

FLUID FRONTIERS:
Cultural Interaction on the Edge of Empire

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ABSTRACT

This paper will use the northern frontiers of the Roman empire as a case study in the relationships between practice, identity and power in a colonial context. Rather than static barriers between Roman and other cultures, those areas which were on the limits of imperial political control were zones of perpetual contact. In different regions, such as northern Britain and north-eastern Gaul, highly specific sets of interactions between people from diverse communities generated constant re-definitions of the boundaries of identity. Sometimes these emphasised distinctions between ‘colonizers’ and ‘colonized’; at other times, these groups shared more than either had in common with their nominally-related fellows in other regions. In either case, the foundation for the negotiation of particular interactions was practice, and the similarities and differences between the things that people did in the course of their everyday routines. Exploring these routines, and their transformation over time, in practices such as burying, eating, dwelling and dressing will demonstrate that all stories of culture-contact must be grounded in a concern with contextuality. The people at the cutting edge of even the seemingly-mechanistic institutions of the Roman empire were just that—people, engaged in a range of relationships with others. Attempting to capture some of their specific stories is a necessary counter-weight to the traditional grand narratives of Roman imperialism, and not simply to provide more holistic accounts of the past. Situations such as this are highly relevant to modern debates concerning identity, where over-simplified stories of origins, territoriality and cultural values need to be critically assessed and challenged with more pluralist perspectives, yet with a full awareness of the potential political consequences.

INTRODUCTION: CULTURE CONTACT AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The study of the Roman empire has always been concerned, in one form or another, with culture-contact. What has only been a relatively recent development, however, is the realisation that the Roman empire is itself a contact-culture: a hybrid, constantly mobile entity which defies generalisation in its own terms, let alone through comparison with other imperial or colonial situations. Nonetheless, much can still be learned by analysing the dynamics of the Roman empire and exploring the roots of their complexity. These are to be found in the many and varied interactions of people in particular places and particular times, which both drew upon and transformed the more abstract institutions that characterize the empire in modern consciousness. Insofar as such interactions can be accommodated within a grander narrative, this will highlight the role of regions that were on the periphery of the empire (cf. Elton 1996; James 1999; Whittaker 1994). Far from being “lines of relative inertia” (Gosden 2004, 110), these frontiers were highly interactive zones, thanks to the presence of diverse indigenous and incoming groups, traditionally characterized as ‘Romans’, ‘Natives’ and ‘Barbarians’. People from inside and outside the Roman empire, and whether members of state organizations or not, were all agents in the creation of that empire. It is from trying to understand this complex process that something can, perhaps, be gained which is of value in the study of other situations of cultural contact, whether in the past or present.

In the main body of this paper, I will elaborate upon how such a process might be explored through the analysis of everyday archaeological material, using examples from Britain and northern Gaul. Before proceeding with this, however, some background on the understanding of cultural contact and change in Roman studies will be useful to situate the field within broader approaches to these themes. The dominant paradigm in the archaeology of the Roman provinces for much of the 20th century has been the concept of ‘Romanization’. This term was partially coined by Theodor Mommsen, a mid-19th century German scholar, but first really applied by Francis Haverfield during the first decades of the 20th century, with reference to the archaeology of Britain, a significant frontier province (Freeman 1996; Hingley 1996, 2000; Webster 2001). At the time, it represented a novel departure from previous interpretations of Roman presence in provincial contexts, which emphasised simple occupation and withdrawal, without any form of cultural interaction. By contrast, Haverfield and his successors in the study of Roman Britain and, indeed, other provinces, argued for a gradual assimilation of the indigenous population to Roman civilization. The more recent variations of this idea, influenced to a certain extent by both post-colonial politics and developments in archaeological theory, have asserted

some indigenous choice or agency in this process, and also recognised that it was not necessarily a benign one (e.g. Millett 1990). In the last decade or so, however, criticism of the rather homogenizing view of culture which the 'Romanization' paradigm ultimately depends upon has mounted, fostering a range of alternative approaches.

