

Western Britain in late antiquity

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Dark, K. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9116-8068>
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WESTERN BRITAIN IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Ken Dark (University of Reading)

ABSTRACT

The relevance of the concept of ‘Late Antiquity’ to fifth- and sixth-century Western Britain is demonstrated with reference to the archaeology of the British kingdom of Dumnonia, and then used to reinterpret portable material culture. Themes discussed include the dating of Palestinian amphorae in Britain, the extent of the settlement at Tintagel, tin as a motivation for Byzantine trade, the re-use of Roman-period artefacts, and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ artefacts on Western British sites. The central paradoxes of Late Antiquity: simultaneous conservatism and **fluidity, continuity** and innovation, are seen to illuminate ‘Dark Age’ Britain and offer new avenues for future research.

INTRODUCTION

‘Late Antiquity’ is both a chronological and cultural characterisation based on studies of fourth- to seventh century Europe and the Middle East (Brown 1989, 2003). It recognises that **peoples across this broad** geographical zone shared a series of common political, religious and cultural characteristics: a synthesis of Roman provincial cultures with the cultural worlds of early Christianity and of non-Roman peoples (e.g. Cameron *et al* 2000). Within these wide-ranging similarities one can identify many local, regional, social and economic variations and diversities, involving both continuities *and* discontinuities from the Roman past, accompanied by a high level of cultural innovation, ethnic fluidity and ongoing reformulation (e.g. Pohl 1998; Pohl and Reimitz 1998).

The relevance of the concept of Late Antiquity to analysing fourth- to seventh-century Britain has been hotly debated since it was first introduced into archaeological and historical debate twenty years ago (e.g. Dark 1994b, 2000, 2005a; Collins and Gerrard 2004). The purpose of this contribution is both to re-state the case for such a perspective and to show the utility of this concept as a means of overcoming some of the most intransigent problems in the archaeology of this period. It will focus on the Britons, that is, descendants of the already culturally diverse population of the fourth-century Roman provinces of Britain, in what had been the fourth-century province of Britannia Prima (the significance of this province to understanding the post-Roman period was first highlighted in Dark 1994b, 8-10, 247-51).

Although the eastern part of the province contained towns and villas in the fourth century, the south-west of Britannia Prima, the fourth-century civitas of the Dumnonii, seems to have been relatively un-integrated into the broader Late Roman economy. If the concept of Late Antiquity can be shown to be relevant to such an apparently ‘peripheral’ area, one would expect it to be even more applicable to those parts of Western Britain where the British communities shared more in common with the heritage of other regions of the world of Late Antiquity. In doing so, it will be seen that many of the points made have far wider relevance to the archaeology of the fifth- and sixth-century Britain (for a larger-scale analysis: Dark 2000).

WESTERN BRITAIN IN THE WORLD OF LATE ANTIQUITY

The ‘Late Antique’ identity of the Britons can be most easily seen through texts and burials. The principal British writers of the fifth and sixth centuries, Patrick and Gildas, demonstrate their ability to produce new literary works showing a familiarity with the contemporary learning, knowledge of the past, and Latinity common to other Late Antique authors in Gaul or Italy (Dumville and Lapidge 1984). Indeed, both Patrick and Gildas attest the existence into the fifth and sixth centuries respectively of the Classical higher education and sophisticated Christian theology of the continental European elite (Lapidge 1984). Other texts from this period in Western Britain, notably the British penitentials and the many Latin-inscribed memorial stones (for a summary of the range of sources: Dark 2001, 32-45), connect the Britons again to shared patterns of thought, symbolism, language and (through the use of poetry) even literature in Late Antique western Europe as a whole (e.g. Kaster 2000).

The ‘Late Antique’ character of British burials of this period has been highlighted by David Petts (2004), and is well-illustrated at Cannington in Somerset (Rahtz *et al* 2000). The specific burial postures employed, their long-cists and cemetery-organization, and their use of focal graves can all be widely paralleled in Late Antique contexts from Western Gaul to the Byzantine East. There are strong links back to the Roman past, but equally there are innovations within a ‘Roman’ and ‘Christian’ tradition that are typically ‘Late Antique’, such as the use of memorials bearing formulae found again from Gaul, Spain and Italy (Handley 2001, 2005; Tedeschi 2005). **(Fig. 1)**

