

1999

Introduction: The Roman Army in Britain

Georgia L. Irby
William & Mary, gkirby@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/asbookchapters>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Irby, G. L. (1999). Introduction: The Roman Army in Britain. *Military Religion in Roman Britian* (pp. 3-9). Leiden: Brill. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/asbookchapters/146>

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts and Sciences at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Introduction

The Roman Army in Britain. The Roman soldier in Britain occupied his time in many ways. He fought barbarians. He built walls to delineate the borders of empire. He spent his evenings in the bars of the *vici* which inevitably cropped up around permanent forts or at the baths, gambling, or exercising, or gossiping. He might marry a local girl, without the sanction of Roman law. Caracalla's edict ratified such marriages. Upon retirement, he might join the local community as a farmer, a craftsman, a politician. Only the highest ranking officer might return to the home of his birth. The rest would not receive passage home.

The army of Roman Britain was as multicultural as the empire herself. Allied troops stationed in Britain were originally raised from Upper and Lower Germany, the Gallic provinces, Spain, Thrace, Syria, Africa, Pannonia, Dacia, Dalmatia, and Raetia—a microcosm of the empire and an archetype of ethnic and cultural diversity. These troops arrived in Britain during times of crisis and expansion. Fresh units came for Claudius' invasion, to fight Caratacus and Boudicca, to expand Roman hegemony under the Flavians, to draw lines of stone on the Roman imperial map under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, to fight and hold territory under Severus. Nero's expeditions of 66 saw the removal of one legion. Troops in Britain were depleted by the expeditions of Clodius Albinus, Constantine, Allectus, Carausius.

This standing army enjoyed a diverse heritage. Legions were traditionally raised from Rome and Italy. Although provinces with full rights of citizenship supplied most of the legionary soldiers of the late first and second centuries AD, Italian families are recorded in Britain. Although allied units might continue to receive fresh recruits from the original area of adlection (especially for specialized units of archers or the like), soon the province herself supplied men for the emperor's army. By the third century, Rome's army in Britain was manned by a largely Romano-British force. But the essence of a

provincial army hardly became stagnant or entirely local, as units moved into, within, and out of the province.

The Roman soldier, like the rest of the emperor's citizens, was religious, prudent, or simply superstitious. Soldiers and officers in Britain, just as soldiers and officers throughout the empire, worshipped the gods who protected the Roman state, the gods favored by the *princeps*, the gods of their own ancestors. These gods were worshipped discretely and together. To the Roman mind, in the broadest sense that there was anything "Roman," there was no religious conflict of interest, and gods of different traditions—Roman, Eastern, Celtic—co-existed on the same sculpted monuments. Sometimes these gods were authentically local, occasionally they were Romans dressed in ethnic guise.

Soldiers and officers worshipped some gods because they were told to do so, because it seemed prudent, because they wanted to ask favors, because they had vows to fulfill, because they were deeply spiritual or philosophical. Worshipping the gods of the Roman state corporately contributed to a unit's esprit-de-corps. Barbecues improved morale. Public monuments to victories on the battle field or in the construction zone further distinguished units.

Roman religion, whether corporate or individual, was a matter of public record. In dedicating altars or statues or temples to the right gods, a worshipper increased his own esteem among his peers. For the most part, the popular gods, the gods favored by the reigning emperor, received attention from the army. Yet local gods, unknown to Rome or *princeps*, also received attention from high ranking officers as well as enlisted men. A powerful local god in Roman dress might protect the emperor's representatives in that distant outpost. This reflects the practical nature of Roman religion—it is a wise thing indeed to propitiate any deity who might have the power to help or harm.

Army Religion. Was there such a thing as army religion, and if so, what did it entail? The *feriale Duranum* from Dura-Europus (chapter one) intimates organized state

religion in the army.¹ All imperial units would observe state imperial anniversaries.² A degree of uniformity in the religious observances (Mithras, for example, was popular with officers in Britain and along the Danube; the *Campestris* received votives from the *equites singulares* at Rome and from legionary and auxiliary cavalry officers in Britain, Africa, and Germany) suggests universally popular private cults, as well. Army religion, though similar to civilian, had its own purpose. It identified the individual soldier and his legion or cohort with the destiny of Rome; it was the means by which officials maintained a high level of *esprit de corps*; it provided a social structure by establishing a level of discipline, a standard of loyalty, rewards for merit, and explanations of tradition.³ The soldier was most likely to face danger and probably felt strongly the need to keep the gods happy.

