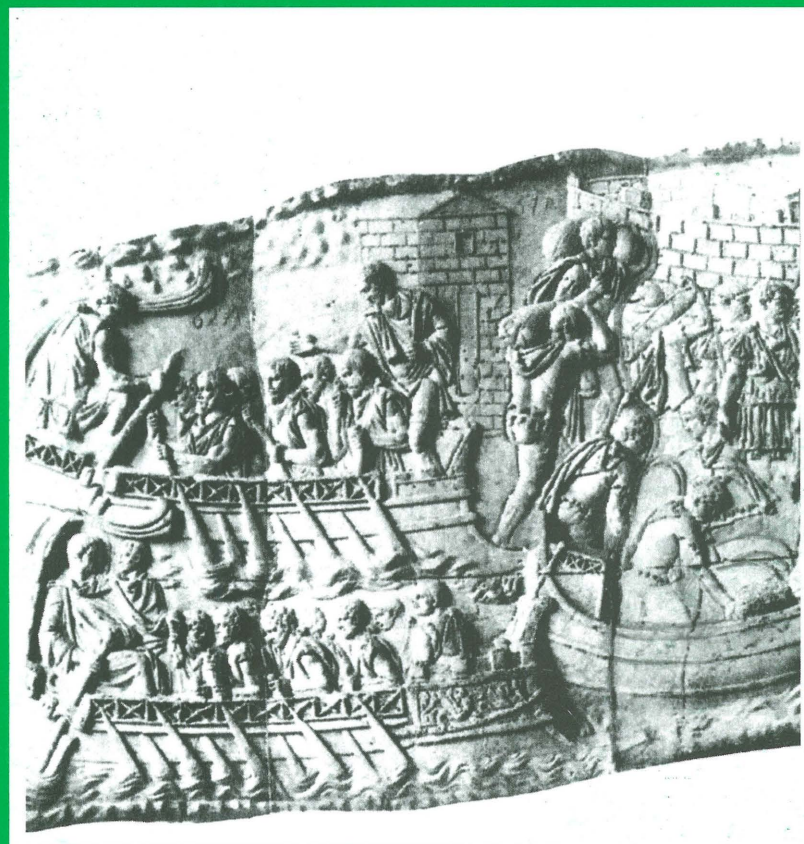


**BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION**

Price £3.50 2005

ISSN 1362 7759

THE HISTORY OF THE BRISTOL REGION IN THE ROMAN PERIOD



THE BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
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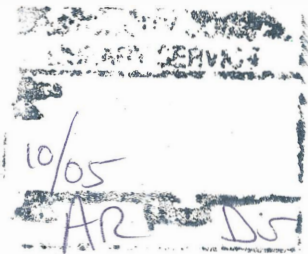
The History of Bristol Region in the Roman Period is the one hundred and fifteenth pamphlet in this series.

David Higgins was Head of the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Bristol until retirement in 1995. His teaching and research embraced the political, cultural and linguistic history of Italy from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, whilst his publications ranged from articles on the history of the Italian language from its Classical origins to the compilation of the historico-critical apparatus for the Oxford University Press (World's Classics) edition of the medieval masterpiece *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. Since 1995 his research has come nearer home to the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods of the Bristol area, with articles on the region's earliest infrastructure (the course of the Roman road through Bristol), the Anglo-Saxon charters of *Bisceopes Stoc*, and their implications for our understanding of the site of *Abona* in the tenth century.

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ISSN 1362 7759



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Cover illustration: A Roman naval and military supply port
(Trajan's Column, Rome)

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THE HISTORY OF THE BRISTOL REGION IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

Introduction: Britons of the Bristol Region

For the purposes of this study, the region of Bristol is defined with reference to certain of the Roman roads of the area and the local shores of the Bristol Channel and the Mouth of the Severn. Its shape is that of an irregular quadrilateral extending from Aust at its N.W. corner approximately 10 miles eastwards to Cromhall, then south some 24 miles along the adjacent Roman road from Gloucester (*Glevum*) to Charterhouse-on-Mendip via Bitton (Margary nos. 541a and 540), and from Charterhouse westwards along the Roman road which runs from Winchester (*Venta Belgarum*) to the small port of Uphill at the mouth of the river Axe (Margary no. 45). The final side of this trapezoidal segment runs northwards again to Aust, along the estuarial shores of N. Somerset and S. Gloucestershire named above.

This area, determined by Roman parameters, is smaller than the now superseded County of Avon but larger than the recently reconstituted City and County of Bristol. It must be recalled, however, that Bristol itself had never been a Roman town, having been founded a half millennium or more after the precipitate departure to Rome of Britain's administrative hierarchy in the early fifth century A.D., following successive heavy military withdrawals over the previous three decades. What Roman presence there had been in the marshy riverine site that was to become early medieval Bristol remains limited enough, merely a pair of rural settlements; possibly a farm or small villa at Castle Green (old St Peter Street site) between the rivers Frome and Avon, and what looks like a more substantial villa site just north of the Frome, outside the line of the first medieval city walls, at what is now Upper Maudlin Street (Jackson 2000).

'Bristol' was merely pastoral land in the Roman period, girt by the sinuous banks of a major tidal river (the Avon) and by the sickle-shaped course of a lesser tributary stream (the Frome), hemmed in from the sea by the impressive limestone crags of the Avon gorge, by surrounding bluffs of extensive limestone downland and by stretches of residual woodland in the Avon and Frome basins themselves (Grinsell 1986). But the wider region of our later city was an already ancient landscape when the infantry, cavalry and naval contingents of the Roman general

Vespasian, before his elevation to the Purple, moved in by both land and sea during his conquest of the south-west of Britain. All around, the Celtic farming communities of the distant Neolithic and Bronze Ages, and the current Iron Age, had piously buried their dead in barrows raised at prominent points, with ancient political intent, in the adjacent Somerset and Gloucestershire areas. Within the City's modern boundaries may still be seen the megalithic chamber-tomb at 59 Druid Hill in Stoke Bishop (Smith 1989), the three barrows on King's Weston Hill (Hebditch and Grinsell 1968) and the tumulus in Southmead. In addition, within the City's boundaries, rose the hill-forts of Blaise, Stokeleigh (with Burwalls) and Clifton, proof of the political and military power of the local kings or sub-kings of the region. Many other monuments stood on high ground in the surrounding countryside of our region or nestled in fields like the stone circles of Stanton Drew, suffused even then, to the superstitious Roman mind, with mysterious meaning and power (Grinsell 1970, 1986), whilst a multiplicity of other hill-forts rose imperiously at Cattybrook (Almondsbury), Bury Hill (Winterbourne), Cadbury Tickenham, Cadbury Congresbury, Worlebury, Banwell and Dolebury.

On the eve of the Roman invasion of 43 A.D., in the immediate pre-Roman Iron Age, the territory of the Bristol region was part of a wider kingdom or polity of the Celtic tribe of the Dobunni, a tribal name metathesised in Cassius Dio's account of the Roman invasion as 'Bodunni'. Given the fluidity of boundaries in this pre-literate period, the exact extent of this kingdom is impossible to define with precision, but from numismatic and other archaeological evidence its western edge against the neighbouring tribes of the Silures and Ordovices may have lain along the Usk, whilst its northern edge in the upper Severn Valley lay against the Cornovii and Corieltauvi. Its southern boundary with the kingdom of the Durotriges may have been determined by the waters of the river Brue and the watershed of the river Wylfe. On the east, against the Atrebates and the Catuvellauni, the kingdom may have been marked by the upper Thames valley, the Cherwell and the Warwickshire Avon (Cunliffe, Darvill, 2003). The major capital of the Dobunni lay at the *oppidum* of Bagendon above Cirencester, but other, perhaps competing sub-tribal capitals may have lain at Camerton, just to the south-east of our region, whilst Abingdon, Salmonsbury and Worcester have also significant claims to political prominence. It was in the Brittonic tongue of the Dobunni that both the Avon (meaning '[large] river') and the Frome ('fair, fine, brisk') were named. Their hill-forts in Clifton and at Stokeleigh (with Burwalls) on opposite sides of the Gorge, now hard by Brunel's suspension bridge, guarded access from the sea to their tribal hinterland upstream along the Avon.

The Roman Invasion

Warfare had characterised the political life of the Dobunni for several centuries. From archaeological evidence, massacres appear to have taken place at Glastonbury and perhaps also at Worlebury Camp near Weston-super-Mare (although the latter, it is now thought, may have been perpetrated by Vespasian's infantry). But new light on the dating of the Dobunnic coin issues of Anted and Eisv (Cunliffe after de Jersey, in Cunliffe 2000) suggests that before the invasion of 43 A.D., the southern Dobunni loyal to the dynasty of Corio may have briefly united with the northern Dobunni loyal to that of Bodvoc, whose territory lay to the north of the Stroud Frome. Yet Suetonius mentions resistance to Vespasian's advance by two tribes in the south-west of Britain. A sure candidate is the Durotriges, who, to judge from the injured remains of many of them, put up a stubborn fight from their great Dorset hill-forts at Maiden Castle, Hod Hill and Spettisbury (Cunliffe 1974). The second tribe is now thought not to have been the Dumnonii of the far South West, for strategic reasons, nor the northern Dobunni who had turned early in the invasion to the support of the Romans, but probably a Belgic coalition formed by a majority of the Atrebates (whose ousted leader Verica, having fled to Rome, precipitated the invasion) and blood-related elements of the southern Dobunni, led by Corio's heir. These 'unreformed' Atrebates may have been still mindful of the defeats in Gaul of their kin by Julius Caesar's armies in 56 and 52 B.C. Both groups would have been driven by the over-riding motive in antiquity, blood-feud, as well as by that of political survival, to oppose the Roman invaders. Resistance against Vespasian, however, was futile. In the course of time, after 'thirty battles and twenty sieges' (Suetonius), the Romans prevailed in the South West of Britain, and appear to have enacted an appropriate punishment on the recalcitrant tribes by creating from their three territories an artificial 'Belgic' administrative unit under direct (and doubtless exacting) Imperial management. The region of Bristol, therefore, was now arguably brought into the zone of the Western Belgae, in which the Roman port of *Abona* at Sea Mills, situated in their ancestral territory, would play a significant military and commercial role.

Before Vespasian was obliged to return to Rome in 47 A.D., his legions deployed in the campaigns of conquest in South West Britain had therefore, almost certainly, already established this port on the western margin of modern Bristol, where the waters of the Bristol Channel narrow as they pass into what Ordnance Survey designates the Mouth of the Severn. It was a well-judged site, founded where the minor watercourse of the river Trym joins the Avon, just over a mile upstream from Pill where the Romans probably erected the standard *pharoi* or beacons, probably in timber, to mark the mouth of the Avon as it then lay. Although from coin

and ceramic evidence most archaeologists have concurred on a Neronian date of c.55 A.D. for the establishment of Sea Mills (Ellis 1987b), in his recent major work on the Roman Navy in Britain (2003) David Mason has suggested an earlier, Claudian, date for its foundation. He proposes a Roman sea-borne operation originating at Topsham, Devon, in 46 A.D., which having rounded Land's End, proceeded on campaign up the Bristol Channel to the mouth of the Avon; then having established the port at Sea Mills, continued into the Severn where the fort at Kingsholm (Gloucester), at the lowest bridgeable point on the river, was founded in 48 A.D. Indeed, an earlier date than c.55 A.D. for the foundation of Sea Mills is indicated also by archaeological evidence from adjacent historic sites in the Bristol region. For example, the now proposed suppression by the Romans of the South Dobunnian coastal hill-fort at Worlebury (Weston-super-Mare) and the construction of the early small fort at the lead-mines of Charterhouse-on-Mendip (only 14 miles to the south of Sea Mills) have been dated to within two or three years of the Romans' landing in 43 A.D. at Richborough, whilst the Roman military cuirass scales found at the nearby native farm at Butcombe (Vale of Wrington) were discovered with pottery of c.50 A.D. Finally, the first of the pigs of Mendip lead bearing a Roman inscription can be precisely dated to 49 A.D., within a year of the conclusion of this sea-borne campaign proposed by Mason. The dates of all these finds and events, including the foundation of the naval base and supply-port at Sea Mills, might therefore be more precisely set between 46 and 48 A.D. If so, Sea Mills rather than (traditionally) Southampton can be proposed as the port from which the lead pigs of Mendip were shipped in 49 A.D.

It is now clear that the conquest of Britain, under the supreme command in the field of Aulus Plautius (awaiting the arrival of Emperor Claudius), was a coordinated effort by land and sea, in which ships' crews played as important a role as marching legionaries. The Bristol Channel and the Mouth of the Severn soon after 46 A.D. would have been alive with Roman ships, whether biremes adapted as troop carriers or heavier triremes, while shore-parties of marines established lookout points and signal stations (known ones at Old Burrow on the North Devon coast and Blaise Castle above Sea Mills harbour) together with both temporary and permanent harbours. All this activity would have been directed to achieving the necessary purposes of security, navigation, communication and the vital supply of foodstuffs, arms and armour, troops, horses and forage for the land-based operations against the native hill-forts and other significant *oppida* of the British. Having established temporary naval bases near Barnstaple between the rivers Taw and Torridge, and at Bridgwater on the river Parrett, the seaborne pincer of the Roman Fleet must have then moved up the Bristol Channel into the

Mouth of the Severn, where it established the timber walls and facilities of the fortified supply base at Sea Mills in readiness for the arrival of units of Vespasian's II *Augusta* Legion from Exeter on the landward side. From recent archaeological evidence, the Operational Head Quarters of Vespasian in the West of Britain now seems quite certainly to have been at Alchester near Bicester, on Akeman Street, rather than at Dorchester-on-Thames (Sauer 2005), and it would have been at Alchester that plans for the coordination of naval and land forces in the West and South West were debated and agreed. The XX Legion *Valeria Victrix*, brought over from Colchester in 49 A.D. in preparation for the war against the rebellious Caratacus, duly proceeded to strengthen the port and supply base at Kingsholm on the Severn, whilst vexillation units of the II *Augusta* Legion under Vespasian, moving from Exeter in 48 or early 49 A.D., would have linked up with the Fleet at the permanent port and supply base at Sea Mills.