One can also see the combination of ‘Roman’ and ‘barbarian’ elements in funerary practice, characteristic of Late Antiquity. Both ‘Roman’ rectilinear funerary structures and ‘barbarian’ cairns and square barrows were used by the Britons to indicate important burials. The former are typically 4-5m x 3-4m, containing between one and three graves, perhaps (although this is as yet unproven) a family group, given special status within cemeteries of otherwise ‘flat’ graves. The structures are, therefore, probably timber mausolea, which as Frances Lynch (2001, 115) put it ‘would not be out of place in the extensive suburban cemeteries of late Roman Britain’. **Alongside these ‘Late Roman’ burial practices, we see others of a non-Roman character: cairns are attested at Tintagel parish church, and perhaps at Cannington (see below and Dark 1985; Nowakowski and Thomas 1990, 1992), and there are square barrows at a series of sites in Wales, such as Tandderwen, Druid, Segontium and, arguably, Tomen-y-Mur (Brassil *et al* 1991; Jones *et al* 2011; Jones 2012; Kenney and Parry 2012).**

Another shared characteristic of Late Antique societies that is well evidenced in Britain is participation in long-distance networks associated with the Mediterranean of red-slipped tableware, and amphorae. Pottery of this sort (including ARSW, PRSW and the ‘classic’ amphora-types of the fifth- and sixth-century Mediterranean, such as LR1 and LR2) is found widely on sites across Western Britain (Campbell 2007, ch.2), attesting the inclusion of this region in those networks.

Although there are also Western imports (Campbell 2007, chs. 3-4), it has been noted by previous scholars that the eastern Mediterranean ceramics display the combination of regional types characteristic of sixth-century Constantinople (Fulford 1989), which after over a decade’s fieldwork in Istanbul I can, in general terms, confirm. The Tintagel assemblage also shows the combination of amphora types associated with sixth-century imperial supply lines in the eastern Mediterranean (Harris 2003, 152) and a recent study by Pamela Armstrong (pers. comm. Armstrong 2012) has shown that amphorae from Tintagel include pottery similar to that produced on the Marmara, re-emphasising the Constantinopolitan character of this assemblage.

The significance of this is apparent when seen from the perspective of the Byzantine eastern Mediterranean. In that region, long-distance trade was closely linked with official diplomacy, and carefully controlled through guilds and other organisational structures (Dark 2003). Consequently, it is likely that there were direct links with the Byzantine east, probably with

Constantinople itself (Fulford 1989), and that these links were more than purely economic. **Political centres attracted** communities of Byzantine merchants elsewhere in the West (Dark 2003), although this is far from claiming that Tintagel was itself a Byzantine site (a view incorrectly attributed to me by Turner 2006, 56).

Interestingly, while commerce in tin and other metals **is** often claimed to explain these Byzantine contacts, Tintagel is almost as far as it is possible to get in Cornwall from tin deposits (Salter 2009, esp. Fig. 21.1 on 322) and there is no on-site evidence for the presence of tin ingots or other unprocessed metals. It is a modern scholarly myth that Turkey has no tin-deposits exploited prior to the modern period (Kaptan 1981, 1990, 1995), and (Campbell and Bowles 2009, 306-7) that there is no evidence for Byzantine tin mines in Anatolia (e.g. Aslihan Yener and Toydemir 1993). To give an example, Matschke (2002, 118) has noted **that** many tin mines ‘found by recent surveys in the Bolkardag district ... were fairly small, but at least they were still active in the eighth century’. **That** the true extent of Byzantine exploitation of these resources is presently **unknown is** unsurprising given the lack of fieldwork on their later use. The interest shown by eastern traders in Tintagel may therefore be as a market for their own goods and as a political centre, which is how it has been interpreted by most recent scholars (since first proposed by Padel 1981), although the Byzantine mercantile interest in Britain may well have included its metals.

It is as yet unclear how early eastern contacts had begun in the fifth century, or how long they lasted. The main reason at present for dismissing the British occurrences of Palestinian LR4 (‘Gaza’) amphorae found in the latest ‘Roman’ or in ‘sub-Roman’ contexts on British sites is, as Campbell (2007, 19-20) recently observed, the absence of other dating evidence **of early- to mid-fifth-century** date on the sites where they are found. However, given the much-discussed difficulty of identifying fifth-century finds in Britain, **this is hardly surprising**. In view of the ongoing debate about the end of Romano-British urbanism, it is interesting that LR4 has been reported in ‘terminal Roman’ and ‘dark earth’ deposits in major towns, including Exeter, Gloucester, London, Wroxeter and York: all towns with other, albeit enigmatic, evidence of fifth-century activity (Dark 2000, 50-2, 106, 109-10, 141).