Methods and Evidence. This study will, of necessity, concentrate on material datable to the second and third centuries, whence the best preserved and most abundant material. The state of the evidence reflects the prosperity of the empire during this time: inscriptions from all classes rise sharply from the Flavians to the Severans. Our analysis will show that certain gods are more popular at particular times and that Celtic gods, especially, are attested primarily at local cult centers. Class distinctions also seem evident—officers worshipped the “Eastern” Mithras and the Celtic Cocidius, whereas enlisted men made vows to the Celtic Belatucadrus and Veteris.

This study incorporates various facets (inscriptions, small votives, gems, coins, archaeology) to present a clear picture of the trends and developments of Romano-British

¹The document was certainly organized by a central administration: Fishwick, *ICLW* 593-608.

²Civilians, also, might observe such anniversaries, especially those seeking favor in larger towns (Pliny *Epistle* 10.100): see most recently, Lendon, *Honour*, especially, 162. Individuals seeking personal gain might erect statues, amphitheaters, altars, temples in the emperor’s honor.

³Helgeland, “Army religion,” 1473.

military cult.⁴ It will, furthermore, show that there existed a balance between public and private religions, as well as between local (Celtic) and imperial (Roman) cults, which runs counter to recent scholarly emphasis on Celtic rites.

Recent Studies and Trends. Epigraphic and archaeological evidence is fundamental in determining the nature Roman army religion. Valuable work on this subject has already been completed by others: Wissowa,⁵ Domaszewski,⁶ Helgeland.⁷ Religion in the army of Roman Britain, to focus our study, is a multifaceted and complex topic which has inspired much scholarly interest. E. Birley, whose contributions to the understanding of Roman Britain and the Roman army are undeniable, has produced valuable works on Roman army religion. Birley offers an epigraphic cult by cult treatment, with no comprehensive analysis of the development and evolution of Romano-British army religion.⁸ Henig's work on gemstones provides invaluable source material,⁹ and his work on Roman religion is indispensable but does not fully examine the military contribution to Romano-British religion.¹⁰ Ross' work establishes a firm background for native Celtic religions but ignores the influences of the Roman army.¹¹ M.J. Green has likewise made important contributions to Celtic religion and the archaeology of military religion, but she does not consistently incorporate epigraphy and numismatics into her

⁴Seminal works in this area include: MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*; Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

⁵Wissowa, *Religion*.

⁶Domaszewski, "Fahnen," *Religion, Rangordnung*.

⁷Helgeland, "Army Religion."

⁸E. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army*; "Religion of the Roman Army: 1895-1977;" "Deities."

⁹Henig, "Roman Gemstones: Figuretype and Adaptation;" *Corpus*.

¹⁰Henig, "Veneration of Heroes."

¹¹Ross, *Celtic Britain*.

work.¹² Additionally, Webster's work is invaluable but proffers the interpretation that religion in Britain was purely Celtic with a thin Roman veneer which disappeared quickly in the fifth century.¹³ Furthermore, little new light has been shed on the significance of certain cults venerated by the army in Britain (e.g., the *Veteres*) since Haverfield.¹⁴

Focus. The epigraphic data (listed in a catalogue of inscriptions) falls into in three categories: Roman State religion, Eastern "Mystery" rites, and Celtic/Germanic Cults. The most significant and representative discrete cults will be discussed in the text, in terms of 1) the concentration of votive material, 2) the social status of the dedicators, 3) comparisons with army ritual and evidence elsewhere, and 4) the mutual assimilation of Roman and native practices.¹⁵ It must be kept in mind that Roman religion was fundamentally syncretic—the adoption of other gods should not surprise . Furthermore, such cultural trades established a point of contact between Roman administrator and local resident.

The interaction of Roman and native in Britain is central. The Roman army, the institution responsible for imposing Roman culture on frontier societies, was itself immensely diverse in ethnicity and culture. The army, despite (or because of) its diversity, enabled locals to interact with Rome *via* veteran colonies, local municipal government, intermarriage, and commerce, as manifested in language, fashion, housing, and religion. Roman and native religions were an important forum for cultural exchange, providing a social organization for civilians as army cults did for soldiers of different cultural and religious backgrounds.

