So, How Did the British Themselves Enjoy Being Colonised?

(¿Cómo los propios británicos disfrutaron siendo colonizados?)

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Resumen: Los estudios coloniales se han centrado en los británicos como instigadores del colonialismo, pero este ensayo reflexiona sobre su propia experiencia de haber sido colonizados, por los romanos, los anglo-sajones, como consecuencia del cambio dinástico o a través de la inmigración.

Palabras clave: Colonialismo. Invasión. Aculturación. Romanos. Anglo-sajones. Normandos.

Abstract: Colonial Studies has focused on the British as instigators of colonialism, but this essay reflects on their own experience of being colonised, by the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Normans, as well as on later perceptions of being invaded by foreigners, as a consequence of dynastic change or through immigration.

Key words: Colonialism. Invasion. Acculturation. Romans. Anglo-Saxons. Normans.

The British "wrote the book" about colonialism, as it were. After all, this is the nation that turned a quarter of the map of the world pink, and on whose empire the sun never set—perhaps because God didn't trust them in the dark, as Abraham Lincoln is said to have quipped (Shapiro, 2006, p.466). And that was even after the British had lost what was formerly their prize possession, the southern half of North America. Yet in the modern debate on colonialism the British are usually cast in the role of villains, or at least *perpetrators*: they are imperialists, bullies, snobs, racists, economic thugs. That debate covers a wide spectrum of approaches, from sophisticated analysis of the interaction between coloniser and colonised to the pathetic whingeing of Grievance Studies (see

Collini, 1999), but the British are seldom cast in the heroic part. How might the British have behaved if the roles had been reversed, and they had been on the receiving end of colonisation? Rather than guess, we could take a brief look at one or two moments in British history when this actually came about.

Although there had been earlier population movements, which might have involved invasion and subjugation (for example, the coming of the Celts), the first great conquest and colonisation of Britain that we know very much about was that by the Romans. Julius Caesar came and saw—twice, in 55 and then in 54 B.C.—but didn't conquer. The conquest proper, in the name of the Emperor Claudius, didn't begin until A.D. 43, after which the Romans stayed for nearly three hundred years. What we know about the feelings of the Britons comes largely from Roman sources; there is no "Subaltern voice" to enlighten us. The surviving non-official documents from Roman Britain—writing tablets, inscriptions, lead or bronze spells and curse tablets—are about births and deaths, and financial or marital problems, but not political concerns. The following Roman coin (*illus. 1*) might be a tiny exception, however.

Illus. 1

It is a brass Sestertius of Claudius (catalogue reference R.I.C. 99, see also Jarman, 2007), originally struck in A.D. 41-42 at the beginning of Claudius's reign and deliberately mutilated in antiquity by someone slashing a sharp knife across the name and the face of the emperor (*damnatio*); the Roman conquest of what was to become the province of Britannia began a year later, when the coin was still fairly new. Let us speculate that the mutilations were made by either a disgruntled Roman soldier or official or by a resentful, recently conquered Briton, probably the latter, on grounds of the coin's provenance, since it was found only a few miles away from the small Romano-British temple at Harlow

(which was already a religious site in pre-Roman times, if the archaeological finds are anything to go by) and nowhere near any significant Roman settlement or known military encampment.

It's a broad-flan coin of good weight (23.48g) and elegant style, the product of an established mint (Rome) and not of one of the informal, temporary mints (or forger workshops) that churned out inferior, often light-weight copies of Roman bronzes, thereby meeting the demand caused by a shortage of low denomination coins in many parts of the empire. This fact would tend to place its date of deposition (i.e. when the coin was lost, jettisoned or hoarded) close to the conquest, in the period before "barbarous" issues started to circulate in the newly subjugated province in large numbers. By a version of Gresham's Law, which states that "bad money drives out good", if the owner of the coin had been able to choose between this and an inferior, possibly semi-legal, piece, he would likely have mutilated the doubtful coin and then quickly put it back into circulation, to give wider expression to his feelings, but retained the better piece, unmutilated (he wouldn't want to be caught with a "politically" mutilated coin in his possession).

