1 Introduction

This is a book about Britain during what might be described as the 'long fifth century'. During this time, which stretches a hundred years either side of the period 400–500, the inhabitants of the British Isles were confronted with a series of challenges – the end of Roman imperialism, barbarian immigration, conflict, economic transformations and social realignments – that are often seen as shaping the future course of insular and world history. The most dramatic example of this is the contemporary use of English as the *lingua franca* of global communication (e.g. Coates 2007), which can be traced to West Germanic dialects supplanting insular Celtic and Latin in lowland Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries. Similarly, the contemporary political geography of Britain – England, Wales and Scotland – is often thought of as originating in the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (Geary 2002). To historians and archaeologists these simplistic visions of the past are invented traditions but they have an enduring popularity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Howe 1989). For many the early medieval period remains the origin of our modern nation states (e.g. Starkey 2010).

Britain's experience of the fifth century was not unique and the fall of the Western Roman Empire allowed similar transformations to play out across Europe. The longevity of Classical civilisation, the impact of Germanic culture and scale of settlement (e.g. Mathisen 1993; Goffart 2006; Halsall 2007; Heather 2009) are all themes shared by scholars of the late antique west. Given this perspective, a book about the end of Roman Britain might be considered an introspective conceit, which emphasises the situation in what was one of Rome's most peripheral possessions at the expense of other more central regions (Esmonde-Cleary 2013). However, many recent works on the late Roman and early medieval west have only discussed Britain in passing.

This treatment of Britain in wider reviews of the late antique west is largely a consequence of their text-based approach. As a peripheral region Britain rarely featured in surviving documentary and historical sources and the sources that do survive are both problematic and mutable. It is thus impossible to write an account of fourth-, fifth- and sixth-century British history that would compare with the detailed discussions of the same period

available for Gaul or Italy (Mathisen 1993; Heather 2005). The response has been either to discuss Britain in a pseudo-historical fashion, or to largely discount the written sources and treat the period from an archaeological perspective as essentially prehistoric.

The pseudo-historical discussion of Britain in the fifth century has largely collapsed under a deluge of informed theoretical criticism, which has come from both historians and archaeologists. The former have demolished narratives based on sources written many hundreds of years after the events they purport to describe and the latter have moved away from historical interpretations of material culture and archaeological sequences. Nevertheless, in a period in which problematic written sources tantalise, the temptation to produce pseudo-historical interpretations of the period remains.

This volume is an archaeological study of the past and its material culture, monuments and landscapes. However, the period is not treated as prehistoric. The existence of both insular and continental written sources cannot and should not be ignored or discarded. Nor should the physical remains of the past be treated as a poor proxy through which a 'history' can be written. The historical sources are used here to illuminate processes of change that can be read in the material culture of the period. The result is a work that largely avoids the pitfalls of pseudo-history but integrates Britain's unique experience of the fall of the Western Empire within a wider cultural context.

The other benefit of approaching Roman Britain's 'end' from an archaeological standpoint is that there is an ever increasing body of data available for study. Developer-funded archaeology has led to an exponential growth in high-quality data since the early 1990s and the creation of the Portable Antiquities Scheme has revolutionised our understanding of material culture during the Roman and early medieval periods. These empirical transformations have been coupled with new methodological approaches which are challenging long-held assumptions about both periods. One academic challenge is to synthesise this new material in a meaningful way and this volume is a modest contribution to achieving such a task.

The fall of Rome and the end of Roman Britain

It is a truism that those studying the past are largely condemned to write their contemporary concerns into their historical and archaeological analyses and interpretations. In the eighteenth century Gibbon's (1993) view of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was intimately connected with the role of religion in secular society, which was an issue that exercised

both him and his contemporaries (Pocock 1999). In the following century Britain's dialogue with the fall of the Roman Empire reflected its own fluctuating relationship with imperial power. Early in the nineteenth century English scholars were at pains to stress their Germanic roots and supposedly ancient democratic institutions (MacDougall 1982, 116) in contrast to the imperialist and tyrannical ambitions of the French (Hingley 2000, 19–20). However, by the end of the century Rome offered an obvious parallel for Britain's own supposed 'imperial destiny' (Hingley 2000, 22–25).

