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**GODS OF THE TWO PEOPLES: HOW THE SACRED BELIEFS IN SOUTHWEST
ROMAN BRITANNIA DEMONSTRATE A UNIQUELY BLENDED RELIGION AND
CULTURE**

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
History
by

Jed Michael Basler

Approved by
Dr. Laura Michele Diener, Committee Chairperson
Dr. Philip Rutherford,
Dr. Nick Freidin

May 2023

APPROVAL OF THESIS

We, the faculty supervising the work of Jed Michael Basler, affirm that the thesis, *Gods of the Two Peoples: How the Sacred Beliefs in Southwest Roman Britannia Demonstrated a Uniquely Blended Religion and Culture*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the Department of History and the College of Liberal Arts. The work also conforms to the formatting guidelines of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.

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-Jed Basler

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Abstract

The Romans practiced many religions in their quest to obtain Pax Deorum throughout the centuries. The Britons came into contact with the Romans and were exposed to many new ideas and concepts. Both groups found a way to coexist, which can be seen most obviously in the religion of the Southwest region of Britain. Gods from both cultures fused together or took on another new form to emerge in this new hybridized Romano-British culture. Sulis Minerva and Mercury often appear as they were quite popular with the denizens of the region. Physical evidence and practices show just how the Southwestern region demonstrated two cultures coming together in the ancient world.

Introduction

The field of Roman history is fascinating from almost every angle imaginable, but scholars have not thoroughly explored every element. Religions in the ancient world are often difficult to tackle due to the variety of interpretations by both ancient and modern people. This makes it all the more important to have a recent piece of scholarship that dissects the complex and vibrant religions of the time period. The Roman Empire provided some of the most complex and unique religions ever found on earth. The concept of Pax Deorum, the idea that the favor of the gods was necessary for society to be successful and prosperous, ensured that both Romans and non-Romans would preserve their religions to a degree, until the official mass adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the late fourth century CE. In the Southwest region of Great Britain (primarily Corinium and Aquae Sulis), one of the most harmonious and culturally blended religions would arise shortly after the initial Roman conquest in 43 CE.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the many ways that the religion of the Romano-Britons in the Southwestern region demonstrates a level of effective intertwining unlike most other locations in the Empire. The level of thorough blending of Latin Roman and British Celtic elements permeating every aspect of the religion in this particular area is genuinely remarkable. The archaeological evidence, ritual evidence, and written sources all point to a religion of societal and cultural blending unlike provinces such as Cyrene and Greece which primarily retained the traditional Roman-style religion. This thesis will mostly utilize primary written sources such as the *Agricola* and *Annals* by Tacitus from the first century CE, alongside the archaeological evidence found in the Southwestern region of Britain. This thesis will also use these sources to give historical context and explain the basic elements of the religions of the

discussed area. Scholars such as Barry Cunliffe and Miranda Aldhouse-Green will provide the bulk of the academic material on Roman history in Britain. The evidence present in this thesis points to a religion of a mixed demographic of people in a specific region within a large empire spanning continents and cultures.

The breakdown of this research will consist of four chapters covering the historical context and details of the blended Romano-British religion in the Southwest region of Britain. The first chapter, “The People of the Gods”, will establish the historical precedent and demographic groups that would come to practice the religion of the region. It will cover the events in the first to third centuries CE that led to the Romans and Britons coming into contact and blending cultures and societies in an effective manner. The relationship between the Romans and Britons is crucial for understanding the formation of the religion in the Southwest region. A brief history of the two peoples is an aggregation of the effective blending that is characteristic of the religion in the Southwest region.

The second chapter, “Romans and their Ideas of Religion”, will discuss the percipience of the area in ancient context. These perceptions from ancient times are useful for understanding the reasons for the lack of knowledge on this religion. There will also be viewpoints of more popular foreign cults in the Roman Empire such as Cybele and Isis to compare with the religion under discussion. Understanding how Romans reacted to non-Roman deities of multiple cultures is immensely useful in determining how both ancient and modern people would view this tradition. There is also a great deal of information regarding Corinium itself and the attention that Romans and modern scholars accorded it.

The third chapter, “Religious Imagery/Blended Culture”, primarily focuses on the archaeological evidence of the religious imagery and iconography of the religion. The major

religious elements and art pieces are the centerpieces of this section of the research. The categories of the physical artifacts serve as the method of organization for the chapter in terms of the number of items present in the Corinium Museum and other sources. Mosaics, figurines, and stonework all contribute to demonstrating the effective blend of Roman and British religious elements in the Southwest region of Britain. The stonework in particular showcases deities of both entirely Roman and entirely British deities, but with an equal representation of both that indicates the blending of cultures that distinguishes the area.

The last chapter, “Religious practices/Blended culture” focuses on the evidence for actual ritual and belief of the Romano-Britons of Aquae Sulis and Corinium. This is apparent in historical records and physical items that reveal evidence of actual beliefs and practices such as sacrifices or curses. The chapter contains many secondary sources and the findings of scholars that have spent decades analyzing specific artifacts or actions they have found in some context. Important artifacts such as the curse tablets and the Lindow Man serve as ways to look into how the Romano-Britons of the area conducted the religion during the occupation of the Romans. A critical analysis of the Roman historical sources regarding the beliefs is a necessary addition to the chapter because many misconceptions and inaccuracies which Romans perpetuated that have plagued modern scholars for centuries.

The historiography for this thesis generally consists of primary written and archaeological items that demonstrate a uniquely hybridized religion in Southwest Roman Britain. The academic work of modern scholars offers plenty of information that would point to this conclusion as well. Mary Beard, Miranda Aldhouse-Green, and Barry Cunliffe have written works that thoroughly discuss the Roman tendency to adopt the religions of other ethnic groups and cultures. *Sacred Britannia*, in particular, is a thorough analysis of religion on the whole

island of Britain during the Roman occupation.¹ The majority of the academic works in this thesis focuses on some aspect of Romano-British religion such as James McKillop's "Mothers, Partners and Healers"² or Douglas Gloin's "Learning Curses in Bath More Attractions: Goddesses, Thieves and a Rich Array of History on Display."³ The former research dissects the various female deities of the ancient European pantheons such as Greek, Celtic, and others. The latter is an analysis of curse tablets and their uses at the sanctuary of Aquae Sulis. Another major subsection of secondary information on this topic is from the Corinium Museum and other major institutions. The organizations focusing on Roman history such as English Heritage and <https://www.romanbaths.co.uk/> have provided quality information for supplementing the primary sources of this research.

Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Barry Cunliffe are foundational for the study of the scholarly area of Roman Britain. Barry Cunliffe's archaeological survey of the Sulis Minerva's temple gives full translations and views of the inscribed stones in the sanctuary and what they convey about the beliefs of the religious practitioners. He utilizes writings and archaeology to determine that the temple had a perpetually burning fire and that excavations in the late eighteenth century revealed the beautiful temple pediment with the unique male gorgonesque

¹ Miranda J. Aldhouse-Greene, *Sacred Britannia: The Gods and Rituals of Roman Britain* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2018) 6-14.

² James, Mackillop. "Mothers, Partners and Healers," in *Myths and Legends of the Celts* no 1 (London, Penguin, 2005), 7-8.

³ Douglas Gloin. "Learning Curses in Bath, More Attractions: Goddesses, Thieves and a Rich Array of History on Display," *Toronto Star*, July 08, 2010. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/learning-curses-bath-more-attractions/docview/748901446/se-2?accountid=12281>.

deity.⁴ Cunliffe's continued work analyzing the sanctuary has provided new scholars with enough incentive to find out a great wealth of new ideas regarding the religious practices that took place in Aquae Sulis during its heyday. Miranda Aldhouse-Green's *Sacred Britannia* is a fantastic representation of the religion on the island in the Roman period. Nearly every category of religion and magic in the ancient world gets covered to at least a minimum degree. The section on curse tablets, in particular, provided the best introduction and concepts regarding their purposes and how they functioned in Roman Britain.⁵ The focus of these two modern scholars may not heavily involve the blending and hybridization of the Southwestern populace, but they provide an incredible framework of information that allows for such a discussion. Both authors have amassed extensive careers in academically dissecting Roman Britain which illuminates countless new research projects in this particular field.

Another academic author who has contributed to the field of Roman religion in the British Isles is Lindsay Allason-Jones. She has written an extensive book on the history of women in Roman Britain which includes their roles and practices in religious affairs. While not the main focus, the religion section of the book provides a new take that often does not receive academic attention. Allason-Jones effectively illuminates how artifacts show the role women likely played in certain religious cults that also happened to show up in the Southwestern region. The author writes of artifacts associated with female ailments such as morning sickness that were found in significant numbers to imply that women were a specific part of the demographic that

⁴ Barry W. Cunliffe, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath* (Oxford, Oxford University School of Archaeology, 1966) 3.

⁵ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, 134-136.

came to be healed in the healing waters.⁶ A majority of the academic scholarship such as, *Shrines and Sacrifice* by Ann Woodward or *Religion in Roman Britain* by Martin Henig, neglects the role of women as practitioners of the religion in favor of a more generalized perspective, giving her book a fresh perspective.

A number of the pieces of scholarship on the city of Corinium are considerably old in terms of trustworthy sources, but that should not suggest that they do not have valuable information regarding religion of the area. Archaeological surveys do give insight into the first contact that researchers had when encountering evidence of religious artifacts and practices with limited information. An excellent example of this would be the stance that James Buckman and Charles Henry Newmark take in their survey *Illustrations of the Remains of Roman Art*. They thoroughly dissect the various medallions of the religious mosaics and what they implied regarding religious beliefs and practices. They write, "These accessories, though simple in themselves, yet have a breadth of effect and vigour of drawing which admirably correspond with the dignity of expression of the benign goddess."⁷ The information might be more vague than the common scholarship of modern times, but even this writing demonstration shows a thorough understanding of the material through meticulous study of the details. The authors are able to make accurate and reasonable assumptions of the religion based on the archaeological clues left behind by the Romano-Britons without many direct clues. The academic study of this field has most certainly advanced considerably, but the work of researchers in the nineteenth century should not be discounted.

⁶ Lindsay Allason-Jones, *Women in Roman Britain* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2006) 148-149.

⁷ James Buckman and Charles Henry Newmarch, *Illustrations of the Remains of Roman Art* (London, Wentworth Press, 1850), 43.

The academic articles regarding the general history of the crucial locations are extremely useful for putting the religion into perspective. Aquae Sulis and Corinium have a multitude of articles and periodicals covering a basic history of the places. Historical encyclopedias give establishing details of key events, demographic groups, and political changes over the centuries. General histories provide brief histories of Roman Corinium and how the populations and cultures collided with its construction.⁸ This was the first indication for the religions of the various groups to start mixing and altering from their original respective states. Aquae Sulis and modern Bath has a similar general history provided by Eleri Cousins, a scholar of Roman history working at the University of Lancaster. Her article speaks of Aquae Sulis as a sanctuary to Sulis Minerva and how it was central to natives and foreigners to Roman Britain.⁹ There are many general sources for the history of these locations published in article form and they only enhance the scholarship of more specific works of research.

The articles directly regarding the religion of the population of Roman Britain are detailed, thorough, and insightful. The level of dedication and fortitude is abundantly clear when reading these academic works. Researchers have been able to track the movements and practices of specific religious cults on the island of Britain, allowing for further observations of hybridization to occur in new projects. The specific cults that receive attention do wonders for determining how religion occurred among individuals much better than larger general works on religion.

⁸ Alan Welsford, *Cirencester: a History and Guide* (Stroud, Amberley Publishing UK, 2010), 8.

⁹ Eleri Cousins, "Springs Eternal," *History Today* 71, no. 7 (July 2021): 54–65.

The cults of classical Roman deities in Britain have received a fair amount of attention from the academic community. A dissertation on the cult of Venus reveals information about the sculpture, traditional history, and various forms of other representations of the goddess. Margaret Birney argues that the role of Venus in a foreign province of Britain cannot be fully understood unless one understands her role in the traditional Mediterranean heartland. After the dissection, it is clear how people in Britain would have interpreted and worshipped her.¹⁰ The other major cults of classical deities have similar research in the form of extensive dissertations. Another large research paper documents how the worship of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Mars was carried out in Britannia. Hybridization is an aspect of the content of this work, but the Southwest and its wealth of information was not the major source of information.¹¹ One of the most popular deities in the Corinium area, Mercury, also has a large dissertation regarding his place on the island of Britain. The author does bring up his prevalence in the southwest quite well, as he was extraordinarily popular with both Romans and locals. She covers imagery and practices from all across the island, especially his popularity with death and funeral ceremony.¹²

With the vast array of scholarly pieces available on Romano-British history, there is little focus on the hybridization as the main point of interest regarding the religion. The Southwestern region also lacks a certain degree of direct analysis from scholars. This thesis puts a magnifying glass on the region while taking an active look at the nature of hybridization in this religion. This

¹⁰ Margaret Birney, "The Cult of Venus in Roman Britain." (PhD diss., Michigan State University, East Lansing, 1990), 1-2, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

¹¹ Perihan El-Ramly. "Cult of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Mars in Roman Britain." (PhD diss., University of Hawai'i, Manoa, 1985), 3-4, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

¹² Nadezhda S. Shirokova, "The Cult of Mercury in Roman Gaul and Roman Britain," *Studia Antiqua et Archeologica* 25, no. 1 (2019): 63–74.

research differs from others because it seeks to find societal and cultural intermingling by looking at the religious evidence. There has been excellent academic work on the Romano-British religion in terms of practices and artwork, but the hybridization aspect does not tend to serve as the centerpiece. I wish to use this research as a way to convey that the religion of the Southwest is a profound example of the Roman tendency to shape its religion according to the cultures with which it interacted.

This project will be useful in modern academic discussions of religion and culture in the field of Roman history. The practice of scholars viewing the Roman empire as simple and monolithic is archaic and needs a drastic change. Ethnic minorities, varying social classes, and gender are all dissected with increased frequency, which prompted me to look at the religion of the Empire in a new way. This research is an attempt to modernize and reevaluate the study of the religion of the Roman Empire in a more refreshed and nuanced way. Researching the elements of hybridization of the Southwestern religion as a shining example of how the ancient world was a time of complex and varied population is my method of adding a modern piece of scholarship to the field of history.

This research is crucial for an area that doesn't often receive an abundance of academic attention. The hybridized religion of the Romano-British settlements of Corinium and Aquae Sulis demonstrates blending and harmony among their inhabitants. The unusually large number of religiously focused artifacts found in this area alone is remarkable in its own right. A thorough analysis of the religion of the Southwestern region could open of all sorts of academic conversations on religion and relations in the Roman Empire. This instance of Romans and Britons combining the divine elements of their cultures is in stark contrast to the popular idea that Britain only intended to rid themselves of the Roman rulers and immigrants. This research

also shines a light on the fact that Romans did not destroy what they dominated when they came into contact with a conquered culture and people. This religion is an example of many larger concepts found throughout history such as syncretism, religious and cultural preservation and adaptability, and demographic mixing in the ancient world.

Chapter 1

The People of the Gods

The Romans lived in a world full of unique and exotic peoples throughout its long and complicated history. The legendary conquests of the Roman legionaries saw the fall of ancient and storied civilizations across Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Population centers such as Greece, Egypt, and Judea were incorporated into the Empire despite their grand and illustrious legacies which far surpassed Rome's at the time. Rome made it a significant point to "Romanize" foreign populations in order to promote cultural and societal unity in a multi-ethnic and religious Empire. Various emperors carried out this act in a direct manner, such as Caracalla in 212 CE, by decreeing that every person within the Empire's borders was now a Roman citizen.¹³ A large part of Romanization was bringing the religion and culture of the Romans to the outer provinces who would never have been exposed otherwise. These methods included settling veterans in cities, introducing Roman gods, and importing Roman goods. The Southwest of Britannia was eventually incorporated into the Empire to the point where religious objects characteristic of either Celtic or Latin origin could be frequently found. This analysis of the demographics of the Southwestern region will illuminate the reasons for having such a distinctive hybridized Romano-British religion.