Furthermore, the supposed *terminus ante quem* ascribed to this material by Ewan Campbell (2007, 125) in his recent corpus of British imports is based on the stratification of the LR4 at Billingsgate in London below a brooch of the mid-fifth century. By the conventional logic of

archaeological dating, a portable artefact, however well-sealed, cannot provide a *terminus ante quem* for anything, only a *terminus post quem* date for the layer in which it was found. Consequently, the date of this brooch is irrelevant to the dating of LR4 at the site.

Interestingly, LR4, and LR1 and LR2, occur together on some British sites, suggesting its continuation into the late fifth century. For example, at Trethurgy, 20 sherds of LR4 were found alongside later fifth- and sixth-century imported sherds on a surface inside Structure Y, which is likely to have been constructed after c.375 and was used into the sixth century (Quinnell 2004, 102, 175-9). That is, at least some of the LR4 in Britain could represent a fifth-century phase of external contacts earlier than, but overlapping with, that which brought LR1 and LR2 to Britain. If so, in this case there need have been no direct link with the source-area of the pottery, and the importation of LR4 may have been earlier than that of the other imported amphorae.

It may well be that the significance of fifth- and sixth-century coins found in Britain has also been underestimated (e.g. Campbell 2007, 74-5). Recent work by the Portable Antiquities Scheme supports the earlier interpretation that at least some of these coins represent genuine fifth- and sixth- century losses (e.g. Moorhead 2009). One coin comes from near Tintagel (Moorhead and Lewis 2007a), while a group from Otterton, Devon (Moorhead and Lewis 2007b), were found together (most likely a purse-group) during construction of a small weir on the River Otter. The weir is at the foot of Anchoring Hill, a medieval landmark used by sailors to indicate the limit of navigable water. The hill itself may have been a temporary residence for medieval sailors, and could, perhaps, have been used for a similar purpose in earlier centuries. The reason for coming to this precise locality may be the hillfort at High Peak, where excavation has produced imported Byzantine pottery and much Roman-period material (Pollard 1969; Dark 1994a, 87; Dymond 2012), the latter apparently in a wholly fifth-century or later context.

Imported pottery and epigraphic formulae leave one in no doubt that fifth- and sixth-century Western Britain was connected to the same network of contacts as other Late Antique societies in the West, from Gaul and Spain to Italy. In fact, the specifically Constantinopolitan composition of the Tintagel ceramic assemblage appears to be unique in the West, suggesting that it had more direct links with Constantinople than did many regions in Gaul or Spain. As we have seen, the same close connection with that broader world is

visible in British writings, inscriptions, burial practices and, in so far as it is possible to tell, the religious beliefs of the Britons (e.g. Quensel-Von Kalben 1999; Petts 1999). Identifying an equivalent degree of similarity in **settlement evidence** is more difficult, simply for the reason that Western British settlements of this period, especially lower-status settlements, have been especially hard to find.

However, there is one area where a unique juxtaposition of extensive fieldwork, exceptional access to imported material, and the production of recognisable fifth- and sixth-century pottery, allow the incorporation of settlements into this analysis: the south-western peninsula. In the sixth, and probably fifth, century, Cornwall, Devon and north-west Somerset were the British kingdom of Dumnonia (Dark 1994b, 102, 105, 126, 131, 134). Continuing the name of **the Roman-period Dumnonii**, and ruled over by kings with such good Late Roman names as Constantine and Gerontius (Dark 1994b, 92), the kingdom shared in the attributes discussed in broader terms above. In particular, Christianity was well-established by the sixth century at latest, judging from texts, place-names, inscriptions, burial practices and what may be monasteries (e.g. Trudgian 1987; Weddell 2001; Dark 2001, 158-63, 2005b).