The study of the end of the Roman Empire during the twentieth century was clearly influenced by the experiences of two long and bitter global conflicts. The First and Second World Wars allowed Germanic barbarians to be recast as the enemies of civilisation (e.g. Haverfield and MacDonald 1924, 264) but other less clear-cut visions of the past were also promoted (Pirenne 1939; Delogu 1998). In the aftermath of conflict, a purely 'German' past founded on genocidal Anglo-Saxon invaders sweeping the hapless Britons into the mountains of Wales and Cumbria (Camden 1586, 43–44; Freeman 1867; Leeds 1913, 20; Stubbs 1926; Lennard 1933; Hodgkin 1935) became increasingly uncomfortable (Babcock 1916; Collingwood and Myres 1936, 426–427; Stenton 1971, 314–315; Higham 2007, 2). For European scholars the decades following the Second World War were also a time for re-evaluating models of the early Middle Ages. The concept of racially pure Germanic tribes invading and conquering parts of the Western Empire was discarded in a deconstruction of suspect historical methodologies associated with Nazism (Wenskus 1961). Thus the end of the Western Roman Empire and Roman Britain became a tale of migration and the partial assimilation of indigenous inhabitants.

In Britain the 1960s and 1970s saw the climax of a pseudo-historical school of research that sought to blend a seamless medley of late Roman and early medieval historical sources with a limited body of archaeological evidence (e.g. Evison 1965; Myres 1969). The resulting works, which included the final chapters of Frere's (1967) *Britannia* and Salway's (1981) *Roman Britain* as well as volumes such as Alcock's (1971) *Arthur's Britain* and Myres' (1986) *The English Settlements*, epitomise this essentially culture-historical approach. The narrative framework was provided by supposedly historical accounts and fleshed out with archaeological evidence. At its most extreme – exemplified by Morris' (1973) *The Age of Arthur* – this type of analysis could be used to produce a history of the early medieval period that approached fantasy (Kirby and Williams 1976).

By the end of the 1970s this paradigm was beginning to crumble in the face of a twin onslaught. Withering criticism of the written sources was

spearheaded by historians such as Dumville (1977) and Sims-Williams (1983). They swiftly demolished the narrative framework by pointing out that many of the early medieval texts used in its construction were the product of later times. Ninth-century annals and twelfth-century saints' lives could no longer be trusted as witnesses to fifth- and sixth-century events. The second attack on the orthodoxy was driven by changes happening within archaeology. The adoption of the so-called 'New Archaeology' or processualism (Clarke 1978), which borrowed methodologies and approaches from allied disciplines such as geography and anthropology, opened up new avenues of research and prompted questions about the nature of society and its organisation, rather than just the geographical and chronological spread of material culture (e.g. Scull 1993; Arnold 1997, 14–15). At the same time, major projects to redevelop urban centres and the construction of infrastructure like motorways turned field archaeology from a well-meaning but often haphazard exercise, led by academics, museum curators and interested amateurs, into a profession funded first by the state and then later by the developer. The resulting upsurge in data changed our understanding of the landscape of Roman and early medieval Britain. The densities of sites, and thus ancient populations, increased many times (e.g. Millett 1990, Table 8.1); material culture was being assessed in a more rigorous fashion (e.g. Young 1977; Dickinson 1982) and new statistical and scientific approaches were beginning to unlock the complexity of the period.

The main interpretative issue to emerge from this debate concerned the mechanism or mechanisms that brought about the 'end' of Roman Britain. The old culture-historical model had promulgated to a greater or lesser degree the notion of invading Germanic barbarians as a cause of extra-systemic change. Yet the removal of many of the historical sources and the new archaeological data seemed to illustrate an alternative story. A Gildasian cataclysm of Anglo-Saxon raiding could no longer be held responsible for the destruction of late fourth-century towns (e.g. Leeds 1913, 20) when the archaeological evidence demonstrated that they crumbled into ruin. Equally, a more critical approach to claims of destruction at archaeological sites meant that villas that had previously been interpreted as burnt by Saxons, or forts sacked by Picts, were being reinterpreted as accidental fires or the residues of industrial processes. The barbarian 'Other' as a *deus ex machina* ushering in the new Germanic early Middle Ages was definitely out of favour and this perspective was also fashionable in broader analyses of the Western Empire (Goffart 1980).