¹³ Illka Syvame, *Caracalla: A Military Biography*, (England, Pen and Sword Military, 2017), 61.

The religion of the Romano-Britons was an entirely singular and sophisticated fixture in the area for several centuries, but this lacks clarity without knowing about the people who inhabited the region. The lack of primary written sources does render it difficult to determine information regarding the populace, but archaeology is extremely useful for these purposes. The ethnic and geographic origins of the people who resided in Corinium and Aquae Sulis are somewhat inconclusive. The human tendency to try to simplify a population by location is certainly incorrect in an environment with a multi-ethnic Empire. The incredibly biased writings of Roman writers such as Tacitus and Cassius Dio (two of the most prominent primary sources on Roman Britain) intentionally boosted the deeds and society Rome while demeaning others, and served to taint available information about pre-Roman Britons. Tacitus is a famous Roman politician and historian born in the first century CE. His *Annales* and *Agricola* are two of the most prominent historical primary sources on Roman Britain. Cassius Dio was born in the second century CE and wrote massive comprehensive books on Roman history from its foundation to his contemporary mid third century CE. This has left scholars with no direct sources from the native Britons with the exception of archaeological evidence.

The native Britons are considered as being part of the Celtic ethnic group by the ancient Roman scholars. The Roman historians placed the location of the Celts to be Northern and Western Europe, inhabiting a different climate and region than the Romans. They found the Celts to be courageous and warlike to their cores. Romans undoubtedly admired the Celtic people and their culture, but they viewed their own as far superior.¹⁴ They are frequently compared to their mainland counterparts of Gaul who were likely closely related. When writing on the origins of

¹⁴ Paul K. Davis, and Allen Lee Hamilton, *Encyclopedia of Warrior Peoples & Fighting Groups*, (NY: Grey House Publishing, (2016), 62.

the people in Britain Tacitus writes, “On a General estimate, however, it is likely that Gauls took possession of the neighboring island.”¹⁵ More Roman descriptions of native Britons also support the idea that they were related, at least in part, to the mainland Celtic groups of Western Europe. The famous geographer, Strabo, believed that the Britons were at least partially related to the rest of the Celtic peoples. This Pontic Greek lived during the first century BCE and wrote geographic and historic works for many parts of the world. He writes, “In their wars they make use of chariots for the most part, as do some of the Celts. Forests are their cities; for having enclosed an ample space with felled trees, they make themselves huts therein, and lodge their cattle, though not for any long continuance.”¹⁶ Due to the shadowy and mysterious nature of pre-Roman interaction with these natives, it is understandable that Southern European writers would not know much of anything concrete. The fact that Britain was an island with minimal trading ties to the mainland did not allow the general populace to be knowledgeable about the culture and society. It is unclear to the Romans how or when the native people arrived on the island, but in particular cities and settlements there are scholars with theories and ideas.

There were no established cities before the arrival of the Roman colonists, but there were small settlements where cities would be established later. The city that would come to be called Corinium by the Romans was a pre-Roman town known by several names such as Cær-Cori which influenced the Roman naming of the place. This town predates the initial Roman contact by Gaius Julius Caesar in 55 BCE, leading scholars to believe that the location already had

¹⁵ Tacitus. *Agricola and Germania*. (London, Penguin UK, 2010), 9.

¹⁶ Strabo. *The Geography of Strabo*. (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2014), 256-257.

significance to the native population.¹⁷ It is likely that the area already contained a small settlement that functioned similarly to Corinium. The people were believed to be traders who bought and sold goods and possibly minted coins.¹⁸ Celtic kingdoms and areas of influence did exist shortly before the major Roman military incursions of the campaign of Claudius in 43 CE. The Iceni, Brigantes, and Atrebates all existed previously and later alongside the Roman presence in Britain in the southern and central regions.¹⁹ These groups had figures of importance and clearly defined power structures that the Romans did acknowledge to some degree.

Pre-Roman Britain was a land of many Celtic tribes and people groups. Most of the evidence for human civilization on the island prior to Roman arrival is purely archaeological as the Britons did not write history. Flint spear points dating from 12-10,000 BCE are found in many places across Great Britain.²⁰ As the centuries progressed, the inhabitants became prolific builders of stone monuments that would become some of the most famous structures in the world. The history of pre-Roman Britain is full of archeological evidence of culture and societal traits that Romans would come to note in their histories.

Scholars are not entirely sure when the Celtic groups arrived in Britain, but there is plenty of physical and historical information that points to possible conclusions. The languages spoken in the present time are echoes of the original Celtic languages that were spoken in the Pre-Roman

¹⁷ Beecham, Kennett John. *History of Cirencester and the Roman City Corinium*. (London, Humanities Press, 1978), 5-6.

¹⁸ "Roman Corinium." Corinium Museum, last modified February 22, 2018, <https://coriniummuseum.org/schools/resources/roman-corinium/>.

¹⁹ Eleanor Scott. "Roman Britain," *The Oxford Companion to British History*, edited by John Cannon, and Robert Crowcroft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 789.

²⁰ Barry W. Cunliffe, *Britain Begins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 103.

era of the British Isles. Barry Cunliffe brings to light the popular theory that the Celts arrived in Britain after leaving Gaul where some of the Celtic people still resided.²¹ He ties the modern languages of Welsh and Cornish as evidence that even modern inhabitants of the region still claim the Celtic identity, and that this identity stems from thousands of years of history and culture.

The distinct cultural artifacts of Celtic Britons revealed a long history before Roman arrival. The wearing of cloaks fastened by elaborate brooches were present for centuries before the conquest of Claudius in 43 CE. In Corinium, copper alloy brooches have surfaced from the Iron Age beginning around 800 BCE.²² The Celtic reputation for warfare that Romans refer to is also heavily backed up by archaeology from before their arrival. Weapons of all sorts have been found in great quantities on the island of Britain, leading one to believe that the culture emphasized military and combat. A pair of beautiful bronze daggers from around 1400 BCE imply that weapons could also be crafted with the purpose of showing off social status in Celtic culture.²³

Iron age Britain also provides some of the best religious information regarding Celtic beliefs and practices before they became mixed with Roman traditions. The burial offerings of jewelry and other goods have a long history in Celtic Britain. Barry Cunliffe points out that burial shafts were less common, but most likely constructed for ritual purposes because of the

²¹ Barry W. Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 6.

²² Corinium Museum, *Brooch*. Cirencester, UK, April 23, 2022. <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/2006-32-1-2/>

²³ Corinium Museum. *Daggers*. Cirencester, UK, April 23, 2022. <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1991-26-and-28-2/>

craftsmanship of the items found buried.²⁴ The area outside of Corinium has produced one such treasure hoard dating to the Bronze Age. It contains elaborate gold bracelets and neck rings that are generally found within most of the sacred buried treasure hoards.²⁵ There is also limited evidence of human sacrifice that Romans claimed was a centerpiece of the Celtic religion. Bodies such as Lindow Man and others have been found with injuries that some scholars believe to be evidence of human sacrifice, but that question is difficult to definitively answer. This possibility of human sacrifice was one of the ways that Romans differentiated from the Celtic peoples, however it did not stop them from having frequent interactions with them.

The Celtic religious practices were disseminated to the population through individuals known as Druids. The historical records come primarily from Roman writers who are unfortunately biased against the Druids. This fact makes it difficult to count information about their religious traditions to be confirmed or denied, however Lindow man and other physical evidence brings some level of confirmation with Druidic practices. Modern scholars have determined that most outsiders had not come into direct contact with Druids, but rather relied on stories from those who had for information.²⁶ Druidic rituals that do not leave direct physical evidence are difficult to pinpoint with certainty due to Roman bias. The ritual of Mistletoe comes to mind when considering religious practices. Pliny the Elder writes of a ritual where Druids

²⁴ Cunliffe, *Britain Begins*, 347.

²⁵ Corinium Museum, *Gold Hoard*. Cirencester, UK, April 23, 2022.
<https://coriniummuseum.org/object/2007-18-2/>

²⁶ Cunliffe, *The Druids: A Very Short Introduction*, 8.

climb a sacred oak and cut a sprig of mistletoe because of its healing properties.²⁷ Interactions between Romans and Druids led to the island of Britain changing forever after.

There were many stories of contact between Celts and Mediterranean people before Rome conquered the southwest region of the island. Scholars throughout the Empire theorized and studied the people of Celtic origins before regularly established contact. The Greek writer, Strabo, writes a general physical description of what Celts looked like in his geographical work *Geography*. “The men of Britain are taller than the Celti, and not so yellow-haired, although their bodies are of looser build.”²⁸ This appearance is not associated with the common appearance of the Italic Romans who often had darker hair and dressed quite differently from the Britons. Modern scholars have written much of the uniquely Celtic clothing items that show up with great frequency all over Britain. Artisanal brooches and Celtic cloaks from first through fourth centuries CE have been found at burial sites, implying the frequent use and reverence for these clothing items.²⁹ The frequency of appearances of the brooches suggests a heightened popularity for fastening clothing as well as fashion. Carefully crafted jewelry was also heavily featured among people of Celtic origins according to scholars. Many of these personalized Celtic ornaments belonged to women across tribes and geographic locations. P.S. Wells writes, “Women's graves often contain sets of personal ornaments, including bronze neckrings, bracelets, fibulae, and link belts, as well as glass beads and bracelets.”³⁰ Romans often remarked

²⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (London, Penguin Classics, 1991), 120.

²⁸ Strabo. *The Geography of Strabo*. 255.

²⁹ Jacqueline I. McKinley "Archaeology of Britain." *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 129-45.

³⁰ Peter S. Wells. *Encyclopedia of Archaeology*, (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008), 1926.

on these differences between them when writing their histories, neglecting to mention just how much they would come to favor the religion in the Southwestern region.

In 55 BCE Gaius Julius Caesar crossed the English Channel in an attempt to conquer the mysterious island of Great Britain. In his account of *the Gallic Wars* he describes how the natives appear, as well as elements of their culture. Caesar writes, “They wear their hair long, and have every part of their body shaved except their head and upper lip. Ten and even twelve have wives common to them, and particularly brothers among brothers, and parents among their children; but if there be any issue by these wives.”³¹ While Caesar and his writings may have been more fanciful than factual, this illustrates how Romans at the time would have viewed the natives of the island.

While the natives of Great Britain did not contribute much in the way of written history, the Romans were quite adept at keeping records of themselves. Two major people groups in the province of Roman Britain ultimately provided the culture and society that created the new hybridized Romano-British religion. The people who built the most famous empire on the European continent were no strangers to leaving their mark on outer lands. They were clear about their origins and their purpose as a civilization in the ancient world. There are several fanciful tales of Roman origins such as the *Aeniad* and the tale of Romulus and Remus. The *Aeniad* in particular shapes Roman religious and cultural perspectives of themselves for centuries before they became an imperial power. The story details the journey of Aeneas, a noble of Trojan origins, after the crushing defeat of the Trojans by the Greeks in the famous war in the *Illiad*. After a long and arduous journey which took years, Aeneas arrived in central Italy and became

³¹ “Gallic War,” Lacus Curtius, Accessed May 18th, 2022, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Caesar/Gallic_War/5A*.html.

the forebearer of the founders of the city of Rome.³² Written by the poet Virgil during the time of Emperor Augustus, this tale served to provide Romans with a definite and inspiring origin story that boosted their place in the world.

The origin stories of the Roman people have provided some of the best examples of archaeology and imagery throughout the history of the Empire. The most famous example regarding the Roman origins is the Capitoline Wolf depicting the suckling of the famous brothers, Romulus and Remus. The boys are depicted as babies being nursed by a she-wolf before they would later grow to found the eternal city. Not much is known about this particular statue besides the fact that the boys were added much later to the original wolf sculpture.³³ This wolf image was clearly held sacred to the Romans because it is just one of many examples that can be found. Many silver coins have been found that have images of the she-wolf as it relates to the founding of Rome and her saving the two boys from certain death.³⁴ This image was central to Roman identity in the context of their religion and culture.

Due to the mythological and less than reliable histories written about the Roman people, it is quite difficult to determine when they actually emerged as a distinct people. Modern scholars have dated the traditional founding of the city of Rome to 753 BCE, but the discussion surrounding the date is still ongoing. The people of early Rome were considered a small and divided group of warrior farmers who would not pose any significant threat to the Etruscans,

³² Virgil. *The Aeneid*, (London, Penguin, 2003), 128-130.

³³ Capitoline Museum, *Capitoline Wolf*. Rome, Italy, October 27, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Romulus-and-Remus>.

³⁴ Capitoline Museum, *The She-Wolf on a Coin in the Late Roman Republic (c.77 BCE)*. Rome, Italy, October 27, 2021. <https://imperiumromanum.pl/en/article/wolf-animal-of-ancient-rome/>.

Greeks, or other groups located in Italy at the time.³⁵ The Romans later decided to expand their dominion and conquered other groups in the Italian peninsula. They would later escape the confines of Italy and control much of the land outside of their original geographic and ethnic boundaries. This pathway would later lead the Romans to the shores of the island of Great Britain to the far northwest.

Emperor Claudius was the first Roman leader to have a legitimate hold on the island of Great Britain in the first century CE. The military exploits of Claudius and his legions was one of the first major highlights of his reign as an emperor. His decision to invade and his appearance during the military expedition drastically improved his standing with the Roman people.³⁶ Claudius would be viewed quite favorably by his people for achieving victory in his early years as an emperor.

The circumstances surrounding the invasion of the island are rooted in cultural and societal pressures in the ancient world. The emperor Claudius was the ruler who decided that military conquest would bring glory to the empire in 43 CE. Utilizing military and political power is considered essential for an individual to be an effective leader in the Roman culture.³⁷ Claudius understood this reality and acted early in his reign by carrying out a military assault on Britain. His actions led to the Roman imperial body consuming Britain, but Britain's people and culture would not be erased by the conquering forces.

³⁵ Silvana A. Gaeta, "founding of ancient Rome." *World History: A Comprehensive Reference Set*, (NY: Facts on File, 2016), 140.

³⁶ Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (Oxfordshire, Taylor and Francis, 2015), 163.

³⁷ Keith C. Sidwell, *The World of Rome: An Introduction to Roman Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75.

The first contact between the Romans and the Britons dates back to before Caesar's attempted conquest of the island. This is confirmed mostly by archaeology, since Roman writers did not necessarily focus on the island as a realistic place before they could establish their own settlements. However, the first definite and physical contact between the two groups occurred when Caesar attempted to take the island in 55 BCE. This mission by the Roman military was a failure, but this direct contact proved to the rest of southern Europe that Britain was not a mystical land full of monsters and myth. Caesar's *Gallic Wars* described the island as a somewhat normal place which could theoretically fall to Roman authority.³⁸ The writers of ancient history dedicated a great deal of time and effort to describe the warring that went on between the Romans and Britons at various points in time. The earliest recorded conflict between the two groups was Gaius Julius Caesar's invasion of the island in 55 BCE. This account was written by the hand of Caesar himself, and contains obvious attempts to glorify both himself and the state of Rome. He had recently conquered much of the province of Gaul and was looking to add more military renown to his name. Caesar crossed the English Channel with the intent of steamrolling over the Britons as he had the Gauls. This is when he wrote of the British affinity for horses in warfare against them, detailing how Britons sent both riders and charioteers to attack the Roman troops as they attempted to disembark their ships.³⁹ The natives were not as interested in Roman control as they had hoped and responded with violence. Caesar wrote of the tactics of the natives in a way that almost suggests a level of respect and admiration despite their status as an enemy of Rome. The British leaders acted by cutting off any food and supplies that

³⁸ Lacus Curtius, "Gallic War."

³⁹ Lacus Curtius, "Gallic War."

the Roman troops might use to maintain their conquest of the island.⁴⁰ This source reveals a level of amazement and shock from the Roman perspective because they had not expected such stiff resistance. Caesar's skill in combat and strategy may have not been the most reliable in this source, but the Roman surprise at British abilities was certainly and reliably evident. The ability to utilize horses and chariots was highly significant when the Romans returned in force to permanently conquer the island. After the failed attempt at conquest, the Roman Republic left the island alone for decades while the heartland remained their focus. This all changed when Rome transitioned into an empire in the late first century CE where conquest became expected of rulers in order for them to make a name for themselves.