These have tended to emphasise the cultural diversity within the traditional categories of 'Roman' and 'Native', and the complexity of the processes by which the empire came into being. One theme in such work has been a focus upon active or passive resistance to the empire among some indigenous groups (e.g. Fincham 2002). Another has been the examination of interaction as a multi-directional process. In this vein, some have argued for the replacement of 'Romanization' with terminology which better emphasises diverse hybridities, such as 'creolization' (Webster 2001), while others have advocated an even more radical break away from generalizing terms of any kind (Barrett 1997; cf. Mattingly 2002), a view with which I have considerable sympathy. Through debates over these and other issues, Roman studies has belatedly moved away from a concern with contact between Roman and other cultures, to the understanding that Roman culture was itself constantly created through the networks of contact that made up the empire (e.g. Woolf 1998; cf. Gosden 2004, 116). As important as this departure from simplistic approaches to culture is, two significant problems remain, which I hope to address during the course of this paper.

The first is one of temporal focus. Most of the aforementioned debates have occurred within the context of the initial period of Roman occupation in Britain in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., and have therefore been concerned with the phase of—from a traditional point of view—greatest potential change. From the perspective adopted in this paper, however, all periods are a mixture of continuity and change and all are therefore important in the maintenance and transformation of an entity such as the Roman empire. The study of changes towards the end of the Roman period have—as with its beginning—typically employed crude mechanisms of cultural contact, particularly invasions and migrations, with little concern for how significant these really were at the level of everyday interactions between people in frontier regions. It is vital to extend our newly critical eye on Roman colonialism to all periods, and I will therefore focus, in my examples, on the 3rd to 5th centuries. Equally, it is important to incorporate in our narratives all of the social actors who potentially participated in the making and remaking of the empire. These included members of state institutions, such as the military, who unfortunately seem to have slipped from one kind of caricature within the traditional paradigm, as the bearers of civilisation (e.g. Webster 1985), to another in more recent work—that of the sinister oppressor (e.g. Faulkner 2000). More

nuanced understandings of the relationship between these kinds of actors and the institutional structures of the empire will be a key part of a more dynamic picture of cultural interaction at the edges of the Roman empire.

INTERACTION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Building this kind of picture also depends upon particular theoretical insights from the wider social sciences, and some indication of those which I find most useful in examining the relationships between people in this context may already be apparent. In spite, and in some cases because of, the criticisms directed against it within both social theory and archaeology, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory remains, for me, a rich source of inspiration in social analysis. Various commentators have taken issue with aspects of Giddens' attempt to unite actors and structures within a non-deterministic framework, often claiming that he fails to do justice to the complexities either of social organisation or of agency and interaction (see e.g. Archer 1995; Gero 2000; MacGregor 1994; Parker 2000). However, in many cases these criticisms take as their starting point precisely the kind of dualistic thinking about the incompatibility of different kinds of social entity that Giddens is trying to get away from. In other cases, critical points about the level of detail which structuration theory allows for in social analysis can be readily built into the conceptual apparatus that Giddens has outlined in his major works on the subject (esp. 1984), by exploiting sympathetic traditions such as symbolic interactionism (e.g. Musolf 2003; cf. Stones 2005). That is the approach adopted in my own work, and here I will focus briefly upon one aspect of this that is particularly important in the case at hand.

One of the central tenets of structuration theory is that social structures are chronically dependent upon the everyday, routine interactions of social actors for their reproduction and transformation over time, while actors are similarly dependent upon structures for creating the possibility of action. While individual actors will be confronted with widely variable opportunities and constraints, and will understand and react to these in different ways, Giddens' insight accommodates these as it requires us to explore the social and political implications of even the most mundane activities and practices. Even in contexts with distinctly asymmetrical power relations, the interactions of people situated within different institutions and different cultures will reproduce some and reshape others of the practices of all concerned (Musolf 2003, 97-100; cf. Given 2004, 13-7). These interactions may well entail coercion and/or resistance, but these are not the only manifestations of agency in colonial contact situations. Maintenance of some traditional ways of doing things, the absorption of new ones, and the development of hybrids will all occur, with varying degrees of deliberate

intent and with variable significance for the identities of the people enacting them. The Roman empire was the result, not of the intentionality of a few individuals who were senators or emperors, nor of implacable historical forces working through social institutions, but of all the myriad interactions that were connected by, but also shaped and changed the Roman world over time. In the next section of this paper, I will present several vignettes from the north-western frontier provinces. I hope that these will illustrate how the dynamism which is integral to these zones, and is evident in the practices of everyday life, played a key part in the structured transformation of the late Roman empire.

