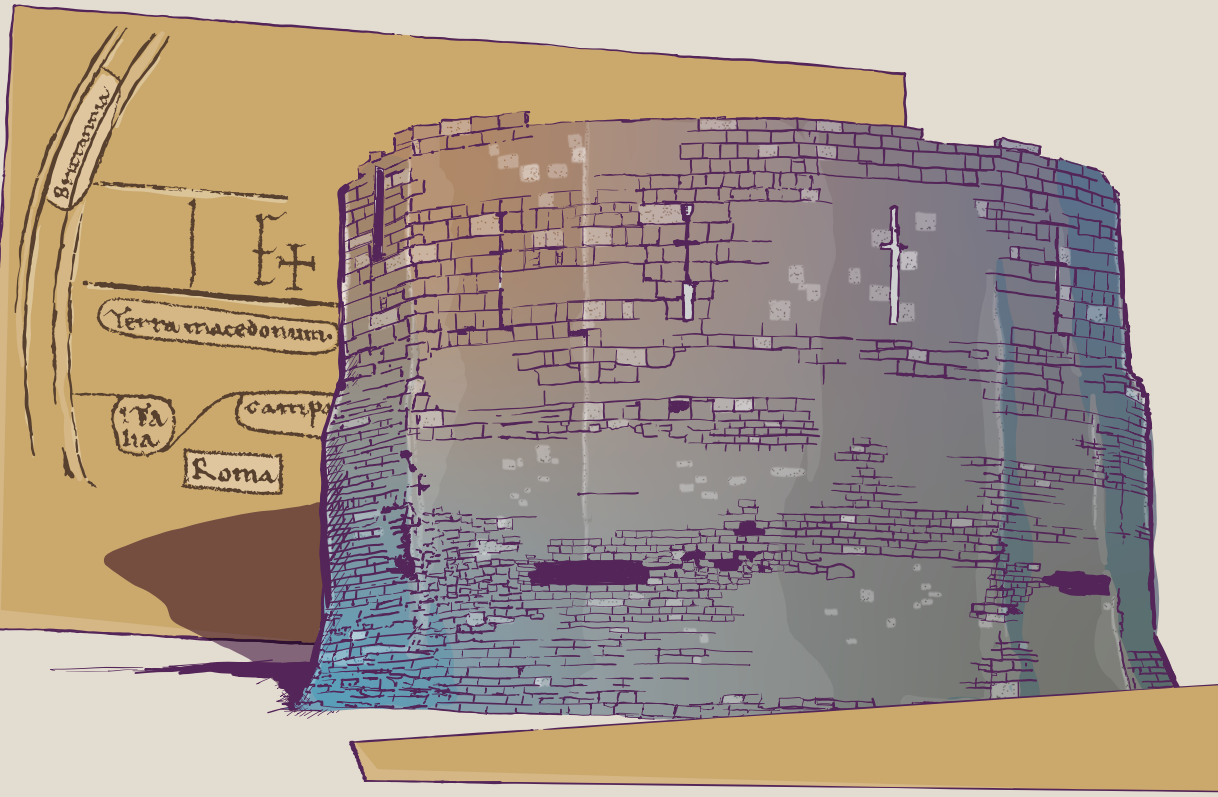

Mateusz Fafinski

Roman Infrastructure in Early Medieval Britain

The Adaptations of the Past in Text and Stone

Amsterdam University Press

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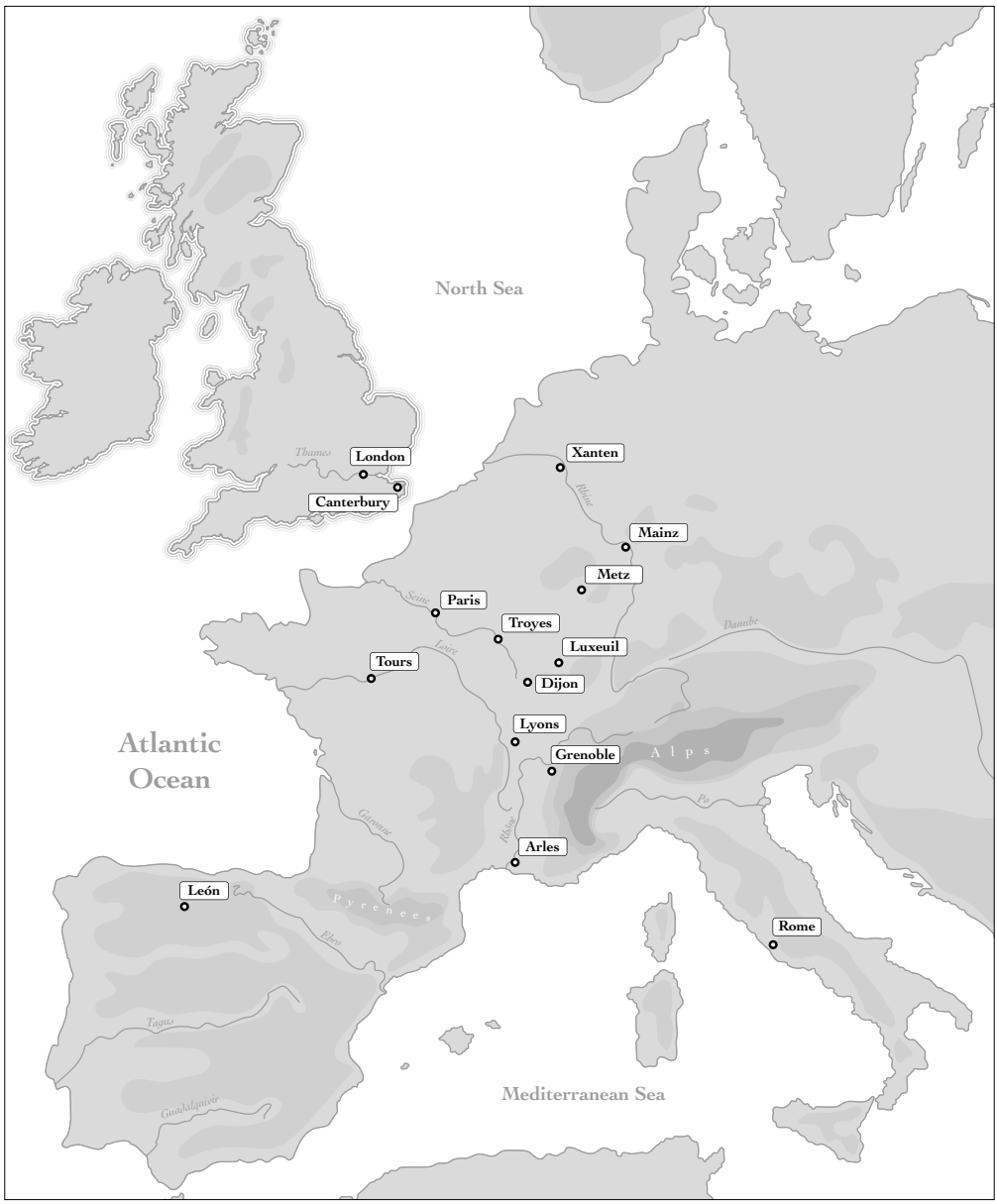

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List of Abbreviations

ASC	*The Anglo-Saxon chronicle: a collaborative edition*, ed. by D. N. Dumville, Simon Keynes, and Simon Taylor (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983)
ASE	Anglo-Saxon England
ASPR	*The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition,* ed. by George Krapp and Eliot Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-1942)
EME	Early Medieval Europe
HE	Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969)
GPRE I	*Gregorii I Papae Registrum Epistolarum. Libri I-VII*, ed. by Paul Ewald and Ludwig Hartmann, MGH Epistolae (Berlin, 1891).
GPRE II	*Gregorii I Papae Registrum Epistolarum. Libri VIII-XIV*, ed. by Ludwig Hartmann, MGH Epistolae (Berlin, 1891).
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
	AA Auctores Antiquissimi
	SRG Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum
	SRM Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum
TBEL	*The Beginnings of English Law*
RIB	Roman Inscriptions of Britain