The need for military conquest in imperial culture is what led the Roman Empire to encompass the southwest of Britain. Eager to create an image of strength and power, Claudius traveled to the island of Britain to oversee the capture of the city of Colchester.⁴¹ The successful invasion of the island allowed the Romans to turn it into a province that could host citizens from all over the Imperial body. The conquest of Britain is considered by some to have never ended due to the many rebellions carried out by Britons, but by the year 87 CE the southern half of the island was mostly under Roman control. One archaeological piece succinctly personifies the Roman intrusion into British territory unlike any declaration or historical account. A relief found from the city of Aphrodisias in modern-day Turkey depicts the figure of Claudius dominating the female Britannia from the first century.⁴² The image of a Roman emperor dominating the

⁴⁰ Lacus Curtius, "Gallic War."

⁴¹ "History - Claudius." BBC. Last modified October 28, 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/clauius.shtml.

⁴² University of Oxford, *Illustration of the conquest of Britain from Aphrodisias*, Aphrodisias, accessed June 15, 2022,

personification of a foreign province speaks to Rome's culture of military excellence and superiority. It also reveals much about Roman masculinity being considered superior to femininity. The concept of Virtus supports the idea that masculinity is intertwined with moral excellence and physical capability, and the stone relief of Claudius perfectly encapsulates this idea.⁴³ This image of domination and defilement defined the relationship between the Empire and the island of Britain for centuries.

The history of the relationship between the people of Britain and the Romans has been a tumultuous one. Rome did not often come by territory in a peaceful manner because people in the ancient world preferred autonomy and would fiercely defend it. The Roman legions were famous for their effectiveness in taking over lands and people with relative ease. The military played a large part in the settling of the Roman province of Britannia, especially in the early years of conquest of the island. The southwest saw conflict to a certain degree, but military aggression and usurpation permeated the relationship even after the initial conquest in 43 CE.

After several emperors had sat the throne of Rome, Emperor Claudius had to conduct military forays into foreign lands to gain respect and honor in the militaristic Roman culture. Several Roman historians have written about the initial conquest of Britain by Claudius and his general Aulus Plautius. Some of the historical sources directly pertain to the southwest region and the Dobunni tribe who resided there. Cassius Dio writes, "After the flight of these kings he gained by capitulation a part of the Bodunni, who were ruled by a tribe of the Catuellani; and

https://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/sites/open.conted.ox.ac.uk/files/styles/full_size/public/resources/Claudius%20%26%20Britannia%20.JPG?itok=_5b16PfK.

⁴³ Mark Golden. "masculinity." *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 500.

leaving a garrison there, he advanced farther and came to a river.”⁴⁴ Plautius was highly successful in his military campaigns, causing many tribes, such as the Dobunni in the Southwest, to surrender without putting up much of a fight. Modern scholars also agree with the military efficacy of Aulus Plautius in his British campaigns. Beecham writes, “Plautius encountered Caratacus and then Togodumnus, both of whom were defeated and compelled to take refuge in flight. This struck terror in the inhabitants that a portion of the Boduni (or Dobuni) submitted to the Roman arms.”⁴⁵ The Roman forces conquered most of the southern part of the island rather quickly and this terrified many of the Britons into surrendering and making deals with them. The success of Claudius’ military efforts allowed him to construct an elaborate triumphal arch in the city of Rome to commemorate the takeover of the province. The arch was dedicated in 51 CE and contains an inscription which reads, “The Roman Senate and People to Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, son of Drusus, Pontifex Maximus, Tribunician power eleven times, Consul five times, Emperor 22 times, Censor, Father of the Fatherland, because he received the surrender of eleven kings of the Britons defeated without any loss, and first brought barbarian peoples across the Ocean into the dominion of the Roman people.”⁴⁶

Roman success during the reign of Claudius was not without difficulty despite their many victories. The early 60s CE were quite difficult for Romans in terms of holding onto the island as

⁴⁴ Cocceianus, Cassius Dio, Earnest Cary, and Herbert Baldwin Foster. *Roman History*. (Wentworth Press, 2019), 417-418.

⁴⁵ Beecham, *History of Cirencester and the Roman City Corinium*. 6-7.

⁴⁶ Jenni Ahonen, *Inscription from the Arch of Claudius, Capitoline Museum*. Rome, Italy, March 21, 2007, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Capitoline_museum2.jpg

a province of the empire. There were many rebellions and unhappy natives who had no interest in letting foreigners rule over them on their own land. Others were people who formerly held the good graces of Rome, but ultimately decided to take action against them. The most famous instances of this were the rebellion of Boudica and the extermination of the Druids by the governor of Britain.

The governor of Britannia was Gaius Suetonius Paulinus and he wished to conquer a native British stronghold in the island of Mona off the coast of modern-day Wales. Tacitus wrote in his *Annales* that, “Among them were black robed women with disheveled hair like Furies, brandishing torches. Close by stood Druids, raising their hands to heaven and screaming dreadful curses.” He also wrote of Paulinus destroying their sacred groves in order to end their religion of superstition and sacrifice.⁴⁷ This is not the only time this that the island of Mona was attacked by Roman forces. In 77 CE governor Agricola has to suppress the population of Britain and put down major rebellions. Tacitus wrote of how the soldiers supposedly swam across the water to deal with the insurgents and secured victory for Agricola.⁴⁸ These accounts should certainly be taken with a grain of salt due to the intensely pro-Roman stance that Tacitus and other writers often had.

Boudica’s Rebellion in the early 60s CE did serious damage to Roman authority on the island for a time, and a great deal of resources were used to defeat her. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote of her revolt in the *Annales* and the *Agricola* in moderate detail. The story of the rebellion consists of her husband, a client king of Rome, being killed by Roman soldiers and her daughters being raped. The outrage of this event allows Boudica to gather forces to burn the

⁴⁷ Tacitus. *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (London, Penguin UK, 1973), 327.

⁴⁸ Tacitus. *Agricola and Germania* (London, Penguin UK, 2010) 14.

cities of Londinium, Verulamium, and Camulodinium.⁴⁹ This was one of Rome's greatest opponents throughout its long and storied history, but she was eventually defeated by the Roman forces. Tacitus wrote more about how the Boudica and her British forces would have fought the Romans during the rebellion. "Our cavalry squadrons, meanwhile, had routed the war chariots, and now plunged into the infantry battle."⁵⁰ This attack by a non-Roman woman on the citizens living in Roman cities led the Empire to respond with extreme force and the revolt was brutally put down.

The military and aggressive relationship between the Romans and native Britons would not stop after the famous Boudican Revolt. The entirety of the island of Great Britain was never conquered during the entire history of the Empire. It became the sort of place associated with hardship and a good place to toughen up young men with experiences.⁵¹ This was the plan of Emperor Septimius Severus with his two unruly sons, Geta and Caracalla. In the year 208 CE, the emperor decided to take a military expedition to the province of Britannia to put down a minor rebellion in the far north and gain more territory. The historian Herodian writes, "In the midst of the emperor's distress at the kind of life his sons were leading and their disgraceful obsession with shows, the governor of Britain informed Severus by dispatches that the barbarians there were in revolt and overrunning the country, looting and destroying virtually

⁴⁹ Caitlin C. Gillespie, *Boudica: Warrior Woman of Roman Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018), 28-29.

⁵⁰ Tacitus. *Agricola and Germania*. 24.

⁵¹ Paul K. Davis, *The Encyclopedia of Invasions & Conquests*, (NY: Grey House Publishing, 2016), 24.

everything on the island.”⁵² Once again, the province of Britannia was used by Romans as a testing ground to build up the character of young men through military conquest. This conquest took place primarily in the northern regions of the island which would become modern-day Scotland. The forays into northern Britain allowed Emperor Severus and his sons to gain the title of Britannicus, much like Emperor Claudius, but this did not have the desired effect on his sons as he wished. The Emperor died in York during the campaign in 211 CE and his sons would later go on to conspire to kill each other and squabble over the throne.⁵³

It was the nature of the Romans to bring their civilization and culture with them no matter how far from home they might go. This was certainly no different in the province of Britannia as much evidence suggests. Scholar of Romano-British religion and culture Miranda Aldhouse Green writes that, “Roman colonists, whether military or civilian, sought to construct environments, both physical and emotional, in which they felt at home.”⁵⁴ The arrival of the Italian colonists certainly shaped the island of Great Britain in such a way that the natives had never previously witnessed. Cities began to spring up, roads were built, and new agricultural goods began to appear in British markets. Many native Britons began to see the Romanized city lifestyle as a worthwhile way to live and began coexisting with their new overlords to a certain degree.⁵⁵ This was when the major Roman cities of the Southwest region begin to emerge as

⁵² Herodianus, and Edward C. Echols. *Herodian of Antioch's History of the Roman Empire: from the Death of Marcus Aurelius to the Accession of Gordian III* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 208.

⁵³ Anthony R. Birley, "Septimius Severus, Lucius." *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 148-150.

⁵⁴ Miranda J Aldhouse Green. *Sacred Britannia*. 38-40.

⁵⁵ William E. Burns. *A Brief History of Great Britain*, (NY: Facts on File, 2009), 16.

major population centers for both Romans and native Britons. The cities were generally populated by military veterans in the beginning stages after the conquest, but later would be populated by civilians of many origins in the early second century CE.⁵⁶

The cities of great importance for a uniquely blended religion and culture in the southwest region would certainly be Corinium and Aquae Sulis. The Roman colonists created these cities with the intent of establishing roots in a very foreign land, but managed to form so much more. The city of Roman Corinium, what would later be known as Cirencester, is believed by modern scholars to have been established as a Roman fort on the frontier during the early days of the invasion of Claudius around 43 or 44 CE. The days of the fort did not last long and in the 70s CE the structure changed into what scholars recognized as the city of Corinium Dobunorum.⁵⁷ The city was named for the native Dobunni tribe who inhabited the area and made up most of the population of the city along with the Roman colonists. Not much is directly written about this particular city, but scholars have determined that it had at least a somewhat important role in the history of the province. Scholar Kennett J. Beecham writes of the scholarly debate surrounding the nature of Corinium's importance and origins in his historical account. "Richard of Cirencester says that he (Aulus Plautius) built Corinium, while Mr. Lysons asserts that that Aulus Plautius held his court here and in Gloucester."⁵⁸ Based on the size of the town during Roman occupation, one can infer that the city was a bustling hub of activity and culture.

⁵⁶ Alan Simon Esmonde Cleary. *The Oxford Companion to British History*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), 204.

⁵⁷ "Resources - Corinium Museum." Corinium Museum, last modified October 28, 2021. <https://coriniummuseum.org/schools/resources/>.

⁵⁸ Beecham. *History of Cirencester and the Roman City Corinium*. 8.

The Roman city of Corinium has more than religious artifacts associated with its southern European identity. Much of the art and building material found at the site is entirely of Roman origin despite the general mixing of the imperial and native demographic groups. One uniquely Roman cultural item is the top piece of the Corinthian style column found near the center of Corinium. This column piece holds a plethora of Roman religious and cultural imagery, such as grapes and Bacchus. This item has been dated roughly to the late second or early third century CE after the city had been established for quite some time.⁵⁹ The next major purely Roman piece of archaeology is the plaster from a city wall. The native Britons only constructed small hill forts such as the one located at Maiden Hill, but never constructed major stone cities like southern Europeans did. This changed when the Romans arrived and constructed the city of new materials other than the islanders were used to using. It has been determined that the wall plaster is dated to the first century CE and that it faced outward, but its purpose is shrouded in mystery.⁶⁰ The Romans left traces of themselves even in the furthest of the outer provinces, and the Southwest region of Britannia is certainly no different than other areas.

The sanctuary of Aquae Sulis, later known as Bath in the modern era, was an incredibly significant Roman settlement in Southwest Britannia. The religious significance of this location cannot be understated, however it is advisable to analyze its history. It was located further to the southwest near the modern-day city of Bristol in England.⁶¹ There was not much in the way of a

⁵⁹ Corinium Museum, *Corinthian Capital*. Cirencester, UK, April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/a348-2/>

⁶⁰ Corinium Museum, *First Century Wall Plaster*. Cirencester, UK, April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1980-53-932-2/>

⁶¹ *England Celtic Tribes*. November 1, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Age_tribes_in_Britain#/media/File:England_Celtic_tribes_-_South.svg.

settlement before the arrival of the Romans, but there was evidence of human activity long before their arrival. Scholars have determined that the area was more of a religious sanctuary than a city, like many of the other Roman sites across Britain. The hot springs located at the site were utilized for both religious and practical purposes such as medical treatment.⁶² Both of these sites are highly significant in terms of Romano-British religion and culture in the Southwest region of the province. While these people groups would eventually produce religious and cultural wonders, the relationship between the native Britons and foreign Romans was not a peaceful one in the beginning.

The Roman province of Britannia saw conflict and a constant military presence during its stint of being owned by the Empire. The relationship between these two often warring groups of people holds a wealth of information. Due to the frequent rebellions throughout Roman occupation, the natives of the island clearly felt that Romans had overstepped their autonomy and land boundaries multiple times in history. Romans felt entitled to march on the resource rich island and take it to fuel their ever-expanding empire with people and goods. The religions and cultures had massive differences, but as seen in the Southwest, those differences also gave way to an incredibly rich blend of both foreign and domestic religions and cultures, in towns such as Corinium and Aquae Sulis.

The primary resources used for examining individual people in the Southwest area were recovered gravestones from Roman Corinium in the Dobunni territory. These tombstones give volumes of information, even with the small Latin inscriptions that they provide. These stones directly convey specific information about the ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds of the

⁶² Eleri Cousins, “Springs Eternal.” *History Today* 71, no. 7 (July 7, 2021): 54–65.

people to whom they refer. They provide the most direct look into what the population of the area would have looked and sounded like during the Roman occupation of Britain. The first tombstone of major importance is the Bodicacia tombstone found in modern Cirencester at the site of the former Bridge's Garage. This tombstone is dedicated to a woman known as Bodicacia based on the inscription on the five-foot stone. The writing reads, "To the Shades of the Dead. Bodicacia, spouse, lived 27 years."⁶³ While the writing does not give away much, it does speak of a young married woman with a name of definite Celtic British origins. The most interesting aspect of this stone is that the person found buried underneath it was not a twenty-seven-year-old woman, but a middle-aged man. The tombstone has been roughly dated to the second century CE while the skeleton found comes from the fourth century CE.⁶⁴ This heavily implies that old tombstones could and would be repurposed for other people after many generations. Scholars believe that this is the first time that this particular name appears on tombstones in Britain, making it a unique find. Not much is known about the man other than his age and location, but research is still ongoing. The tombstone also had a rough backside, indicating that it may have at one point hung on a wall rather than placed at the head of a grave.⁶⁵ There is also art on the pediment of the stone that likely depicts a deity, indicating an association between divinity and the dead.

⁶³ Corinium Museum, *Bodicacia Tombstone*, Cirencester UK, April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/2016-1-1-2/>

⁶⁴ Jessica Esther Saraceni. "More on Bodicacia's Tombstone." *Archaeology Magazine*. November 4, 2021. <https://www.archaeology.org/news/3322-150528-cirencester-roman-tombstone>.

⁶⁵ Jessica Esther Saraceni. "More on Bodicacia's Tombstone."