The dominant paradigm suggested that Roman Britain underwent a socio-economic 'collapse' in the early fifth century. This left a power vacuum into which the 'Anglo-Saxons' could step during the middle of the fifth century (Esmonde-Cleary 1989). However, those Anglo-Saxons were no longer seen as tidal waves of invaders or migrants crashing against Britain's eastern shores (Moreland 2000). Developments in approaches to material culture and identity led to a questioning of the easy equation between Germanic style objects and architecture and Germanic origins (Lucy 2000, 155–186; 2002). It was now argued that a small Germanic elite offered an ideology and identity which the rudderless inhabitants of Britain, left bereft by the collapse of the Roman way of life, seized upon (Higham 1992; Hills 2003; Halsall 2007, 361).

There were, of course, individuals who did not subscribe to this hypothesis. Those working on the west of Britain pointed out that they were free of Anglo-Saxon material culture for much of the early medieval period. Clearly the societies in those regions followed a different path. The excavation of sites like Cadbury Castle (Alcock 1995) or Cadbury Congresbury, both in Somerset (Rahtz et al. 1993), revealed a society trading with the Mediterranean that could be interpreted either as traces of a 'Celtic' warrior elite, or as the remnants of late Roman power structures (Alcock 1995, 151). The discovery of an ephemeral, but large timber building of supposedly Classical plan at Wroxeter (Shropshire) added fuel to the notion of post-Roman communities perpetuating some elements of a Roman way of life (K. Dark 1994, 2000; Barker et al. 1997; White 2007). In the east some of those concerned with the Anglo-Saxons argued that the scale of the change seen in the fifth century and the impact on language and placenames could only have come about due to a significant movement of people from northern Germany (Welch 1993).

By the turn of the millennium the end of Roman Britain had become polarised between those who continued to argue for a short and sharp 'end' (Faulkner 2000, 2004) and those suggesting that *Romanitas* lingered on in some form in the west (K. Dark 1994, 2000). This discussion is sometimes referred to as the 'continuity–discontinuity debate' and it seemed particularly intractable because the two apparently diametrically opposed positions were argued from the same body of evidence. An attempt to reconcile these positions and the study of the east of Britain through the adoption of 'late antiquity' as an over-arching framework failed, because the term soon came to be both used and abused as a synonym for the 'continuity' approach (contrast Esmonde-Cleary 2001 with the use of 'late antiquity' by

Bowles 2007). The debate over the 'Anglo-Saxons' was also fractious as new scientific techniques, such as the analysis of mitochondrial DNA and isotopic data derived from human skeletal remains, were deployed in increasingly technical and specialist studies (e.g. Lucy 2002; Thomas, Stumpf and Härke 2006; Pattison 2008; Hills 2009).

These discussions did not exist in an insular vacuum but were part of a wider debate about how the Roman Empire ended in Western Europe. The starting points for this were Jones' (1964) magisterial *Later Roman Empire* and Brown's (1971) short survey *The World of Late Antiquity*, both of which argued that the post-Constantinian period was not just a time of decline, but worthy of study in its own right. This emphasis on late antiquity enabled scholars to approach the 'end' of Rome as a positive experience rather than the last gasp of Classical civilisation (Bowersock 1996). Ultimately, this new paradigm led to the fourth and fifth centuries being cast as a period of *transition* or *transformation*, in which the legacy of Rome was fused with new Germanic ideas and ideologies (Van Dam 1985; Mathisen 1993). This approach culminated in a European Science Foundation Project that ran between 1993 and 1998, titled: The Transformation of the Roman World, which brought historians, archaeologists, linguists, art-historians, numismatists and others together to examine the process of change that led to the origins of the modern European nation states.