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M.F.
Berlin, February 2021

Prologue

When Augustine landed in Kent in 597, what we call the Roman Empire was still raging against the dying of the light. After a prolonged struggle, the Empire had reconquered Italy (only to lose a large part of it to the Lombards shortly after). It held onto Northern Africa and even, by the thinnest of threads, parts of southern Spain. The economic heartlands in Egypt and Syria were undergoing a kind of golden age. The laws of the Empire had been recently codified once again in an enormous effort, proving the ability to shore up a massive amount of intellectual resources. Roman diplomacy if it did not control, then at least retained the ability to vastly influence those parts of the Empire that – no doubt, in the minds of courtly panegyrists and propagandists, temporarily – found themselves outside its borders.

But, as is the case so often with revivals, it was no longer the same old Rome, although its political and literary class did their utmost to pretend otherwise. Its point of gravity was in the East. Its machinery altered, its interests more divided. It was a late act, an empire transformed: its landscape was different from one, two, or three hundred years before; its infrastructure was weaker, its resources spread thinner over too large a territory. Nevertheless, at this moment, when the mission sent by Pope Gregory landed on the shores of Kent, nothing was yet decided, it was still the Empire. The members of the mission knew they were part of a world which had adapted, but in no way did they think of their world as a world in decline and fall.

What they encountered on the island of Britain differed greatly from what the Empire on its last tour looked like. Nonetheless, Rome was here too. On this island that Belisarius in his hubris reportedly wanted to give to the Goths in exchange for Sicily sixty years before, Roman roads still criss-crossed the landscape. Some (if not most) had different functions than transportation, but their gravitational pull still warped the environment around them. Roman city walls surrounded the now mostly empty urban spaces. Roman forts dotted the shore. Underneath this visible infrastructure, even more Roman legacy could be found.

No wonder then that when the mission took to its religious and imperial task, Britain was transformed as well. During a span of no more than two generations, Britain became a succesful cover act of its former metropolis, a spiritual province of an empire. And when the Empire, under the stress and reorganisation of the seventh century, withdrew to the East, shrank and transformed even more, to finally leave its Late Antique form, the attachment to the *idea* of Rome did not die in Britain. What made it possible, apart from

the intellectual infrastructure, were also in great part the material and symbolic infrastructures, which history this book tries to tell.

Both in their material and symbolic forms infrastuctures can work in ways that are not immediately obvious. They can exert an influence long after the actors who built them are gone. They can also become dormant and be reactivated again, change function, role, and appearance. Their story is not a simple story of continuity and discontinuity; it is one of adaptation and distinction.

Infrastructures and their survival have become a mark of advancement, a pulse of civilisation beating in the background of historical events. The idea is far from new – Bede wrote admiringly of the Romans, mentioning the cities and forts and roads that they built in Britain.[1] Gildas, although grudgingly, betrayed a stronger attachment to Rome and its trappings than he perhaps cared to admit.[2] Historians all too often take this attitude towards infrastructure (both material and immaterial) as a mark of quality. If societies took care of their infrastructure, they underwent a transformation. If they did not, they collapsed. This is a lazy metric. It provides a reductive approach to the dialectic of transformation/collapse. It is a metric trapped in a false idea of progress.

Sometimes even a memory of Roman infrastructure could exert a tremendous pull on the landscape and societies of Early Medieval Britain. Managing this infrastructural past, or even pasts, was a major activity in Britain during this period, which both generated and required adequate resources. Ignoring that aspect, that ability for infrastructures to be phantom as well as material, would mean providing an incomplete picture.

