

The Material Fall of Roman Britain 300–525 CE. By R. Fleming. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2021. Pp. 303, illus. Price £36.00. ISBN 9780812252446.

This book enters an already crowded field of publications that examine and interpret the evidence for the last centuries of Roman rule in Britain. These publications have variously favoured ‘long and gentle’ or ‘short and brutal’ interpretations of the end in a debate that has often been hamstrung by the nature of the evidence from the fifth century.

Fleming’s book sits in the ‘short and brutal’ camp in that she argues that Roman Britain was part of an integrated economic system and that falling out of that system precipitated rapid change that made profound differences to the lives of people at all levels of society. However, such a categorisation does a disservice to an important publication that stands apart in a number of areas.

The author describes herself as historian, but largely ignores the textual sources. Instead, she opts for a detailed examination of trends across a range of material culture and (generally successfully) straddles the fourth to early sixth century. The focus is very much on ‘Roman’ Britain (the southern and central part of the island that fully participated in the visible products of Empire) and little attention is paid to the west and to Scotland, which responded in other ways to the end of Roman rule.

Her approach starts by identifying the 15 per cent of the population whose well-being was most closely connected to that of the Roman State and whose existence was supported economically by the other 85 per cent. The latter, however, produced sufficient surplus to purchase mass-produced consumer goods. All were tied into a system in which Britain was part of a single economic unit with northern Gaul and the Rhineland, allowing for a mobility of population (and grain pests) to areas that were supplied with bulk shipments of grain from Britain.

Fleming’s exploration of the material begins (refreshingly) by highlighting the range of plant and animal introductions into Britain in the Roman period and the range of extinctions that followed, notably the demise of cereal-dependent pests and other species that depended on particular habitats (ch. 2). She also highlights in a stimulating way how human practices were shaped by the presence of certain plants and convincingly demonstrates that such practices disappeared in the post-Roman period in ways that affected the whole population. Such changes did not affect other western provinces, which did not experience the same range of herbal extinctions.

The following two chapters (3 and 4) focus on the use and manufacture of pottery. Fleming charts declines in certain industries in the second half of the fourth century, which she argues were triggered by changes in military supply networks, noting that decline of production at regional centres hastened a loss of technical skills. By the mid-fifth century, the fine-ware industries had disappeared and were replaced locally by part-time potters making handmade pots, the behaviour of which on fires requires different food-preparation strategies. Increasingly scarce pottery and glass acquired new significance in people’s lives as well as in funerary contexts. Fleming paints a slightly apocalyptic picture with the citizens of Cadbury Congresbury undertaking ‘systematic scavenging campaigns in search of still-useable vessels at deserted sites in the neighbourhood’ (p. 84), and the inhabitants of a modest farm at Overton Down ‘living it up’ (p. 87) in ways previously inaccessible to them, using glass vessels taken from abandoned high-status sites.

Reuse of material in the form of brick and quarried stone (ch. 5) and metal (ch. 6) is also used to highlight the disappearance of a range of skilled workers (alongside the demand of such skills), evidenced by the low quality of later masonry structures and repairs. Those constructing new buildings in the fifth and sixth centuries opted for a different range of materials. A decline in the numbers of nails available was particularly marked, and metal was used in a much narrower range of tools, a restriction again particularly marked in Britain. Building materials, however, acquired different significance in well-closure events (described in detail in relation to villas at Rudston and Dalton Parlours) and graves.

The book then moves slightly awkwardly to burials, first looking at infant burials in late Roman settlement sites (ch. 7) and their absence from early medieval settlements and arguing that the cessation in the practice of ‘living with little corpses’ marked a fundamental change in worldview, reminding us perhaps of the difficulties in comprehending major aspects of the Roman period. Adult burials are discussed in ch. 8, which takes a welcome polemical approach, decrying the maleness of the existing narrative of the early medieval period and ‘the habitual, sloppy, underinterrogated use of ethnic labels’ (p. 158) by historians and archaeologists. Fleming notes that women dominate the furnished burial record and argues that the material evidences female agency in the emerging new world.