CONTEXTS OF INTERACTION

Fort Communities in Northern Britain

A good starting point for the analysis of long-term cultural interaction on the Roman frontiers is the monument which is most readily associated with the idea of these as linear barriers: Hadrian's Wall. Constructed in the early 2nd century A.D. on an existing line of control, the Wall was used more-or-less continuously throughout the Roman period, and was garrisoned by a number of forts. There has been considerable debate about the function of the Wall (e.g. Breeze and Dobson 2000), though this in itself was almost certainly flexible, as the use of installations attached to it, and others both to the north and south, changed over time. That problem is not my immediate concern here; rather, by looking at the archaeology of certain key sites in the central and eastern sectors of the Wall zone (Figure 1), I will try to demonstrate how this region was one of both fluid interactions and occasionally surprising separations.

For many of the farmers of the northern frontier region, the Roman military presence along Hadrian's Wall does not seem to have had a great deal of material impact. Relatively few farmstead sites in this area have been excavated, but those that have produce little in the way of pottery or other Roman-period artefacts, and limited evidence of architectural transformation (e.g. at Huckhoe; Jobey 1959; cf. Jobey 1960; Shotter 1996, 136-41). This in itself might indicate a confrontational situation, with opportunities for the kinds of material transformation represented by southern Romano-British villas being limited by the military's control of economic and administrative activity in the region (Millet 1990, 100-1), or by cultural resistance to change, and quite possibly a combination of these factors. However, there are other locales of interaction between soldiers and a range of other groups, in the small townships or *vici* attached to forts which flourished in the middle of the Roman period. These have traditionally been interpreted primarily in terms of the provision of services to the soldiers, and to some extent as residential areas for soldiers' families.

This makes them seem somewhat detached still from the people living inside the fort walls, however, and indeed there is increasing evidence that fort-enclosures were not exclusively occupied by men, even from quite early on in the Roman period, while there were also occasions when detachments of soldiers lived outside the walls (Crow 2004, 79-81; Driel-Murray 1995). That the fort and *vicus* was an integrated community in which people of diverse origins mixed is indicated by an oft-cited inscription from South Shields, commemorating a southern British woman married to a Palmyran from the eastern empire (Bidwell 1997, 76), and by late Roman laws relating to the recruitment of soldiers' sons (Codex Theodosianus, VII.1.5, VII.1.8), many of whom must have been raised in this kind of context. Connected by a range of different interactions and activities, and combining both the global and the local aspects of life in the Roman world, the fort/*vicus* communities of Hadrian's Wall were at once distinctively military compared to the surrounding farms (cf. James 1999, 23), yet also internally diverse.

These internal dynamics at each particular fort will, by the later Roman period, have also generated distinctive ways of life that created potential identity boundaries between the military communities along the Wall. This is illustrated by the distinctive histories of the forts at Housesteads (*Vercovicium*) and South Shields (*Arbeia*) in the later Roman period. The former, in the central sector of the Wall, was apparently occupied from the early 2nd century by the *cohors prima Tungrorum*. Although the presence of one or two irregular Germanic units in the 3rd century is attested by epigraphy and pottery, these seem to have been accommodated outside of the fort, and did not significantly impact upon a more long-term pattern of gradual modifications to the fort's interior. In the late Roman period, these are manifest in changes to the headquarters building (sub-division of the courtyard, metalworking in the main hall), the commanding officer's house (alterations in room layout), the barracks (construction of self-contained units), and a store-building (into which baths were inserted; Crow 2004, 89-112). By the 4th century, then, this community had adapted the standard institutionally-designed fort to its own purposes. Interestingly, this occurred at a time when the many of *vicus* buildings began to be abandoned, suggesting perhaps that the whole of the fort community was now more resident within the walls.

By contrast, the early 4th century phase at South Shields was much more in keeping with contemporary imperial trends. This fort, at the mouth of the river Tyne and always an important communications node between the Wall and coastal supply routes, was largely rebuilt at the beginning of the 4th century to accommodate a unit transferred from the eastern empire, the *numerus barcariorum Tigrisiensium*. The commanding officer's house was constructed in a contemporary Mediterranean style,

and the overall plan of the fort was also adapted to a novel cruciform pattern, again reflecting trends in some other parts of the empire (Bidwell 1996; Bidwell and Speak 1994; Hodgson 1996). While the pattern of occupation changed (and arguably 'localised') later on, 4th century *Arbeia* was built and initially inhabited in ways reflecting a different set of 'military' practices to those lived by the people of *Vercovicium*, and members of these communities would have therefore been able to find dimensions of difference, as well as some common threads of soldiers' experience. This highlights the complexity of contacts even within the military as an institution, and of the lives of its members as subalterns (in the original sense of the word) in the process of colonialism.