Since 2000 this comfortable view of the fall of Rome in which provincials and their new Germanic overlords came to mutually beneficial accommodations has begun to be questioned. Ward-Perkins (2005) has forcefully restated that the fifth century in Europe was nasty and brutish, with epidemic violence and a catastrophic decline in living standards. Heather (2005, 2009), reacting against those that have sought to minimise the scale of barbarian migration, has presented a new history of the late Roman period dominated by warfare and large-scale migration. No single meta-narrative suffices for Wickham's (2005) view of the late Roman and early medieval world, in which a multiplicity of socio-economic and political processes occurred across Europe and the Mediterranean. The impact of these works (and others) on the historiography of the end of Roman Britain is beginning to be felt. Warfare and migration are re-emerging as causal agents and the pendulum of academic debate is beginning to swing again.

This shift in the parameters of academic debate about the 'end' of the Roman Empire and Britain reflects, as did earlier historiography, the time in which it was written. That violence, migration and collapses should be back in academic fashion is far from surprising. In a decade that has seen real-time televised conflict on an unprecedented scale, the rise of mass

migration in a globalised world, increasing concern about the weakening of western political and economic hegemony (Ferguson 2011) and fear of environmental change (Diamond 2005), it is no surprise to find Rome being used as an example of the consequences of these factors. Ward-Perkins (2009) cautions in the *Financial Times* that at least the 'Credit Crunch' was not a new Dark Age; the spectre of mass migration on a fifth-century scale can be used by an admiral to justify defence spending (Almond 2006); the fall of Rome can be associated with climate change recorded in the dendrochronological record (Büntgen et al. 2011); and the end of Roman Britain might have been due to religious conflict (Dark 1994). Here is Rome's end as a mirror for princes, reflecting contemporary events on the distant past (e.g. Murphy 2007).

This volume is also a product of its time. Written during the early twenty-first century, it has been influenced by the historiographical tradition outlined above. Some of these influences are overt and deliberate and this is especially true of the first half of this work where the importance of violence and warfare and economic collapse as explanatory mechanisms is discussed. The second half of this volume is concerned primarily with worldviews, ideologies and identities. Contemporary concerns are discernible here as well and the shadow of globalisation, migration and integration can be easily detected. There are undoubtedly other contemporary themes that the reader may identify. Thus this is a statement of one view of the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-century past at a particular point in time. Other perspectives will emphasise alternative interpretations and this multivocality is to be welcomed. There is no explanation for the fall of Rome or the end of Roman Britain – just competing alternatives that in some configuration may, or may not, reflect the complexities and challenges that accompanied the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages.

Chronology and datasets

The period under study runs from *c.*300 to *c.*600 and this block of time can be defined in a number of ways. Historically the start date is approximately congruent with the accession of Diocletian in 286 and the foundation of the so-called Dominate (Corcoran 2000). The fall of the Western Empire occurred in the late fifth century (e.g. Cameron 1993; McGill 2010) and the terminal date for Roman Britain is usually either marked by the usurpation of Constantine III (*c.*407) or placed *c.*410 when the so-called Honorian Rescript is thought to have been written (Esmonde-Cleary 1989, 137–138).

The beginning of the 'Anglo-Saxon' period is usually dated to *c.*450 following Bede's calculation of the *adventus Saxonum*. The end date coincides with the establishment of St Augustine's mission to Kent in 597. Thus the period spans the transition between the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages: a time of profound political, social and economic change in the British Isles.

Archaeologically the late Roman period in Britain can be defined as starting *c.*250/270 and ending *c.*400. This is not significantly different to the historical periodisation and there is, of course, an important interrelationship between the historical and archaeological chronologies. However, these dates also mark significant shifts within Romano-British material culture. The ubiquitous and chronologically sensitive red-slipped pottery known as *terra sigillata* or samian is typical of the early Roman period but large-scale importation of this ware ceased in the middle of the third century (King 1981; Webster 1996). This occurred at the same time as the well-known monetary problems that followed the Severan dynasty (e.g. Casey 1994, 9–12). Some decades later new Romano-British pottery producers began to manufacture red-slipped samian imitations and other vessel forms (Fulford 1975; Young 1977). It is the products of these kilns and the new and relatively abundant copper-alloy coinage of the late third and fourth century that become the main archaeological indicators of the late Roman period. However, new coinage ceased to be imported into Britain (and large parts of northern Gaul) on any scale shortly after 402 and it is usually assumed that the 'end' of Roman Britain marks the end of the production of Roman period objects (Fulford 1979).