Here, for comparison, is an "informal" Sestertius of this same type (*illus. 2*), though found in Bulgaria, which weighs only 12.54g; also, a primitive local British forgery of an As (or quarter-Sestertius) of Claudius (*illus. 3*).

Illus. 2

Illus. 3

The huge-scale activity of local forgers was not a subversive project aimed at destabilising the hated Roman regime, nor even a sign of epidemic criminality and antisocial behaviour; it was, as far as we know, merely a response to a chronic lack of small change. To some extent it was tolerated by the Roman authorities, just as, for instance, the British government in the late eighteenth century tolerated the circulation of vast numbers of copper tokens and counterfeit halfpennies for the same pragmatic reason. How do we know that local fakes were often tolerated by the powers-that-be? Because many of them were actually validated with official countermarks, as the obverse of the half-weight "Sestertius" from Bulgaria, for example, has been. It was stamped DV to show that it was acceptable as currency, though only as a Dupondius (or *half-Sestertius*).

The invasion and subjugation of Britain was a brutal military procedure, but even in its early stages not all the British opposed the conquest or necessarily resented Roman rule. Some actively collaborated. The huge palace at Fishbourne in Sussex (*Fishbourne Roman Palace*, webpage), the largest Roman residence which has so far been discovered north of the Alps, may have been part of the reward for King Cogidumnus of the Regni (who was also awarded Roman citizenship, as "Tiberius Claudius Cogidubnus"), a client king whose pro-Roman sympathies were commented on rather sourly by Tacitus in the *Agricola* (written c. 97-98):

> Certain states were presented to King Cogidubnus, who maintained his unswerving loyalty down to our own times—an example of the long-established Roman custom of employing even kings to make others slaves (p.64).

—which is not unlike the way that the British authorities chose to work through local chiefs in parts of colonial Africa.

Apart from occasional trouble from the more unruly, less Romanised Brigantes in the north and a tense relationship with some of the tribes of the Welsh mountains, there was apparently little by way of uprisings and incursions, except for the notorious rebellion of Queen Boudicca ("Boadicea") of the Iceni, which was provoked by a particularly crass and brutal Roman financial official named Catus Decianus. After the rebellion had been crushed, the man was replaced—by Gaius Julius Alpinus Classicianus, a Gallic provincial nobleman (who could thus be expected to have more understanding of the British provincial population)—as so too was the brutal governor, Suetonius Paulinus, and more enlightened policies were introduced.

Our view of the Roman suppression of the local culture has been coloured by the account of Boudicca's uprising in Tacitus's *Annales* and his description of the campaigns of Agricola in the shorter book of that name, but Tacitus is a most unreliable authority. In his *Germania* he idealises and exaggerates the virtues of the ancient Germans to make a point about the moral viciousness of contemporary Rome, and in the *Agricola* too he follows a personal agenda, to glorify his father-in-law Gnaeus Julius Agricola. Making Agricola's opponents noble and dignified is a major contribution towards that end. The Caledonian tribal leader Calgacus's famous denunciation of the Romans—"Robbery, butchery, rapine, the liars call Empire; they create a desolation and call it peace" (p.80)—may be magnificent (albeit invented) rhetoric, but it is historical nonsense. Agricola's Caledonian campaign was taking place beyond the frontier, a project rather like those unhappy British military incursions from India into Afghanistan, and with a similar lack of long-term success. The Caledonians were under attack, their territory was a war zone, and they had no direct experience of the long-term benefits of Roman civilisation. The Romans could certainly be ruthless in crushing resistance, as during Caesar's conquest of Gaul, or in suppressing revolt, as in Judaea, but (as we know so well from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*!) they were generally in the business of bringing "[...] sanitation, [...] medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, [...] public health [and] peace", not of creating desolations.