The Bodicacia tombstone was a rare archaeological find because it is the only tombstone ever discovered dedicated to a woman. Most of the tombstones found in Corinium were dedicated to men with clearly Roman names, but the origin of all of these people were not strictly Italian Romans. The stone of Sextus Valerius Genialis speaks a great deal of the Roman militaristic relationship between them and the Britons. Much more is known about his life, background, and occupation unlike the mysterious Bodicacia. Sextus Valerius Genialis is thought to have been recruited into military service in Lower Germany where he remained until 43 CE and thought to have died at age 40 around 60/61 CE. This man clearly adopted Roman culture despite originating from a tribe known as the Frisiavones tribe of Gallia Belgica. The tombstone depicts him as a soldier atop a horse in heavy Roman-style armor trampling an enemy.⁶⁶ His tombstone is also written in Latin despite being in a land far outside the native region of that language. The tombstone also reveals his non-Roman origin with the inclusion of the horse on the top of the artifact. The Empire specifically used people outside of Italy for their cavalry at this time, but he was not a legionary soldier as that position was reserved for native Romans.⁶⁷ The time frame of his life suggests that he was sent to Britain during the initial conquest of the island by Emperor Claudius. Genialis demonstrated his wealth and status as a Roman citizen by commissioning a stone with intricate detail with all three of his names clearly displayed. This is all the more impressive considering Genialis was not of Roman origins, so his military accomplishments must have been immense to gain him such a position in such a society.

⁶⁶ Corinium Museum, *Military Tombstone*. Cirencester, UK, April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b956-2/>

⁶⁷ Nicholas Jones, "The Tombstone of Sextus Valerius Genialis." Corinium Museum, date accessed February 22, 2018. <https://coriniummuseum.org/2017/08/the-tombstone-of-sextus-valerius-genialis/>.

This particular tombstone does not have any religious artwork, as it mostly depicts Genialis performing his duties as a soldier as he would have in life.

Sextus Valerius Genialis was not the only person associated with the Roman military found buried in Corinium. Another stone with a figure depicted in a similar way shows up in the same Roman city. The tombstone of Dannicus, found in the Watermoor area of Cirencester in 1835, was in a much worse condition than the Sextus Valerius Genialis artifact.⁶⁸ There are a few similarities between the Dannicus and Sextus stones in terms of imagery and structure. They are organized in the same way, in that they have an image on the top with an inscription found below. The figure of Dannicus is portrayed in an almost identical manner to Sextus by having him atop a horse while trampling an enemy beneath him. The face and much of the details on the figure are worn away due to the stone being from the first century CE.⁶⁹ The horse and rider implies that Dannicus was a cavalryman as Sextus was, but he did not possess the three names of a full-fledged Roman citizen. This demonstrates the differences between classes among soldiers of varying origins in the Empire and where they lived. In a similar manner to Sextus, Dannicus did not originate from Britain or the Italian peninsula. The inscription reads, “Dannicus, trooper of the Cavalry Regiment Indiana, from the troop of Albanus, of 16 years’ service, a tribesman of the Raurici, lies buried here. Fulvius Natalis and Flavius Bitucus had this erected under his will.” Dannicus came from an especially barbarous area outside the Roman heartland only a short time

⁶⁸ “Tombstone of Dannicus - Corinium Museum.” Corinium Museum, date accessed November 4, 2021. <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b977-2/>.

⁶⁹ Corinium Museum, *Tombstone of Dannicus*. Cirencester UK, April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b977-2/>

before his death around 70 CE.⁷⁰ The military exploits of the Roman Empire in Britain truly created an immigrant population of both ethnic Roman and non-Roman army veterans.

The last major stone, that of Nemomnius Verecundus, reveals an inscription indicating that he was able to reach the age of seventy-five years, an exceptionally old age in the ancient world.⁷¹ Surprisingly, the tombstone is extremely minimalistic and plain despite Verecundus' status as a Roman citizen. This demonstrates the possibility of a Roman citizen to forge a prosperous and fulfilling life in an area of the empire formerly considered to be horrific. Not much else is directly known of the man called Nemomnius Verecundus other than what his inscription reveals. The inscription reads, "To the spirits of the departed. Nemomnius Verecundus lived 75 years. His heir put this up."⁷² While this writing does not reveal the heir of Verecundus, it does give insight into the expected duties of an heir in Roman Britain. The discovery of this grave marker demonstrates just how different the island of Britain had become with the establishment of the Empire in foreign lands.

There was one more type of death preparation technique that was found in Roman Corinium. A funeral urn containing obviously cremated remains was located in 1765. Scholars have not been able to determine whose remains they might be, or whether the urn was located in a home or mausoleum.⁷³ This item would have likely been quite expensive due to it being made

⁷⁰ Corinium Museum, *Tombstone of Dannicus*. Cirencester UK, April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b977-2/>

⁷¹ Corinium Museum, *Tombstone of Nemomnius*. Cirencester, UK, April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1971-11-2/>

⁷² "Tombstone of Nemomnius." Corinium Museum. Cirencester UK, date accessed November 7, 2021. <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1971-11-2/>.

⁷³ "Glass Cinerary Urn," Corinium Museum, Cirencester UK, date accessed April 23, 2022, <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b900-2/>

of exquisite Roman glass. The glass is entirely intact and is still relatively clear despite the ravages of time.

The gravestones and other burial related artifacts reveal the incredibly diverse population of the southwest region of Roman Britain. The native Britons comprised of the majority of the population and contributed a great deal to the culture in the area. The most common misconception about the area is that the native cultures and customs died out when the Romans introduced their own, but the southwest region disproves that entirely. The sheer volume of archaeological finds and historical writings showcase a large presence of native Britons in the area who never gave up their ways. The blending of the native Britons with the more dominant Roman culture produced an incredibly diverse population in the ancient world. People from all over the Empire made their home in the southwest. Evidence of Roman Italians, Southern Germanic, and Western Gallic individuals are all evident in the artifacts related to the buried dead of the region. This speaks to the increasingly global nature of the expanding Empire in the first few centuries of the Imperial body.

The most prominent element of the Southwestern region of the Roman Britons was the richly blended religion of the area, as confirmed by the abundant archaeological evidence provided by the settlements of Corinium and Aquae Sulis. The exquisite art and ritual artifacts give insight into how the people of this area would have practiced and perceived their divinities and their roles in their lives. The varying works of stone, delicate mosaics, and hand-crafted sculptures show evidence of a new style of religion specific to the area. This was made possible by many groups of people coming together and coexisting on a level which provides new religious and cultural innovations which Britain had never witnessed. Analyzing the religion of

southwest Roman Britannia will provide a look into an area long considered to be barbarous and unsophisticated by both Romans and modern scholars.

Chapter 2

Romans and Their Ideas of the Religion

The Roman concept of religion is crucial for comprehending the nature of the religion of the Southwestern region of Britain. The primary sources on Roman religion support the idea that the gods were of and in all things, leading to an emphasis on making them happy. The writers of Roman lineage would have seen their religion as an appropriate extension of the Roman state religion of the heart-landers. This is the reason evidence for classical Mediterranean deities can be in places such as Britain and Palmyra, where they had not been worshipped previously. I will use the examples of foreign cults entering Roman society and receiving historical attention from them to apply their viewpoints to the Southwest region of Britain. This is because many Roman writers simply refer to deities by their Roman names when writing, even if they might be combined with another deity in actuality. It is important to analyze the perception of the religion of the Romano-Britons to paint a clearer picture of how the Southwestern inhabitants of Britain were viewed. There are examples of Roman histories and especially Roman Vindolanda's tablets referring to many aspects of life in Roman Britain. I will consider how Romans viewed the religious cults of Isis, Cybele, and Bacchus and how this influenced their religious thinking of the Southwest of Britain. I will accomplish this by including written information from ancient and modern writers to demonstrate how religious views might change over time. Analyzing scholars writing from every angle possible ultimately enhances the argument that the religion of

the people of Southwest Roman Britain was a uniquely harmonious blend of two cultures that came to blows many times before achieving that state.

No discussion of Roman perception of British would be complete without looking into the pre-Roman Druidic practices of the native population. Prior to the invasion of Gaius Julius Caesar in 55 BCE, the island of Great Britain was home to vastly independent Celtic groups.⁷⁴ The major group inhabiting the area that would become the Roman urbanized area under analysis were the Dobunni tribe. They lived in the general area that would include the city of Corinium and the sanctuary of Aquae Sulis. The Dobunni did not disappear when Romans entered Great Britain, but they were the dominant political force in the area beforehand.

Written Roman sources serve as the basis for how modern scholars were able to look into the religion of the Romano-Britons. The Romans did not directly record information regarding specific religious practices of the Dobunni people, but rather covered the beliefs of the Britons as a whole. Caesar was one of the first Romans to write about the traditions of the Britons with intent to describe them “in earnest.” He mostly described the Druidic practices of the province of Gaul, which would have had similar practices to the British Druids. In his account of the Gallic Wars Caesar writes, “They feel that the spirit of the gods cannot be appeased unless a man's life is given for a life.”⁷⁵ This account fed into the perception by the Romans that the Britons and Gallic tribes were fierce and often practitioners of human sacrifice. It seems that there is some truth to his account as expounded upon by some modern scholars. Barry Cunliffe writes of how the Lindow man and other skeletal remains have been found with evidence of sacrificial practices. He compares the remains in Britain to similar ones found in Ireland with a similar

⁷⁴ Burns. *A Brief History of Great Britain*, 9.

⁷⁵ Lacus Curtius, “Gallic War.”

Celtic culture who would have also carried out sacrifices to ensure divine protection or favor.⁷⁶

Miranda Aldhouse-Green writes that the Roman elite likely used the human sacrifice component to justify a reason for conquest of a foreign culture.⁷⁷ While scholars are mostly sure that the pre-Roman Celts were practicing human sacrifices, there is no definitive agreement among modern scholars that it was happening. Romans had previously outlawed any form of human sacrifice, so it would stand to reason that their culture would view it as unseemly and disgusting.

The island of Mona also served as a negative locale by the Roman culture. Roman writers bring up horrific scenes of death and suffering in the sacred groves on this Druidic center of power. This island is located just Northwest of modern Wales and was firmly tucked away from initial Roman interaction. Famous Roman historian Tacitus wrote, “The groves devoted to Mona’s barbarous superstitions he demolished. For it was the Druids’ religion to drench their altars in the blood of prisoners and consult their gods by means of human entrails.”⁷⁸ Tacitus is referring to the destruction of the sacred groves on Mona by the Roman governor Suetonius Paulinus in 60 CE. The island was seen by the natives as a last bastion of domestic power against the foreign conquerors. The governor carried out an extremely destructive strike on Mona with great prejudice because there is absolutely no evidence remaining of any sanctuary. The original Druidic practices of the native Britons were essentially wiped out in one fell swoop, changing the religious landscape of the island forever.

The most frustrating and difficult element of studying the Romano-Britons is the lack of written sources directly addressing it. It seems that the Romans stopped paying much attention to

⁷⁶ Cunliffe. *Britain Begins*, 352-354.

⁷⁷ Aldhouse-Green *Sacred Britannia*, 16-18.

⁷⁸ Tacitus. *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. 264-265.

the religion and people of the island of Great Britain when there was not violent conflict. The lack of historians and ethnographers talking about Britain after its assimilation into the Roman Empire implies several assumptions by them. They likely assumed that the Roman leadership on the island would Romanize the people of the province to the best of their abilities. This certainly would have been the expectation of the Roman leaders because Romanness was considered to be the ideal state a person could achieve in the Roman culture. One of the greatest goals of the empire was to bring the Roman culture to a foreign people and have them fully embrace it.⁷⁹ This attitude was definitely prevalent in the southwest region because Mercury and Diana were so abundant in the artwork. The structures of Corinium and Aquae Sulis are extremely Roman in their appearances, leading the Britons to be surrounded by Roman society and culture.

There is also another assumption by the Romans would have been that Roman deities would have been made a priority over any native deities. The Romans were rather arrogant when it came to viewing their own religion, culture, and civilization in general. Many prominent Romans, such as general Agricola, asserted the opinion that barbarian lands should belong to the Romans by right. Tacitus writes, “A general belief went with him that the province of Britain was to be his, not because he had himself hinted it, but because he seemed worthy of it.”⁸⁰ They certainly felt that they were owed a portion of the world due to their highly civilized nature and that the Britons with their “savage” customs were in need of the Roman overlords bringing them the concept of cities and of goods from another land. This would have applied to the gods as well because there were several Roman deities that were considered to be essential for worship to keep the empire going. The Capitoline trio was considered to be crucial divine protectors of

⁷⁹ Sidwell, *The World of Rome*, 5.

⁸⁰ Tacitus. *Agricola and Germania*, 14-15.

Roman success and expansion. “Although the Romans attributed to Jupiter many of the myths of Zeus, they imagined him ruling as the chief figure in a celestial committee analogous to the triumvirates of aristocratic Rome. Jupiter's fellow-deciders were Juno (see Hera) and Minerva, and between them they oversaw all supernatural activity.”⁸¹ The Roman leaders would have expected these deities and other crucial Roman entities to be made a priority by the governors of all the outer provinces. This would have been the case for all of Britannia and the Southwestern region would have been no exception to this universal Roman rule. This expectation evidently took most of the attention away from the more “unsavory” parts of the native traditions because Roman divine figures were entering the culture. As previously written, the Romans famously allowed for the worship of most of the native divinities but they would have also ensured that “obscene” or “barbarous” practices would not be allowed any longer.

These two major assumptions from Roman historians and authors likely led them to a perspective of benign neglect. The island of Great Britain was now the Roman province of Britannia starting in 43 CE so they would not believe native traditions outperformed their own. Britain was also now not much of a source of news for the Romans besides the occasional rebellion which would have to be dealt with by varying emperors. The island of Great Britain itself began to be viewed as a hostile environment to create great men with leadership skills. Herodian of Antioch wrote of how excited the emperor Septimius Severus was to hear reports of an uprising in Britain in the third century so he could take his unruly sons to a place to make them good men.⁸² He intended for them to settle into the life of a soldier in a harsh environment

⁸¹ Kenneth McLeish, *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Myth*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 336.

⁸² Herodianus and Edward C. Echols. *Herodian of Antioch's History of the Roman Empire: from the Death of Marcus Aurelius to the Accession of Gordian III*. 208.

so they would learn the skills necessary to take over the imperial throne when he was gone. It is clear that Romans viewed all of Britain as a harsh place, but no longer drew attention to a frightening and barbaric religion as they had at the first contact. It can be inferred that Roman writers saw the inhabitants of the province of Britannia as Romanized enough to have done away with most of the religious traditions they found unappealing. Herodian also does not directly mention the Southwest region in any way, but it is likely that this area would have been perceived the exact same way as all other areas of Britannia in the third century.

It is a shame that the Romans did not see the religion of the inhabitants of the Southwestern region of Britain as a complex interwoven belief system involving both native and Roman divinities, considering they were instrumental in its creation. Their perception of the area based on the scant writings show that Romans outside that region did not give it much consideration at all. This has forced modern researchers to use alternate sources such as archaeology and written sources of more classically Roman deities. Scholars have developed the skills necessary to dissect those sources and apply them to places like Britain with a degree of effectiveness, but without direct sources it can often be difficult to ascertain the truth. Rebellions and conquests made up the bulk of the information surrounding the province and most of the history pertaining to Britain after the initial stages of conquest in the first century. The attention of the Roman historians generally focused on the heartland of Italy and occasionally the dealings with barbarians in the southern regions of Germania. The religious traditions of the people of Corinium and Aquae Sulis were daily practices for them, so they likely did not write much of anything regarding such every day occurrences. The historical sources indirectly referencing what was going on in Britannia are unfortunately the best way into analyzing how this rich set of traditions would have been viewed by the rest of the Empire.

The only major Roman sources to come out of Britain regarding religion directly are the letters from the Roman fort of Vindolanda in the far northern region of the province. Vindolanda is not located in the Southwest region by any means, but they should not be disregarded as crucial sources of the Roman perception of the environment. The tablets are dated roughly to the first and second centuries CE. They contain information from Roman soldiers on the border between Britannia and the northern lands beyond Roman control. These are some of the best tools to know what was going through the minds of Romans that lived in Britain and how they may have perceived any religion they came in contact with.