The Roman Harbours of the Occupation: (i) *Abona* at Sea Mills

Abona at Sea Mills, situated not far from the mouth of the Avon, the largest river of the region after the Severn, was well situated for a major naval and army supply port (Bennett 1972, Ellis 1987, Mason 2003, Higgins 2004 and here Appendix C). The lower reaches and mouth of the tributary river Trym, the banks of which the Roman port also shared, is now a feeble reminiscence of its former state. The harbour was endowed then with a usefully sized river basin which, provided as seems most likely with a tidal lock-gate (*claustrum*, **clusa*) well within Roman capacities to construct, could provide wet dock facilities for sea-going military ships (the *navis longa*) and the wide variety of cargo ships (the *caudicaria*, *actuaria*, *celox* and so forth) at all states of the tide. The same sort of floating harbour was constructed at Sea Mills in 1712, perhaps with Roman masonry on Roman foundations, when the remains of what appeared to be a 'fine [Roman] arched gateway' were recovered from the 'upper part' of the dock on the Trym (Barrett 1789). It was boasted then that only two other harbours on tidal rivers in Great Britain possessed a similar 'floating' capacity. Competition was surely less in the Roman period. The naval and commercial importance of Sea Mills in the Roman period should not therefore be underrated. The site must have provided ample space also for the usual harbour facilities of quays, timber yards, chandleries, smithies, ropewalks, sail-lofts, granaries and warehouses, as well as a 'hard' for the careening of ships under repair. And before sea levels rose in the marine transgression of the second and third centuries A.D., hand-in-hand with the deforestation of its hinterland, the Trym would have been largely free also of the deposits of silt which now obstruct and disfigure both it and the whole of the tidal stretch of the Avon.

Most opinion now holds that the few but coherent Roman remains at Sea Mills are those of a naval port and military supply base, although nothing that is quintessentially and unarguably maritime has yet been unearthed: whether timbers of quays or jetties, the remains of ships, lead anchors or other naval artifacts, as at the major harbours of Portus (Ostia) near Rome, Pisa or London. But circumstantial evidence suggests that Sea Mills had a military role, and therefore a naval presence, from as early as 48 A.D. It is also possible, by the late third century when the walled Roman agricultural and industrial estate at nearby Gatcombe (Flax Bourton) was under development (Branigan 1977), that some of the harbour facilities of Sea Mills may have been replicated also, on the southern bank of the Avon opposite Sea Mills, the Gatcombe side, at Abbot's Leigh. Whilst the often-quoted local field-names here - 'Great Nervis' and 'Little Nervis' (Anon. 1800) - are highly suspect as evidence, suggesting eighteenth-century antiquarian hypercorrection rather than genuine derivation from Nerva (Emperor 96-98 A.D.), certain others which include the element 'stone' may have archaeological significance. Together with the Roman fireclay pot unearthed at Ham Green, now in the North Somerset Museum, they indicate that archaeological enterprise is urgently required to ascertain the extent of Roman settlement on the farther bank of the Avon, first suggested by William Barrett, Bristol's earliest systematic historian, in the late Enlightenment (Barrett 1789).

Controversy still surrounds the identification of Sea Mills as *Abona*. The Antonine Itinerary of the second century A.D., promulgated for the purposes of the Imperial Postal Service (*Cursus Publicus*), describes that part of Route 14 (*Iter XIV*) which lies between Caerwent and Bath and which includes the way-points of *Abone* and *Traiectus* (see Appendix A). The form *Abone* appears thus in the Itinerary's diplomatic tradition, i.e. the locative case of *Abona*, meaning 'at the [river] Avon', hence 'naval/military establishment at/on the river Avon'. A derivation from *Portus Abone* ('port of the Avon'), with the common genitive desinence *-e* for Classical Latin *-ae*, is also possible, although there is no manuscript tradition for this beyond the obscure entry *punctuobice* in the early eighth-century *Ravenna Cosmography* (Richmond and Crawford 1949). The nominative form *Abona*, as used by Ordnance Survey map and guide *Roman Britain* (1994), would seem to be the correct one, rather than the awkwardly employed oblique forms in final *-ae* or *-e*. This would correspond to similar cases in Roman Britain, for example the toponym *Deva*, which is used in Itinerary XI for the town of Chester, is also the name of the river Dee on which it stands (*Deva Flumen*); *Isca* for Caerleon in Itinerary XIV is also the name of the river Usk (*Isca Flumen*); as also *Isca [Dumnoniorum]* in Itinerary XV is the name both for Exeter and the river Exe (*Isca Flumen*).

Roman Harbours of the Occupation: (ii) the case for *Isca* at Uphill
Roman practice in Britain seems to have been, therefore, that the controlling settlement founded at or near the mouth of a major river traditionally received that river's name.

This practice also suggests that Ptolemy's *Isc[h]alis* [with root *Isca-*] should not perhaps be identified as the inland settlement of Charterhouse-on-Mendip (Rivet and Smith 1979) or Cheddar (Costen 1992), but rather as the so far undiscovered Roman port at the mouth of the Axe [*Isca Flumen*], at or near Uphill, where the road from Winchester (Margary no. 45) is now believed to have ended. This westerly extension of the Roman road from Charterhouse was first suggested in the late eighteenth century by the indefatigable antiquaries Sir Richard Colt Hoare of Stourhead and his colleague the Rev. John Skinner, who lent the Roman port, which they believed preceded Uphill, the invented name of *Ad Axium* (Evans and Richards 1984). Recent historical cartography has now come to the conclusion that these distinguished antiquaries were substantially correct in their speculations concerning the existence of this route, although their philology was faulty (*Axium* cannot have produced 'Axe': Ekwall 1928). Gardner (2004), who shared Costen's view that *Isca* was probably Cheddar with its Roman and Anglo-Saxon remains, derived the suffix *[-a]lis* from Brittonic *lis* or *llis*: 'place/seat of authority' (cf. Henllys in Wales). On the other hand, Rivet and Smith (1979) do not admit this particular suffix in compound Romano-British toponyms, while, for this author, the form has post-Roman overtones. Rather unconvincingly, Rivet and Smith thought that *Isca* was Charterhouse on the top of Mendip, at some considerable distance from the river itself. Perhaps perspicaciously, however, they did not rule out the possibility that the name could have belonged to some 'undiscovered Roman fort actually on the river', a solution which does not preclude Uphill, favoured by this author.

But as important as derivation is the question as to why, if *Isca* was indeed the port at the mouth of the Axe, it was not simply named *Isca* on the analogy of Exeter and Caerleon. Certain observations may be made. Firstly, these two river-mouth sites were major military settlements, whilst *Isca*/Uphill remained, as far as is known, an unwall'd civilian port supervised at the most by a Roman guard-post during the early Occupation: earth-works possibly suggesting such a site in the vicinity of the old parish church are now mostly ploughed out (Knight 1909). Secondly, *Isca* would already have been adopted in official documentation as the name for the major military base and port of Exeter, in the same South West region of Britain (*Isca*/Caerleon, in an altogether different region, came into use somewhat later): a second

place-name *Isca* in the South West would have caused bureaucratic confusion. On the other hand, if *Isca* is adjectival, as the form suggests, then the original name for the harbour settlement may have been **Portus Iscalis*, on the analogy of Agricola's *Portus Truculensis* (with adjectival suffix *-ensis*) on an as yet unidentified river in north Scotland. Thirdly, for what second-century cartography is worth, Ptolemy's map depicted only few towns of Roman Britain as lying precisely on the coast itself, of which *Isca* was one.

The coastal conditions of South Somerset in Roman times, even before the embankment of the Axe, would have favoured a port at Uphill. In the Victorian period, sailing colliers of up to 120 tons burthen regularly docked there, despite the problems of silting, and there is no reason to believe, therefore, that Roman cargo boats could not have similarly used the wharf on the Upper Pill. There is good reason therefore to suspect the existence of a working port at the mouth of the Axe in Roman times, and not least perhaps because of the existence of a temple on Brean Down overlooking the harbour. [**Portus*] *Isca*l/Uphill would therefore have replicated the symbolic landscapes of the Greco-Roman world where temples, often on prominent coastline sites, watch over an adjacent port or harbour. These shrines would also have included the Roman temple in the Iron Age coastal fort on Blaise Hill rising above *Abona* (Rahtz and Clevedon Brown 1959). The dedications of the temples at Brean Down and Blaise Hill are not known, although favoured divinities of harbours in the classical Mediterranean were Venus and Neptune, and for navigators, Castor and Pollux. However, the oblong shape of the temple on Blaise Hill suggests the austere cult of Mithras favoured by the military, including the marines (no fewer than fifteen such shrines were found in the town and port of Ostia near Rome: Potter 1987). At Lydney, on the opposite shore to Blaise, within an Iron Age hill-fort possibly overlooking a hitherto undiscovered small Roman harbour in the Mouth of the Severn, the late Roman temple's mosaic floor displays maritime motifs and was dedicated possibly by naval patrons to the syncretic divinity Mars Nodens, Roman god of war and Celtic god of health and safety. This hybrid Mars (slayer and healer) may also have been worshipped in the then coastal hill-fort temple of Cadbury Tickenham, where a worn bas-relief of the god was allegedly found. The temples at Blaise and Brean Down, whatever their precise dedications, are dated by archaeology to the late third and fourth century A.D., but Roman finds of the first century have been made in the vicinity of both, suggesting perhaps a longer history of the sacred sites: a coin of Nerva 96-98 A.D. was found at Blaise (Rahtz and Clevedon Brown 1959) while gold coins of Augustus and Nero were purportedly recovered from the temple site on Brean (Knight 1902, but see Haverfield 1906). Most Roman temples, including those of

our region at Pagans' Hill (Chew Stoke) and at Henley Wood (Congresbury), with its pilgrim accommodation, were erected near a complex of villas which would have provided the necessary patronage on the part of an élite land-owning class. Yet the temple at Brean Down, isolated from known Roman villa clusters, apparently lacked traditional civilian support of this kind close at hand. An official harbour at the mouth of the Axe, on the other hand, would have provided the temple with its own particular sort of maritime patronage and therefore its cultic *raison d'être* which, in isolation, is otherwise hard to fathom. This coordination of construction, with harbour and temple composing a familiar ritual topography, argues for a major investment of capital, which underscores the importance attached by the Roman administration both to *Abona* and to *Isca*l/Uphill. What makes the latter location different from *Abona* in geomorphological terms is the quality of its hydrography. As has been said, the vigorous flow of the Trym (Anglo-Saxon for 'strong', 'steady'), deriving from two distant sources at Filton and Southmead, provided *Abona* with the possibility of a tidal lock and floating harbour. Although Uphill had a tidal lock in the sixteenth century, and probably in the Roman period too, the stream feeding Uphill Pill, where the wharf lay (and where its modern counterpart still lies) cannot be compared in its flow to the river Trym. It was therefore probably more subject to silting than Sea Mills harbour. But the fact that *Abona* lay on a major regional river, with a larger wet dock capacity and with a Roman naval presence for its greater security, explains the relative neglect of *Isca*l/Uphill as the normal port of shipment of the valuable cargoes of Mendip silver and lead, although it lay closer than *Abona* to the mines at Charterhouse.

Archaeological enterprise now needs to be directed to confirm the presence of a Roman port below Brean Down in our region, perhaps in the area of the present wharf on Uphill Pill below the rocky outcrop which the old parish church so conspicuously occupies. Certainly, a modest number of chance Roman finds have already been made in the harbour's vicinity, particularly at Uphill Grange, whilst a considerable Roman coin-hoard was found in a cavern in the quarry below the church in the nineteenth century (Knight 1902, Haverfield 1906, Evans and Richards 1984).

Infrastructure and Problems of Historical Geography: (i) The Antonine Itinerary and *Abona*

The interpretation of Antonine *Iter* XIV (Caerleon to Silchester), which covers Bath to Sea Mills, has not been without problems and confusions. Scholars have been bewildered by perceived anomalies both in the Itinerary's published mileages and in its designation of both *Abona* and *Traiectus*, assuming scribal error perhaps too easily. The doubts of earlier

critics often centred on the problems of accurately judging distances across tidal waters. Margary himself (1973) considered that the Itinerary's estimate of 14 Roman miles from Caerwent across the Severn to Sea Mills was quite unreliable and would have had 'no meaning for men to whom all miles were marching miles'. The factors of time and speed, necessary in the computation of distance, were impossible to measure accurately, it was believed, in an era of sailing boats or galleys, susceptible to the vagaries of wind and current, before stop-watches and towed logs were invented. Added to this obstacle, it seemed inconceivable to Margary, given the existence of a major ferry-port adjacent to the Severn at Sea Mills, that Itinerary XIV should assign the name *Traiectus* ('crossing') to a nearby inland site (Bitton) instead. Surprisingly perhaps, Rivet and Smith (1979) uncritically accepted Margary's conclusion that the Itinerary eschewed reference to sea passages *on principle*, and opined that the whole of the given mileage in the document was 'land mileage'. On the basis of a palpable error of a five miles' excess in the Itinerary's measurement of one of the stages (Sandy Lane to Mildenhall), where *xv* had been misread as *xx*, they assigned this difference in mileage to a 'missing' stage across the Severn, which, on the basis of no known MS tradition, they entitled the *Sabrinae Traiectus*.

