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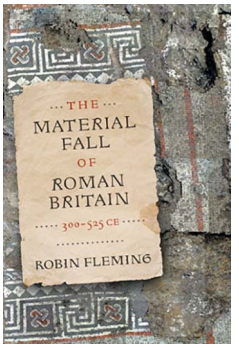
Robin Fleming. 2021. *The material fall of Roman Britain 300–525 CE*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; 978-0-8122-5244-6 hardback £36.



This book is an account of the fifth century AD in Britain, written on the basis of archaeological evidence. It is a readable and thought-provoking volume, which draws not only on a wide range of published works, but also on the wealth of information recorded in 'grey literature' fieldwork reports available on the archaeology data service (ADS). The author is to be congratulated for having spent more time than most engaging with this valuable archive and, it is to be hoped, drawing its existence to the attention of a wider audience. Fleming writes as a historian partly for historians, who are often unaware of how much archaeological evidence exists, but also in an attempt to bridge the other scholarly gap she rightly identifies, between Romanists and early medievalists. She also focuses on the lives of ordinary people instead of the warlords and saints of the written sources, which still colour popular perception of this period.

Like many historians, Fleming sets out to write a narrative, because "the past is more legible through narratives" (p. 5). This qualitative rather than quantitative approach can be problematic if there is no way of knowing how representative the examples presented are. In this instance, however, there are recently compiled resources for many of the topics discussed. In particular, the Rural Settlement of Roman Britain project (Smith *et al.* 2016, 2018) provides a wealth of statistics, graphs and maps. This means, for example, that detailed information in Chapter 2 about the introduction and disappearances of animal and plant species is the starting point for discussion about the impact that horticulture, or its loss, would have had on everyday human lives. The chapter on building materials is a fascinating account of the decline in building expertise, demonstrated by the repair and repurposing of masonry structures in late fourth to early fifth century contexts. The skills to build and maintain such buildings disappeared as the incentive to do so, and the means to pay or command labour, diminished. The backfilling of wells with building materials and animal carcasses is something that has been less well recorded than the pottery that was also deposited. This is a phenomenon known from other periods, and there is debate as to whether it represents practical site clearance or ritual deposition; the latter explanation is favoured here.

Chapters on pottery and metallurgy are again discussions based on the detailed literature, reviewing the evidence for decline in both industries. There are debatable points, for example the suggested reuse of Roman pot bases as moulds for wax models used in saucer brooch-production is unconvincing, especially at a site with no evidence for non-ferrous metalworking. Manufacture of plain cooking pots might have been an independent local response to the disappearance of mass-produced wheel-thrown pots: but that cannot explain the pots used in

burial, which have forms and elaborate decoration directly paralleled in burial sites in North Germany.

Chapter 7 takes a different direction. Instead of a broad review of burial in Roman and early medieval Britain, it focuses on infant burial, and reads like a separate article on that topic. The use of terms such as 'dead babies' and 'little corpses' incline the reader to a modern emotional response that may be anachronistic. Details of selected burial sites show that more infants were given recognisable burial in the Roman period than later—often, however, not in formal cemeteries, but associated with buildings; whereas fewer infants but more children were included in early medieval cemeteries. There is no reference to cremation evidence. At Spong Hill, it was not always possible to distinguish precise ages of cremated burials, but it was clear that a significant number of both infants and juveniles were included (McKinley 1994: 68).

The following chapter (8) considers the identities of those buried in early medieval inhumation cemeteries. Isotopic and genetic research have, in some cases, produced different results to those expected from the associated grave goods. This is, as Fleming says, salutary. The easy reading of ethnic identity from brooches must indeed be revised. Results from larger studies may show more clearly what proportion of those buried with dress and weapons usually described as Anglo-Saxon were descended from locals or incomers. Regionality is likely to be key here—something that Fleming does not stress. At Chedworth near Cheltenham, a new mosaic floor seems to have been laid in the early fifth century, at the same time as incomers were burying their cremated dead in East Anglia. Those cremations are the most striking absence from this chapter. As well as the pots, the associated brooches, bone combs and other items all have parallels from different regions in mainland Europe, but together with local elements, make new material culture identities in Britain (Hills & Lucy 2013). This is one reason for querying the account in the brief final chapter of the collapse of connections between Britain and the Continent, which should also be reconsidered in light of discoveries at Rendlesham, where contact seems to have flourished from the fifth to eighth centuries (Scull *et al.* 2016). The concept of "a fusion corridor" (p. 181) around the North Sea has merit for some later centuries, but is less convincing for the fifth century, where change in burial rites and material culture in eastern regions is very marked and clearly driven, in part at least, by the arrival of continental artefacts, buildings and burials. In those regions, but not necessarily elsewhere, significant numbers of incoming people still seem the most plausible explanation for this material, though how many, and what kind of interaction they had with existing populations, are remaining questions.

The volume reviews the wealth of archaeological evidence that now exists for the material fall of Roman Britain. It is weakest when discussing what came next, and at times seems driven by an ideological need to deny migration—while nonetheless explaining that scientific data suggest mobility in both the Roman and early medieval periods. The endnotes would have been easier to navigate if supported by a bibliography, and the photographs are reproduced poorly, with some of the detail not easily legible. Overall, however, this is an interesting

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and stimulating book that provides an account of the unravelling of Roman Britain, clearly linked to the lives of those who experienced it.

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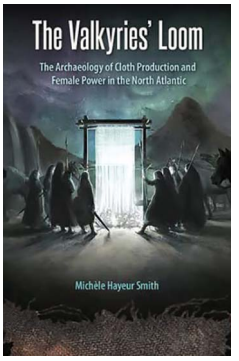
Michèle Hayeur Smith. 2020. *The Valkyries' loom: the archaeology of cloth production and female power in the North Atlantic*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-6662-2 hardback $90.



Thousands of textile fragments exist in the archaeological record of the North Atlantic—from Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, northern Canada and northern Scotland—dating from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries AD. These crumpled, dirty brown lumps of homespun cloth found in middens, or reused and recycled in other garments, form the data set for Michèle Hayeur Smith's study of cloth production. This book does touch upon imported textiles, but rather, the socio-economic and gendered significance of creating homespun cloth on a warp-weighted, upright loom is its primary focus. Several key insights are spun from this relatively short volume.

One of the author's objectives was to understand society and economy from the perspective of women, in order to establish a gendered archaeology for the North Atlantic region. Hayeur Smith argues that nuanced studies of gendered roles have lagged in the region, with the focus remaining on caregiving aspects for women, with little emphasis on alternate perspectives of women's social agency and power. She suggests that notions of power presented in textual and