The only major letter from Vindolanda regarding religion addresses a sacrifice for New Year's Day. This tablet, numbered 265, informs a man called Cerialis that a New Year's Day sacrifice had taken place per his personal request.⁸³ This is consistent with Roman traditional practices of making sacrifices of animals during important religious days. This letter does not mention any distinguishing factors from Roman or British religious traditions, therefore it can be inferred that both natives and Romans could participate without awkwardness. Another tablet lists the particular foods that Cerialis had requested from a man called Brocchus. Tablet number 233 lists, "gruel, pork crackling, and trotters," as specific food items that he would have shipped to Vindolanda.⁸⁴ It is not clear whether any of these food items were meant to be used for religious purposes, but that possibility should not be ruled out as food items were often left on altars as sacrifices. This likely was how the people of the Southwestern region would have operated in terms of religion. The populations of both Corinium and Aquae Sulis had a mixed population and would have likely participated in Roman festivals together. Deities such as

⁸³ "Digital Humanities," Oxford University, April 18th, 2023, <https://digital.humanities.ox.ac.uk/project/vindolanda-tablets-online>

⁸⁴ Oxford University, "Digital Humanities."

Bacchus and Vulcan did have festivals and researchers have located evidence of them in Corinium.

It would appear that the Roman citizens of northern Britain viewed their religion as more or less traditionally Roman in a foreign land. The Southwestern region, which was much closer to the Roman mainland, was considered to be more Romanized than further regions. The writers of Roman lineage would have seen their religion as an appropriate extension of the Roman state religion of the heartlanders. The Roman historian Festus writes of how crucial native Roman traditions were to citizens all across the empire. "Rituals of the state are celebrated at the expense of the state for the people."⁸⁵ This mindset of the Romans influenced how the Romans in all of the provinces practiced religion, implying that the Southwestern region of Britain did the same. Considering these attitudes and viewpoints, it stands to reason that Romans, both inside and outside of the region, would have expected the Romano-Britons of the area to do the same things. This expectation of orthodoxy in Roman culture is likely what led to such a profound lack of written sources on this uniquely blended religious tradition.

The Roman culture was unusually accepting of most aspects of non-Roman religions because of their need to fulfill Pax Deorum. The ever-expanding Roman Empire ran into countless foreign religious traditions that often did not mesh with their own. The traditional Roman beliefs often left something to be desired by much of the population in terms of individual religious satisfaction, resulting in the adoption of beliefs some Romans found bizarre

⁸⁵ Valerie M. Warrior, *Roman Religion: a Sourcebook* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002) 1.

or obscene.⁸⁶ Divine figures from Greece, the Middle East, and Egypt became highly prominent among groups of Roman origins. These mystery cults eventually spread across the empire and would end up in places as far away as Great Britain. There is no evidence for these eastern deities in the Southwestern region, but these deities showcase Roman revulsion towards other religions as they had treated the British religion.

The initial disgust and ignorance regarding the religions of the eastern Mediterranean was quite similar to how Romans originally felt about British traditions before they adopted some of them. Romans did not generally take issue with people prioritizing native deities over Roman ones as long as said Roman deities were being honored as well. This was most definitely the case in Southwest Britannia as indicated by the incredibly blended religious artifacts and practices. The foreign cults were adopted by many people within the borders of the Roman Empire prior to the rise of Christianity. Specific deities quite distinctively showcase Roman perception of foreign deities which caused similar reactions to deities in Southwest Roman Britain upon first arrival. The cults of Cybele and Isis both garnered initial negative responses before being accepted much later by the people of the Empire.

The Greco-Anatolian mother deity known as Cybele is possibly the most famous example of Romans viewing a foreign religion as frightening before later accepting it. Her worship came to the Roman Republic by way of the Greeks in 204 BCE as a result of a prophecy that she would assist Rome in their time of need.⁸⁷ This acceptance of the new goddess was reluctant due to the specifics of her worship that Romans found rather bizarre, but the cult of Cybele

⁸⁶ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989), 55.

⁸⁷ Philippe Borgeaud, *Mother of the Gods: From Cybele to the Virgin Mary*. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 73-74.

eventually became one of the most sought out mystery cults in the empire. Ovid writes of the unusual rituals that took place on Cybele's traditional festival known as the Megalesia. "The goddess herself, seated on the unmanly necks of her attendants, will be borne through the city streets amidst howls." The shrieking was accompanied by strange instruments that he describes as scary and unsettling.⁸⁸ The "unmanly" descriptor of the attendants refers to the fact they castrate themselves in ecstatic rituals to show their devotion to the Great Mother goddess. This occurred because the central myth surrounding Cybele involved her castrating her lover Attis due to his neglectful attitude to her advances.⁸⁹

Even though the Romans did feel indebted to Cybele for her fertility and divine favor in the Punic wars of the republican era, they did still feel uneasy due to the sheer foreignness of her practices. The willingness to be castrated in the name of the goddess was seen as antithetical to the very masculine and sexually forward nature of Roman culture. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek writer in the time of Emperor Augustus, wrote of how the Roman government took steps to regulate the worship of Cybele. "It is contrary to the law and decree of the Senate that any native-born Roman walk in procession through the city wearing multi-colored clothes."⁹⁰ Much like the traditions of the native Britons of all regions, Romans found worship of Cybele to be antithetical to Roman notions of religion. The stance of Romans regarding the Phrygian goddess was not entirely unlike the manner in which they ascribed such disgust to Druidic practices. The archaeological evidence in the Southwest demonstrates that the acceptance of native British

⁸⁸ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 93-94.

⁸⁹ Michael Grant, and John Hazel. "Cybele or Cybebe." *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2002), 153.

⁹⁰ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 96-97.

deities did eventually become embraced by the Romans living there, but this likely was hampered in the beginning by perceptions of savagery. The element of unfamiliarity drew in people from countless origins throughout the Empire. The acceptance of foreign deities into Roman circles was often carried out by people who were unhappy or unfulfilled with the official religion in some fashion.⁹¹ These gods and goddesses often had to go through the pattern of revulsion followed by general indifference and eventual acceptance. Cybele was no exception to this rule as she eventually showed up in locations quite far from Phrygia such as Britain and Italy. These ideas also likely contributed to the lack of writing involving Romano-British traditions in the Southwest, perhaps the fears associated with the area prevented an inquisitive look.

The cult of Isis was one of the most popular and widespread in the entire Roman Empire once it was adopted near the end of the Republic in 30 BCE. This goddess originates from Egypt where she went by the name of Aset, and she was one of the most quintessential deities in all of Egyptian religion. After the Ptolemaic Greek kings took over Egypt in 304 BCE, Isis began to achieve greater popularity in the eastern Mediterranean region.⁹² Once the Romans obtained Egypt as a territory, the cult of Isis began to spread like wildfire throughout the empire. Isis was regarded as a goddess with almost endless areas of power, such as love, protection, healing, and many other beneficial aspects.⁹³ This goddess became beloved by people within the empire, but

⁹¹ Mark F. Whitters. *World History: A Comprehensive Reference Set*, (NY: Facts on File, 2016), 136.

⁹² Lyn Green, "Isis." *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*, (NY: Cavendish Square Publishing, 2012), 760.

⁹³ Green, *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*, 764.

the Romans also initially viewed her with distaste and fear because of her foreignness. Isis received the same level of regulation and disgust the Cybele ran into within Roman territory shortly before the imperial period began. Valerius Maximus writes of how the Roman Senate decreed that all of the temples of Isis and Serapis should be destroyed within Roman territory.⁹⁴ His account written during the reign of Emperor Tiberius is a great look into the Roman perception of the Egyptian cult in their midst. There is clearly a pattern of Roman traditionalists initially reacting out of fear to the foreign religions, but their perception generally changes over time to blissful ignorance and normalcy. The lower classes of the Roman society tended to have a much more relaxed and accepting attitude towards new deities because they were viewed as new opportunities to gain things. These newer gods were often worshipped in mystery cults, leading to a much more personal and rewarding experience for the smaller number of practitioners.⁹⁵

Considering all of the information on Romans and their perceptions of the British and other foreign religions, the lack of sources regarding the uniquely blended and successful religion of Southwest Roman Britain can be attributed to several causes. The initial fear and resentment of the native Druidic practices of the Gauls and Britons caused the Romans to have a prejudiced and narrow-minded view of them. After the military crushed the last of the Druids on the island of Mona in 60 CE, they felt as though there was nothing else to write about the religion on the island. Once the Romans took over governance of the island, they assumed that Romanization would occur and generally wipe most of the British traditions out of existence.

⁹⁴ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 107-108.

⁹⁵ Hugh Bowden. *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 87

The writers certainly did not anticipate the successful hybridization that the blended population ended up producing and which endured for centuries. The other major reason for a lack of sources is a general initial revulsion to anything of foreign nature. Several other religious figures from traditionally non-Roman areas came to the Empire and were not well-received at first, resulting in various levels of coverage by the Roman writers. The religion of the Southwestern Romano-Britons would have fallen in the same category as Cybele or Isis. The nature of this combined religion prompted Romans outside of the region to view it as something of no real significance, resulting in modern scholars not being able figure out the extent of how rich, complex, and successful the religion really was.

Chapter 3

Religious Imagery/Blended Culture

The amazing religion in the Southwestern region of Roman Britain is a product of the larger Roman Empire and its attitude regarding all religions within its borders. One of the core concepts in Roman religion is the Pax Deorum or "peace of the gods." This idea was that the Romans had to do specific things in order to appease their deities to retain their favor.⁹⁶ If the Romans practiced their rituals correctly, lived morally just lives, and behaved in proper Roman ways, then the gods would smile on them and grant success. Part of maintaining the Pax Deorum was including the deities of conquered people into their pantheon so they could aid in Rome's success. The Roman did not directly incorporate deities from "barbarian" deities into their religion, but rather found a Roman equivalent to fuse with a divinity that most closely resembled it. Modern scholars refer to this process as syncretism, which essentially refers to a blending of religious figures or elements by a specific culture.⁹⁷ The Romans carried out this syncretism all over the empire from Britain to North Africa for its entire history. This blending of religions can be regularly seen in art and Roman historical literature. Outside of Britain, Tacitus wrote of Germanic tribes worshipping Mercury and Hercules despite those divine figures coming from the Mediterranean region.⁹⁸ He applied the Roman way of thinking about religion to the Germanic

⁹⁶ Brian P. Bennett. *Sacred Languages of the World*, (Wiley, 2017). 21-47.

⁹⁷ Sara E. Karesh and Mitchell M. Hurvitz. "syncretism." *Encyclopedia of World Religions: Encyclopedia of Judaism*, (NY: Facts on File, 2016), 507.

⁹⁸ Tacitus. *Agricola and Germania*, 39.

tribes despite their rather obviously different approaches. Tacitus is syncretized Roman deities according to the characteristics of the native Germanic gods and goddesses. This practice was used by Romans when coming into contact with any foreign religion or culture.

The common Roman practice of religious syncretism dominated every religion they encountered, so it comes as no surprise that they would carry it out in Southwest Britain. The physical religious items produced in the area showcase the uniqueness and complexity of the beliefs of the Romano-British population. They left behind several major categories of religious artifacts that demonstrate the argument that the Romano-Britons had a rich and distinct religion despite scholarly and laymen dismissal. Lee Antony writes of how it has only been recently that modern scholars have peered into Romano-British with an appropriately inquisitive and nuanced light. He also expresses his disappointment that the masses still view the Romano-British religion as a lesser tradition than other major belief systems in the classical period.⁹⁹ Matthew Bunson barely even mentions the Romano –Britons when covering the religion of the entire empire across the centuries. He favors the impact of the Greek and Eastern deities over any of the Celtic or Germanic religious traditions.¹⁰⁰ In this chapter, artifacts will serve as the tools to observe how the religion of the Southwestern region was an aggregation of traditions and beliefs from all groups involved. The categories of mosaics, figurines, and stonework are the primary tools used to dissect and analyze the details of this religious phenomenon.

⁹⁹ Antony Lee, "Engaging with the Gods: Experiencing Romano-British Religion in Museums." *Material Religion* 16, no. 4 (July 2020): 539-540. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2020.1794606>. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/engaging-with-gods-experiencing-romano-british/docview/2562224960/se-2?accountid=12281>.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Bunson. *Encyclopedia of Ancient Rome*, (NY: Facts on File, 2012): 224.

Mosaics are perhaps the most exquisite and well-preserved category of religious artifacts in the region. The fact that Mediterranean-style mosaics have been found in the British Isles already confirms that a certain level of cultural blending had occurred. The Roman habit of constructing elaborate floor mosaics was inspired by their Greek predecessors, and they utilized both large and small slabs of marble in varying colors to achieve the perfect image.¹⁰¹ While origin of the mosaic art style comes from the Middle Eastern region, the Roman mosaics clearly are inspired by their Greek neighbors. The first floor mosaics in the Greek world appeared at the temple of Athena Pronaia at Delphi from the sixth century BCE.¹⁰² The beautiful mosaics uncovered at Corinium detail such religious figures as Orpheus and the goddesses of the seasons. It is unclear who exactly these mosaics were produced for, but their exquisite detail and overall quality imply that people of immense wealth and influence would have been able to request their construction.

The next major category of religious artifact in Southwest Roman Britain is the figurine. These small religious tokens served a multitude of purposes in the ancient Roman world regardless of geographic location. The most common manifestation of divine figurines in the Roman world was the placement of Lares in the home and other public places. Lares were deities of households and street corners, and they most commonly took the form of small figurines to be placed on shrines at these respective locations. The Romans viewed them to be guardians of the

¹⁰¹ Katherine Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999) 1.

¹⁰² Valentin Miller, "The Origin of Mosaic." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59, no. 2 (1939): 247. <https://doi.org/10.2307/594065>.

spaces they inhabited and so they were found almost everywhere the Romans went.¹⁰³ While the Lares themselves have not been directly located in the Southwest region of Britain, figurines of other major Roman deities such as Diana and Vulcan have been found in the style of the Lares.

The final major category of religious items left behind by the Romano-Britons is the incredible stonework in its various forms. Outside of the British Isles, ancient societies frequently constructed monuments and carved out fine works of art on stone. In the Mediterranean regions of Europe, people built their homes and temples out of large stones of various kinds. The Southwest region of Roman Britain has produced reliefs, altars, sculptures, and many additional forms of religious imagery including stone in some form. The stonework found in this area most directly demonstrates the syncretic nature of the religion in Corinium and Aquae Sulis. The images of the Matres¹⁰⁴ and the Genii Cucullati¹⁰⁵ are prime examples of how the two peoples worked together to achieve the Pax Deorum.

The mosaics in the Southwestern region of Britain demonstrate a more uniquely Roman aspect of the religion than the other categories of artifacts. Mosaics mostly appear in the villas of the Roman elite and would have been used to promote the purest form of Roman religion and culture. The elite of the province may not have necessarily been born Roman but would have been expected to demonstrate Romanness to the highest degree by the heartland Romans in Italy.

¹⁰³ Harriet I. Flower, *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017.), 7.

¹⁰⁴ Corinium Museum, *Mother Goddesses*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022). <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/c2758-2/>

¹⁰⁵ Corinium Museum, *Genii Cucullati*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022). <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/a350-2/>

The other categories of religious artifacts demonstrate the larger population partook in hybridization of Roman and British religious beliefs, and the imagery shows this quite well.

The Orpheus Mosaic is an effective place to observe the religious imagery in the general area. It is unknown exactly which century or what exact location this mosaic would have been found, but it would likely have come from a Roman villa due to others similar to it being located there. The central piece contains the figure of Orpheus playing a lyre or Kythara while surrounded by a menagerie of wild animals. These animals include several varieties of colorful birds and large predatory cats such as lions and tigers.¹⁰⁶ Naturally, all of this imagery is extremely foreign in a place such as Southwest Britain. The style of mosaic, the imagery, and the craftsmanship are marks of Romanness in a land far removed from the traditional Roman homeland. Orpheus was the legendary musician and poet from Greek and Roman religion whose music could tame wild animals and make gods weep. He is also the central figure of the Orphic mystery cult whose practices included moral purity and finding a way to migrate the soul to a purer existence.¹⁰⁷ The Orphic mystery cult appears in Greece in the sixth century BCE as a challenge to the directly traditional form of the Greek religion.¹⁰⁸ The mosaic was most likely in an entirely Roman space because Orpheus mosaics are often in locations of Roman power such

¹⁰⁶ Corinium Museum, *Orpheus Mosaic*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022). <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/2015-71-2/>

¹⁰⁷ William Keith Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993) 4.