The appearance of 'Germanic style' objects in eastern Britain during the fifth century marks an important change in the use and role of material culture (Figure 1.1). Traditionally, this material was dated to no earlier than the middle of the fifth century. However, some forms of metalwork and assemblages of objects are likely on the basis of continental parallels to pre-date 450. Some cremation cemeteries also appear to be of primarily fifth-century date. From *c.*470 objects decorated in a new style, known as Salin's Style I, began to appear and inhumation became the dominant burial rite. By the seventh century new artistic styles (Salin's Style II), the process of conversion and other socio-economic transformations indicate the beginnings of the Middle Saxon period.

In the west of Britain there is relatively little material culture. Some forms of metalwork, especially penannular brooches, can be dated to the fifth and sixth centuries and there is also a small but important group of sites that yield imported pottery from the Mediterranean. These vessels, mainly amphorae

Fig. 1.1 A silver-gilt brooch in the fifth-century Nydam style from Gillingham, Kent. The appearance of fifth-century metalwork with parallels in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia marks the beginnings of the Anglo-Saxon period (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd).

but also African and Phocaean Red Slipped Wares, have an apparently restricted date range of 475 to 550 and distribution in the south-western peninsula and around the Irish Sea (E. Campbell 2007). The other significant chronological indicators are absolute methods such as radiocarbon dating. Radiocarbon dating is usually undertaken on human remains and this has led to the increasing identification of fifth- and sixth-century cemeteries in western Britain (Cullen et al. 2006).

Clearly, the datasets for the late Roman and early medieval periods in Britain are very different. The archaeological definition of periods on the basis of material culture is also problematic. It is, for instance, extremely difficult to determine when a particular type of pottery was broken and discarded. One type of late Roman vessel, such as the Oxfordshire red-slipped bowl imitating the samian form Dr38 (Young 1977, C51), serves to illustrate

the point. These bowls were common across much of southern Britain and have a date range of *c.*240–400+. The vessel may have been produced at any point within that range: in the middle of the third century; the late third century; the early, middle or late fourth century; or even the early fifth century. This is a far from trivial point because the chronology is 'smearing' the experiences of individuals who lived during the late Roman period. The date range of the particular vessel considered above encompasses eight twenty-year generations. To labour this point, it is inconceivable that the concerns of someone born in 240 were the same as those of an individual born in 400. Issues such as these mean that the association of archaeological 'events' with 'historical' events is very difficult to achieve.

These packages of material culture, as well as architectural traditions and burial rites, underline another important point: the archaeological traces for each period are very different and inspire different modes and methods of analysis (Esmonde-Cleary 1993). The study of late Roman Britain is dominated by the analysis of architectural forms (Perring 2002). Urban centres were surrounded by walls and contained townhouses, monumental public buildings, bathhouses, temples and a multitude of other buildings often constructed from stone. The countryside was densely studded with farmsteads and nucleated settlements of varying forms and also contained richly decorated and embellished elite residences and religious complexes (Taylor 2007). Associated artefact and ecofact assemblages are generally those produced by domestic or 'industrial' activities. This has led to a focus on the study of trade and exchange. In contrast, the study of the early Anglo-Saxon period is dominated by cemetery sites and assemblages of objects deposited in burials (Lucy 2000). There are relatively few excavated settlement sites and they were built from timber and rarely contain extensive finds assemblages (Hamerow 2011).

The fundamental difference in the datasets for the late Roman and early medieval periods means that comparing the two is extremely difficult. Two examples suffice to illustrate this point. First, in the late Roman period a study of elite architecture would discuss groundplans, bounded space and room decoration (Smith 1997); in the early Saxon period it is difficult to advance the discussion far beyond noting that one timber 'hall' is bigger than another (Marshall and Marshall 1991). Secondly, the detailed study of Anglo-Saxon burial rites has revealed the complex use of gravegoods to distinguish gender, status and identity (Stoodley 2000). Any study of late Roman cemeteries with the same aim would founder because relatively few fourth-century burials contain gravegoods (Philpott 1991). Thus it can often appear that late Roman Britain and early Anglo-Saxon England run