Limited excavation on relevant sites has rendered what happened to the *civitas* capital, Exeter, and the scatter of villas in southeast Devon **as yet uncertain** (Dark 2001, 152). **However**, the widespread survival of the Roman-period rural settlement pattern of enclosed settlements (called in Cornwall ‘rounds’) is attested by artefactual evidence of occupation in the fifth and/or sixth century from many smaller-scale excavations such as Boden, Grambla, Reawla and Mullion, to complement the evidence from the only completely excavated ‘round’, at Trethurgy (Quinnell 2004). **Trethurgy** shows a fourth-century farming community continuing to live as they had for generations into the fifth and sixth centuries. Interestingly, these low- to middle-status sites have produced more hints of wealth in the fifth and sixth centuries (in the form of sherds of imported pottery and vessel glass) than in the third or fourth centuries, a phenomenon noted in Late Antique contexts elsewhere. While there is as yet little comparable evidence from Devon and western Somerset, due to the relative lack of fieldwork on lower status rural sites, landscape studies and place-name analysis support the view that these settlements formed part of a settlement-system surviving into the late sixth century (Rose and Preston Jones 1995; Dark 2001, 168; Pearce 2004).

Although the number and scale of Romano-British ‘small towns’ in the south-west peninsula may have been underestimated, this was an area with no large urban centres other than Exeter, in its extreme south-east. As mentioned above, evidence for the character of occupation in Exeter in the fifth and sixth centuries is enigmatic, and by far the largest later fifth- and sixth-century settlement known in Dumnonia is Tintagel in Cornwall. (Fig. 2)

The coastal promontory of Tintagel Head (sometimes known as ‘Tintagel Island’, although connected to the mainland) has over 150 separate rectilinear structures, some forming multi-room complexes, constructed both on the plateau on its summit and on artificial terraces on the steep slopes, within an area of the neighbouring mainland delineated by a massive earthen bank and very wide, deep, ditch (‘the Great Ditch’). This occupation is associated with the largest assemblage of Early Byzantine pottery found outside the Mediterranean (for discussions of the whole site, rather than specific surveys and excavations: Dark 1985; Thomas 1994; Dark 1994a, 80-6; Dark 2000, 153-6; Barrowman *et al* 2007). Tintagel Haven (Fig. 3) provides a small harbour below the headland, and was used for sailing vessels carrying slate during the nineteenth century, while a fresh water stream in the adjacent valley provides a plentiful water supply.

Tintagel is a far more ‘Roman’ settlement than any known from fourth-century Cornwall, in the sense that it has more rectilinear multi-room structures associated with Mediterranean and ‘Romano-British’ pottery, vessel glass and evidence of Latin literacy. Indeed, it compares favourably in size with both the smaller Late Antique towns in the eastern Mediterranean, such as Arif (Harrison and Lawson 1979), and with Romano-British ‘small towns’ (Dark 1994b, 164-9). In these terms, there is no logical reason to avoid describing it as a ‘Late Antique town’ – only modern preconception says that such places are unimaginable in Britain. Nor need it necessarily have been unique in this respect, as the evidence from Wroxeter and Gateholm (Fig. 4), shows. Indeed, recent work at Bantham (Reed *et al* 2011) in south Devon suggests that its scale and complexity has been sufficiently underestimated to justify the term ‘port’ instead of ‘market site’ or ‘trading post’ to describe it (Reed *et al* 2011, 132).

A cemetery was found at the site of present Tintagel parish church, where long-cist and dug graves were accompanied by a series of burial mounds with imported Mediterranean pottery being used in graveside ceremonies, perhaps ritual meals – again, a Late Antique custom (Nowakowski and Thomas 1999, 1992). This, along with a brief Latin inscription (‘the

Artognou Stone') from the Head, may attest participation in the Latinate Christian culture of the wider Late Antique world. Indeed, there seems no aspect of the site for which 'Late Antique' is an unreasonable description.

Nor should we assume that the settlement on Tintagel Head was the sum of the occupied area. Recent finds of imported Mediterranean pottery on the **mainland, outside the area of the later medieval castle** (Cole 2004), could imply a larger settlement than simply one on the promontory. Analysis of air-photographic and satellite-imagery, and surface earthworks, suggest other features, such as what seems to be a large rectilinear platform cut back into the hillside northwest of the Haven, although the date of these is presently unknown.

That is, in Dumnonia we can see a clear-cut instance of a settlement-system largely surviving from the fourth century, and developing all of the attributes of Late Antiquity identified elsewhere, with an (albeit small-scale) urban community acting as an administrative hub for its rulers. Having shown this concept to be relevant to understanding Western Britain, one might ask what its use can contribute beyond conventional analysis of the Britons as 'post-Roman', 'Celtic' or 'early medieval' (on such terminology: Dark 2004). One illustration of this is by looking again at what is often considered the most intractable of all problems besetting the archaeology of the fifth- and sixth-century Britons: identifying their portable artefacts, and how these were used socially in the construction of British cultural identity.