Yet there are good grounds for asserting that the Severn-crossing stage from Caerwent to Sea Mills, given as 14 Roman miles in *Iter XIV*, is correct within a margin of error of only 2%. What has not been sufficiently appreciated by commentators is that the science and practice of land surveying, based on Greek (Euclidian) geometry was highly developed in the Roman world. Thus the task of computing distances across water, without the need to make the actual crossing, was quite possible, provided only that the opposite shore was in visual range. The method of survey was based on the well-known theorem of similar triangles. Transposed on to a standard Ordnance Survey map this method produces a distance of 13.7 Roman miles, as against the Itinerary's 14 (see Appendix B). It is very possible that the Roman *gromaticus* (*groma*=theodolite) who first calculated the distance in question was Sextus Julius Frontinus, Governor and general, the author of text-books on warfare and surveying. It was he who fought the successful campaigns of pacification against the Silures of South Wales between 74 and 78 A.D., using the naval base of *Abona* as his main supply port.

Infrastructure and Problems of Historical Geography: (ii) Bitton and *Traiectus*

It is still a matter of dispute where the *Traiectus* of Itinerary XIV lies, defined as it is by the Roman route directory as an intermediate way-point on the major road between *Abona* and Bath, lying at m.p. 9 from the former and m.p. 6 from the latter (see Appendix A). Since this road,

part of the route (Margary no. 54) from Caerleon (*Isca*) to Silchester (*Calleva*), lies largely beneath the A431 (Bristol to Bath) trunk road, *Traiectus*, if plotted on Ordnance Survey maps, lies within 100 metres of Bitton. '*Traiectus*' means 'a crossing', but a passage over the minor local tributary river of the Boyd at Bitton can be ruled out at once. A small bridge or a stone-paved ford would have been adequate to this task. The 'crossing' to which this name referred in the Itinerary must therefore have been that of the nearby major river Avon. Here a dedicated river passage must have been established early in the Roman period to carry traffic on the Roman road (Margary no. 540) from the Imperial lead-mines on Mendip to the cross-roads to the west of Bitton on Margary no. 54. From here traffic would have continued either westwards to the export facilities at Sea Mills, or eastwards towards Bath and the major road networks of the Fosse Way, or northwards on the Roman road to Kingsholm and Gloucester (Margary no. 541a), via the recently confirmed 'small' defended Roman town of Hall End (Ravenna Cosmography's *Milidunum*?) near Rangeworthy. Critics of the Itinerary have cast doubt on the appropriateness of the term *traiectus* for something as minor as a river-crossing, but the term indicated a crossing, normally of water, irrespective of means and distance. Very pertinent to the case is a coin of Caracalla of 209 A.D., now in Paris, commemorating his part in the invasion of Scotland under Septimius Severus, which bears the legend *TRAIECTUS* above the image of Roman legionaries crossing a pontoon-bridge of boats over a river, either the Tay or, as recent research now suggests, probably the Forth (Reed 1976). No lengthy journey or ferry-craft is implied. In fact, the construction of pontoon bridges across rivers and inlets during campaigns was typical of Roman military engineering practice, a task for which they were routinely trained. It would have been the solution adopted especially in the early phases of the invasion of a territory before permanent bridge building could be undertaken. Rivet and Smith (1979) remind us that the word '*traiectus*' is found as a suffix in compound toponyms on the Continent (*-tricht/-trecht*). Utrecht on the Rhine replicates the situation of Bitton and the Avon, since in both cases the main Roman road in question does not cross the river, but leads by a connecting road to the actual crossing nearby.

On linguistic and historico-geographical grounds, therefore, we can accept that *Traiectus* lay at Bitton at or near the cross-roads immediately to the west of the village centre. As the purely functional Latin toponym indicates ('crossing') the place itself was a new Roman foundation, with no British settlement antedating it. Besides being the place where it was necessary to turn off the road to make the crossing which its name indicated, Bitton's location also fits the normal Imperial parameters for

the foundation of a *mutatio* (a government way-station for food and change of horse along any major road in the Roman Empire) or, at every fifth such site if required, a *mansio* (a more substantial official inn and police post which offered overnight accommodation in addition to livery). These latter establishments, which sometimes developed into small towns in Britain, lay normally at intervals of between 10 and 20 Roman miles (m.p.). At Bitton the necessity for such a *statio posita* arose less from the small mileages of the Bath to Sea Mills stage of *Iter XIV* (m.p. 6 from Bath and 9 from Sea Mills) than from the weightier needs of the Charterhouse-on-Mendip to Gloucester road (Margary nos. 540 and 541a) which crossed it at Bitton. Here the distance would have been a *cursor's* (courier's) normal day's journey by horse of some 50 Roman miles, with way-stations notionally disposed at the following standard intervals: Charterhouse (*mansio*) m.p. 15 to Bitton (*mutatio*), Bitton m.p. 12 to the probable small town at Hall End (*mutatio* or *mansio*), Hall End m.p. 12 to Cambridge (*mutatio*) on the A38 (Margary no. 541), Cambridge m.p. 12 to Gloucester (*mansio*).

Recent stimulating work at Somerdale on the Keynsham Hams (Avon Fields), hard by the point where the road from Charterhouse to Bitton (Margary no. 540) crossed the Avon, has confirmed a Roman settlement with a possible temple site constructed some two centuries before the two well-known Roman villas in the vicinity (Browne 1987). That this settlement may have been the *Traiectus* of the Antonine Itinerary, as has been proposed, is perhaps less convincing, since the official Roman route-directory locates it squarely on the Bath-Sea Mills road. This, with good reason (see below) has long been accepted as lying on the north bank of the river, where archaeological remains of the Roman road can in any case still be identified (Margary 1957 and 1973). If, on the analogy of Utrecht and the Rhine, Somerdale, which lies on the south bank of the Avon, were *Traiectus*, would not one have also expected that the Bath-Sea Mills road lay along the south bank? Archaeology in and around Bitton should now be directed to discovering the footprint of the relatively small building-complex of a way-station. Bitton's so-called 'Roman Camp' now appears to archaeology to be spurious, but a few genuine Roman finds, including a flue box-tile (indicating a sophisticated building with hypocaust), were discovered in the nineteenth century near the Church of St Mary and in the vicinity of the Old Vicarage. The Church, for example, might itself be more thoroughly investigated in view of its 'long, aisleless Saxon nave ... on a Roman site' (Verey in Pevsner 1980), in case it was actually built on the foundations of a *mutatio* or *mansio*, or at least includes residual Roman masonry in its fabric.

Infrastructure and Problems of Historical Geography: (iii) The Road from Bath to Sea Mills

How much of Mendip mineral production may have been transported by river rather than by land through the Bristol region to the point of embarkation is not the open question it at first appears. Rahtz and Greenfield (1976) thought that the silver ingots and lead pigs from Charterhouse, *en route* northwards along the first stretch of the road to Bitton, would have been loaded on to small river-craft once the river Chew was reached, thence carried to the Avon which offered the possibility of access by water to both Sea Mills and Bath. The awkward, broken geomorphology of the overland route along the Chew Valley was adduced as the reason for this alleged practice. However, rivers in spate offer obstacles and dangers to the transport of goods which roads, however twisting, normally do not. The river Chew is as awkward and serpentine a water-course as any road which was built to follow it, whilst traffic along the Avon, a river subject to autumnal and winter flooding, must have been unsatisfactorily seasonal. It is more than likely that the Imperial silver and lead of Mendip were transported by road rather than water, despite the high costs of road and bridge construction and maintenance over difficult ground. But, without doubt, economy was normally the password in road construction in the Roman Empire. The geomorphology of the Bristol region suggests the higher and drier north bank of the Avon, rather than the south bank, as the cheapest and strategically most apposite course for the major Bath to Sea Mills road, since its destination at Sea Mills also lay on the north bank of the Avon. This significant regional highway passed through later Bristol's northern suburbs for this reason, and partly also in order to meet the demands of frugality in bridge construction. Along this particular route to the sea, only the relatively small stream of the Bristol Frome needed to be negotiated by a bridge. The Roman practice of conveying valuable goods such as silver and lead by land rather than by river is revealed, ironically, by the discovery of two lead pigs in a river bank in the Bristol region in the nineteenth century. These were found in the Frome at Wade Street in the City, although it had always been assumed that they were being transported by water when the accident happened. The opposite was almost certainly the case - they were being transported by land. It appears very likely that here, at some time between 139 and 161 A.D., the collapse of a bridge cast the pair of pigs, property of the emperor Antoninus Pius, from their cart deep into the slime of the Frome, from which irretrievable depth they were only fortuitously rescued in road and river-bank works in the city in 1865. But this accident, so interpreted, at least allows the reasonable assumption that, although poorly maintained a century or so after its construction, the bridge must nevertheless have carried a

major Roman road into the north Bristol area along an east-west axis. The route in question can only have been the one which is described in Antonine Itinerary XIV as passing through Bath on the way to Sea Mills (Margary no. 54) and which was crossed at Bitton by the equally significant north-south axis of communication between the *colonia* at Gloucester and Mendip (Higgins 2000). It might also be added that a Roman cart was of standardised construction, officially designed to carry exactly four lead pigs of a standard weight. This must argue that the approved mode of conveyance of this valuable Imperial commodity, for the purposes of security and indemnity, was normally cart rather than barge. It is also possible that if the two Bristol pigs were part of a full cart-load, two (or more if an overload caused the incident) may still await discovery at the Wade Street site.

Military and Economic Organisation: (i) State Ownership: Industries and Security

For at least the first two centuries of Roman Britain, the history of the Bristol region is largely the history of the port and small town of *Abona*. When in 78 A.D. its function as a ferry port for the military ceased as the campaigns of Frontinus against the Silures reached their successful conclusion in S. Wales, the new maritime forts of Cardiff and Chepstow as well as the new legionary fortress of Caerleon were in use. The troops of the II *Augusta* Legion left Kingsholm (Gloucester) for Caerleon but archaeological material from Sea Mills (a stamped tile) indicates that they probably left a legionary control post at *Abona* for policing the flow of produce from the Imperial mineral and agricultural monopolies of the Bristol region (see below). Much of this material would have been loaded or transhipped for the construction of the new maritime forts mentioned above, as well as for the building of the new tribal *civitas* capital of the Silures at Caerwent (*Venta Silurum*). Otherwise the Legion appear to have left *Abona* to the safekeeping of a detachment of their colleagues and doubtless to a unit of marine artificers from the Imperial Fleet in Britain, the *Classis Britannica*.

The exact site of the fort of the Conquest period at Sea Mills has not been determined conclusively by archaeology. The timber construction may not have continued in use much beyond c.80 A.D., when it was probably dismantled in favour of the site's expansion in its post-campaign role as a major naval base for the Fleet. The nature of the naval command and control of the Bristol Channel at this time is obscure. It is not known whether the seaborne units in question remained an integral part of the *Classis Britannica*, with its headquarters at Dover or even Boulogne, or whether they composed a legionary flotilla under the control of the II *Augusta* Legion based at Caerleon (*Isca*), which

although sited inland, disposed of naval quays on the Usk. It is most likely, although not certain, that if under legionary control, authority was exercised for the first two centuries of Roman rule in the South West by the legionary Legate at Caerleon. From the third century, when raids from Ireland became a serious challenge to the security of the South West, the Bristol Channel units may have been reorganised and re-equipped as a semi-independent fleet, a *Classis Ivernica* (Hibernian/Irish Sea Fleet), under the control of a Fleet Commander stationed at the new shore fort of Cardiff at some time after 268 A.D. (Mason 2003).

In the first two centuries of Roman rule, however, irrespective of whence and by whom the naval units of the Bristol Channel were controlled, the wet docks of *Abona* and spacious area of the Trym basin must have offered unique facilities for re-manning, re-victualling, storage, ship-repair and even agreeable shore-leave at Bath for the officer-class, found nowhere else in the South West region of Britain. Frequent users then of the harbour at *Abona* must have been the crews of the coastal patrols (*speculatores*), operating swift double-banked *liburnae* in the Bristol Channel and the Mouth of the Severn against possible sea-borne infiltration of the Silures from the Welsh side during the occasional periods of colonial disaffection. The need for civilian manpower at *Abona* may not yet have been pressing (the marines could do most jobs, as in every century), and therefore Ellis (1987) may be correct when he proposes that identifiable elements of a civilian presence at *Abona* are not greatly visible in the archaeological record before the beginning of the second century. The shipyard work of the navy, as well as the stevedores' tasks in the loading or transshipment to the wider Empire of Imperial produce (primarily, but not exclusively, the silver and lead of Mendip), would have been provided early on by the Fleet. *Abona*'s civilian role as a port and small town must have begun in the second century, when the primitive buildings of the civilian *vicus* were made permanent and even town walls constructed. Then more localised trading would have taken place, with the marketing and exportation of home grown foodstuffs and woollen clothing, especially to the markets provided by the new Roman forts and fortresses in S. Wales accessible by water (Chepstow, Caerleon, Cardiff, Neath, Loughor, Carmarthen) as well as to the new civilian settlements of the recently pacified areas across the water - not least Caerwent (*Venta Silurum*). British wool products, known internationally in the later Roman period (the *birrus Britannicus* and *tapete Britannicum* of Diocletian's Price Edict) may have passed from our region through *Abona* to a government weaving centre (*gynaeceum*) situated either at Caerwent or Winchester. It is pleasant to think that casks of British 'export' beer may also have passed

early on through *Abona*: certainly in later years Diocletian's discriminating civil servants applied a price-cap of four *denarii* on it, while valuing Egyptian beer at only two *denarii* (Potter 1987). The economic picture of S. Wales in the early period of its Romanisation, before the development of its own villa economy in the Vale of Glamorgan, has yet to be researched in depth, but it is highly likely that in the early years the weight of the economic balance lay on the eastern side of the Bristol Channel, where the southern Dobunnian lands would have been quickly taken in hand by trained farm managers of the Roman State, while the northern Dobunnian farm economy of the Cotswolds would not in any case have been interrupted by the arrival of the Romans, their recently elected friends and overlords. On the contrary, the Roman advent must have increased the trade and wealth of the Bristol region at this time as it responded to the commercial openings afforded by the passage *en masse* of Roman troops and by the corresponding devastation in the countryside of S. Wales produced by the lengthy, stubborn but ultimately futile resistance of the Silures. From all of this the new Romano-British port of the Bristol region would have certainly derived benefit, as the luxury items of domestic goods found in the archaeological record of *Abona* from the second century onwards testify.