¹⁰⁸ Bianca M. Dinkelaar "Plato and the Language of Mysteries: Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues." *Mnemosyne* 73, no. 1 (January, 2020): 36.doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1568525X-12342654>. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/plato-language-mysteries-orphic-pythagorean/docview/2491199669/se-2?accountid=12281>.

as villas and stone temples. Nothing else of Orpheus or Orphic mysteries was found in Corinium or Aquae Sulis, but the larger religion of the area contained more shared images.

The other religiously significant mosaic in the Corinium area is known as the Seasons Mosaic. The entire mosaic is covered in exquisitely detailed religious imagery from Greco-Roman culture. Each medallion of the piece offers a new divine image or story from the religion of the conquering foreigners of the island of Great Britain. The Actaeon section is similar to the Orpheus mosaic in the sense that it contains a religious story. This image comes from the famous story in which Actaeon comes upon Diana, goddess of the hunt, while she bathes in the forest. The goddess is enraged and turns the hunter into a stag, causing his hunting dogs to brutally kill him.¹⁰⁹ The image of his death is displayed in detail on this mosaic including a partial transformation into the stag. While she has not been seen on this particular mosaic, it is believed that Diana would have likely adorned this piece alongside Actaeon. She is not visible on this mosaic in the modern era because of the damage inflicted by time.¹¹⁰ The significance of this image demonstrates that Diana must have been worshipped in the area because there are more artifacts relating to her in the city such as figurines and stonework with animal imagery.

Several medallions of this mosaic contain divinities regarding the changing seasons. These sections adorn the corners of the piece and the Winter goddess is missing. The Summer goddess is depicted with a sickle and grains in her ceremonial headdress. The plants appear to be

¹⁰⁹ “Actaeon.” *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, no 6, (March, 1 2021): <https://search-ebshost-com.marshall.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=134518312&site=ehost-live>.

¹¹⁰ Corinium Museum, *Seasons Mosaic*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022) <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1983-2-7/>

colorful flowers that symbolize the vibrant life of Great Britain in the summertime.¹¹¹ It is not clear exactly which grains are depicted with the Summer goddess' headdress, but grains were present on the island before Roman arrival. Barley and emmer were native to Great Britain, but the Romans did introduce the Isca grain and other new agricultural items.¹¹² The goddess of springtime is depicted similarly to the other deities in the art piece. Her headdress includes plants of brilliant green and a young bird is perched upon her left shoulder. The divine figure is depicted as young and beautiful in relationship to the blooming of the plants in the British climate. The Autumn goddess is certainly the most prominent of the divinities on the mosaic. Her headdress is full of large plants and she is dressed in clothing of what appears to be leopard skin. She is also flanked by large grapes and a pruning knife indicating that the major crops are due for harvest.¹¹³

It is clear that the changing of the seasons had a level of significance in terms of the Romano-British religion due to their personifications on the mosaic. In ancient times, deities were often the personifications of seasons or weather patterns. In particular, the depiction of Autumn in this mosaic could likely be attributed to the Roman goddess of orchards and fruits, Pomona. Ovid writes of her marrying another seasonal deity, Vertumnus, and that she is commonly associated with pruning knives, which adorn the Autumn divinity depiction on the

¹¹¹ Corinium Museum, *Seasons Mosaic*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022) <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1983-2-9/>

¹¹² H. Helbaek "The Isca Grain, a Roman Plant Introduction in Britain." *New Phytologist* 63, no. 2 (1964): 158–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8137.1964.tb07368.x>.

¹¹³ Corinium Museum, *Seasons Mosaic*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022) <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1983-2-10/>

mosaic.¹¹⁴ The other deities on the art piece are not as directly linked to Roman or British deities, but seasons and nature were heavily prevalent in the religious consciousness of the people in the Southwest.

The last major figure displayed on this particular mosaic would be the drunken god Silenus. The central medallion depicts the god lounging on a donkey due to the drunken stupor that he is most commonly associated with. He is commonly associated with the Roman god of wine and ecstasy, Bacchus, who is assumed to be missing from this mosaic by most scholars.¹¹⁵ There are other depictions of Bacchus in Southwest Roman Britain, as he was an extremely popular deity among all classes and cultures. Silenus and his fauns were companions of Dionysus and frequently appeared alongside nature spirits such as the nymphs.

The figurines of the Corinium and Aquae Sulis are plentiful and distinct. The seven figurines found at Corinium alone provide useful information about the blended religion. They demonstrate a more accessible aspect of the religion than the elaborate mosaics of the Roman villas. They are made from a multitude of materials including metals, ivory, and wood. There are deities from every aspect of religion that take the form of figurines in the Southwest region of Roman Britain. Major and minor deities show up all over the area, but a few of the most distinctive ones show the richly blended religion of the Southwest.

A major deity to appear in the form of a figurine is Diana. The goddess of the hunt appeared in multiple places in Corinium, including a life-size statue that included wild animals. The figurine is made of a copper alloy, giving it an elegant sheen fitting a divine figure. The

¹¹⁴ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 67.

¹¹⁵ Corinium Museum *Seasons Mosaic*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022)
<https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1983-2-6/>

goddess is depicted in the active situation of pulling an arrow from the quiver on her back. Her tunic is much shorter than the other female deities in the Roman world, bringing an element of uniqueness and cultural change to the generally male-centered task of hunting.¹¹⁶ While Diana does not directly have a British counterpart, she fits into the harsh environment of the island. The harsh culture of conflict on the island of Great Britain certainly left many people alone and destitute, requiring them to fend for themselves in the wild. It makes sense that both Romans and native Britons revered and respected this divine figure who helped with hunting. Author Miranda Aldhouse-Green writes that Roman state gods such as Jupiter, Minerva, and Diana were worshipped heavily in Corinium, but they had an undeniable Celtic flavor to them due to religious blending.¹¹⁷ The work of the artisan who created the figurine showcases the Celtic elements by including boots instead of sandals to accommodate the colder climate. This figurine represents much more than the religious honor of Diana, but an embodiment of life in Southwest Roman Britain, rough but capable of a great civilization.

The next major religious figurine is the headpiece of the god Vulcan. His head is constructed from the same copper alloy as the goddess Diana. The features of the hair, beard, and headpiece are exceptionally detailed as befitting the Roman god of the forges and fires.¹¹⁸ He is depicted wearing a conical hat, similar to the one worn by Orpheus in the mosaic. Vulcan is not one of the gods that every Roman citizen would have worshipped in their daily lives, but this figurine head was found nonetheless. This likely implies that there was an individual or group of

¹¹⁶ Corinium Museum, *Diana*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022)
<https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b595-2/>

¹¹⁷ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, 82-85.

¹¹⁸ Corinium Museum, *Vulcan*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022)
<https://coriniummuseum.org/object/c105-2/>

people dedicated to worshipping Vulcan by blacksmithing and crafting. Vulcan had major temples in Italy but mostly had a lower profile across the rest of the Empire. The mosaics and other pieces of artwork certainly back up this idea for the Romano-British people. Pieces of clothing, jewelry, and sculptures are of exquisite quality, leading scholars to believe that artisans and blacksmiths would have resided in the region. Anyone who worked on crafting and smithing would have held Vulcan in high regard because they believed their skills came from him. Being part of the Roman Empire for centuries, the island of Great Britain would have taken part in religious festivals of the dominant culture. The Vulcanalia was a festival used to honor Vulcan by sacrificing animals into a sacred fire. The purpose of this festival was to prevent Vulcan's fires from becoming wild and spreading, so anyone who did not celebrate this festival were inviting his wrath.¹¹⁹ While there is no direct evidence of a large following of Vulcan in the Southwest, the level of craftsmanship found in the area would imply he was not insignificant to the Romano-Britons.

The last figurine of significant importance for Southwestern Romano-British religion is the nymph figurine. This figure is unique in that it is composed entirely of bone that remains mostly unbroken. She holds a pitcher which she pours the contents over her leg into a theoretical sacred body of water. The nymph wears no clothing and has her hair in a bun similar to that of the Diana figurine.¹²⁰ This finding is incredibly significant in terms of the blending of Roman and British religions. The emphasis on sacred water was heavily prevalent in the native Celtic British religion long before the Romans arrived. The entire sanctuary at Aquae Sulis was built

¹¹⁹ John Skene, *De Verborum Significatione*. (Legare Street Press, 1641) 50.

¹²⁰ Corinium Museum, *Water Nymph*. Cirencester. UK, (April 25, 2022)
<https://coriniummuseum.org/object/c742-2/>

around the sacred spring of the British goddess Sulis. “Long before the Romans settled in this area around 60 AD, local tribespeople were throwing coins and other votives into the sacred spring to their Celtic goddess Sulis.”¹²¹ This nymph would have easily appealed to both the Romans and Britons in the pre and post-Roman conquest. The affinity for water in both religions allowed members of both ethnic groups to participate in beliefs that centered around sacred waters. Religion had found a way to unite the conquered with the conquerors despite the many differences. Sulis Minerva does not appear outside of Britain and the status of Nymph worship is spotty on the island. Water spirits and goddesses beautifully showcase the blending that took place despite vastly different religious origins.

The last category of religious artifacts from the Southwestern region of Great Britain is the detailed stonework found all over the area. The images produced in stone are some of the clearest examples of religious blending in the entire island of Great Britain. The sculptures, reliefs, and other works of stone have distinct elements of British deities with a Roman twist. The stone products are also the most numerous of all the religiously centered items in the whole region.

The first major stone artifacts in the Corinium area focus on the Roman deity of travel and roads, Mercury. There were over five large-size stone artifacts relating to Mercury, leading to the scholarly assumption that he must have been highly popular with the Romano-Britons of the area. The most prominent artifact is a votive relief from the second or third century CE. The image of the god is almost completely intact and contains all of his signature clothing and accessories. The winged hat and caduceus staff are on full display with the nude figure of

¹²¹ Gloin, Douglas. "Learning Curses in Bath More Attractions: Goddesses, Thieves and a Rich Array of History on Display." 5.

Mercury taking up most of the stone item. The artifact is composed of limestone and shows clear evidence of master craftsmanship.¹²² There are also two limestone heads of Mercury of a similar carving style from the Cotswold region where Corinium is located. The main distinctions that the heads are indeed meant to represent Mercury is the youthful face and winged helmets which identify the divine figure.¹²³ The prevalence of Mercury in Corinium is not shocking considering the city was one of the most populated in the Southwest region. Miranda Aldhouse-Green writes that, “Mercury’s popularity here may be explained by the fact that in Britain and the Gallic provinces his principal function was as a god of commercial transactions, so people running urban businesses would have been attracted to his cult.”¹²⁴ The Roman deity found great popularity in the region for more than just his divine responsibilities for the people. The native Britons adopted Mercury and gave him the native British divine consort of Rosmerta who served as a Celtic goddess of plenty.¹²⁵ While Rosmerta is more often depicted in Gaul, her link as a goddess of plenty and consort of Mercury is definitely due to the number of depictions of them together in reliefs. The Roman version of Mercury never canonically had a consort so it is often considered by scholars to have been a religious change from the Celts.¹²⁶ The evidence of unique Romano-British religious blending is highly evident in the Corinium Mercury figures.

¹²² Corinium Museum, *2nd Or 3rd Century Mercury Sculpture*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022) <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b2050-2/>

¹²³ “The Roman Sculpture of Corinium - Corinium Museum — Google.” Google Arts and Culture Accessed January 3, 2022. <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-roman-sculpture-of-corinium/hgIyQj9yQ4QkLA>.

¹²⁴ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, 83.

¹²⁵ Katja Ritari, *Understanding Celtic Religion*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2015), 230-232.

¹²⁶ Mackillop "Mothers, Partners and Healers." 22.

The next major stone artifacts are the triad of mother goddesses found all over the Southwest British region. The “Three Matres” are an example of an exclusively Romano-Celtic cult, for they have not been found outside of the Celtic provinces Britannia and Gaul. Most of the stone artifacts depicting these goddesses are similar in appearance and style. One example of these mother goddesses shows them seated next to each other holding a different type of food, indicating that they are goddesses of agriculture and plenty.¹²⁷ Another depiction of the goddesses demonstrates their motherly role as they are all seated beside each other, managing the children at play. These depictions of the ‘Matres’ are the embodiment of Romano-British religious blending. It should not go without notice that the number three is highly prevalent in the native Celtic religious tradition. The mothers are not the only Celtic divine figures located in the area who are depicted in threes. “The early Celts, like other Indo-Europeans, attached symbolic significance to most frequently used numbers but gave the greatest to the number three. Artistic expression dating from all periods of Celtic history underscores this penchant.”¹²⁸ While most everything about the mother goddesses appears to be British in nature, the stonework is a uniquely Roman habit. The figures in all of the carvings appear very similar to many classical deities of the Greek and Roman world. These figures are without question the greatest examples of cultural and religious blending.

The next divine figures also demonstrate this Celtic symbolism of three found throughout the island of Britain. The Genii Cucullati are similar to the mother goddesses in the fact that they are depicted in threes. The main difference between them is that they are generally accompanied

¹²⁷ Corinium Museum, *Mother Goddesses*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022)
<https://coriniummuseum.org/object/c2758-2/>

¹²⁸ James MacKillop, *Myths and Legends of the Celts*, (London: Penguin, 2005), 193.

by one of the mother goddesses on one side of the piece. These deities are always shown with hooded cloaks and faces are not generally distinguishable.¹²⁹ There are some examples where they are in motion on the relief and others where they are still, and all appear to have them listening to the mother goddess. Not much is known about these deities other than that they must have been popular because of so many similar finds in the city of Roman Corinium. Most of the scholars believe that they have must have served as guardian spirits, but not much is easily determined from the artifacts themselves. What is clear is that the fourth figure on these stone reliefs is indeed a mother goddess. One piece shows the fourth figure holding a child while another shows a cornucopia of food like many iterations of the mother goddesses.¹³⁰ Similar to the mother goddesses, the Genii Cucullati have not been found outside the Romano-Celtic provinces of the empire.

The next major stone artifact comes from the sanctuary of Aquae Sulis rather than Corinium. The sanctuary famously produced the incredible temple of Sulis Minerva which served as one of the greatest religious centers in Roman Britain. The pediment of the temple contains the incredibly interesting bearded divine male figure of uncertain identity. The central figure is often described as a male gorgonesque figure with snaky hair and a large beard.¹³¹ The strange figure draws from earlier Greek imagery of figures such as Medusa in the sense that the terrifying snake hair was present. This image is quite uncommon in Great Britain because the

¹²⁹ Corinium Museum, *Genii Cucullati*. Cirencester, UK (April 25, 2022) <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/a350-2/>

¹³⁰ Google Arts and Culture. "The Roman Sculpture of Corinium - Corinium Museum — Google" Accessed January 3, 2022. <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-roman-sculpture-of-corinium/hgIyQj9yQ4QkLA>.

¹³¹ Charlotte Higgins, *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain*. (New York, Abrams, 2015) 94.

gorgon image seemed to appear mostly in ethnically Greek regions of the Roman Empire.¹³² While the identity of the figure on the pediment is not officially determined, most scholars assume that the gorgon is correct because of the association with Minerva. The Roman iteration of the Medusa story entails her being transformed into a monster by Minerva after she was violated in her temple.¹³³ The sheer singularity of this image makes it impossible to determine how the temple gorgon might be entangled in British religion. It is clear that both Romans and Britons came to the temple to worship Sulis Minerva and would have gazed upon this figure every day. The gorgon imagery is certainly quite foreign to the island of Great Britain, as is Minerva, but the conjunction with Sulis is yet another example of the hybrid blend of Roman and British religions.

The next major artifact of stone in the Southwestern region is the antlered deity relief. The divine figure is unclear since the face has been worn away over the centuries, but scholars have a few ideas as to whom the stone is meant to depict. Cernunos seems to be the primary deity that the scholars believe the stone relief to showcase. This deity is of native Celtic origin and is generally considered to be a god of wild places and creatures. Across the Celtic world, Cernunos is depicted with large stag antlers and is accompanied by various wild creatures.¹³⁴ The interpretations of Cernunos are generally stone reliefs and they are found mostly in Gaul. This particular stonework includes the deity flanked by two very large serpentine figures in both

¹³² Albert Mintz Potts, *The World's Eye*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1982) 26.