A LATE ANTIQUE PERSPECTIVE ON BRITISH MATERIAL CULTURE

Elsewhere in the 'world of Late Antiquity', cultural and ethnic identities have been shown to be both multi-layered and surprisingly fluid (e.g. Pohl 1998; Pohl and Reimitz 1998), often being subordinated to political affiliations or religious beliefs, as in the multi-ethnic armies of Late Antique rulers in both East and West. Yet, paradoxically, a remarkable level of conservatism among some communities could co-exist with this broader trend towards cultural fluidity. This extreme conservatism is exemplified (if we are to believe Procopius) by the Arborychi of northern Gaul (either the Breton peninsula or the wider *Tractus Armoricanus*), who 'always carry their own standards when they enter battle, and always follow the customs of their fathers. And they preserve the dress of the Romans in every particular even as regards their shoes' (Procopius *Wars* V.xii, 18-19).

One may be able to recognise this Late Antique paradox of cultural conservatism and cultural fluidity among the fifth- and sixth-century Britons. The fifth- and sixth-century Britons retained theological views and liturgical practices that had passed out of use, or were even declared heretical, in most of continental Western Europe: it was such conservatism that seems to have occasioned the famous ‘Easter Controversy’ between them and the emerging Anglo-Saxon Church (Stancliffe 1999). It is reasonable, then to ask if there are indications of equivalently archaising behaviour in relation to British material culture.

Western British sites dated to the fifth and sixth centuries (for the range of sites: Dark 1994a, chs. 1 and 2; Dark 2001, chs. 3 and 4) have a distinctive set of artefacts, which while they may largely be of little help regarding dating, **are remarkably consistent in their range**. This distinctive ‘package’ includes superficially Roman-period objects (typically, pottery, glass vessels, metalwork and coins), organic artefacts (typically combs, (dress?) pins, plaques and handles), stone objects (typically quernstones, rubbing stones and whetstones), identifiably post-Roman metalwork (such as penannular brooches, knives and nails) and imported pottery and glass. Apart from the imported pottery and metalwork, little of this is chronologically distinctive.

As long ago as 1971, Peter Fowler (Fowler 1971) pointed out that if one took away the imported artefacts from most Western British settlements dated to the later fifth and sixth centuries, then one would be left with only an assemblage of **pottery, glass and metalwork of types found on fourth-century and earlier sites**. Nearly half a century later this remains true, and yet the dating of the relevant sites has become much more firmly based on (imported) artefactual and archaeometric grounds.

What looks like Roman-period material at fifth- and sixth-century sites in Western Britain may be divided into two **categories**. **First, there are artefacts** which might have been produced after c.400, such as Cornish Gabbroic pottery and BB1 (e.g. Dark 2001, 55-6, 108, 140-1; Quinnell 2004, 106-111, 238-40; Thorpe 2007; Gerrard 2004, 2010, 2012). **Second, there are artefacts** that must pre-date the fifth century, such as samian ware (Wallace 2006. In an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ context: Eckardt and Williams 2003). Like the imported material, the relevance of the former to a Late Antique model for Western Britain is obvious, but the relevance of this concept to understanding what the latter is doing on fifth- and sixth- century British sites may also be elucidated by this perspective.

In his study of Roman-period material in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, Roger White (1988, 161, 163) argued that this included artefacts ‘clearly in use’ (White 1988, 45) and that, among other functions for re-used objects, a process of substitution was at work, whereby many of the ‘Roman’ objects in these graves were ‘scavenged’ from fourth-century and earlier sites to ‘stand-in’ for Anglo-Saxon artefacts in the fifth and sixth century. White argued that this was a question of finding replacements for equivalent ‘Anglo-Saxon’ objects unavailable to those burying the dead, **rather than the material culture of a British component within the** ‘Anglo-Saxon’ population (White 1988, 164). This may be true in the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ funerary contexts of his study, but such re-use took place in Western British contexts where burial was usually unaccompanied and (where both occur) Roman-period finds characteristically bear a strong spatial relationship to well-dated later fifth- and sixth-century imported material (e.g. Rahtz *et al* 1992, 151, 228; Burrow 1979, 1981, 111-138, 268-302).