¹²M.J. Green, *Civilian Areas; Military Areas*; "Iconography." *Gods of the Celts*.

¹³Webster, *Celtic Religion*; "What the Britons required."

¹⁴Haverfield, "Di *Veteres*;" Heichelheim, "Vitires."

¹⁵G. Webster, "What the Britons required;" J. Webster, "Interpretatio."

Content. The first chapter addresses Roman Army religion: Calendars, State Cults, State gods, especially Jupiter, the most significant and widely worshipped. Cults which integrated military units into larger imperial structures—the cult of the emperor, the Capitoline triad, and the personified abstractions—tended to be homogenous. Assorted calendars and festival lists show that the Roman government ordained much of the religious activity of civilian and soldier.¹⁶ Bureaucrats presented the cult of the emperor as a focus of loyalty and Romanization.¹⁷ Because the state cults emphasized ritual, rather than belief, spirituality, and salvation, their appeal was limited to official functions.

The second chapter presents eastern cults (Mithras, Jupiter Dolichenus) which unified legionary and auxiliary units (whose original ethnic composition varied greatly from place to place) and provided a social framework through corporate worship.¹⁸ Mystery rites soothed private anxieties ignored by the state religions.

Local religions are explored in chapters three and four. To fulfill private, spiritual needs, the soldier stationed in Britain turned also to the indigenous deities (e.g., Cocidius, Belatucadrus). These Horned Warrior Cults have much in common with the cult of Greek heroes in function, iconography, and myth. Whereas the cults of the Greek and Roman heroes were strictly personal and offered little opportunity for social and religious interaction,¹⁹ native and imported Celtic cults, in contrast, formed an institutional

¹⁶E.g., Fink, Hoey, and Snyder, “Feriale;” Gilliam, “Military Feriale;” Fink “Hunt’s Pridianum;” Fishwick, *ICLW*, 593-608.

¹⁷For the cult of the emperor, c.f. especially Fishwick: *ICLW*; “Votive Offerings?” “Soldier and Emperor.”

¹⁸For Mithras: Franz Cumont, *Textes et monuments; Les mystères*; Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont.” Speidel, *Mithras-Orion*. Ulansey, *Origins*.

For Jupiter Dolichenus: Merlat, *Repertoire; Jupiter Dolichenus*; Speidel, *Jupiter Dolichenus*; Hörig, “Jupiter Dolichenus;” Hörig and Schwertheim *CCID*.

¹⁹Burkert’s studies are especially instructive: *Greek Religion, Structure; et alia*. Also of interest is Henig, “Veneration of Heroes.”

framework for contacts between provincial garrisons and native populations. In addition, many of the most popular cults centered around healing shrines, where deities were venerated at sacred springs, wells, and other sanctified bodies of water. The goddess was not merely a healer; she figured prominently into war-cults as well—inclusion within official state dedications shows how the native warrior goddess became an appropriate benefactress of the Roman army.

In Chapter five the discussion centers on the introduction of civilian religious epigraphy, archaeology (temple remains and small votives), religious iconography, and numismatics which point to a melding of peoples into a uniquely Romano-British community.²⁰ Sulis Minerva, our most dramatic example, received a temple at Bath built in the first century AD.²¹ The Roman army continued to patronize these healing springs. In addition, Eastern cults (Cybele, Isis, Jupiter Dolichenus) are noted in Britain, but popularity is limited geographically and temporally, coinciding with the Severan dynasty.

In Chapter six, evidence for late Romano-Celtic Religion and Christianity is investigated. Romano-Celtic religions remained vital in the British countryside. While many temples were converted to Christian churches on the continent, the contrasting lack of temple conversion in Britain may be significant. The late antique Christian community showed strength, as some “pagan” shrines were converted to Christian use, but the Roman church was not consistent in Romanized Britain during the Anglo-Saxon hegemony. Augustine of Canterbury, at the end of the fifth century, would build a Roman Christian church in southern Britain from the ground up.

²⁰For epigraphy: *RIB*, supplemented by annual reports in *JRS* (1956-1969) and *Britannia* (1970-present).

For temple archaeology: Lewis, *Temples*; Rodwell, ed. *Temples*.

For iconography and art: Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain*; *Art in Britain*; Henig, *Art of Roman Britain*; *CSIR* 1.1-8.

²¹Cunliffe and Davenport, *The Site*.