In an almost impossible feat, through ingenious use of architecture, Early Medieval Britain was able to create new memories of Rome. The crypts of Hexham and Ripon were grand memory theatres, able to evoke both the Roman past and the present of Christian Rome, but also to create memories of Rome in their visitors even though the empire itself was gone. Thomas Aquinas, five centuries after they were built, posited that a soul can only recall and cannot produce new memories, which only a body is able to do.[3] With that quip in mind we can see how Rome was present in Early Medieval Britain not only in spirit.

The infrastructural landscape was then shaped with a great understanding of memory and mnemonics – systems for improving and assisting memory.

1 HE, I.11.

2 Gildas, chap. 13-14.

3 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 73.

In this the inheritance of Rome shows as well, for the use of architecture to shape and direct memory is a well-attested classical tradition.[4] The High Medieval culture was chiefly memorial but already in the Early Middle Ages we see the roots of this practice.[5] And not only the roots; creative ways of applying it to shape the lived-in environment and the development of documentary practice. Adaptation is crucial for this process, as memory involves the passage of time and recollecting Rome is something different to recognising it.[6] Thus, studying the adaptations of post-Roman Britain is inseparable from studying the systems of memory.

The study of memory is thus one of the important methodological frameworks in this narrative. In order to understand what was being done with past infrastructures, we need more such frameworks and approaches that will allow us to see not only more of the additional functions of infrastructures but also additional facets of our sources, thus enabling us to see the connections between them. But there is no universal way to explain the modes in which Roman infrastructure functioned in Late Antique and Early Medieval Britain. The post-Roman landscape that emerges from our investigations is distinctively regionalised and varied. It is precisely this variation which advocates the use of a wide approach. To finally look at the island beyond the divide between the 'British' and 'English' material and to place them side by side in conversation. For the biggest differences are to be found precisely on a regional level and not on the, somewhat artificial, divide between what is seen as 'British' and 'English'. It is perhaps a testimony to the persuasive ability of writers like Bede that we are still trapped in this distinction. That methodological divide also contributes to our commitment to the dichotomy of continuity and discontinuity.

We can try to avoid being trapped in the dichotomy of continuity and discontinuity if we approach the connections between the infrastructures and the sources that describe them from a different angle. One of the chief impulses behind this book was a deep methodological unease with the idea of 'continuity'. Thus, the very understanding of continuity for the Early Medieval and Late Antique actors is put into question here. What we actually observe as Roman to Late Antique to Early Medieval continuity can be seen as, in reality, pluralistic strategies of maintaining distinction. This distinction opperates on many levels: as past objects, as legal spaces, and as urban spaces. From this perspective continuity is a term coined

4 Blum, *Die antike Mnemotechink*.
5 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 9.
6 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 76.

by us, the modern researchers, always on the lookout for the unbroken afterlife of Rome. Our understanding of continuity carried at the most very little currency for the inhabitants of Late Antique or Early Medieval Britain. Even more so since what we often take as a manifestation of discontinuity – like the evacuation of cities to hill-forts which is discussed in this book[7] – was for them a preservation of a very Roman *habitus*, a mode of action.[8] This multitude of processes of adaptation created, even on such a geographically constrained area as Britain, a number of very different approaches to *Romanitas*. In this, maintaining a distinction of singular or collected elements of infrastructure becomes part of the strategy of maintaining a horizontal distinction in the post-Roman and Early Medieval society.[9]

Romanitas could only be performed if a distinction was retained. Maintaining a distinct character of, for example, former urban space, seemed to matter for the actors in Late Antique and Early Medieval Britain. This distinction is reflected in the language they used for infrastructures inherited from the Roman past but also in what they used those infrastructures for. While this understanding of distinction that we use here is different both from the original meaning by Bourdieu and from the ethnicity-centred reworking proposed by Pohl, it maintains a strong connection with both. The distinction of the Roman character of infrastructure was crucial both for operating the 'market of symbolic resources' and the creation of identity in post-Roman Britain.[10] Insofar as this book is also an experiment to try to look for the strategies of adaptation and activation of what was left by the Romans – the roads, the urban spaces, the forts – it is also concerned with the ruins. By entering into a conversation with the concept of distinction we can understand not only our sources better but also ways in which the societies of post-Roman Britain interacted with those remains.