Fortress and Civitas in South Wales

A different set of contacts and interactions is indicated in the evidence from another region within Britain. The area of modern south Wales was not on the frontier 'line', but did contain diverse communities who were part of a broader frontier 'zone' within the empire. In particular, the links between the fortress of Caerleon, the town of Caerwent, and the surrounding rural landscape offer further scope for considering the multiple agents in the creation of 'Roman' Britain. In the 1st century A.D., the area of the people known to the Romans as the Silures saw considerable military activity, culminating in the establishment of both military and administrative instruments of control, only a few miles apart: the legionary fortress at Caerleon (*Isca*), and the district or *civitas* capital at Caerwent (*Venta Silurum*). From this point on, interaction between soldiers, local members of the elite involved in civic administration, and farmers proceeded in a more eclectic fashion, and again gave rise to distinctive local trajectories of cultural change.

Some of this story can be told from the artefactual evidence. The military community at Caerleon was initially distinguished by, among other things, its use of coinage, and in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries this marked it out even from the townsfolk at Caerwent (Figure 2). Although legionaries from the fortress may well have travelled the 9 miles to Caerleon to spend their money there, exchanging practices involving Roman coins will perhaps have been more commonplace in the settlement around the fortress (the *canabae*). Over time this dimension of difference changed as the use of coinage became more socially widespread, and by the later 2nd century such distinctions of practice had disappeared. Coin-use was delayed—or resisted—for even longer on farmsteads, but in other respects there were similarities between the kinds of artefacts used, and therefore perhaps some kinds of activities, across most sites in this area, irrespective of whether the farms changed architecturally.

With pottery, for example, the dominant ware in the 4th century at both Caerleon and Llandough, a farmstead site near Cardiff, was Black-Burnished ware (BB1), which had indeed been a ubiquitous ware in western Britain for some time but which was produced using traditional Late Iron age technology in Dorset (Figure 3). While the uses to which the popular BB1 cooking-vessels were put need not have been the same in the two locations, the common material culture between these communities (reflected also in the spectrum of small-finds types in use) suggests more potential for interaction than between the equivalent groups in northern Britain.

The extent to which the boundaries between ‘conquering’ and ‘conquered’ communities remained in the 4th century in this region are unclear. This is partly because the continued presence of soldiers at Caerleon after the end of the 3rd century has been disputed, with occupation at sites like that illustrated in Figure 3 often being ascribed to ‘squatters’ (e.g. Boon 1972). However, from analysis of the finds across this site, and consideration of their ambiguity in terms of clear ‘military’ or ‘civilian’ identities, I have concluded elsewhere that the military probably was in residence at Caerleon still, but that the boundaries between these groups might only be marked in some kinds of interactions (Gardner 2002). These might involve contextually-specific uses of widespread material culture, as with the pottery mentioned above, or patterns of practice which do not need to involve much material culture at all, such as violence. At the same time, it seems clear from the ways in which the ‘official’ spaces of Caerleon (and indeed Caerwent) were being used for more diverse purposes in the 4th century (see Gardner, forthcoming) that the lifestyles of soldiers, administrators and farmers had impacted upon each other in this area, creating a common hybrid culture (for which there is no better term than ‘Roman’) within which boundaries had to be defined in new ways.

Travellers and Contacts in Britain and Gaul

The final kind of contact within the northern Roman frontier zone that I want to discuss is manifest primarily in burial evidence from southern Britain and northern Gaul in the 4th and 5th centuries. The cemetery of Lankhills, outside the Roman town at Winchester (*Venta Belgarum*), has attracted a good deal of attention within late Roman archaeology because of its two groups of supposedly ‘intrusive’ burials (Clarke 1979). Although one of these groups, a rather loosely-defined series of ‘Saxon’ graves, has been effectively dismantled (Baldwin 1985), the other does seem to represent a small immigrant community of both men and women. While dress artefacts associated with the men, including specific kinds of brooch and belt-fitting believed to be symbolic of late Roman imperial authority (either military or administrative) tie these

people in to some aspect of state service, it is the costume of the women which allows the group to be identified as probably Pannonian in origin. It is from this region, in modern Hungary, that the only parallels for the particular kinds of beads and extensive left-arm bracelets worn by the younger women within the group come (Swift 2000, 69-77). Associations between the burials link this group much more coherently than the 'Saxon' graves.