The subject of Imperial monopolies in this part of S.W. Britain has received the renewed attention of historians of the period. While the Cotswold region, to the north of our own beyond the Stroud Frome, is noted for its plethora of fine Roman villas and productive private estates, the picture of the Bristol region, arguably under close State control, is less than impressive in its architectural wealth. The presence of fine villas clustered around the Roman spa-town of *Aquae Sulis* (Bath), both an 'inland resort' for much of western Roman Britain and an important cultic and administrative centre, is well attested. On the other hand, the Bristol region as defined here is largely devoid of villas until the last quarter of the third century. And with the exception of the high-status villa at Keynsham on the edge of our region (to be considered, socially and economically, rather a satellite of Bath), the more substantial civilian villas of the Bristol region along the valley of the Avon, at King's Weston, Portishead, Bedminster, Brislington and Somerdale, are not at all impressive as to size or architectural elaboration. The same is true of the other known Roman villas of our region - those of the northern group at Cromhall, Tytherington, Tockington, Upper Maudlin Street (Bristol), possibly Bentry and Mangotsfield (Rodway Hill), and those of the southern group at Wraxall, Wemberham, Woodlands (Congresbury), Chew Lake, Gold's Cross, Locking, Lower Langford, Lye Hole (in the Vale of Wrington), Havyatt, Banwell and Star - and the question naturally raises itself as to why this might be so.

We have seen that not all of the Dobunni capitulated to the Romans in the first year of the Invasion in 43 A.D. This may explain the genesis of what has been denominated, from Ptolemy's map, the Canton of the Belgae. These lands are depicted by the Alexandrian geographer as lying in the region of the Southern Dobunni and, including Bath, span the Bristol region as defined here, south-eastwards to the coast beyond the map's *Venta* (Winchester). In terms of river catchments (perhaps the only realistic political parameters), the Canton of the Belgae would probably have stretched from the southern bank of the Stroud Frome, to include the basins of the Bristol Avon, the Dorset and Wiltshire Avon and the Hampshire Test and Itchen. This Belgic Canton would therefore have embraced the Dobunnian Bristol region and also portions of Durotrigian and Atrebatian territory, all of which were arguably confiscated by the Roman State in the early Occupation period as a punitive measure for conspicuous resistance against the invasion, as well as for sound economic and political reasons of State.

Our region, administratively of the Western Belgae, lay largely bereft of villas for two centuries or more, whilst being part (it is proposed) of an autonomous Imperial Estate with its local capital and headquarters at Bath. The so-called Combe Down inscription appears to identify the city as the Headquarters of a Provincial Procurator, the highest rank of Civil Servant, directly answerable to the Emperor for his financial interests, his personal income from the monopolies of mints, mines and quarries and from the Imperial *patrimonium* of landed estates. A lead seal indicates that Bath was the seat also of a Regional Centurion traditionally responsible for the policing of Imperial estates. The argument for an Imperial Estate, of which the Bristol region was part, is therefore very strong. Its eastern headquarters would have lain at 'Belgic' Winchester (*Venta Belgarum*), but it seems that the Procurator, rather than vegetate in the provincial backwater which that town (although the fifth largest in Britain) then probably was, chose instead to reside with his other officials at Bath. This was a sensible arrangement, given the amenities of that spa town, health resort and religious centre, attributes which have endured undiminished down the centuries.

While the simple lack of villas across a region cannot in itself argue for the presence of an Imperial estate (Rippon 2000), the hypothesis which has been gaining ground proposes also the following evidence: the unarguable Imperial ownership of the silver and lead mines on Mendip (the region's economic generator of the early Occupation period), the wealth of minerals in the area other than those of Mendip for which the Roman State also held the monopoly, the unusually highly developed transport infrastructure of the region (ports, rivers and roads), and the

early capital-intensive construction of sea-walls along the north Somerset coast of the Bristol channel for the reclamation of new arable land and ranches for the maintenance of the Army (Rivet 1958; Cunliffe 1974, 2000; Branigan and Fowler 1976; Branigan 1976; Russell and Williams 1984; Frere 1987; Salway 1993; further argument and summary in Gardner 2004). To this corpus of evidence may be added the fact that Hadrian (117-138 A.D.) actively promoted land-reclamation in the Empire, probably as a result of witnessing the achievements in Britain, and liberalised the laws of settlement on Imperial lands by waiving rents for up to ten years, providing only that the tenant maintained hearth, home and farming productivity and refrained from passing the property on by sale in that time (Wacher 1998). The lack of villas in the Bristol region for two centuries is a fact beyond dispute and surely speaks for the lack of a privatised economy. Productive land reclamation on the Wentlooge Levels in Gwent, on the other hand, is known to have been undertaken by the II *Augusta* Legion of Caerleon, but the Bristol region did not possess such a concentrated military presence after c.80 A.D. The Imperial bureaucracy instead must have furnished the oversight and the funds, whilst the manpower was provided instead from the homes of humbler Imperial subjects, whose capital was measurable in agricultural experience and capacity for toil rather than land-ownership and management. These were the many tenants of the Romano-British farming settlements of the Bristol region: those of the N. Somerset Levels, the Vale of Wrington, of Mendip and of the Failand Ridge, of the Avonmouth Level and of deep rural South Gloucestershire. On the other hand, some of our region's earlier villas with less sophisticated origins, such as Star and Wemberham Lane, may well have begun as the residences of estate bailiffs or overseers in the days of their Imperial employment.

Scholarship has therefore been favourable on the whole to the notion of a vast Imperial canton in the South West dedicated to the monopolistic development and exploitation of the region's natural (mainly mineral and agricultural) resources. Overland communication would have been provided by the developed Roman road system between the port of *Abona* at Sea Mills, closest to Bath, and, succeeding the early supply-port of Hamworthy on Poole Harbour, the port of *Clausentum* at Bitterne on the Solent, closest to *Venta Belgarum*. From *Abona* commerce would have extended across the Mouth of the Severn and the Bristol Channel to South Wales, then south-west to Armorica (later Brittany), Galicia, Biscay, Gibraltar and the Mediterranean. From *Clausentum* commerce proceeded across the Channel to Belgic Gaul, the Rhine and eventually Italy. From this Imperial domain the products of State monopolies would have flowed back and forth unceasingly along the infrastructure of roads and bridges, and by barge and

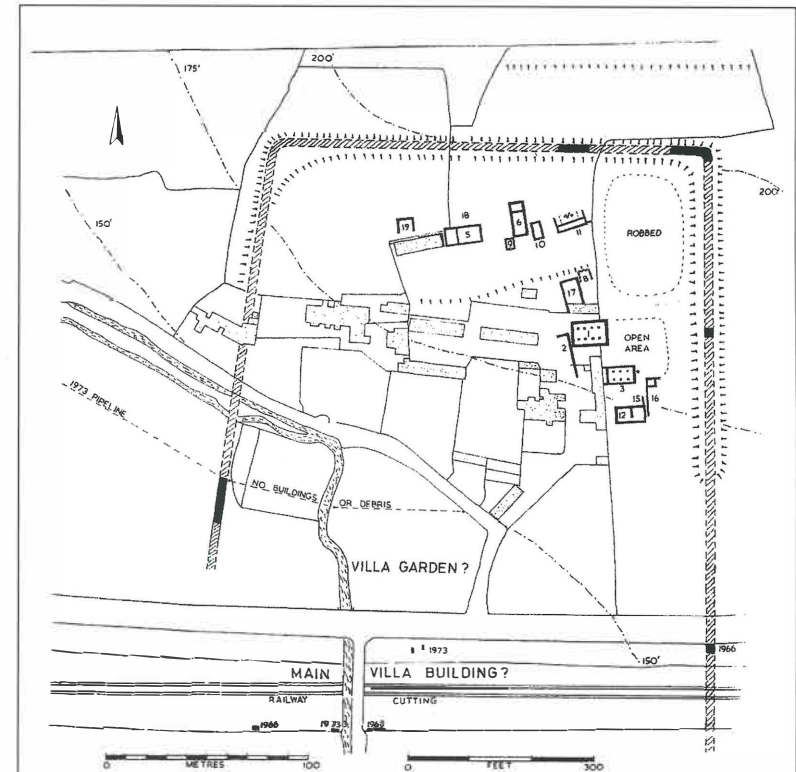
ferry along the rivers and rhines towards the two ports of shipment, Sea Mills and Uphill, thence to the wider Empire: lead, silver and zinc from Mendip and its wider area; gold, silver, coal and iron from Wales; iron from the Forest of Dean and coal from N. Somerset and S. Gloucestershire; corn, salt-beef, horn and hides from Salisbury Plain, Cranborne Chase and the grazing lands recovered from the marshes of the Channel and Severn shores of the Bristol region (the N. Somerset and Avonmouth Levels); salt from the coastal salterns of Banwell and the margins of the river Brue; high quality oolitic freestone from Dundry and Bathampton; dressed building blocks of Portishead Old Red and Black Nore sandstone, roofing shingles of Pennant sandstone and querns also of Old Red sandstone from Dean.

Military and Economic Organisation: (ii) Private Ownership: Rural Retreats and Insecurity

It was only when the assets of this extraordinary territory were sold off, as they arguably were, in the late third century that land in the Canton of the Belgae would have become available for the development of a 'privatised' agricultural economy, based on the traditional Roman villa estate common to the rest of the Empire. The foundation of the villas at Brislington, King's Weston, Wraxall, Chew Park, and Banwell can all be firmly dated between 270 and 290 A.D., whilst possibly also Locking, Portishead and Bedminster can be included in this window of opportunity. The foundation dates of the other villas remain unproven, but apart from Star and Wemberham Lane (Yatton) which appear to be of the early to mid-third century A.D., they are very probably of late third century date and include Cromhall (Ellis 1987), Tytherington, Tockington Park, Woodlands (Congresbury), Lye Hole (Wrington Vale), Lower Langford and Havyatt. Keith Branigan (1976) has argued that the dissolving of most of the Imperial assets in the Belgic and Durotrigian territories took place under the emperor Probus (276-282 A.D.), who followed his predecessor Aurelian's expensive task of repairing or rebuilding towns in Gaul after the devastating raids of the Alamanni across the Upper Rhine in 258 and further invasions in 268 A.D. The earlier incursions had led to the collapse of the Roman frontier there and the formation of the breakaway 'Gallic Empire' from 259 to 274 A.D., which was a desperate but ultimately futile response to the chaos in the legitimate Empire. It was also Probus rather than the usurper Carausius, his successor in Britain, who resumed the costly programme of the building of the coastal forts against the sea-borne invaders along the 'Saxon shore' of Britain and the coast of Gaul, on both sides of the English Channel. Wealthy refugees from Gaul, with capital to invest, may well have bought up Imperial land and have established villas in the Bristol region, encouraging thereby a wave of new industry: from mass-produced pottery manufacture at Congresbury

on the Somerset Levels to regional schools of mosaic artists. Theirs was probably the innovation of intra-mural yard or hall-type villas (King's Weston, Brislington, Somerdale, Wraxall, Chew Park) such as are found in northern Gaul. Finally, capital investment on the part of immigrant Gallic plutocrats, rather than public or Imperial funds, may well have been responsible for the building of the enigmatic, massively walled agricultural and industrial estate, probably with desirable villa accommodation, at Gatcombe in our region, in the last half of the third century (Rivet 1964; Smith 1969; Branigan 1976).

The Roman estate at Gatcombe Court and Farm (Flax Bourton), was a unique initiative and enterprise in Roman Britain, reflecting the times in which it was built. Its layout and defences, reminiscent of more than one similar establishment in Gaul, speak of considerable invested wealth under threat nevertheless of imminent siege or destruction. With its massive walls enclosing an area of some 18 acres, the settlement sits in a sheltered spot beneath the Failand Ridge, remote from any major Roman road or navigable waterway. Its object appears to have been to shelter the cautious owner (probably a wealthy refugee from Gaul) from yet more robbery, to make money for him through large scale agriculture and light industry, and at the same time afford him some luxury of living-space (the villa building, for which there is some small but significant evidence, probably lay at the southern end where the railway cutting was excavated in the nineteenth century). The whole Gatcombe design and enterprise therefore is in some ways symbolic of the Roman Empire itself at this time: massive, imposing and productive, but subject to external forces beyond its competence to resist - especially adverse economic factors, determined by sclerotic monetarism and a slowly deteriorating military and political situation. The collapse of the 'Gallic Empire' in 274 A.D., of which Britain formed a part, was followed by a period of hyperinflation throughout the Empire, which may have been the cause rather than the result of Probus's economic strategy two years later to sell up the Imperial estates in order to finance his rebuilding of the devastated cities and towns of Gaul. It is these events, as much as the raids of the Hiberni from Ireland, which encouraged the burying of coins in the Bristol region, several hoards of which date to this period. These radical Imperial economic measures were followed by the emperor Diocletian's division of the whole Empire into a tetrarchy for the purposes of more effective government, closer control of the economy and stricter supervision of the Empire's now porous borders. In remote Britannia, this provoked the usurpation of Imperial authority in 286 A.D. by the Admiral of the Fleet in Britain, M. Aurelius Carausius - an event whose repercussions must have been felt by the naval detachments at the port of *Abona*.



