

BOOK REVIEW

Conquering the Ocean: The Roman Invasion of Britain. By RICHARD HINGLEY. *Ancient Warfare and Civilization.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xiii +312. Hardback, \$29.95. ISBN: 9780190937416

During the 2008-2009 construction of a bypass in Weymouth, Dorset in preparation for the 2012 London Olympics, archaeologists discovered a mass grave of decapitated male skeletons at Ridgeway Hill. The dead men were initially supposed to be plucky, local defenders killed by invading Romans: “We think that these dismembered bodies are likely to be native Iron Age Britons. The question is — how did they die and who killed them,” said dig head, David Score, of Oxford Archaeology. ‘Were they fighting amongst themselves? Were they executed by the Romans? Did they die in a battle with the Romans? The exciting scenario for us possibly is that there were skirmishes with the invading Romans and that’s how they ended up chopped up in a pit,’ he told Reuters” (<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna31314746>, June 12, 2009). By late 2009, scientific testing had established that these were invading vikings, killed between 970 and 1025 CE. Dorset was an important site of Romano-British conflict, so the initial assumption was not necessarily wide of the mark: but it is also illustrative of the hold this Roman invasion still has over the imagination. The cover illustration of Richard Hingley’s well produced and definitive study—a detail of a late 18th-century relief by John Deare showing Julius Caesar invading Britain, looking for all the world like Washington crossing the Delaware—is a key to what lies inside: critical analysis of historical events with an eye to their reception and re-use in modernity.

Hingley’s work on Roman Britain falls broadly into two areas: technical archaeological analysis and heritage theory and archaeology. He writes evocatively and with deep knowledge of the reception of “Roman

Britain,” especially in the *Recovery of Roman Britain, 1586-1906* (2008, a book continuing his work in the 2000 publication *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen: the Imperial Origins of Roman archaeology*), and publishes frequently in archaeological journals such as *JRA* and *Britannia*. The present book is a combination of the two, bringing his extensive archaeological expertise and wide reading to bear both on the history and the historiography of the Roman invasion of the British Isles. As part of OUP’s “Ancient Warfare and Civilization” series, its remit is to provide a new narrative of a conflict that “shaped and reshaped the classical world”—the series covers wars in ancient Greece, Rome and the Arabic world. Series volumes tend to have catchy short titles with detailed subtitles; Hingley’s “Conquering the Ocean” is not just a conventional flash, but points us to perhaps the key aspect of the Roman view of Britain, one which serves as a thread through the book. This was not just another island—certainly not one from which one can make an day trip to a *hypermarché* to stock up on wine—but one which lay on the other side of the border of the known world: the ocean that encircles Achilles’ shield, whose enormous shaggy head dwarfs tiny boats and sea creatures on mosaics, that even Alexander long hesitated to tackle. Topography, ethnography and myth powerfully combine in this story of how the Romans undertook their first invasion out of curiosity and strategic thinking. Julius Caesar’s initial voyages across the Channel produced the first Roman ethnographical record of the island; by the time of Domitian and the governorship of Agricola, that record could (optimistically) be completed by Tacitus, who shapes Roman conceptions of Britain in the wake of Agricola’s circumnavigation. Knowledge is power. Following Caesar, successive emperors had varied success in varied parts of England, Wales and Scotland until the final, poorly documented centuries after Hadrian and the administrative withdrawal from Britain. Some of the island remained out of reach, in particular the north beyond the Antonine wall, which served always as a reminder that Ocean and its inhabitants are nothing to trifle with.

Hingley’s narrative of this process is a masterful blend of the archaeological and textual records (find spots, epigraphy, historiographical narratives). He deliberately concentrates on the military acts and political decisions behind the conquest, weaving this story in with the now rich

archaeological information available from centuries of study. There are plenty of maps, some of them helpfully repeated, with additions or different features, as the story progresses—a non-specialist (such as I) has no trouble following his argument. Short appendices outline the timeline of events and the names/locations of places and peoples, long before they became “British.” The story is economically told and brought as up to date as possible—at a guess, items from 2010 and after comprise more than half of the bibliography, with an impressive collection from 2019-2021. Hingley’s all-too brief “Afterword” returns us to the present and the implications that archaeological analysis raises, complicating and critiquing our judgments of imperialism and the very “warfare and civilization” this series puts—apparently unironically—on display. There is always a lot of archaeological interest in Roman Britain; Hingley’s great service is to bring that often scattered work together here, as a benchmark for future research.

CHRISTINA S. KRAUS

Yale University, christina.kraus@yale.edu