The Romans took control of Britannia, but they didn't disinherit the local population by handing over their land to Roman magnates or replacing them with Roman settlers. The conquered seem to have made their arrangement with the conquerors quite early on. As Tacitus wrote (thinking probably of the Boudicca uprising):

> The Britons themselves submit to the levy, the tribute and
> the other charges of Empire with cheerful readiness,
> provided that there is no abuse. That they bitterly resent;
> for they are broken in to obedience, not to slavery
> (*Agricola*, p. 63).

In describing the efforts made by his father-in-law to cultivate the sons of British chiefs, he couldn't resist a cynical dig at the softening of British ways as the process of Romanisation progressed:

> [...] our national dress came into favour and the toga was
> everywhere to be seen. And so the Britons were gradually
> led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable—arcades,
> baths and sumptuous banquets. They spoke of such
> novelties as "civilisation", when really they were only a
> feature of enslavement (p. 72).

Easily said! For an affluent senator like Tacitus, such amenities could be taken for granted, but most Britons south of the Wall probably accepted the exchange without demur. Roman Britain then settled down to three centuries of Pax Romana, with (for many people) an unprecedented level of comfortable urbanisation and, to a high degree, the freedom to manage their own affairs. Most of the "cities" of Roman Britain, for instance, were *civitates*, what today might be called "county towns", and were simply the urbanised versions of the old tribal centures: Calleva of the Atrebates (Silchester), Corinium of the Dobunni (Cirencester), Venta of the Belgae (Winchester), Viroconium of the Cornovii (Wroxeter), and so on. Tribal notables, now Romanised into civic officials, continued to run things on the local level. There were a handful of Roman *coloniae*, which were essentially settlements of retired soldiers—Colchester, Gloucester, Lincoln, and York—but none of them were comparable in size or importance to Roman London. After Boudicca, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the overall picture is one of cooperation and incorporation rather than of ruthless suppression.

The final withdrawal of Roman troops came in 407, and there seem to have been heartfelt appeals by the British for their return, to help in the defence against Germanic invaders (the texts are admittedly all somewhat obscure and problematical), see, for example, the famous letter quoted by the sixth-century historian Gildas:

> To Ætius [or Agitius, according to another reading], now
> Consul for the third time: the groans of the Britons [...]
> The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea throws us back
> on the barbarians: thus two modes of death await us, we
> are either slain or drowned (p. 16).

We don't know what happened between the Romano-British and the Anglo-Saxons:

> It is now widely accepted that the Anglo-Saxons were not
> just transplanted Germanic invaders and settlers from the
> Continent, but [were] the outcome of insular interactions
> and changes. But we are still lacking explicit models that
> suggest how this ethnogenetic process might have worked
> in concrete terms (Härke 2011: 1).

The events, whether they were of conquest, genocide or displacement, or of acculturation and intermarriage, ended with the formation of a population that was homogeneously Anglo-Saxon. Heinrich Härke himself favours an initial phase of conquest, with apartheid-like social structures, followed by a phase of assimilation leading to a common identity.

A few centuries later, the Anglo-Saxons themselves were subjected to invasion by the Danes, who occupied half of England, the "Danelaw", and who extorted a huge tribute from the Anglo-Saxons known as the "Danegeld". The extent to which they oppressed or replaced the Anglo-Saxon population is unclear. Given the similarities between the languages, place-names are not always helpful, and the ethnic groups stemmed from overlapping areas of northwest Europe, which tends to render DNA evidence inconclusive. The numbers of the Danish invaders were probably comparatively small, so that for many historians:

> [the] conclusion drawn from the evidence as to the size of
> armies and their subsequent settlement on the land is that
> the Danish settlers were too few in number to overwhelm
> the English and that they settled where they could, often
> on land which the English had not yet occupied (Fisher
> 1973: 244).