¹³³ Maria Jerinic. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2010), 367.

¹³⁴ Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past*. (Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2013), 94.

hands. The strange work demonstrates hybridization in terms of the Romano-British religion in the Southwestern region in several ways. Firstly, the fact that a native Celtic/British divinity in stone is a rather Roman practice. Pre-Roman Celtic art in Britain did not include large-size stone depictions of gods. The fact that the Cernunos stone exists implies that the Roman conquerors gave this figure enough deference that they would carve a relief or the natives would take their newfound skills and do it themselves. The craftsmanship and size of the figure is yet another manifestation of Romano-British religion in its proper form.

The major categories of religious artifacts demonstrate the rich and beautifully hybridized religion of the Romano-British people, but other artifacts demonstrate this as well. Grave goods and Bronze heads also pop up in the Southwestern region to give the mixed population divine figures to worship that included flavors of foreign and domestic roots. *Aquae Sulis* and *Corinium* provide even more examples of imagery that shows this uniquely regional belief structure. The miscellaneous category also contains perhaps the famous religious artifact in all of Romano-British history.

This profound artifact is likely the most significant archaeological find regarding the history of the Romano-British religion in the Southwest and beyond. The Gilt-Bronze head of *Sulis Minerva* often serves as the symbol for religion in the Romano-British pagan tradition in history. The Roman-era geographer Solinus writes in the mid-third century CE that, "Over these springs *Minerva* presides and in her temple the perpetual fire never whitens to ash, but as the flame fades, turns into rocky lumps."¹³⁵ It is highly evident from this account that *Sulis Minerva's* worship was taken very seriously in *Aquae Sulis* by inhabitants on the entire island. The head is one of the most finely crafted pieces of religious art in all of Roman Britain. The

¹³⁵ Adlhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, 111.

head has been exquisitely preserved since its discovery in 1727 and showcases that the sanctuary was an extremely important location in the province. Gilt-bronze barely shows up in the outer provinces of the Roman Empire and this head belonged to a slightly larger-than-life frame.¹³⁶ The head is cleanly separated from the body of the statue and contains small holes where the signature Corinthian helmet was supposed to be inserted.

The imagery and combination of the two names directly demonstrate Roman syncretism with a Native British goddess of springs. The structure of the face and helmet holes indicate a classical figure while inscriptions and other context clues bring Celtic aspects to her character. The very Celtic trait of inhabiting a small area is revealed within some of the inscriptions found at the sanctuary. One reads, “Gaius Severius Emeritus, the Centurion in charge of this area, has restored, freshly cleansed this holy place, wrecked by vandalism. To the Virtue and Deity of the Emperor.”¹³⁷ The statue likely stood inside the temple presiding over the sacred springs for which purpose the sanctuary was built.¹³⁸ The goddess was believed to have inhabited the spring long before the Romans had even arrived in the area, making this depiction a personification that the Celts had not constructed. Much is unknown about the sanctuary at Aquae Sulis, but no one doubts the importance of the deity for which it was named. The syncretized statue head is a perfect encapsulation of the role of a hybrid goddess in the Southwest region of Britain.

¹³⁶ “Key Objects of the Collection | The Roman Baths.” The Roman Baths, Accessed January 6, 2022. <https://www.romanbaths.co.uk/key-objects-collection>.

¹³⁷ “Secondary School Decoding Roman ... - Roman Baths, Bath.” Accessed February 24, 2022. https://www.romanbaths.co.uk/sites/roman_baths/files/heritage/SECONDARY%20SCHOOL%20Decoding%20Roman%20tombstone%20leaflet_0.pdf.

¹³⁸ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, 123.

The last major section of religiously centered artifacts in the Southwest area of Roman Britain is the animal-centered religious items. In religions all across the globe, people assign divine qualities and roles to animals in various ways. Corinium contains many examples of animal-related artifacts which tie into the local religion. Horses, chickens, and other creatures all end up in places all across the city. These animals also plainly showcase the blending between the foreigners and natives.

The most directly religious animal figures are cockerels of various sizes, shapes, and materials. They pertain to religion because many of them were found in the graves of locals as ritualistic items. These could often be elaborate and decorative such as the green second-century example found in an infant's grave. Copper tarnished over the centuries turned green over the original metallic dark orange.¹³⁹ Another elaborate cockerel was found in the city of Corinium and its condition was far better than the former. The smaller silver cockerel displays wonderful detail and craftsmanship with golden wings and tail feathers.¹⁴⁰ The placement of this item in the grave of a child clearly has some religious purpose due to nearness to death. The Romans held this bird to be significant to many divinities such as Mercury and Minerva. Mercury was especially associated with the cockerel due to his role as a psychopomp, which is the role of a divinity to shepherd souls of the dead to the afterlife.¹⁴¹ It follows that a town that held Mercury in high regard would include his animal symbol in the graves. The cockerel figures also

¹³⁹ Corinium Museum, *2nd Century Roman Cockerel*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022) <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/2014-42-93-2/>

¹⁴⁰ Corinium Museum, *Cockerel*. Cirencester, UK, (April 25, 2022) <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/a361-2/>

¹⁴¹ Caroline. Fisher, "Striking Figurine found at Landmark Roman Burial Site." *The Gloucestershire Echo*, Dec 16, 2011. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/striking-figurine-found-at-landmark-roman-burial/docview/911420317/se-2?accountid=12281>.

demonstrate how even native British practices came to adopt the Roman action of burying classical Mediterranean symbols with them. While the exact identities and ethnicities of the dead remain unknown, it is certain that burials are another part of the blending experience the Romans and Britons would have shared in.

The last category of animal-related religious artifacts is the animal brooches. The native British Celts were very fond of wearing elaborate cloaks with more decorative brooches to hold them together. One Roman emperor, Caracalla, got this name by frequently wearing one of the famous Celtic/Gallic hooded cloaks.¹⁴² Corinium provides two examples of animal brooches, but one has some religious significance. The first-century horse and rider brooch is likely a symbol of a native divine figure. The Celtic horse deity Epona is a highly significant figure figure Celtic British culture. The helmeted figure is cloaked and mostly preserved, with the horse being shown in wonderful detail depicting the action of a living animal. This divine figure on the brooch gives the evidence that an element of Celtic culture and beliefs remained despite Romanization. In fact, especially in the case of Caracalla, the Romans may have even found the custom of wearing the garments with brooches to be quite agreeable.

In closing, the artifacts containing religious imagery in the Southwestern region of Great Britain showcase a rich blend of Roman and British elements. The differing categories of sacred items bring in images of classical Southern European gods alongside the wild and mysterious divinities from the island of Britain. The Southwestern region of Roman Britain provides an interesting look into a form of Romanization, contrary to the popular narrative of conquerors and conquered. The sheer skill of craftsmanship demonstrated by the religious artifacts is a clear

¹⁴² Syvanne, *Caracalla: A Military Biography*, 14.

manifestation of the worship of Vulcan on the island of Britain. The Romano-Britons knew that their gods were in all places, so they gave them faces and bodies in so many forms across the Southwestern region. Mosaics, stonework, and figurines all contain the puzzle pieces which create the beautifully combined Romano-British hybrid religious tradition. Corinium and Aquae Sulis provide some of the most prominent examples of how religion blended and created a new belief system and the relationship between the conquerors and natives.

Chapter 4

Religious Practices/Blended Culture

In this chapter, I will discuss the religious practices of the Romano-Britons of the Southwestern region. These practices include but are not limited to, writing curse tablets, sacrifices, and the celebration of religious festivals. I will use deities such as Sulis Minerva and Fortuna as vehicles for expanding the information about the first centuries CE. I will use curse tablets, human remains, and Genius loci altars as examples that imply religious practices during the Roman occupation. The Matres and the Mercury statues demonstrate the ability of the people of the region to find a new way of coexisting in the ever-expanding Roman Empire. The physical and written examples provide adequate information to determine just how the hybridized religion of the Southwest was able to endure in its distinct fashion.

The chapter will primarily contain sources that are attached to specific religious practices, which are confirmed to have taken place based on the archaeology. The artifacts that directly confirm religious practices in the Southwestern region will be front and center because they are a direct link to these practices. I will use these prominent written and physical sources to expand the academic discussions of authors such as Barry Cunliffe and Miranda Aldhouse-Green. Their analyses of Romano-British religion in larger contexts are essential, but do not focus on such a specific area as this research.

The Romans, as advanced as they considered themselves, told outlandish tales of how the island was unlike anything they had previously encountered. The Roman-era writer Plutarch

writes, "The island was of incredible magnitude, and furnished much matter of dispute to multitudes of writers, some of whom averred that its name and story had been fabricated, since it never had existed and did not then exist."¹⁴³ As he wrote, even some educated people did not believe that the island was real, much less a place that could be conquered by Roman power. The arrival of the Romans also allowed for the first look into the religious beliefs of the Britons prior to the hybridization process facilitated by the Romans in the area.

There is a great deal to be said about the Roman perception of the native British religion in the Southwest and beyond. Tacitus writes of their shared beliefs in the *Agricola* stating, "In both lands you find the same rituals, the same superstitious beliefs; the language does not differ much."¹⁴⁴ This seems to be a simplistic view of the religious traditions of the different groups, especially considering the Gallic and British peoples were divided into tribes. They did, however, seem to share many religious beliefs that crossed tribal lines. such as respecting and honoring the opinions of the Druids. Caesar, in particular, wrote of how Britain was viewed by many of the Gallic tribes as a significant location to send people to become Druids.¹⁴⁵ Roman writers wrote of strange practices regarding human sacrifice and bizarre rituals making it extremely difficult for modern historians to determine legitimacy. There are a few archaeological pieces of evidence regarding this sacrifice, such as the famous Lindow man, that prompt some modern scholars to believe some of the Roman claims. Melanie Giles believes the Lindow man allowed himself to be killed based on the position of his head and body in a way that exposes

¹⁴³ Plutarch, *The Life of Julius Caesar*. Accessed January 13, 2022. https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caesar*.html#23.2.

¹⁴⁴ Tacitus. *Agricola and Germania*, 9.

¹⁴⁵ Lacus Curtius, "Gallic War."

vulnerable parts of his body.¹⁴⁶ Cicero, in particular, wrote of the custom of divination by the use of augury and other magical methods of worship.¹⁴⁷ It is almost impossible to determine the validity of these claims because of Roman biases and a lack of written sources by the native culture. These Druidic practices would have gone on in the Southwestern region of Britain for centuries until the Romans destroyed these priests and altered the religion forevermore.

The Romans viewed the Druids as possibly the greatest threat to their society in all of Northwestern Europe, leading to the Druid's eventual extinction. The Romans brought their divinities to British shores but used a rather quaint approach to appease the natives after destroying the last remnants of the religious leaders of old. Acceptance of the British gods was not an unprecedented response to absorbing the island into the fold. The Roman writer Minucius Felix (a third century writer and Christian apologist) encapsulates the Roman attitude towards all religions in his defense of Christianity titled *Octavius* in 197 CE. He writes, "The Romans, however, worship all gods in the world. Their power and authority have encompassed the whole world, and they have extended their Empire beyond the paths of the sun and the confines of the ocean itself."¹⁴⁸ This was a method employed by the Romans to allow a degree of normalcy for the natives of a land that had been recently conquered by them. As mentioned before, the Romans believed that incorporating all gods into their pantheon would allow the Pax Deorum to be maintained. This concept entailed that the gods would smile on the Romans if they upheld

¹⁴⁶ Melanie Giles. "Iron Age Bog Bodies of North-Western Europe. Representing the Dead." *Archaeological Dialogues*, 16, no. 1 (06, 2009): 75-101. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1380203809002815>. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/iron-age-bog-bodies-north-western-europe/docview/198927256/se-2?accountid=12281>.

¹⁴⁷ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 84.

their values and positive characteristics while devoting their successes to the divine figures.¹⁴⁹ This was no different in Britain as it was in Greece, Egypt, Gaul, or any other of the countless provinces that they incorporated over time. Most of the time, the Romans accomplished this by finding a native deity with similar characteristics and combining the two. This process is known as syncretism and it is essential to understanding Romano-British traditions.

There were religious traditions that Romans introduced that were entirely their own as well. One major Roman practice that ended up in every corner of the empire was the celebration of religious festivals pertaining to specific Roman deities. These events entailed lowly slaves and wealthy patricians coming together to placate the god that they intended to honor. While direct primary sources on Roman festivals did not originate from or directly reference Romano-British practices, it would not be prudent to assume that the festivals would not have been observed as the province was under Roman territory. In Corinium and Aquae Sulis there is sufficient evidence for classical Roman deities which have designated festivals in the Roman calendar. Ceres, Bacchus, and Mercury all feature heavily in the physical artifacts of the Southwestern region of Britain. Ovid writes that the Roman festival to Ceres, in particular, was honored with competitive games which greatly pleased the goddess, who continued to allow necessary crops to grow as a reward. Ovid wrote, “Next come the games of Ceres. There is no need to declare the reason; the bounty and the services of the goddess are manifest,” to imply just how important it was to keep Ceres pleased.¹⁵⁰ The Roman elite would have especially adhered to the Roman festivals to maintain their image as perfect Roman citizens. It is unclear just how much the native

¹⁴⁹ Bennett, *Sacred Languages, Past and Present, Sacred Languages of the World*, 21-47.

¹⁵⁰ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 65-67.

Britons took part in the entirely Roman religious affairs of the new Roman culture. The evidence of a new hybridized and blended religion certainly gives the appearance that both Romans and Britons did not completely give up all of their traditions. The practices of the Romano-Britons are a perfect encapsulation of differences in religious traditions that could still bring opposing ethnic groups into relative peace with each other.

So many native, Roman, and blended deities were present throughout the region, that it provides evidence of how the people worshipped them. The unfortunate reality of the situation in Britain is that not much is written of how specific religious practices occurred in the area under discussion. The Roman historians and poets must serve as the major sources for how the people worshipped their gods. The amount of physical evidence in Corinium, in particular, provides much insight into how religious life persisted for centuries before Roman influence ended.

The first deity that reveals details of religious practices is Fortuna. Multiple depictions of Fortuna have been discovered in the Southwest and leads to the understanding that she was widely worshipped by the denizens of the region. It has been determined by scholars that Corinium was a prosperous center for trade in Britain, so it stands to reason that a deity associated with fortune and prosperity would be important to them.¹⁵¹ The existence and function of the city operated as a form of worship to the goddess in a practical way and was of a somewhat decent level of importance in the wider Roman world according to several histories. Beecham writes that Corinium enjoyed the privilege of serving as the capital of Britain for a time and hosted the praetor, a high-ranking military official, on many occasions.¹⁵² The market city functioned as a working devotion to earn Fortuna's favor because many of the residents were

¹⁵¹ Welsford, *Cirencester: A History and Guide*, 8.

¹⁵² Beecham, *History of Cirencester and the Roman City Corinium*. 8.

merchants and craftsman plying their trades to earn a living. These people lived inside a walled city of about two-hundred and forty acres, second only to Londinium in Britain in sheer size.¹⁵³ The luck or ill fate that Fortuna could provide was enough for Romans to fear displeasing her and led to some of the first Romans to establish the festival of Fors Fortuna to placate and honor her. Ovid, a famous Roman poet from the first century BCE and first century CE, wrote of people in Rome travelling to her temple along the river Tiber while making merry and becoming intoxicated from wine.¹⁵⁴ While there is no direct evidence for a temple or the festival taking place in Corinium, it does not seem feasible for the people not to take part in the celebration. The Roman calendar is well-defined and clearly includes her day of festivities for Romans in all corners of the empire. The fact that several artifacts demonstrate her likeness implies that this practice occurred in the area. Failure of the people to participate in the festivals of any god would certainly bring on their angry wrath, as any Roman or British deity would have found ignorance of their worship to be an egregious affront.