Plan by Keith Branigan 1976

The Roman settlement of about 18 acres, at Gatcombe Court and Farm, Flax Bourton, is unique of its sort in Britain and, because only partially excavated, difficult to characterise. Rather than a small town, in its isolated position it may have been the fortified administrative centre of a very large estate, of the sort found occasionally in parts of the continental Roman Empire. Despite extraordinary walls some five metres thick, datable from the mid-third century (as most of the internal buildings so far excavated), no rationally ordered grid of streets appears so far to have been laid out. Evidence for the settlement's residential villa (*villa urbana*) is sparse: it may have lain in the southern part of the site destroyed by the railway cutting excavated in the nineteenth century.

Within ten years, however, Diocletian's *Caesar* in Britain and northern Gaul, Constantius I, had brought the governance of Britain back into the legitimate succession and resumed Probus's task of strengthening defences against Saxons and Franks on the eastern coasts, and against the marauding *scotti* (lit. 'plunderers') from Ireland in the west. These seaborne raids, by Britannia's traditional enemies, the Hiberni, would again certainly have affected the Bristol region. It is now, if not earlier, that *Abona* would have been provided with walls, in common with other Roman towns in Gaul and Britain under Probus's initiative. Certainly the local archaeological evidence of a collapsed rampart with masonry rubble having fallen into what appears to have been the town ditch of *Abona* (Ellis 1987 on the 1965-68 excavations) already points to the provision of town walls. There is a strong implication in the Anglo-Saxon charters of Stoke Bishop that the remains of a circuit of walls stood in the tenth century (Higgins 2002 and 2004); nor should the anecdotal evidence of Seyer (1821) be discounted that the old name for Sea Mills (before the founding of the serge or 'saye' mills in question caused a change of nomenclature) had been Portchester, where Anglo-Saxon *caester* normally indicated a walled town (Gelling 1997). Certainly *Clausentum* at Bitterne on Southampton Water, the East Belgic counterpart of the West Belgic port of *Abona*, was provided with a defensive wall. It is hard to understand why the major port on a major river should have languished without such an obvious, normal and, after c.250 A.D., crucial means of defence.

The Mature Economy: The Villa Estate as Farm and Factory

Whilst historians have noted signs of an economic recession in the South East of Roman Britain in the last half of the third century, the injection of new capital into the South West of Britain from the timely sale of Imperial lands in the Canton of the Belgae after 276 A.D. appears to have brought, as already indicated, a welcome boost to the economy of the constituent regions and localities, including Bristol's. A surge of estate division took place, giving rise to new or revitalised industries and enterprises for the construction of villas and outbuildings: the quarrying of freestone, the mass production of bricks, terracotta tiles and stone roof-shingles, the extraction of coal and peat for hypocausts and baths, the crafting of objects for the day-to-day economy of the villa (pottery, pewter-ware, glass-ware and, for the estate workers, treen-ware), the creation of luxury decorations and fittings, including mosaics (as at the villas of Keynsham, King's Weston and Brislington), painted plaster-work, window-glass, carved stone table-tops and wooden furniture, as well as ordinary linens, woollen cloth and leather for the clothing and footwear of the numerous tied labour-force of *servi*, for the

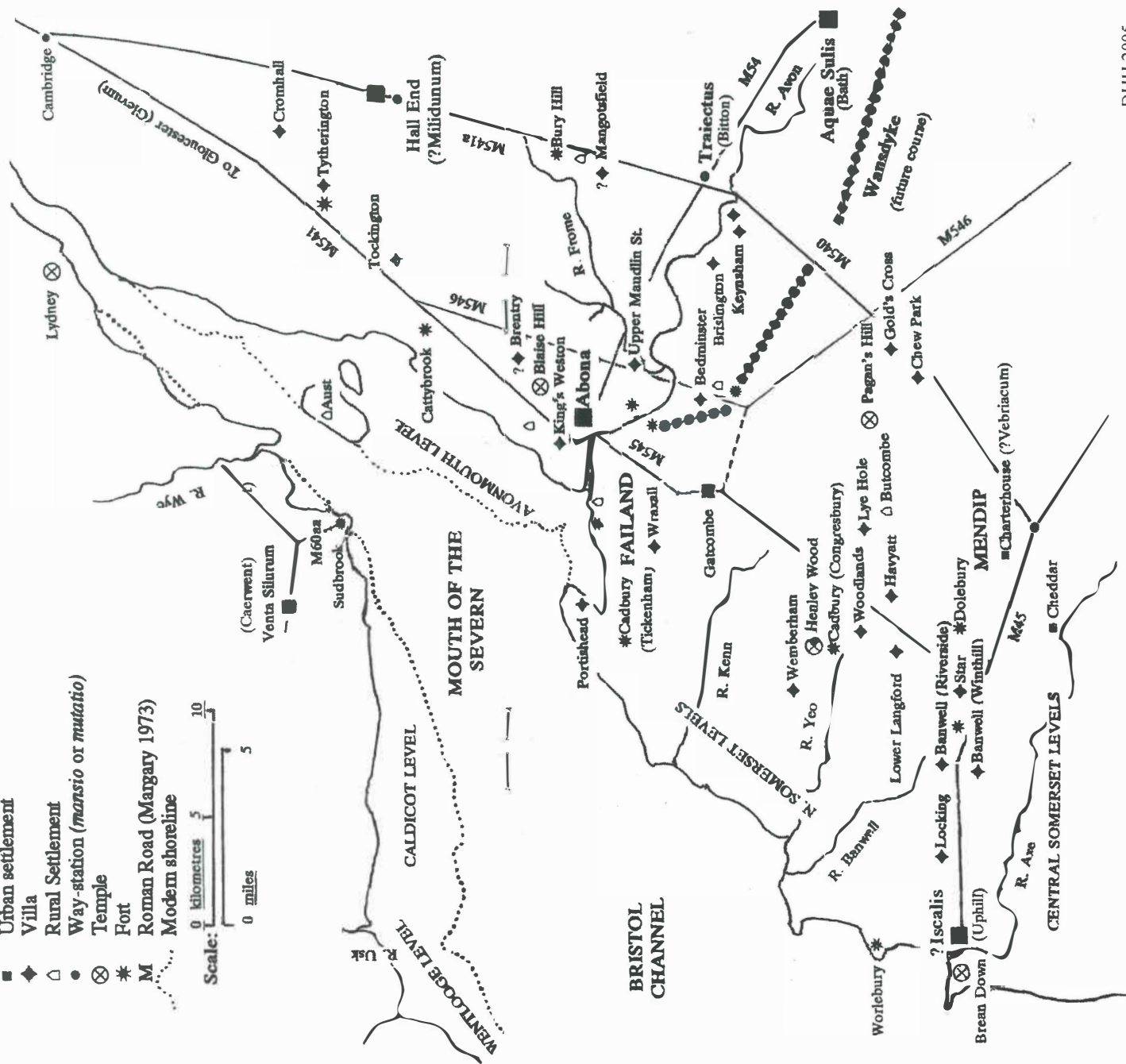
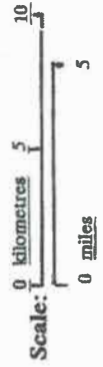
local markets and for the Army procurement agents. What could not be produced locally in the Bristol region would have been imported mainly through the port of *Abona*, or through the lesser port of *Isca*/Uphill on the river Axe. But the major facility of importation would have been *Abona* with (arguably) its floating harbour, available for mooring at all states of the tide, a hub of river and road-haulage, allowing access by road and river to the Roman *colonia* at Gloucester or to Bath and thence to the Fosse Way with its developed road networks. With the 'privatisation' of the Imperial estates of the Canton of the Belgae probably under the emperor Probus, the agricultural industry passed into the sphere of control of the villas, each situated within the boundaries of what Stephen Rippon (2000) has called its 'federative' estate, defined as a broad holding containing smaller specialised settlements. At the same time, the Imperial monopolies of the great extractive industries of lead, silver and zinc mining, and salt production, were apportioned as leases to civilian companies rather than being entirely sold off.

The villas of the Bristol region may therefore each have controlled satellite rural settlements of specialised activity, wherever their estates embraced a varied ecology. This is illustrated by the villas of the Gordano and North Somerset Levels, where estates were composed of both elevated arable land and also lower pastoral land reclaimed from wetland: the villa at Portishead villa, for example, would have controlled at least one satellite peasant settlement which specialised in the fattening of cattle on the freshwater marshland of the Gordano valley; Wraxall villa probably exercised the same control over subordinate rural settlements on the Tickenham and Nailsea moors. Likewise, the estate of King's Weston villa must have included tenured rural settlements on reclaimed land on the Avonmouth Level, which specialised in grazing, fishing and wild-fowling. The same 'federative' relationship may well have prevailed on the estates of Wemberham villa (the Kenn, Kingston and Wick moors), Congresbury's Woodlands villa (the Congresbury and Puxton moors), Banwell Riverside villa (Banwell moor), Locking villa (the Locking and Hutton moors). The villas may themselves have been organised within wider economic federations: the imposing, magisterial villa at Keynsham, in order to ensure income for its doubtless costly upkeep, may well have owned or exercised financial control over the lesser villa estates at Brislington and Bedminster Down.

The economy of the villa estates was therefore varied in nature. Besides their specialised farming enterprise, which was determined by local soil-type, altitude, drainage and so forth, the proprietors also exploited what varied bounty they could find in the geology and natural features of the landscape in which their villas stood. Starting from the north of our region,

THE REGION OF BRISTOL IN THE ROMAN PERIOD FROM 43 A.D. TO 410 A.D.

- KEY**
- Town
 - Urban settlement
 - ◆ Villa
 - ◇ Rural Settlement
 - △ Way-station (*mansio* or *mutatio*)
 - Temple
 - ⊗ Fort
 - * Roman Road (Mangary 1973)
 - M Modern shoreline



Cromhall villa, in its sheltered situation beneath the ridge of Priest Wood, seems from its outbuildings to have specialised in grain, but sited also upon carboniferous limestone, offers evidence of coal mining in an adjacent field. Brislington villa, in the valley of the Avon, sits squarely on the North Somerset coal measures. Besides producing grain here, the owners clearly also smelted iron with their coal, leaving quantities of iron-stone and slag in the villa's stratigraphy; and given the number of pewter flagons or jugs recovered from its well, they may have had a stake also in the production of the alloy. To the south of the Avon, the villas at Portishead and Wraxall with their own estates, may well have become satellites of the great walled villa and industrial 'town' of Gatcombe, contributing to the considerable corn production of its tenurial parent. It has been estimated that Gatcombe, at the height of its prosperity, controlled an estate of some 15,000 acres, requiring at least fifty families to provide the labour. Wraxall itself, although of short productive life, may well have mined coal-seams of the Nailsea and Backwell coalfield, besides controlling the specialised production of grain on its own estate farms on the Failand Ridge (probably at Naish House, East End Farm and Moat House Farm) while overseeing grazing at settlements on its adjacent moorland. But Gatcombe itself, to judge from the number of heavy quern stones recovered, was a major grain producer in its own right and besides other agricultural specialisms strongly indicated by the archaeology (cattle grazing and slaughter for salted meat, and horse-rearing) was also a significant producer of pewter-ware. The now submerged villa at Chew Valley Lake (Chew Park villa) yielded similar irrefutable evidence for major corn production, as well as soft-fruit growing (grapes, cherries, plums and so forth), with some cattle grazing and horse breeding. It also left evidence of light industry: leather-working from the resulting cowhide and even the extraction of lead from sources on Mendip (pewter-ware may also have been produced here). Involved in the agricultural enterprise of this villa would have been also the nearby small villa at Gold's Cross and the 15 acre Romano-British farming settlement at Herriott's Bridge. What is difficult to detect from the archaeology at Chew Park, Gatcombe (with its large slaughter-house) and the other sites where cattle rearing and fattening is in evidence, is the production of salt-beef; but given the salt-pans of Banwell (supplemented by those of the Brue valley to the south of our region), this staple Army foodstuff must have been, with grain, an important and profitable villa enterprise.

In the North Somerset area of our region, in Roman times, land was reclaimed by the construction of sea-defences between the mouths of the rivers Banwell and Kenn. Stephen Rippon (2000) ascribes this costly

venture to the co-operative enterprise of the North Somerset villa owners in the third or fourth centuries, while seeing its hydrographic technique as 'late unsystematic [land] reclamation'. But the dating of the whole project cannot be conclusively shown, and it seems equally probable that the planning, funding and provision of the huge labour-force required was an early Army enterprise, similar to that effected in the later reclamation of the Wentlooge Level, on the opposite shore of the Bristol Channel, known to have been completed by the II *Augusta* Legion. It is not inconceivable that the same Legion may have begun the North Somerset sea-walls enterprise early in the Conquest period, employing the forced labour of defeated southern Dobunnic troops, then easily rounded up. The Legion's withdrawal from the task before its completion, because of urgent campaigning requirements in South Wales against the Silures, may account for the 'unsystematic' nature of the subsequent drainage rhines alone, which Rippon remarks on. Land reclamation was a significant Imperial priority, for which the Army, with its corps of surveyors, engineers and resources of labour, was primarily responsible. The Emperor would have expected at least 20% of the land of any new Roman province to fall into his private hands, and the South West of Britain, with its valuable mineral resources, its quarries and potential ranch-lands from reclamation, must have immediately become the target of Vespasian's invading forces.