The Anglo-Saxons can't have resented the Danes too bitterly, because after the death of Edmund Ironside in 1016 they accepted the Dane Cnut (the famous "King Canute" of legend) as king of the whole country; indeed, he

became "probably the most effective king in Anglo-Saxon history" (Cantor, 1994, p.278), despite not being Anglo-Saxon himself.

The last true colonisation of England took place after the victory of the Normans at Hastings in 1066, which led to the English losing their land, their royal family and their nobility, and the central importance of their language. Many centuries later, Rudyard Kipling wrote a sentimental poem, *Norman and Saxon (A.D. 1100)* (1911), in which a dying Norman baron dispenses sensible advice to his son on how to handle his Anglo-Saxon tenants—the tenor being that they are rough and stubborn, but basically decent folk, provided that you don't rub them up the wrong way.

> But first you must master their language, their dialect,
> proverbs and songs.
> Don't trust any clerk to interpret when they come with
> the tale of their wrongs.
> Let them know that you know what they're saying; let
> them feel that you know what to say.
> Yet even when you want to go hunting, hear 'em out if it
> takes you all day (p. 589).

The poem makes much better sense if you substitute Pathan troopers or Punjabi villagers for the Anglo-Saxons, paternalistic British officers or colonial administrators for the Normans, and a Bengali *babu* for the clerk, because whether relations between Normans and Anglo-Saxons in these early years after the Conquest were quite so harmonious is truly doubtful: the sturdy castle-keeps and towers that the new Norman rulers built for themselves—the Anglo-Saxon thegns had lived in barn-like wooden houses much like those of their villeins, though bigger—tell of a ruling élite that had been imposed on an unwilling Anglo-Saxon population and who were fearful of being overwhelmed in a sudden insurrection.

The initial sufferings of the dispossessed Anglo-Saxons were noted by the Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis, who was born (in England) not long after the Conquest:

> When their men-at-arms were guilty of plunder and rape
> they protected them by force, and wreaked their wrath all
> the more upon those who complained of the cruel wrongs
> that they suffered. And so the English groaned aloud for
> their lost liberty and plotted ceaselessly to find some way

of shaking off a yoke that was so intolerable and unaccustomed (pp. 202-203).

There was some local resistance to the victorious Normans, including the activities of a semi-legendary figure known as Hereward the Wake, and much lawlessness and banditry, but the idea of noble-hearted Anglo-Saxon freedom fighters like Hereward or Robin Hood taking on the might of the Norman oppressor for a hundred years or more after the Conquest is an invention of the nineteenth century, notably of the novelists Sir Walter Scott and Charles Kingsley. Instead, the two cultures were soon intermingling (Orderic himself was the son of a Frenchman and an English mother); an Anglo-Norman identity was gradually formed; and (ironically) the most famous uprising of the English masses during the Middle Ages, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, happened long after the breakdown of the Norman/Saxon dichotomy, when courtly literature was already being written in Middle English and the royal court was switching to that language.

There were no further conquests, if we exclude a number of "felt" rather than actual invasions, such as when a dynastic change brought with it a real or perceived influx of foreign favourites and hangers-on.

The short "reign" of Philip II of Spain as husband of Mary I and co-ruler of England can in this respect be ignored. Philip spent as little time as he possibly could in his new kingdom, and though the Spanish were loathed by many in England for being Catholics they were, on the other hand, still seen as England's allies against the hated French.

Similarly with the accession of James VI of Scotland as James I of England: James brought a few Scottish favourites with him to London when he succeeded Elizabeth I in 1603, and he appointed Scottish lords to his Privy Council, but the new king was at first quite popular (as a refreshing contrast to the difficult old lady that Elizabeth I had turned into) and, enchanted by the affluence of his new kingdom, he soon lost interest in Scotland and things Scottish. There was later some resentment in court circles at the rise of the handsome young Scotsman Robert Ker (Carr), ennobled by James as Earl of Somerset, but this was due less to his Scottish origins as to the king's vulgar display of affection for him. With Carr, and later with the even more notorious George Villiers, who was created Duke of Buckingham (and was not a Scot), the king behaved lasciviously in public. According to the gossipy account by Francis Osborne (1658),

> the love the King shewed [towards them] was as
> amorously conveyed as if he had mistaken their Sex, and
> thought them Ladies. Which I have seen Somerset and
> Buckingham labour to resemble, in the effeminateness of
> their dressings (p. 476).