The next major divinity that implies particular religious practices and beliefs is the Genius loci. Corinium has produced a well-preserved example of an altar to the Genius loci or “spirit of the place.” Romans placed these altars all over the empire and all people who traveled or practiced Roman religion would have known what these artifacts were. This particular altar includes a crowned figure in Roman dress holding a double cornucopia implying that the deity would protect and provide for the people who pleased it.¹⁵⁵ There is a space on the top of the

¹⁵³ “Roman Corinium.” Corinium Museum, last accessed February 22, 2018. <https://coriniummuseum.org/schools/resources/roman-corinium/>.

¹⁵⁴ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 68-69.

¹⁵⁵ Corinium Museum, *Stone Altar of the Genius Loci*. Cirencester, UK, (April 27, 2022), <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/b953-2/>

altar intended for the leaving of sacrificial items to obtain the protection and favor of the Genius loci. This practice was absolutely perfect for blending with the native British traditions because they also had strong beliefs about deities inhabiting specific locations.

One major example is the most famous deity of British origins, the water goddess Sulis. The British natives believed that Sulis inhabited the sacred springs and surrounding areas where the Romans would later construct the sanctuary of Aquae Sulis. Miranda Aldhouse-Green writes, “for the worship of Sulis was all about heat,” implying that the heat in the sacred springs was proof to the Romans and Britons that she inhabited them.¹⁵⁶ The ancient British god Nodens is another deity that primarily inhabited one region in particular as indicated by the inscriptions found at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire indicates a fairly localized area of worship by the inhabitants. Nodens was associated with healing and solar energy, much like Sulis Minerva in her sanctuary.¹⁵⁷ The Genius loci is a traditionally Roman divinity that coordinated extraordinarily well with native British practices. Instances like this make it easier to understand how two religions might come to blend and change when coming into contact with each other.

The next god of significance in the Southwest region is Mercury. This deity was perhaps the most widely worshipped in Romano-Celtic cultures all across the empire for centuries. The role of Mercury as a god of travel and roads would be widely worshipped in a large empire with roads linking all of the major cities. Physical artifacts relating to Mercury are extremely plentiful in Corinium and around the rest of the Southwest. While most other Roman deities did not get large dedicated temples in the Southwest, Uley in Gloucestershire provided an actual temple of

¹⁵⁶ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*. 112.

¹⁵⁷ Malcolm Todd. *A Companion to Roman Britain*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 193- 219.

Mercury. The temple contained quarters for the priests and a bath complex, implying that the temple was busy and easily maintained by the population.¹⁵⁸ The method of worshipping at a temple for a specific god was generally intended to get the attention of that deity. Corinium and Aquae Sulis do not have large temples of Mercury; it was clear that he was worshipped in a smaller capacity. Rosmerta was a Celtic deity of prosperity and she was the divine wife of Mercury in Roman Britain.¹⁵⁹ Linking Mercury with a divine partner, which he did not have in traditional Roman religion, blended him into the native British traditions. Giving divine figures of different origins and equal and opposite was another way that syncretism and hybridization occurred. The worship may have been altered from that of the Italian Roman way, but it clearly was of great importance in the Southwest of Britain.

The gods and goddesses were not the only physical manifestation of religion in Roman Britain, and artifacts directly relating to religious practice are some of the most prominent findings regarding Roman pagan history. Curse tablets, gravestones, and grave goods are only some of the myriad components of Romano-British practices made physical. These artifacts are perhaps the most useful objects in determining how people practiced their religions.

The curse tablets of Aquae Sulis are some of the most amazing historical and religious artifacts from the ancient world. These items are emblematic of the classical Mediterranean religion and culture. Pliny the Elder wrote of the fears of the Romans of being cursed by their friends or neighbors. “There is no one who does not fear being spellbound by malevolent

¹⁵⁸ Shirokova, 2019. “The Cult of Mercury in Roman Gaul and Roman Britain.”, 63–74.

¹⁵⁹ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*, 83.

prayers.”¹⁶⁰ The belief that someone could curse or hex someone by way of a divine curse was very real for the people of the classical Greek and Roman worlds. People believed that they had the ability to call on the divine figures to bring ill fortune or revenge upon their enemies. The curse tablets of Aquae Sulis were all directed to Sulis Minerva and they asked many great and terrible things of her.

The one hundred-thirty curse tablets located at Aquae Sulis date from the second to fourth century CE. The common Latin spoken by the residents of Britain was the language present on most of the curse tablets, allowing for translation and interpretation of most of them.¹⁶¹ These lead and copper tablets were addressed to the goddess of the sacred springs, Sulis Minerva. The syncretized deity was in charge of the sanctuary and heard the prayers and concerns of the people who clearly loved and feared this goddess enough to ask her to do great and terrible things to people who they felt had wronged them. Most of the time, theft or insults prompted people to write curses upon the tablets and throw them into sacred waters so the goddess could see them. The curse tablet inscriptions called for violent actions by the goddess against the person being cursed, such as sickness or attack by animals.

A number of the curse tablet inscriptions have been effectively translated to illustrate their purpose at the sanctuary. One curse tablet read, “I have given to the goddess Sulis the six silver coins which I have lost. It is for the goddess to exact [them] from the names written below: Senicianus and Saturninus and Anniola.”¹⁶² This individual felt he was owed money from many

¹⁶⁰ Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 139.

¹⁶¹ J. N. Adams, “British Latin: The Text, Interpretation and Language of the Bath Curse Tablets,” *Britannia*, no 23. (1992): 1-26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/526102>.

¹⁶² Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*. 129.

individuals and wished for the goddess to compel them to give him the money. This is perhaps the most unusual curse tablet among all of the tablets found at the sanctuary. This punishment is most definitely the mildest of all of the punishments that citizens asked for from the deity. The next major tablet says “Docimedis has lost two gloves and asks that the thief responsible should lose their minds [*sic*] and eyes in the goddess' temple.”¹⁶³ Violence, vengeance, and revenge motivated a great deal of the curse tablets in Aquae Sulis and other locations in the Empire.

The curse tablets demonstrate the religious morality of the Romano-Britons in the Southwest region, which were not as clearly defined and rigid moral systems with later religions. The calls for violence and revenge certainly do not mesh with the well-defined moral systems of the Abrahamic religions of later societies. One specific curse tablet perfectly showcases the culturally normal, but rather bizarre morals of the Romano-Britons in the antiquated past. "The person who has lifted my bronze vessel is utterly accursed. I give him to the temple of Sulis, whether woman or man, whether slave or free, whether boy or girl, and let him who has done this spill his own blood into the vessel itself."¹⁶⁴ The presence of such violence and harm in a sanctuary with healing waters is not a coincidence. It would be up to the goddess to determine whether the person would be of good or ill health, and committing crimes against people in her sanctuary was enough for her to deny good health, according to her worshippers.

It is clear from the information provided from the curse tablets that the Romano-Britons of the Southwest feared the abilities of their divinities such as Sulis Minerva. They believed that these beings were capable of doing them great harm if they offended them or someone beloved of them. The frightening elements also confirm an opposite belief that definitely occurred in the

¹⁶³ Aldhouse Green, *Sacred Britannia*, 136.

¹⁶⁴ Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia*. 136.

belief system of the Romano-Britons. Sulis Minerva was also capable of giving great help to those who earned her favor and goodwill. The waters served as a healing sanctuary for both Romans and Britons, hence the association of a goddess of healing and craftsmanship.¹⁶⁵ This practice of throwing curse tablets into the sacred waters is also a perfect example of the unique blending of the Roman and British religions. Many of the traits of the unaltered British Sulis led to the Romans bringing the tradition of inscribing curse tablets to the area. Both groups believed that divinities inhabited the sacred waters, healing unwell individuals and bringing punishment against wrongdoers.

One practice of the Southwestern Romano-Britons that indirectly involves religion is the placing of gravestones atop the burial sites of the dead. Britain was not the only place where gravestones have been located, but they are often considered a Roman practice because none have been found that predate their arrival. This practice has persisted into the modern age and most cultures have some form of a death marker to identify the buried individual. Corinium, in particular, has produced a sizable number of grave markers with detailed inscriptions that survived quite well. While most aspects of the tombstones do not have to do with the religion, small details on these showcase some information regarding spirituality and religious imagery. The dead may not be able to speak, but scholars have been able to determine some of what they desired their peers to see when they visited their site of burial.

The Bodicacia tombstone refers to a woman buried in Corinium who lived to the age of twenty-seven. The inscription on her stone does not directly reveal much about the religion, but the image on the top tells a different story. The top segment of the stone contains a carving of an

¹⁶⁵ "Roman Baths." *Architectural Excellence: 500 Iconic Buildings*, (East Sussex: Greene Media, 2008): 43.

old bearded male figure looking over the rest of the artifact. It is unclear who this figure is due to most of the features being worn away by time, but it is assumed that it is divine due to its position on the stone.¹⁶⁶ This is certainly sufficient evidence to assume that this divine figure would have some hand in the guardianship of the departed. Romans in particular believed in several divinities that were psychopomps, or gods in charge of guiding the dead to their intended locations.¹⁶⁷

The next tombstone is quite plain in terms of craftsmanship, but the inscription indicates how the Romano-Britons of the region would have viewed themselves in death. The tombstone of Nemomnius contains a well-preserved inscription that reads, "To the spirits of the departed. Nemomnius Verecundus lived seventy-five years. His heir put this up."¹⁶⁸ The transference of the human being from a physical body to a spirit is consistent with classical Greek and Roman religious traditions. While very little is known about the nature of ancient Celtic British religion, it is widely believed that they believed in an afterlife of some sort.¹⁶⁹ Most of the information regarding the Celtic otherworld comes from much later Irish and Welsh records, therefore it would not be correct to state that the Southwest Roman-Britons agreed with these ideas. It does appear that the inhabitants of the area believed that setting up tombstones for the deceased would assist them wherever they went after death.

¹⁶⁶ Corinium Museum, *Bodicacia Tombstone*. Cirencester, UK, (April 28, 2022), <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/2016-1-1-2/>

¹⁶⁷ David Kowalewski, *Death Walkers*, (Bloomington, iUniverse, 2015), 81.

¹⁶⁸ Corinium Museum, *Tombstone of Nemomnius*. Cirencester, UK, (April 28, 2022), <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/1971-11-2/>

¹⁶⁹ John T. Koch and Anne Holley, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*. (Santa Barbara, CA etc.: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 711.

The last physical artifacts relating back to religion also relate to the death practices of the inhabitants. Grave goods of many kinds have been found in the particular region of discussion. Perhaps the most important one is the second-century copper-gilded cockerel found in 2011 in Corinium. Leaving grave goods with the deceased evokes images of dramatic tombs of Egyptian pharaohs or Chinese imperial mausoleums, but other cultures left grave goods in a subtler manner. The people of the Southwest region did place grave goods in burial sites to a certain degree. The cockerel figurine was placed in the grave of an infant and was seen as a rare find amongst the archaeologists.¹⁷⁰ This particular figure fits well with the location in which it was found due to the relationship between the cockerel and Mercury. The bird was closely associated with Mercury and his role as a psychopomp would have been critical for the lost spirit of a young child. This was a way that the people could comfort themselves by guiding Mercury to the spirit of the recently deceased child so they would not become lost in the living world.

In closing, the evidence regarding the beliefs and practices of the Romano-British religion indicate a unique case of hybridization that does not receive the scholarly attention it deserves. The incredible archaeological finds alone showcase actions that are reminiscent of both classical Roman and pre-Roman British traditional religious elements. The religious practices of these inhabitants of the Southwest region of Britannia give evidence that they were able to reach a level of coexistence that was unusual for most of Roman Britain. The first chapter introduces the original conflicts between the Roman foreigners and the Dobunni people of the region, and also the minimal military conflict after the initial fighting. The religion is a reflection of this general peace between the two major population groups in the region, as demonstrated by the

¹⁷⁰ Corinium Museum, *2nd Century Roman Cockerel*. Cirencester, UK, (April 28, 2022), <https://coriniummuseum.org/object/2014-42-93-2/>

physical and written evidence regarding all of the gods found in Corinium and Aquae Sulis. Sulis Minerva, Mercury, and the Three Matres speak to the Rome's religious attitude of preserving traditions of the Celtic Britons despite an initial revulsion. The result of this blending is a well-preserved example of how religion and culture actively grew and changed over the centuries in the Roman world.

Conclusion

The concept of religion in the Roman world is a useful way of viewing their interaction with their subjects. People from Egypt to Britain were impacted by new forms of government, diets, and especially new deities. Rome was undoubtedly a powerful force for change in the ancient world, but the so-called "barbarians" should not be counted out for their contributions to history and culture. The concept of Pax Deorum produced religions stemming from multiple origins, resulting in never-before-seen aggregations of deities. The religion of the Southwest region of Roman Britain is one of the most thoroughly mixed and preserved religions from the first few centuries of imperial rule. This religion was able to flourish despite the many conflicts between Romans and natives throughout the centuries. This conclusion is derived from some of the best religiously centered artifacts found in the city of Corinium and the sanctuary of Aquae Sulis. Curse tablets, Genius Loci altars, and figurines all pointed to a religion composed of Roman and Celtic elements, although this was not considered especially remarkable by Roman historians.

This religion and the surrounding subjects are ideal for expanding the academic conversation to more specialized areas in Roman history. There is room for additional research in the fields of Roman religion and culture, especially when considering people on the fringes of Roman territory. British, Germanic, and Palmyrene religions could use the same regional treatment in an attempt to look at Roman interaction on a smaller scale. This would bring the possibility of looking at people in the ancient world with a more individualized lens instead of

the more often used large-scale one. People groups of ethnic minorities and social groups of non-Roman origins would be the center of the narrative.

The field of ancient religions and the foreign traits that form them is another field that should be bolstered. Roman religion is fairly direct with many of its foreign deities, but Greek and Egyptian pantheons could use the same treatment. Academic discussions on syncretism and foreign deity adoption would serve to strengthen the argument that ancient communities were not isolated. Misconceptions and myths of entirely self-created cultures and societies would dispel the idea that women, ethnic minorities, and foreign populations did not have a sizable impact on dominant societies. Academic works of this variety would serve to modernize and diversify the study of Roman history.

The material culture surrounding ancient religions would also benefit from more academic sources. This field is deservedly beginning to pick up steam in the academic community, and ancient religions could serve as the subject of new academic works. Archaeology on the religion of the Roman Empire is solidly established for scholars to be able to dissect it in terms of material culture. Categories such as curse tablets, religious clothing, and altars could all become individual projects in this field. Works in material culture could help readers to understand the everyday occurrences in the lives of Romans and non-Romans. The objects held in the hands of the people who practiced the religion could open up so much dialogue in the academic community.

This thesis also presents the possibility of exploring how religions have crossed and combined throughout the centuries. It could be useful to compare the religion of the Southwest Roman-Britons and the more modern examples of intertwining religions such as Christianity in Latin America or Islam in Southeast Asia. Making the hybridization elements relevant to more

modern religions and concepts would enable scholars to revamp ancient history. Comparative works serve to string together patterns across the centuries, and doing so would clarify the history of world religions.

In short, the implications of the religion of the Romano-Britons of the Southwest region stretch far beyond the confines of the island of Britain. The preserved pieces of the religion show a vibrant and distinct belief system separate from even the surrounding areas of the same province. The three Matres, Mercury, and Sulis Minerva all showcase their nuances and distinctions from other versions of themselves found in other places. This set of traditions would never have evolved if not for the colorful history of the Romans and Britons. The fierce conflicts and ignorance of each other's cultures made this religion all the more special. The people of the Southwest region of Britannia produced a religion that shows the complexities and details of living life in the ancient world.

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Appendix



Office of Research Integrity

November 14, 2022

Jed Basler
338 Elaine Court
Huntington, WV 25703

Dear Jed:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract entitled "*Gods of the Two Peoples: How the Sacred Beliefs in Southwest Roman Britannia Demonstrate a Uniquely Blended Religion and Culture.*" After assessing the abstract, it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making t/his determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction, it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract, you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director

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