Before the later 'privatisation' of the land and the establishment of villa estates, this area of new land, which abutted on to the northern side of Mendip must already have allowed the specialised, large-scale rearing of sheep supervised by Imperial estate bailiffs and their farmhands, probably living in small farm tenements. Thus, in the Vale of Wrington, the villa which was later established at Lye Hole, with its dependent Romano-British farming settlement at Butcombe (of three stone cottages with five other enclosures), has yielded evidence of both grain and wool production. The villa estates on reclaimed land at Locking, Banwell (Riverside), Lower Langford and Havyatt, with those of Banwell (Winthill) and Star, all similarly engaged in raising wool sheep, would have used the nearby high, rough pastures of Bleadon Hill and Mendip as sheep-runs, employing the practice of localised transhumance. It is at most of the villas and dependent farms that the spinning and weaving of wool would have taken place (shale and pennant spindle-whorls and loom-weights are common finds), producing broadcloth for the Army and local markets. Also, where suitable arable was available in our region, the growing of flax (*linum usitatissimum*) must have given rise to the villa and cottage industries of linen-weaving for the perennial clothing market of togas, chemises, underwear and so forth.

Religions: Paganism and the Advent of Christianity

Important events meanwhile were taking place in the wider Roman world, of which the Romano-British of the Bristol region must have been aware. One such was Diocletian's persecution of Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century, which aimed at the suppression of ritual and liturgy in villa 'house churches', and the burning of holy Scriptures. This would have affected some of our region's wealthier population, such as the owners of the villas at Wemberham, Keynsham and Brislington, where the iconography of the mosaics (floriate cross, peacocks, doves, chalices and dolphins) suggests possible Christian meaning. At first the proscribed religion of slaves and the humbler classes of the Roman Empire, Christianity reached Britain in the late second century (according to Tertullian) and finally gained toleration as 'religio legitima' under Galienus in 260 A.D. It gained its permanent freedom, after Diocletian's death, in the Edict of Milan of 313 A.D., issued by the joint emperors Constantine and Licinius. Constantine, who had been proclaimed *Augustus* in York by his father's troops, was strongly influenced by his mother Helen, later canonised, who was a British Christian. But at the time of the creation of the Bristol region's mosaics with their arguably Christian motifs at the end of the third century, Britain was still for the most part pagan, as was four fifths of the rest of the Roman Empire.

Within a short time of the advent of Roman power in Britain in the first century A.D., the Roman administration had suppressed the politically dangerous Druidic priesthood of the Britons by force of arms and begun instead the assimilation of the Celtic gods into their own already eclectic pantheon. The dedication of the great temple of Roman Bath to both Sulis (Celtic) and Minerva (Roman) must have been a widely advertised and very public occasion of reconciliation in the town's history under Roman rule, of immense political significance in the South West of Britain as a whole (Cunliffe 2000). With the passing of time, the life of the people must have revolved increasingly around the new or re-dedicated Romano-British temples and shrines in town and countryside with their syncretic deities. The buried remains of these sacred buildings in our region are yet conspicuous for their number, quality and interest. In the Bristol area, those that have been found and examined are located on high ground, but many now lost would have existed in the setting of a woodland grove (*lucus* or *nemus*) or hard by a pool or spring of water which was considered numinous, identified by a tablet with a sacred inscription suspended from a tree. Most of the temples that survive in our region are found within hill-forts or in their proximity. The temple on Brean down, where a Bronze Age burial

mound and an Iron Age fort lie close at hand, may have been founded or refounded as the tutelary shrine for what this author proposes was the Roman port of *Isocalis*; the fort on Blaise Hill in Henbury appears to have contained the third century tutelary shrine of the port of *Abona*; the Roman temple in Henley Wood, on a Bronze Age site, lay adjacent to Cadbury Congresbury hill-fort and was rebuilt in the fourth century in model Romano-Celtic style; other temple sites are known or suspected in the hill-forts of Worlebury, Dolebury and Cadbury Tickenham. Only the major temple at Pagan's Hill, Chew Stoke, has no hill-fort at hand. The patronage of the temples lay in the hands of the local Romano-British villa-owning class of *honestiores*, and it is no surprise that temples fell into disrepair and finally into ruin as that class adopted the Christian religion or, eschewing day-to-day life in their villas, chose the safety of town-life behind defensive walls. The fate of Pagans' Hill is a testimony to the times. Enlarged at the end of the third century as the owners of the new villas of the region took up residence, Pagan's Hill could boast a fine new octagonal *cella* with a vaulted ambulatory three metres wide, a sacred well fifteen metres deep and accommodation for pilgrims and priests. But in common with other temples, the sacred complex had fallen out of use by the end of the fourth century, at exactly the time when the villas themselves were losing their desirability as dwellings of the rich, who found both safety and places of worship in urban surroundings. In this regard, mention should be made of the carved freestone altar found in *Abona* itself (now in the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery), which strongly indicates that this Roman town, apparently devoid of the usual public buildings, at least possessed one temple for public use. Although uninscribed and therefore hard to date, certain of the altar's motifs (an eagle surmounting a globe and a cornucopia) suggest it was dedicated to the divine Emperor, appropriate to a town of Imperial foundation, although both Jupiter and, suitably for a sea-port, Neptune have also been proposed.

During his return visit to Britain at some time between 312 and 314 A.D., Constantine, perhaps bringing a constitutional conception of Diocletian to fruition, redesignated the island as the Diocese of the *Britanniae* ('the Britains') and divided it into provinces, by which the Bristol region became part of *Britannia Prima* with its capital at Cirencester. The British people of our region, after two centuries or so of anonymity as faceless *Belgae*, with their administrative centre at Bath, regained *Corinium Dobunorum* as their capital and with it their ancient identity and patrimony amongst the tribe of the Dobunni. In 324 A.D. Constantine shifted the political focus of the entire Roman world to Byzantium on the Bosphorus, which he renamed Constantinople, and issued coins bearing the legend 'Beata Tranquilitas'.

After Constantine the Great: the Problem of Coastal Raiding

This blessed condition of universal peace hardly outlasted his enlightened rule. At Constantine's death in 337 A.D. the Empire was divided between his three sons, dissension arose and Britain entered a period of serious internal unrest when its ruler Constantine II was defeated and killed at Aquileia by his brother Constans. The latter made a crucial diplomatic mission to these Islands to settle the problem of Britain in the winter of 342-343 A.D., a season regarded as dangerous for sea voyages when ships were normally laid up (*mare clausum*). At the same time, taking advantage of the critical political and social situation, raids were again launched from Ireland against the western coast of Britain, in search of plunder both from the new villas of the Bristol region and from the older, wealthier villas of the Cotswolds, within easy reach of the Severn shore. The coastal defences of western Britain had been underpinned in the normal course of events by flotillas of the *Classis Britannica*; from about the mid-third century, however, the Fleet in Britain falls from the records, and it is possible that smaller regional fleets operated instead, for example, the possibility of a semi-independent *Classis Ivernica* ('Hibernian/Irish Sea Fleet') has been floated by Mason (2003). This unit may have operated from *Abona* in coordination with the coastal fortress of Cardiff and the old legionary fortress at Caerleon. But the integrity of any Irish Sea Fleet must have been weakened during these raids of the 340s A.D. in order to assist in repelling simultaneous attacks from the now seaborne Picts in the north (which by-passed Hadrian's Wall) and from continental Saxons and Frisians in the east. These new, apparently cooperative raids came to a remarkable climax twenty years later.

The years 367 and 368 A.D. mark the apogee of this type of raiding, which the soldier-historian Ammianus Marcellinus calls the Great Barbarian Conspiracy (*barbarica conspiratio*), when Britain was again attacked on all sides at the same time, but with greater ferocity and consistency than hitherto: from the north by Caledonian Picts, from the north-west by *Attacotti* of (probably) the Isles, by Hibernian *scotti* from Ireland, and from the east and south by continental Saxons and their Germanic colleagues, Frisians and Franks. The historical reality of this phenomenal hostility has been challenged recently by certain historians and archaeologists, who descry in Ammianus Marcellinus the distortions of clientism; but Ammianus was born c.330 A.D., therefore he and the Imperial court he served were contemporaries of these particular events, and his credibility in this sophisticated, highly educated milieu must have been dear to him. Indeed, there was nothing essentially improbable that this onslaught on the island of Britain should have been co-ordinated in a pre-arranged plan amongst its traditional enemies and that it should

have been ferocious - after all, the Empire had suffered from many confederations of Germanic invaders against its continental land borders in the distant and recent past. The events may have been especially threatening to the survival of the Diocese because they may well have been encouraged from within both by disaffected elements in the Roman Army and by disgruntled British leaders: surprisingly and suspiciously, both of the highest Roman military commanders were neutralised or killed: the *Comes Britanniarum* (lit. 'Count' of Britain) commander-in-chief of the mobile armies, and the *Dux Litoris Saxonici* ('Duke' of the Saxon Shore) with his static army in their chain of coastal forts. Ammianus reports a crisis of authority and order in Britain at this juncture, with the whole Diocese 'on the verge of collapse', its inhabitants 'defeated and harassed'. Traces of the raids in the archaeological record are now doubted by certain archaeologists, but regions in the West and South West of Britain had been suffering from historically verifiable, sporadic sea-borne attacks from Ireland for over a century. Evidence of Ammianus's catastrophe in the region of Bristol can be found in the remains of its villas, particularly along the course of the Avon, which were the immediate object of the plunderers. Whilst neither *Abona* nor Gatcombe with its five metre-thick walls have left traces of destruction at this point in their archaeological record (another reason perhaps to credit *Abona* with town walls), there is strong evidence of contemporary damage or destruction at the villas of King's Weston, Brislington, Keynsham and possibly beyond, which defies the charge of coincidence (Branigan 1972).

That there was a serious conjunction of destructive forces aimed at Britain at this time can also be judged by the *démarche* of the Roman state in their British policy over the next two years. Roman authority in the Diocese was only restored at great cost by the energies of three exceptional soldiers sent from Rome by the emperor Valentinian I: Count Theodosius (father of the future emperor in the East of the same name and therefore favoured by Ammianus) and the generals Civilis and Dulcitius. Ammianus, an old-fashioned patriot, approvingly reports Theodosius's purging of treacherous elements in the Roman Army and in the professional and civilian leadership of country, as well as his promotion of the 'strengthening of towns and walls': a time for the repair perhaps of the damaged defences at the important naval port of *Abona* also, whose garrison had resisted attack but clearly had not been able to protect the villas in its immediate vicinity.

This surge of restoration did not extend to the villas of our region, the prime targets of the Conspiracy's raids. Indeed, archaeology has shown that patching-up rather than professional restoration took place. The

material condition of our villas remained in a degraded state. This probably indicates that their owners, having first retreated into the walled fastnesses of *Abona* or Gatcombe, then turned their fine accommodation over to the labour force, perhaps leaving the day-to-day business of their estates in the hands of farm managers. The dating of these catastrophic events of which the villas appear to have left traces is based on coin evidence, which although not now considered conclusive, points nevertheless, in all probability, to the actualities of 367-368 A.D. The west wing of King's Weston villa, which was burned down, was left ruinous, whilst the portico remained unrepaired and the front corridor later adapted to use as a kitchen. However, the mutilated skeleton discovered in the hypocaust is now thought not to have been the victim of fourth-century Irish raiders but conceivably that of Vikings in 918 A.D. (Boon 1993). At Brislington, where the bones of four or five people were found in the villa's well, two rooms indicate damage by fire. The stone-tiled roofs were not replaced, probably receiving a thatched covering instead. At Keynsham, the decline of this splendid patrician villa may have taken place in two phases: the first may have been precipitated by the brutal intervention of Paulus Catena (Paul 'the Chain'), the agent of Constantius II, who undertook purges of the supporters of the British usurper Magnentius after 353 A.D.; the second phase may have been the work of the Irish raiders under consideration, when the *oecus* or main reception room was set on fire, causing the wall to collapse upon an adult occupant whose skeleton was recovered in the excavations. Although the finest villa of the whole area, with architectural hints of Ravennate palaces, Keynsham nevertheless lost part of its main corridor to a cooking facility of hypocaust tiles constructed upon charred rubble. The nearby villa at Newton St Loe also overlooking the Avon, just outside our region towards Bath, seems also to have been destroyed by fire perhaps in the same period of raiding (Russell 1985, 1992). Other lesser villas in our region in the valley of the Avon (Bedminster, Somerdale, perhaps Portishead) may well have suffered a similar fate, as also those lying within a few hours marching distance from river or shore, such as Tockington Park and others in the northern group, or Locking and the two Banwells in the southern group; but the evidence from archaeology (specifically numismatic) is not always conclusive in these cases. Fire too often destroyed or damaged villas by pure accident; for example, the villa at Star in our region suffered so, whilst the villa at Wraxall became redundant and was simply abandoned by 337 A.D., its function probably assumed by Gatcombe.

The fate is unknown of the very many humbler Romano-British establishments - small villas, farms, rural settlements and industrial sites - which occupy most of the Bristol region, such as those discovered at

Shirehampton, Cattybrook, Crook's Marsh Farm (Everton 1981) and other sites on the Avonmouth and Severn levels at Rookery Farm, Brynleaze Farm, Washingpool Farm, Rockingham Farm; also at Pilning, Severn Beach, Lawrence Weston (Parker 1984, Boore 1999), Henbury (Russell 1983), Horfield, Winterbourne (Russell 2004), Stoke Gifford, Bradley Stoke (Samuel 2001), Bailey's Court Farm at Little Stoke, Emerson's Green, Rodway Hill in Mangotsfield, Stone Hill at Hanham (Russell 1993), Whitchurch, Hengrove (Inn's Court, Filwood Park: Williams 1983, Cox 1997), Congresbury, Abbot's Leigh (Gardner 1998), Ashton Court, Weston-in-Gordano and Portbury. Most of these locations would not have provided the quantity or quality of plunder which the Irish rovers were seeking and, except as a convenient source of victuals or worse, would have been scorned as serious targets.

Usurpations and Decline: the Late Fourth Century A.D.