The Roman infrastructural remains constituted resources that could be at the disposal of the post-Roman polities. But their activation as governance resources was costly – Roman infrastructures, both physical and symbolic, were a product of a bureaucratised state, a state able to muster assets that from the perspective of post-Roman Britain were massive. Therefore, converting those resources into instruments that could produce tangible benefits was often beyond the scope of those polities.

7 *Vita Lupi Episcopi Trecensis*, chap. 6.
8 Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice*, 72-95.
9 Pohl, 'Introduction: Strategies of Distinction', 5-6.
10 Bourdieu, 'Le marché des biens symboliques'.

The two modes of use of Roman infrastructure that we can distinguish in our sources, both functional and symbolic, required different kinds of activation strategies and a different cost. Even physical remains, like roads, milestones, cities or ruins could be used as symbolic resources. It might be easier to maintain a memory of a Roman origin of a road than to maintain its surface in a traversable state. But we cannot underestimate the symbolic activation of Roman infrastructures as a process requiring a lesser effort. In fact, in some circumstances it might have been even more costly. And we can see the symbolic investment in Roman infrastructures in our sources: how authors like Bede use the symbolic value of the past infrastructures to strengthen contemporary arguments; how this investment in the Roman past allows Bede to see himself, and his Church, as Roman.[11]

Seeing that interface requires an approach that simultaneously recognises the multitude of adaptation strategies in post-Roman Britain and the more general drive to capitalise on the Roman past, recognising that symbolical systems could be instruments of power. Those instruments allow two activities crucial from the point of view of Late Antique and Early Medieval Britain: a communication between cultural and language spheres and the achievement of a consensus inside a – at least superficially – similarly structured world.[12] From the point of view of the rulers of post-Roman polities, this meant that symbolical systems built from those resources could be important instruments of power and legitimacy. By becoming part of the symbolic capital, they could be made productive.[13] Harnessing them, even in a haphazard way, meant tangible benefits in internal organisation and an ability to navigate the post-Roman West. To attain this symbolic capital meant that a form of symbolic productive monopoly was needed; in Early Medieval Britain this took the form of a claim to a status of being the successor state of Rome.[14] The attainment of this 'monopoly' required the production of (post-)Roman meaning. The kings giving charters in Roman cities, Bede's conflict with the British Church, or Wilfrid building churches from Roman stones, are, as we shall see throughout this book, also a form of production of the past. Memory of the past enables the activation of Roman infrastructures as symbolic instruments. It was also a powerful tool which enabled the rulers to enter

11 Hilliard, 'Bede and the Changing Image of Rome and the Romans'; Moore, 'Bede's Devotion to Rome'.

12 Bourdieu, 'Éléments pour une théorie de la production', 752.

13 Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice*, 171-182.

14 Bourdieu, 'Éléments pour une théorie de la production', 759.

into a conversation with contemporary Rome – like Oswiu, stylising himself as a ruler of a post-Roman polity, with his palace in *Ad Murum* on Hadrian's Wall and his decisive step towards Roman Easter as the Easter of the post-Roman world.[15]

For all of this to matter Rome must have been a form of a tangible administrative example and the feeling of belonging to a circle of successor states must have been something real for the rulers of early polities in Britain. And indeed, when we look across our written sources, from Gildas referring to Roman practices (even if begrudgingly), through Bede casting Angles, Saxons and Jutes as the inheritors of Roman bridges, streets and cities of Britain and Welsh rulers deriving their genealogies from Roman emperors to Gregory the Great using imperial parallels in his correspondence with Aethelberht and Bertha, we see that such sentiments were not alien to the actors in Early Medieval Britain.