The final chapter on ‘The Great Disentanglement’ returns to catastrophe, arguing that the loss of technological knowledge cast a long shadow in Britain. However, although the period must have been one of ‘distressing dislocation’ (p. 184) for the 15 per cent whose subsistence was based on surpluses produced by others, those others were adopting farming practices that suited their own needs rather than the needs of another group.

This is an important (and very readable) book, although many may not agree with everything in it. It is refreshing to see a book on ‘the end’ that successfully transcends a range of disciplinary boundaries and that exploits a wide range of archaeological evidence in ways that are sometimes innovative and never less than stimulating. Hopefully it will inspire a generation of scholars to look at the period and its material evidence with fresh eyes.

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Silchester Revealed. The Iron Age and Roman Town of Calleva. By M. Fulford. Windgather Press, Oxford and Philadelphia, 2021. Pp. xviii + 206, illus. Price £16.99 (pbk); £34.99 (hbk). ISBN 9781911188834 (pbk); 9781914427084 (hbk).

As an urban history, *Silchester Revealed* joins a well-established genre of writing on the Roman world; its relative brevity and intended wide audience mean that the argument is painted in quite bold strokes. Kings, emperors and would-be emperors shape ancient *Calleva*, while the modern ruins under the changing seasons are vividly evoked. The illustrations’ abundance and sharpness put academic presses to shame. Succinct explanation of methodological changes in archaeological fieldwork, as applied or trialled at Silchester, enhances the volume’s value for a non-specialist readership (ch. 1). In place of references a short afterword links the narrative to key sources. The book’s principal content foregrounds the fruits of research conducted by the author and his collaborators from 1974 onwards on monuments and houses within the town, alongside the geophysical survey by Creighton and Fry. Into the framework provided by these results evidence documented by previous scholarship is selectively integrated. The volume reveals the time depth masked by the often reproduced ‘Great Plan’ of the Victorian and Edwardian excavators, fills many of its ‘gaps’ with timber buildings they overlooked, and foregrounds the agents who shaped the town and lived within it in a dynamic narrative. For a specialist readership, *Silchester Revealed* signposts key insights of the last half-century’s research, including eight Britannia monographs (of the 33 so far published). Given Silchester’s long prominence as an exemplary Roman town, from studies of Roman urbanism to school syllabi, this book will find a resonance well beyond scholarship on Britannia.

Whereas Boon’s 1974 *Silchester* devoted few pages to change over time, the bulk of *Silchester Revealed* is organised chronologically in eight chapters spanning the city’s six-century existence. Founded in 20–10 B.C., with residential compounds laid out on a grid surrounded by earthworks, Silchester came into being as an entrepôt, channelling insular resources to Roman military consumers via Gallic intermediaries (ch. 2). After a brief episode as a possible centre of resistance, Roman authority left its mark on the town (ch. 3), first as a communications hub for military administration, then under imperial ownership. The ‘Nero project’ – the emperor’s name and titles are recorded on tiles from the town, a one-off for Britain – stamped imperial authority on Calleva through monumental buildings including a bath house and amphitheatre. Transition to self-governing urban status under the Flavian emperors (ch. 4) was marked by a street grid proper, monumentally engineered, and public buildings including a forum-basilica, *mansio*, new baths and temples. By the mid-second century (ch. 5), competitive investment by municipal elites saw these buildings and larger houses rebuilt in masonry, the city’s population reaching c. 7,000. Late in the same century, an earthwork circuit was the last major public structure to be added, replaced in stone in c. A.D. 260–280, a much more resource-intensive undertaking (ch. 6). Contemporary with the walls came new uses for the forum-basilica, now accommodating metalworking alongside feasting and either market or tax-collection activity. Fourth-century Calleva (chs 7–8) saw masonry town houses proliferate alongside smaller timber buildings with the population size remaining close to that of the second century, a possible church being a rare new public building. Traces of subsequent activity are difficult to date (ch. 9), including the famous Ogham stone, but by the seventh century Silchester’s marginal position vis-à-vis Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had relegated it to irrelevance.