An overall decline in the quality of civilian life in the last four decades of Roman rule in Britain has frequently been noted. This was aggravated by the degradation of the Diocese's political life, which in turn was determined by the sorry state of security both in Britain itself and, crucially, in the wider Empire. Largely because of its position at the margins of Empire, Britain offered the possibility of a more detached view of catastrophes on the Continent and, in turn, the invention of opportunistic politico-military solutions by ambitious soldiers of senior rank stationed in the Island. The single factor most disruptive of the integrity and security of the Roman world was Hunnish pressure beyond the Empire's eastern borders and the consequent mass migration westwards of displaced Germanic and Slavic tribes into its territories. It was in part for these reasons that Britain, insulated from migrations by land, became the cradle instead for conspiracies and usurpations against the legitimate emperors. The list of serious infringements of the *Pax Romana* begins with the creation by Marcus Postumus of the so-called Gallic Empire (*Imperium Galliarum*) in 259 A.D., in which Britain played a subordinate but complicit role for thirteen years. This was followed by the usurpation of Imperial authority by the Admiral of the fleets in Britain, M. Aurelius Carausius and his colleague Allectus, from 286 to 296 A.D. Some fifty years later, from 350 to 353 A.D. the usurpation by Magnentius took place in Britain, followed in short time, as we have seen, by the treachery and self-serving of high-born Roman and British elements in the Great Barbarian Conspiracy of 367-368 A.D.

Finally there occurred the signal case of the usurpation of legitimate authority in Britain by Magnus Maximus from 383 to 388 A.D., whose career is worth brief investigation. Magnus's five years at the pinnacle

of political and military life in Britain and Gaul were the stuff of splendid legend, arguably causing the rebirth of what was a sense of supra-tribal British patriotism for the first time since Boudicca's rebellion of 60 A.D. An Hispano-Roman with a British wife, Magnus entered the earliest bardic traditions of the Welsh as the hero Maxen Wledig. Brittonic oral literature, which must have circulated widely in our South West of Britain before its annexation two centuries later by the Saxons, portrays him as a leader with popular as well as aristocratic support amongst a people dissatisfied with the lack of authority and military grip on the part of Imperial Rome. He took Roman and British troops, including units from Hadrian's Wall, to Gaul, where he defeated the emperor Gratian on the field of battle. Magnus finally established a pioneering settlement of Britons in Armorica, later renamed Brittany (lit. 'Little Britain'). This Romano-Celtic province on the far side of the English Channel would later become a refuge for many of the British of the West country, including those of our region, who were fleeing from the Saxon terror (Giot et al. 2003).

Abona at this period therefore must have seen considerable naval activity connected with this massive bid for power on the part of Magnus Maximus - not only the provision of transport ships for the usurper's legions but also perhaps for military families and settlers bound for Armorica. The death of Magnus in 388 A.D. at the hands of the Emperor of the East, Theodosius I, had lasting effects: thereafter seamless Roman power in Britain was never fully reinstated. Instead, a form of devolution appears to have been enacted: the administration of Britain was probably delegated to the Romano-British cantons (*civitates*). Militarily, the situation declined rapidly, inviting further attacks by barbarians. The Caledonii and neighbouring tribes amongst the Picts unleashed their fury on the hated Wall of Hadrian. Erected more than two and a half centuries earlier, it remained at once symbol and instrument of Roman control. After this onslaught, the Wall was never fully repaired again. By 395 A.D. sea-borne incursions from Ireland under Niall of the Nine Hostages had resumed, in which the entire west coast of Britain suffered, including our own region. His plundering of Chester (*Deva*) was followed by that of Caerleon, the once grand legionary fortress now reduced in size and devoid of a significant military presence. The port of *Abona* would certainly have been directly involved, as a source of Auxiliary naval units, but how many war ships may by now have been mustered, and in what condition of sea-worthiness, it is impossible to know. What is clear is the evidence from archaeology. Both at *Abona* and Banwell (Riverside) villa, late fourth-century bronze buckle attachment-plates have been found, whilst at King's Weston villa

spearheads of the same period have been unearthed. Both types of artifact throw light on the military security of our region at this time: they suggest the presence of a part-time local militia rather than that of units of a full-time and fully equipped professional Army.

Political, Social and Economic Stress of the Early Fifth Century A.D.

Although by 399 A.D. Britain, with Gaul and Spain, was governed by one of Rome's greatest generals, Stilicho, Regent of the Western Empire under the young emperor Honorius, order was restored only partially and temporarily. Roman hold over Britain to the north of York, delegated by Magnus Maximus a decade before to the local *civitates*, was never resumed, but probably entrusted by Stilicho once more to the cities' *ordines* (town councils) of Romano-British patricians, reviving or further enhancing the sense of British regional identity.

A series of troop withdrawals followed, which had dire consequences for the security of the Province as a whole. In 401-2 A.D. Stilicho was obliged to detach numerous units of the Army from Britain for the wars against Alaric and his Goths in Northern Italy. In the meantime, what were to be the last supplies of bulk copper coinage dating from 395 to 402 A.D. entered Britain, some perhaps through the port of *Abona*; and in 405 or at the latest 408 A.D., the last official shipment of gold coin to Britain was made, a significant event, since it was only with gold that Roman troops and civil servants were paid. In these critical circumstances, further imperial usurpations in Britain were attempted: by Marcus in 406, then in 407 A.D. by Gratian, a Briton of the native aristocracy, who was assassinated shortly afterwards for his procrastinations by the Romano-British troops who had elected him. More substantial was the usurpation attempted by Constantine III in 407 A.D., the 'benedigeit Custennin' of early Welsh literature, who withdrew what remained of the Roman garrisons and crossed the Channel to defend Gaul with his lieutenant Gerontius (the 'Gereint' of Welsh folklore), finally to oppose the forces of the Emperor Honorius on the field of battle. The late Roman historian Orosius reports that Britain remained henceforth denuded of her experienced troops, with only 'the veterans and young' left behind. Although recognised as co-emperor by Honorius, Constantine's imperial aspirations ended in failure and death. Left to all intents and purposes defenceless, the Diocese of Britain soon became subject once more to heavy sea-borne raids along the east coast by Saxons and Frisians in 408 and 409 A.D. Whereas twenty years earlier Magnus Maximus had interrupted his campaigns on the continent to return to Britain and drive away Irish and Scottish raiders, Constantine made no such gesture. On their own, the British civilians could mount

no defence against the raids, while Constantine's heavy war taxes and exactions of grain from Britain were directed entirely to the support of his armies on the continent. The Romano-British leadership of the provincial capitals and tribal towns, driven to despair by this intractable situation, acted it seems for the first time in their history as a nation. They expelled Constantine's redundant officials and appealed directly to Honorius in Rome for military aid. In the following year, 410 A.D., the British received Honorius's reply (the so-called Honorian Rescript). This, if genuinely addressed to the British, formally placed the defence of the Diocese not in the hands of any high-ranking Roman official, *Comes* or *Dux Britanniarum*, but in the hands of the civilian leadership - the people themselves.

These far-reaching historical events in the last half of the fourth century and the first years of the fifth took place at a time when the British economy suddenly and unexpectedly entered a period of considerable stress. The political fragmentation of the Western Roman Dioceses, caused by an unprecedented series of challenges to the Empire, was aggravated here in 'the Britains' not only by unrelenting incursions of sea-borne raiders, but also by meteorological and geological difficulties. Recent research has revealed a concomitant deterioration of the climate in Britain and also progressive marine transgression, resulting in poor harvests and the coastal erosion of the grain-lands in two of the most productive areas of wheat production in Britain: the Lincolnshire Wash and the reclaimed lands of the Severn Estuary - of which latter zone the Bristol region formed part (M. E. Jones 1996). This was the challenging economic and social background of the most important political event in Britain's early history: the end of the Roman occupation of this Island.

Vale Roma: the Parting of the Ways

Fundamentally, therefore, the Greek historian Zosimus was correct when he noted for the year 409 A.D. that 'the Britons won their own freedom by expelling their Roman governors and by setting up their own government', but the circumstances of this political event are more complex than even he allows. The 'Roman governors' in question had been appointed after all by a usurper, and it is an open question whether the majority of the native British leadership was as anti-Roman as Zosimus's history implies. The Britons' appeal to the legitimate Emperor speaks of a deep-seated loyalty to Rome, which transcends any previous support they may have given to the usurper Constantine. Probably the Romano-British of the Bristol region were of the loyalists' opinion. No longer now a wealthy area, with its degraded villas become mere farm-

houses in a deteriorating rural economy, with Gatcombe no longer the productive phenomenon of the previous century, these earliest Bristolians (if the anachronism can be tolerated) would have remembered with growing nostalgia the industrious days of their local Imperial port at *Abona*, the region's economic hub, when regular government money maintained the quaysides, naval buildings and installations, as well as its town walls, whilst coin and commerce flowed freely into its markets and harbour. Certainly the pro-Roman sympathies of the Britons were restored in the years following the execution of Constantine III in 411 A.D. Thirty-five years later what amounts to a national appeal was made, unsuccessfully, to the *ter*-Consul Aëtius to bring his Roman legions over from Gaul in order to save once more the former Roman Diocese, now 'groaning' under the unprecedented pressures of relentless invasion and annexation by the Saxon incomers.

Nevertheless, the economy of the British regions had to keep going during these dark years of the fifth and sixth centuries, whatever the political and economic conditions and whatever the prevailing means of exchange (coin or barter). There were still mouths to feed between the crimes and distractions perpetrated first by sea-borne Irish marauders from the west, then later by Saxons, Frisians and possibly Franks infiltrating into our region in raids from both the east and the south coasts of Britain. Capitals of provinces, such as *Corinium* in the case of the Bristol region, would still have functioned under their patrician council (*ordo*), at least whilst stocks of coin lasted - perhaps for thirty or forty years after the final importations of c.408 A.D. Evidence of fifth century life even at Cirencester, the second largest town of Roman Britain, is scarce. What there is points to the probability that the city's *curiales* (officials), the *praepositi* and *decuriones*, finally operated from the security of the amphitheatre outside the walls, from where, as long as coin circulated, demands for normal taxation of the population would have been made. Requisitions of produce from rural estates for the upkeep of a military capability would have been made - whether residual Army units or (as seems the case from archaeological finds) local militias were involved. In this context of profound historical change, the role of *Corinium*'s provincial Christian Bishop would doubtless have exercised a stabilising and unifying influence amongst the Christian flock of the scattered towns and settlements of his diocese, as was occurring also in Gaul and Italy similarly ravaged by barbarian incursions and deprived of other central authority.

Although the governance of Britain was lacking orthodox *imperium* (legitimate Imperial authority) for long periods in the fourth century, as the Roman troops set up or deposed the leadership at will, there appears

to be little evidence of anarchy at the level of the Romano-British citizenry in the Bristol region. In Gaul at around the turn of the century 'masterless men' (*bagaudae*) roamed and plundered as Imperial authority collapsed, whereas in that part of Britain still free from Saxon occupation, the rule of law appears to have prevailed, even if there are hints in historians (Zosimus) of some civil unrest. Ken Dark has suggested that regional secular government continued to be exercised from Cirencester into the late fifth century, followed by a fracture of *Britannia Prima* along the line of the Wansdyke (Dark 2000): to the north of this sub-Roman rampart (Iles 1988, Gardner 1998) urban bureaucracies (possibly under *rectores*, mentioned by Gildas) still governed a rump of the old Roman region, whilst to the south of Wansdyke the remainder was governed by a hierarchy of local 'kings' (*reges*) based at refurbished old tribal hill-forts such as Cadbury Congresbury. The region of Bristol in late Roman times, which lay on both sides of Wansdyke, was therefore broken in two, shattered politically, militarily and socially, if not culturally. As regards the latter issue, the *stilus altus* (high Latin style) of the British monk Gildas's history, *The Ruin of Britain*, is evidence of the considerable literary sophistication still of his readership, and therefore speaks of significant Roman cultural survival in the South West of Britain, including our region, probably into the first half of the sixth century.

It was inevitable that, in the course of the fifth century, ancient British cantonal or tribal leadership amongst families of the Romano-British aristocracy should begin once more to take over the reins where the late Roman administration was either deficient or simply impotent because of the increasing absence on the Continent of the regular units of the Roman army. In what must be seen as the overall decline of *Romanitas* of the classical model in Britain of the last forty years of the fifth century, many towns in the Diocese appear from archaeological evidence to have fallen into slow decay, even before Anglo-Saxon invasion and occupation had taken place. Yet there is occasional evidence of an intermittent, restored prosperity in the wider south-west of Britain. Here, where Anglo-Saxon adventurism and settlement in the east of the country remained still a distant threat, faith in a cleansing return of the Roman legions (which had happened twice in the second century and three times in the fourth) must have remained strong. New mosaic floors were laid in this period in Gloucestershire, to the north of our region, at Whittington and Hucclecote, whilst quality building was undertaken at Frocester and Chedworth. These indicators of a new prosperity do not, however, extend to the Bristol region and must be regarded as ephemeral. At the villas of King's Weston, Brislington and

even at the great courtyard villa of Keynsham with its important mosaics, the late fourth-century picture is one which suggests that there had been no return to the standard of Roman civilian life achieved before Magnentius's attempted usurpation of 350-353 A.D. The archaeological remains at villas indicate, as we have seen, rather retreat from the reinvestment of capital, recompensed by an inevitable economic and material decay.

The last decades of the fourth century and the first of the fifth in the Bristol region, therefore, appear equally inauspicious. By c.380 A.D. the walled industrial estate at Gatcombe had been abandoned, and although archaeology shows that it was partly resettled some twenty years later, its former high productivity in agriculture and metal-working was never resumed before the site fell altogether out of use in the course of the fifth century. The picture at Sea Mills is hardly different. The archaeology of *Abona* indicates occupation into the early fifth century; thereafter this walled town appears to have fallen into a decline, several late intramural burials indicating the final disappearance of effective Roman control (Ellis 1987b, Etheridge 2002 and 2005); but the port itself must have continued to function as a valuable asset of the region. Indeed, there are no material signs of systematic destruction by force or fire amongst the buildings, domestic or commercial, within the town itself, its walls probably falling, at some much later time, through the effects of natural decay.