This might suggest that some or all of these first- to fourth-century objects had been retrieved for everyday use, rather than **for** burial customs alone or religious **reasons** (Rahtz *et al* 1992, 228). If so, one might also expect to find fifth- or sixth-century British communities using first- to fourth-century material culture as substitutes for those artefact-types for which newly-manufactured products were no longer available to them but which they continued to want.

This is precisely what is visible at the Baths Basilica site in Wroxeter, where Phillip Barker and his colleagues (Barker *et al* 1997) observed that there were very few recognisably fifth-century or later artefacts in the layers associated with the long post-fourth century stratified sequence. If this was the material culture in use contemporary with the massive ‘Great Rebuilding’ of the site, which postdates hearth D371, with a remanent magnetic dating of c.500-550 (Barker *et al* 1997, 240), then, to quote Barker *et al* (1997, 203), ‘it is almost as if anything Roman was wearable in the fifth and sixth centuries’.

In fact, not ‘anything’ was being re-used in this way. Well-excavated fifth- and sixth-century sequences at Cadbury Congresbury and Uley, show people (Dark 2001, 136-42) apparently adhering to the late fourth- and early fifth- century habits of artefact-choice identified by Hilary Cool (2000) into the later fifth and sixth centuries, in contrast to the sort of recycling recently discussed by Ellen Swift (2012) **and Robin Fleming (2012)**. Interestingly, imported

goods and newly-manufactured artefacts seem also to have been used as substitutes for artefact-types recognised by Cool as part of what she sees as characteristically 'latest' Roman (Dark 2001, 142). That such material is present has implications for British attitudes to earlier settlements and burials, which, if so, were neither considered so 'impure' or 'dangerous' that they were unable to be searched for usable artefacts. In this respect, artefact-reuse may offer a glimpse into the perception of the physical traces of the local 'Roman' past among the fifth-century population.

In a Western British **context** especially, such arguments could produce sites which, using otherwise entirely organic artefacts, had only earlier Roman-period objects as their durable finds. So far, although there are no published sites from Western Britain with large assemblages of fifth - or sixth-century organic artefacts, a recent study of bone artefacts at sites around the Bristol Channel associated with imported Mediterranean pottery showed that 85 per cent of known organic finds dating to this period are recognisably Romano-British in style (Bowles 2007, 134-6). This contrasts to a much lower percentage for metalwork likely to have been produced in the fifth- or sixth-centuries from the same sites. That is, emphasising the typological importance of the few pieces of recognisably post-Roman metalwork might be distorting the overall impression of the assemblages associated with fifth- or sixth-century occupation at site after site. Their material culture may have, through continuing production or substitution, been superficially 'Roman', and this may have been a conscious choice.

This brings us to the topic of cultural fluidity, in which we could see an apparent contradiction unless viewing this through the paradoxical attitude of Late Antique communities. One of the boundaries that scholars have seen as most firmly established in fifth- and sixth-century Britain is between 'Anglo-Saxon' and other artefacts and structures. Yet, when we look at the archaeology of the west and north of Britain, this boundary seems to disappear. 'Anglo-Saxon' metalwork (although never, apparently, decorated pottery) is now known from several sites in Wales and South West England, for example at Cadbury, Dinorben and Dinas Powys (Graham-Campbell 1991; Alcock 1995; Dark 2001, 133, 142-3, 164, 173, 182, 246). The undated bronze boar, perhaps an Anglo-Saxon helmet crest, and sword fragment from Gaer Fawr, a multivallate contour hillfort on the Welsh Marches near Guilsfield in Powys, may be yet another (hitherto unrecognised) example of such a site (Barker 2007). Likewise, sunken-featured buildings and 'Anglo-Saxon'-like surface

buildings have been recognised at Western British sites, as at Poundbury and Allington Avenue (Dark 2001, 107-8).

It may be that much of this 'Anglo-Saxon' material reflects no more than the location of sites close to the border between the Britons and 'Anglo-Saxons' at the date of the material, but this is a poor explanation for 'Anglo-Saxon' structures and finds further west: as at Longbury Bank in Pembrokeshire, where there is an, admittedly atypical, sunken-featured building (Campbell and Lane 1993), or isolated finds of 'Anglo-Saxon' portable artefacts at Clovelly Dykes, and Devonbury, in Devon (Dark 2001, 221).

