaeological evidence from religious sites suggests that the Romans invoked some deities using both a Celtic and Latin name, thereby syncretizing the deities, while they created divine partnerships between other Roman gods and Celtic Goddesses, which also reflect this union of religions (Aldhouse-Green 2018). However, due to gaps in the archaeological record and a lack of contemporary Celtic sources, it is hard to tell how the Roman occupation affected the religious practices of regular indigenous people. Most of the archaeological evidence we have today was left by Romans, who worshipped foreign gods in the Roman style to erase traditional practices. Further, many of the Celtic-made statues and engravings we do have could represent Roman gods, or depict one of the over 200 Celtic deities we do not know the name of. It is also clear that after the Romans left Britain in the 5th century, abandoned ritual sites were used again. This could suggest that the indigenous religion had continued under Roman occupation and public rituals were revived once Rome left. Alternatively, this could be the Brittonic Celts’ reaction to the weakening Empire, reviving extinct practices from before Rome’s influence as a source of stability (Hutton 2013). These analyses are complicated due to the great regional differences regarding religion across the British Isles before the Roman occupation, as well as the distribution of Roman settlements during the occupation. Since there was no cohesive British religion before the occupation, it is unlikely there was a uniform reaction, especially when comparing rural areas, far from Roman settlements, to the South-East which had contact with Rome for a century before the invasion and contained the largest Roman settlements.

I intend to expand on this research in future by focusing on specific sites in Britain, so I can better understand these regional differences. Also, I would like to conduct research regarding other elements of Roman and Brittonic culture and how they interacted during this period. I am interested in researching gender roles in Brittonic Celtic society, before and during Roman occupation, as well as how this understanding influenced Roman attitudes towards the Province.

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