This means that distinction mattered because only a governance resource that could be seen as distinct in its Roman sense carried this added value or was able to be activated as such. Moreover, very often this distinction was maintained by using instruments that were essentially Roman in their nature. What we might observe as discontinuity is just (and as much as) adaptation. The great paradox of some of the more successful adaptation strategies in Britain, but also in the broader view of the post-Roman West, is that while rooted in an essentially Roman framework they lead to a repurposing beyond recognition and thus to a loss of distinction. We often take the manifestation of such a process (like dismantling a Roman fort to build a church) as discontinuity while the underlying praxis that lead to its end result was clearly rooted in the Roman past.

A vast majority of Roman infrastructures in Britain could not be possibly activated as governance resources by the polities in the post-Roman period. A city with baths and paved streets is useless without an imperial or Church bureaucracy, its amenities almost impossible to maintain without a tax revenue. There are other, more cost-effective strategies for fulfilling its functions. But it can still be valuable to maintain its distinction – both in memory and on the ground – for the purposes of activating it as a symbolical instrument. It was important for the drafters of charters and for Bede when he wrote about the *civitates* in Britain. A story, a tale, can bring you a bigger return on your investment in the Roman past than the actual bricks and mortar from which buildings were made. Roman infrastructures could move between functional and symbolic uses.

15 HE, III, 21.

Strategies of activation are essentially means within which a resource can be put to use. A charter is a great example of such a strategy, as it offers multiple possibilities, both functional and symbolic. A Roman road or a Roman milestone can be used as a boundary marker; a charter can be given in a Roman city, thus using the sense of a place as a factor boosting the legitimacy of a ruler; the terminology used in a charter can refer to a purported or real knowledge of the Roman past, thus giving an anchoring to the actors involved. Similar strategies relying on the past can be seen in chronicles and laws.[16] Such approach to our sources, as elements of the adaptation process, but which still maintained a distinction of the Roman character, can make us better understand the relationship between the written sources and infrastructures. Evan a ruin can be symbolically and functionally activated. The stones can be re-used, both in a practical sense and to carry meaning and memory. The actual perimeters of walls can be repurposed. The memory of a distinctive character of an urban precinct, for example, can be a powerful tool as well. Adaptation is therefore not methodologically opposed to transformation. But it stresses better the nature of the framework in which those processes started.

The chosen time span, between roughly the end of the fourth century and the middle of the eighth century, is the period of transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages in the post-Roman West. The structure of the book is thematic. Organising the material into problems and thematic topics is the most productive way to analyse it. This means that we can also see the evolution of the terms and concepts that we discuss here over time. We can also see inherent tensions instead of overlooking them, like the friction between the royal and ecclesiastical actors evident in the last chapter, or the tension between the chronologies of 'Eastern' and 'Western' charters. Some of those tensions cannot be reconciled with the evidence that we have at hand. Instead of trying to remove it, we can try to show it.

One of the chief hypotheses of this book is that the way Roman infrastructure was used and re-used in Britain throughout that time showed on the one hand a high degree of regionalisation, but on the other was also exhibiting similar characteristics to the processes that were similarly happening on the Continent over the same period. But such claims require a firm methodological footing in the subject. While reviewing major points of scholarship, the first chapter attempts to set out the working definitions of the key theoretical notions, providing an ad hoc structure for interdisciplinary Medieval infrastructure methodology. It advocates on the one hand

16 Reimitz, *History and Frankish Identity*, 410-443.

a broad understanding of terms such as infrastructure, and on the other the rejection of simple methodological dichotomies. I have then attempted to build up the argument proceeding from the material foundations to symbolic interpretations in chapters about infrastructures of transport through urbanism to the infrastructures and the Church. This layered approach hopefully allows for the progressive introduction of new values of Roman infrastructure as they appeared alongside the developments in the social, political and religious landscape of Britain. This book is then, in essence, a story of how the Roman infrastructural past was used and re-used, but also exerted a pull on the societies of Britain in that time of adaptation.