William of Orange (William III) was also suspected of having a weakness for handsome young men, although his public behaviour (unlike that of James I) gave no true grounds for scandal. His two Dutch favourites, Hans Bentinck (created Earl of Portland) and the suspiciously good-looking Arnold van Keppel (created Earl of Albemarle), attracted animosity, but as with James it was less because of their foreign origins than because of the titles and estates that were lavished on them.

A more noticeable influx of privileged foreigners, this time **Germans**, occurred when George of Hanover became king of England in 1714, after the death of the childless Queen Anne. But it was not the total Hanoverian takeover that many had feared (and which the Jacobites used as propaganda). George found his political role considerably restricted by the constitutional changes brought about during and subsequent to the "Glorious Revolution", and was not happy in London. He barely understood English, and felt more comfortable with Germans around him. Not surprisingly, the king preferred the company of his German entourage, but he also preferred German doctors to English, and it was much the same with mistresses.

The two principal royal favourites were therefore imported from Hanover—as if there were no charming English ladies of the court eager to make the new king's intimate acquaintance!—and what made the snub even greater was that the two ladies were grotesquely unattractive, albeit in contrasting styles. Ehrengard Melusine von der Schulenburg, created Duchess of Kendal, was tall, emaciated, pockmarked, and almost bald (which she hid under a garish red wig); she was known as "the Maypole". Sophie von Kielmansegg, created Countess of Darlington, was the king's illegitimate half-sister; loud, red-faced, and strikingly corpulent, she was known as "the Elephant" (see Borman 2007: 31-32).

The Hanoverian favourites and courtiers were mocked for their rude manners and lack of English, and resented for their opportunism and avarice. Once, when "the Maypole" was being jeered by a crowd, she asked them, "Goot people why you abuse us? We come for all your goots", and someone shouted back, "Yes, and for all our chattels, too!" (quoted in Lehman 2011: 531).

The British Royal Family's family name was tactfully changed from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor during the First World War, but they are still referred to in some snobbish circles in Britain as "the Germans".

Britain has not been colonised in modern times, and so has not seen its native population dispossessed of their property and its people groaning under the oppression of foreign invaders. The brief period of German rule (1940-45) over the Channel Islands during World War Two was a case of military occupation, not of colonisation; and the Channel Islands belong, strictly speaking, neither to the United Kingdom nor to the British Isles. Nazi repression of the Channel Islanders was much less drastic than what much of the rest of Europe was undergoing, although they were subjected to such indignities as being told to switch from Greenwich Mean Time to Central European Time, and having to drive on the right-hand side of the road (*German Occupation of the Channel Islands*, webpage).

Since the end of the war, the only invasions to which the British have been subjected have been (if populist politicians are to be believed) those of immigrants from countries of the so-called New Commonwealth and, more recently, the supposed influx of job- or benefits-seekers from eastern and south-eastern countries of the European Union. It is probably too early to say how many of the "Polish plumbers" and "Rulgars" (Rumanians and Bulgarians) will stay on in Britain. The earlier immigration of South Asians, Africans and West Indians, on the other hand, despite some of the social problems that initially followed, has undoubtedly been what Sellar and Yeatman in their humorous history *1066 and All That* would have called "a Good Thing": it is now hard to imagine modern Britain without the contributions that these groups have made in medicine, transport, commerce, music, dance, sport, and good eating, to name just a few areas. What the British really think about this "invasion" is shown by the fact that one British child in ten is now growing up with parents of different backgrounds (Smith 2011).

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