This case represents, therefore, an important continuity of mobility within frontier contexts, where people (and not just male soldiers or officials) travelled quite long distances in connection with imperial business. The artefacts that these particular people were wearing when they were buried were distinctive to frontier culture. While some of the items belonged to a specific regional tradition, these and the more generic items with imperial associations have stylistic affinities on both sides of the Continental frontiers, attesting to interactions in those regions which were similar to those we have examined in Britain so far. However, within a generation or so this small community seems to have been absorbed into the broader population of Winchester, as the distinctiveness of the rite is diminished within later graves in the sequence and then disappears. Again, therefore, the results of the contact situation were not predictable, and led to the emperor's servants from another part of the empire changing their way of 'being Roman'.

Similar kinds of evidence can be found in the rural cemeteries of northern Gaul. At Frénouville, in Basse-Normandie, a change in burial orientation and diversification of the range of grave-goods in the mid-5th century was associated with the appearance in the region of Frankish allies brought in by the Roman state as a way of harnessing Germanic immigration to imperial defence (Pilet 1980). However, the biological anthropology of the skeletal remains was not, according to the excavators, indicative of any kind of population influx or change. In this case, then, the dynamic nature of the later Roman frontiers in the lower Rhine region apparently led the local population to make their own decisions about appropriate cultural practices. By contrast, an immigrant population is attested at the nearby cemetery of St.-Martin-de-Fontenay in the later 5th century, both through some burial goods and evidence of skull-deformation. This practice is believed to have been used by allies of the Huns to imitate their appearance (Pilet 1994). While this example relates to the collapse of the late Roman frontiers rather than to their fluid character within the Roman period proper, it does perhaps represent an extreme case of how flexible the identities of those associated with military expansion could be, and of how they could still be absorbed within the continuity of burial practice at a particular site which had been in

use from the late Iron Age. As with the Romans, being 'a Hun' changed people, but did not prevent them changing further in response to new situations and interactions.

CONCLUSION: INTERACTION, IDENTITY AND MULTI-VOCALITY

The main purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate that empires, particularly at their edges, are culturally dynamic places. This fluidity is not confined to the earliest phases of 'contact', nor does it entail one-way cultural transformation. Rather, the empire is created by these interactions—in the Roman case, it is through the diverse cultures of the empire that 'Roman' is created, defined, and transformed. I have also tried to show, however, that this is not an abstract social process, but something that emerges from the routine interactions of people living in areas like Britain and northern Gaul. This is an important point if we are to understand the differentials of power within the empire, and situate the agency of different people within their particular circumstances. It is clear, at a general level, that the kinds of interactions which I have described on the frontiers—not all of which were harmonious—were important in the transformation and fragmentation of the Roman west. The late Roman period is, in many ways, defined by the increasing cultural marginalization of Italy and the redefinition of Roman-ness in provincial contexts (see e.g. Swift 2000; cf. James 1999, 21-3 on the role of the military). This was the result, though, not of a teleological historical force, but of people deciding how to cook, what to wear, and who to talk to in countless interactions all across the Roman world. The (largely unintended) consequences of this may have been fragmentation or even collapse, but the process was fundamentally one of *structuration*—of people shaping structures simply by inhabiting them.

This point is vital because it highlights the fact that there were lots of agents involved in the transformation of the Roman empire, with very different motives and very different experiences of what this meant. This, I would argue, is something that will be true in many culture-contact situations. Equally, contact is not necessarily a short-lived process, but can involve a prolonged interchange and interaction, with seemingly paradoxical results. In many cases, indigenous people in the areas conquered by Roman armies were subjected to violence and exploitation, yet over time the interactions between these groups, and even with those outside of imperial control, undermined the structures of the empire. Cultural contact in the Roman world, therefore, involved highly complex local negotiations of identity, which would have been viewed differently by all those participating. As with such situations in other past, and present, contexts, it is essential not to over-simplify their complexities if we are to understand them. We can, however, work with these complexities if we pay attention

to the subtle ways in which practices change or stabilise over time, and their likely significance in terms of identities. This is because it is through the mundane ways in which people adapt or perpetuate their daily lives in new situations that identities are actively shaped.