Vae Victis: the Saxon Anschluss

It is frequently forgotten that the Roman Empire survived the several barbarian sacks of Rome which disfigured the opening decades of the fifth century, beginning with that by Alaric's Visigoths in 410 A.D. The core and centre of the Late Empire lay by now essentially at Constantinople (Byzantium), which did not succumb to conquest until the Muslim onslaught of 1453. It is relationships with the centre of Roman power in the eastern Mediterranean, rather than with its more ancient western counterpart, that mark the end of the history of the Bristol region in Roman times. Contacts with the western Empire and with Rome as its focus declined drastically in fifth and sixth-century Britain, as Anglo-Saxon power spread inexorably if sporadically westwards towards our region, in a long series of territorial annexations by force or fraud. At the same time distant Rome itself became the target and toy of Germanic or Turkic powers: Visigoths, Huns, Vandals, Ostrogoths. Only in spiritual matters did Rome feel sufficiently empowered in 429 A.D. to exercise its duty of care towards the British by sending orthodox missionaries led by St Germanus - St Garmon of the Welsh - to counteract the heresies

of the British monk Pelagius. In other matters, the writ of the capital city of the Empire in the West no longer ran in its former Diocese of the Britanniae. But the evidence from pottery uncovered in the South West of Britain shows, on the other hand, that direct trading contacts with Byzantium were still being made in the fifth and sixth centuries of our era. It is possible that a few samples of fineware datable to the first half of the sixth century came as gifts, rather than by trade, from the emperor Justinian at Constantinople, as part of his diplomatic strategy amongst the 'lost provinces' to restore the Roman Empire in the West. As such, this ceramic evidence may indicate that the native British leadership (forerunners of Gildas's *tyranni*) still recognised themselves, if no more than nostalgically, as *Romani*, even if Roman authority, at least in secular matters, was now exercised from Constantinople. Signal finds of Byzantine amphorae and ceramics have also been made as far afield as Ireland and western Scotland. The major sites in question in the South West of Britain are Tintagel, South Cadbury in Somerset and, in the Bristol region, Cadbury Camp at Congresbury (Harris 2003). But these locations were too far for even the long reach of Justinian's armies. His brilliant generals Belisarius and Narses managed to wrest Italy from the Ostrogoths and restore it to the Empire in a campaign which lasted from 535 to 554, only to be forced to cede it to the Langobards fourteen years later. No such heroic imperialism was to wrest Britain from the Anglo-Saxons, and restore her to the British and to the Empire. The high political promises symbolised by the luxury ceramics of Cadbury Congresbury unfortunately came to nothing.

The multivallate hill-top fort at Cadbury Congresbury, with its fifth to seventh century cemetery in adjacent Henley Wood, is now regarded as an 'élite residence' of the period of British re-Celticisation. Constructed originally in the pre-Roman Iron Age, it was re-occupied as a security measure probably when the walls of nearby Gatcombe could no longer perform their function, in the long century and a half following the enforced departure of Constantine III's inefficient Roman officials in 409 A.D. It was refurbished and reoccupied hill-top forts of this sort, lying to the south of the protective fifth-sixth century ramparts of Wansdyke, which would have supplied much of the military force and capability of our region during this period. The neighbouring hill-forts of Worlebury, Brean Down and Dolebury may have functioned similarly, if less conspicuously. To the north of Wansdyke, the rural settlements of the Avon Valley in our region, which succeeded the now ruined and defunct Roman villas, may have finally become part of a petty sub-Roman polity, perhaps under tribal and Church leadership, centred on Bath. The population of the Bristol region, lying to the north of

Wansdyke, must have found refuge from hostilities of any sort initially within *Abona*; thereafter, following the decay of the town walls, they probably reused the old hill-top forts of Blaise, King's Weston, Portbury, Clifton, Stokeleigh and Burwalls. Armed contingents from the whole of our region, both north and south of Wansdyke, must have buried any political differences in order to join other forces of the British polities born out of the old *Britannia Prima* province, to do battle allegedly at *Deorham* (Dyrham) in 577 A.D., against the gathered Saxons of the Upper Thames led by Cuthwine and Ceawlin. That struggle, whatever its true nature, date or location, the shadow of which surely falls across the pages of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, was lost to the Germanic fyrds. The last function of *Abona*, before it lost its Romano-British name for ever, was in all probability to act as a port of embarkation for refugees from the ensuing Saxon annexation of the minor British polities of the lower Severn Valley, of which Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath, although much depleted as townships, must have been the administrative capitals. These fugitives, for whom Roman Britain was now only the stuff of their bardic poetry and perhaps of family anecdote, surely included many from the Bristol region. But they would have entertained the hope for a better future which was not entirely misplaced, as they set out for the relative security of unconquered post-Roman South Wales or the distant shores of Armorica, the future Brittany.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study of the Roman period in the Bristol region follows, but does not attempt to supplant, the Association's pamphlet *The Romans in the Bristol Area*, which was written by my friend and former colleague at the University of Bristol, Keith Branigan, and published in this series in 1969. His contribution was characterised by the breadth and precision of his archaeological expertise, which is still beyond price. My own contribution is more that of a historical linguist and cultural historian, specialisms at the root of my professional dedication to the late classical world of the Mediterranean and to the culture of early medieval Italy. Keith's plan of Gatcombe, the Roman site at Flax Bourton which his work did so much to uncover and to clarify, appears in these pages and is gratefully acknowledged. My thanks are also due to my wife, Myra, whose mathematics disclosed to me the relevance of similar triangles in Roman surveying, and to my son Stephen for his critical reading of the text.

APPENDIX A: ANTONINE ITINERARY XIV

The section of the Antonine Itinerary XIV (from Caerleon to Silchester), which treats the crossing of the Severn Estuary (Caerwent to Abona at Sea Mills) and onwards to Bath, reads as follows:

Item alio itinere ab Isca [from Caerleon] ad Callevam [to Silchester] m.p. ciii [103 Roman miles]:

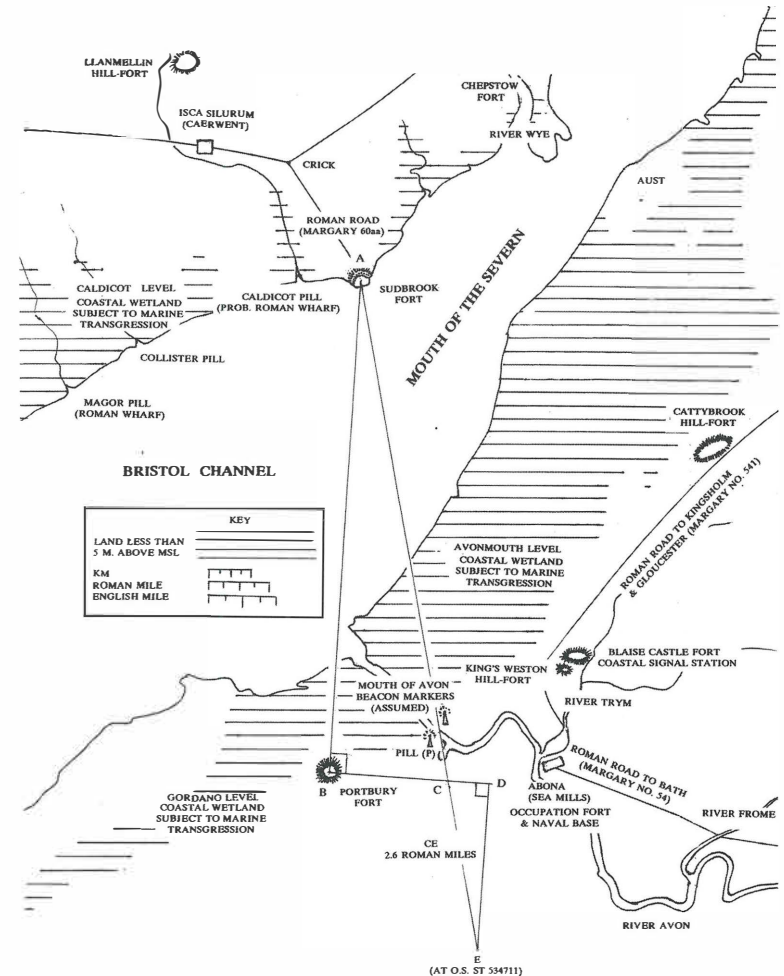
[to Caerwent] Venta Silurum m.p. viiii [9 Roman miles]
 [to Abona at Sea Mills] Abone m.p. xiiii [14 Roman miles]
 [to Bitton: see text] Traiectus m.p. viiii [9 Roman miles]
 [to Bath] Aquis Sulis m.p. vi [6 Roman miles]

Note: 1 Roman mile (m.p.) = 0.9193 English miles

APPENDIX B: CALCULATING THE DISTANCE OF THE SEVERN ESTUARY CROSSING IN THE ROMAN PERIOD METHOD OF SURVEY

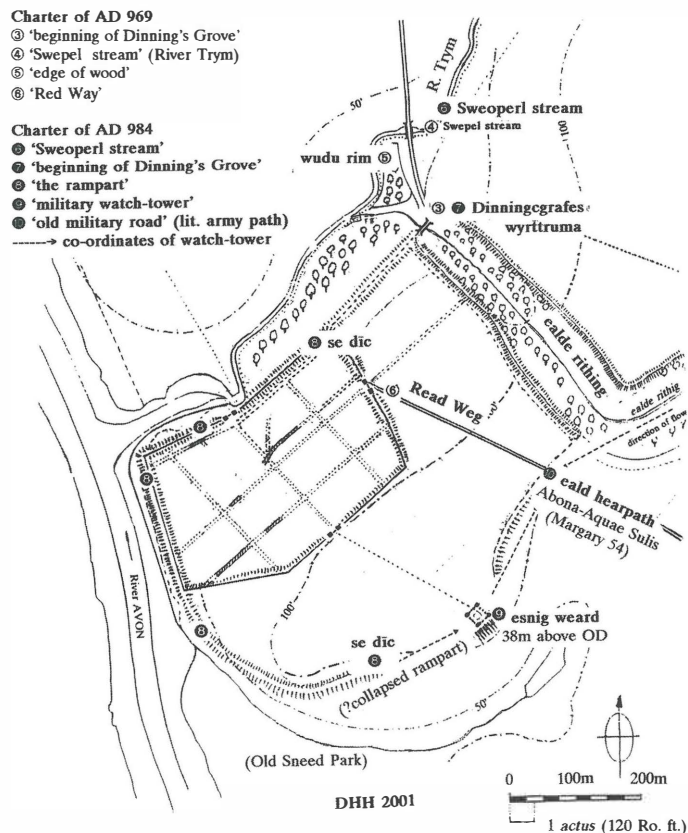
1. Set up a theodolite (*groma*) upon a chosen vantage point (B), such as Portbury's ancient hill-top earthwork, opposite and in view of Roman occupied Sudbrook Fort (A) on the west bank of the Mouth of the Severn (identified as necessary by smoke from a beacon).
2. Lay out on the ground, by theodolite, the base-line BC at right angles to the line of sight towards Sudbrook Fort (A), such that AC passes through Pill (P) at Mouth of Avon.
3. Extend on the ground BC to D, such that CD is a known proportion of BC (in this example one third).
4. Drop a perpendicular from D to cut, on the ground, extended AC at F.
5. Measure on the ground CE by surveyor's chain [CE=2.9 Roman miles in this example] which, by the theorem of similar triangles, will be the known proportion of the gross distance AC across the Severn [therefore $AC = 3 \times 2.9 = 8.7$ Roman miles].
6. Finally, subtract PC [0.5 Roman miles in this example] from AC [i.e. $8.7 - 0.5 = 8.2$ Roman miles] which gives the shortest distance across the Severn Estuary from Sudbrook Fort to the mouth of the Avon at Pill.
7. Add to this, measured by surveyor's chain, the following distances: 3.7 Roman miles from Venta Silurum (Caerwent) to Sudbrook Fort via Crick, plus 1.8 Roman miles from Mouth of the Avon at Pill to Abona [$8.2 + 3.7 + 1.8 = 13.7$ Roman miles].
8. The Antonine Itinerary XIV gives this distance as 14 Roman miles, therefore shows a deficit of 0.3 Roman miles, a percentage error of (-)2.14%.

CALCULATING THE SEVERN ESTUARY CROSSING IN THE ROMAN PERIOD



APPENDIX C: THE SITE OF ABONA ACCORDING TO THE ANGLO-SAXON CHARTERS OF STOKE BISHOP OF 969 A.D. AND 984 A.D.

The only account of the site of Abona before modern times is that which occurs incidentally in the tenth century Anglo-Saxon charters of the tithing of Stoke Bishop in the parish of Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol (Higgins 2002). Here the Anglo-Saxon surveyor, in defining a portion of land in the parish for legal purposes, walked through the historic Roman site and recorded landmarks on it. He refers to the whole site with its masonry ruins (possibly town walls) as the *esnig maed* (military meadow), notes the course of its ramparts (*se dīc*), picks out the course of a military road (the *Read weg* [Red Way]/*Eald hearpath* [Army road] which joins Sea Mills and Bath) and selects within the site a tower which he terms the *esnig weard* (military watch-tower). This was arguably of Roman construction and stood on the highest part of the site, overlooking the town and allowing uninterrupted views of the river Avon towards its mouth. The street-grid here, and the line of the town walls, is conjectural, based on the find-spots of earlier excavations (full account in Bennett 1972, Ellis 1987).



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