That is, the mere presence of 'Anglo-Saxon' artefacts on British hillforts may carry no implication of a specific cultural identity: a point with considerable implications for Eastern as well as Western Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. If using 'Anglo-Saxon' artefacts, or being buried with them, need indicate no more than their availability, this opens up the possibility that many 'Anglo-Saxon' settlements and graves might be culturally British, or those of communities neither completely British nor completely 'Anglo-Saxon' (as suggested in Dark 2001, 75-7). Of course, similar arguments have long been posited, but my point here is that the increasing number of 'Anglo-Saxon' objects from Western British sites shows the British use of this 'Germanic' material culture is more than a theoretical possibility, but a demonstrable fact.

There may also have been artefact types produced by both Britons and 'Anglo-Saxons'. For example, Jane Timby (2003) has pointed out that organically-tempered pottery was produced from at least the fifth century until at least the Middle Saxon period, and maybe beyond. It occurs on what one would usually say were British sites (as at Crickley Hill and Uley) and in the latest occupation deposits in the Colliton Park 'Roman' house at Dorchester, Dorset, but also in 'Anglo-Saxon' settlements (Dark 1994a, 95, 97, 114; Dark 1994b, 123-4; Dark 2000, 87-88).

This British willingness to employ artefacts manufactured in other cultural contexts may also be seen in relation to the Irish, as Ewan Campbell has recently noted in his discussion of the penannular brooch from Goodwick Sands (Campbell 2012). Bowles (2007) and Campbell (2012) interpret this in terms of postcolonial theory, but one might see it as merely a pragmatic willingness to use decorative or functional objects, whatever their origin.

That is, applying a ‘Late Antique’ perspective to archaeological evidence demonstrates a degree of cultural fluidity unanticipated in most archaeological work on the period: anything could be, and was, used if it suited a given purpose. This co-existed with the conservatism that felt it especially appropriate to re-use Roman artefacts and to employ objects, from any source, in recognisably Late Roman ways. This may have implications both for the study of fifth-century pottery, where a lack of typological change has long been the principal difficulty in crediting the continuation of production much after c.400, and for identifying Britons in the east of the island. If even inside British kingdoms high-status Britons used ‘Anglo-Saxon’ artefacts, then one might be wary of dismissing the presence of British communities in the east of the island merely on artefactual grounds.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored some of the ways in which the concept of Late Antiquity can be usefully applied to the archaeology of the fifth- and sixth-century Britons, using evidence from south-west England to illustrate this. As noted earlier, if such a concept can be shown relevant to the south-west peninsula, then it is likely to be more widely applicable to other parts of Western Britain, as discussed elsewhere (e.g. Dark 1994b, 2000).

However, it is worth stressing that this is far from advocating a static or changing notion of fifth- or sixth-century society or culture. Quite the opposite: all Late Antique societies exhibit ongoing transitions and reformulations that arise from the very dynamism and the paradoxical interaction of conservatism and cultural fluidity, continuities *and* discontinuities, discussed here. Among the Britons one might identify three broad subdivisions of this sort even on present evidence (as argued in Dark 2005a) – doubtless much more nuanced analysis will become feasible in future. In the first period, until perhaps the late fifth century, one might identify attempts to continue fourth-century cultural practices and patterns of settlement, in a broader context of Christianisation and the ongoing economic implications of imperial collapse: this was the world of ‘sub-Roman’ Wroxeter, Crickley Hill, Uley and of Patrick’s *Confessio* (Dumville *et al* 1993; Dark 2001, 123-4, 141, 145-7). In a second period, perhaps from the later fifth through to, perhaps, the late sixth century, one can see the Britain of Gildas, Tintagel and the British series of inscribed stones. Lastly, this collapsed in the face of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ political expansion in the late sixth and early seventh century, so that by the

middle of the seventh century independent British kingdoms **had been** confined to the geographical margins of the island.

Each of these periods begins with political revolution or upheaval: the collapse of Roman imperial authority and the formation of independent British polities; the initial emergence of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ polities across eastern Britain and protracted warfare; and the establishment and expansion of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ kingdoms. These events formed a context for the emergence, formulation, and eventual collapse, of Late Antique British society, but whether they were the causes of those developments is far from certain.

What is easier to discern is that there was no single linear process of ‘de-romanization’ or single moment at which ‘Roman Britain ended’. In some areas, such as Dumnonia, life may have become ‘more Roman’, at least for some people, in the fifth and early sixth century than it was in the fourth; in others, **fourth-century ways** of life may have been swept away by c.500. That is, Western Britain was just as regionalised and diverse as the rest of the world of Late Antiquity.

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