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Constitution*. (Translation, commentary, glossary and bibliography by C. Pharr
with T.S. Davidson and M.B. Pharr; introduction by C. Dickerman Williams).
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Location map of British sites discussed in the text.

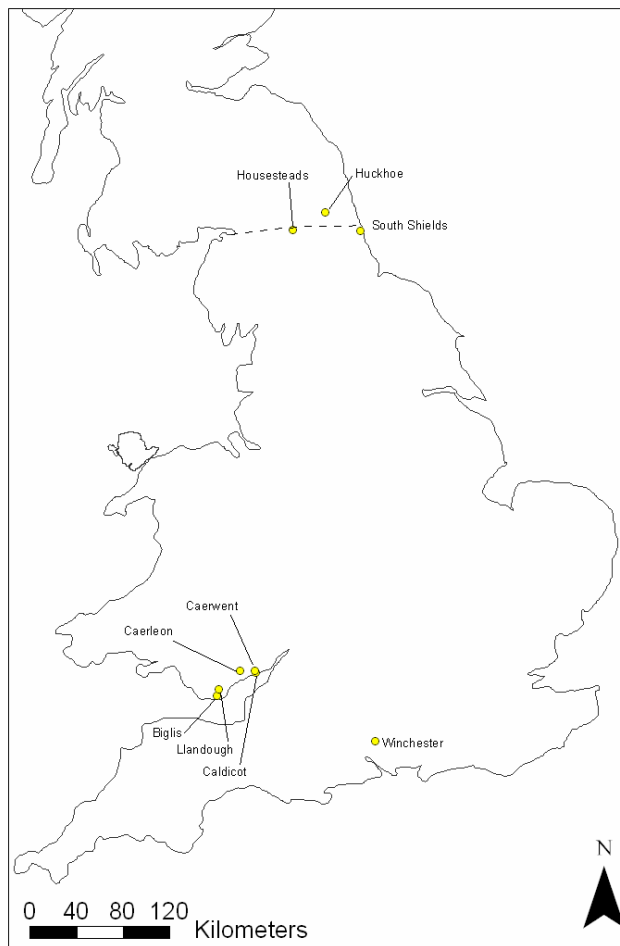


Figure 2. Coin-use in south Wales. The patterns of coin-loss are plotted following methods devised by Richard Reece (1995), and intrinsically involve comparison with a mean pattern for Britain. Whether a site is above-average, average, or below-average at a particular time is indicated by its curve's direction relative to the x-axis (i.e. Caerleon is strongly above-average in the early period). [Data from Boon 1988(a) and (b); Gardner 2001].

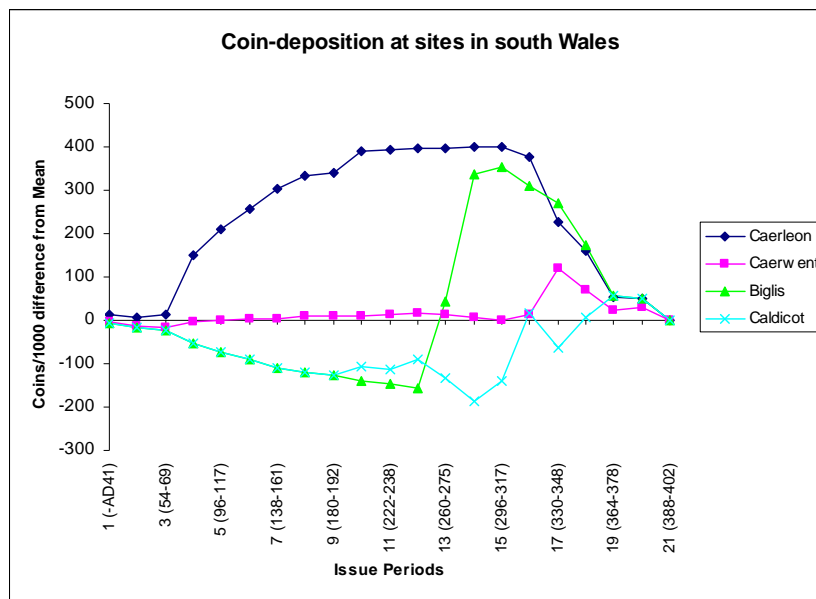


Figure 3. Pottery supply at Caerleon and Llandough in the later Roman period. [Data from (Caerleon:) Greep 1986 (Llandough:) Hartley 1988: 171; Webster 1988].

