

Paganism in Roman Britain

Deities and Temples

Professor Ronald Hutton
Gresham Professor of Divinity



EST. 1597

GRESHAM
COLLEGE





A totally artificial and unnecessary debate:

1. Native British Religion was carried on almost totally unchanged, in Roman dress
(Miranda Aldhouse-Green, Graham Webster)

2. The religion of the native British was thoroughly Romanised (Martin Henig, Guy de la Bedoyere)



Unnecessary because in one sense insoluble, in another both clearly right.

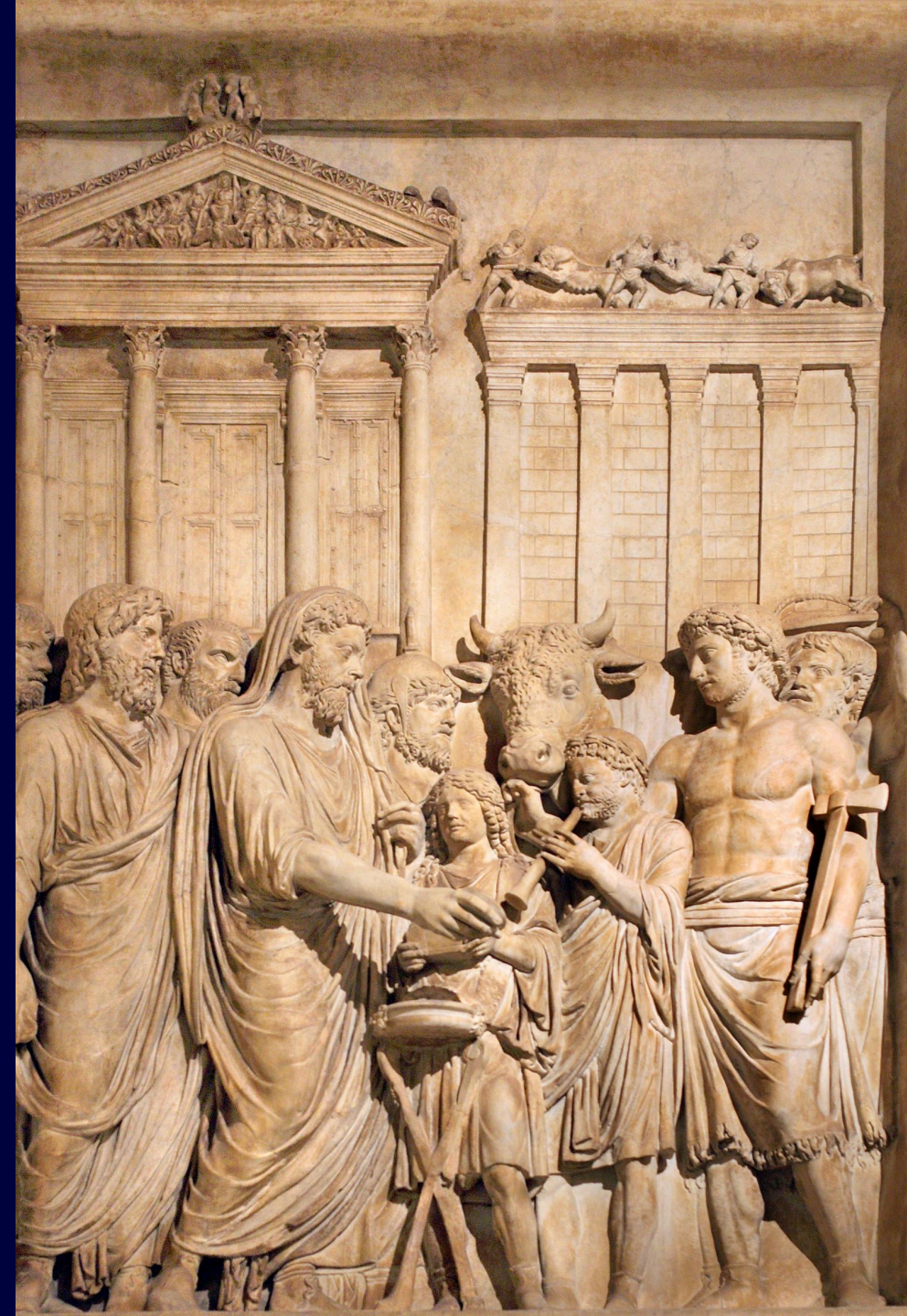
- We don't really know what the religion of the native British was like before the Romans arrived;
- The Romans always honoured the local deities of lands which they conquered- hence the 'Genius Loci' and the example of Julius Secundus on Scargill Moor (Yorkshire): Silvanus and Vinotonus;
- So no religious struggle, just a few removals: Druids, human sacrifice (if needed) and war deities invoked against Romans and their shrines;
- The only way to tell who engaged in a religious act is from their name, and most are nameless and Britons took Roman names.

So What is the Evidence?

Roman deities are well represented, especially Jupiter, Mars and Mercury who controlled government, weather, trading, family, farming, death and war.



Also the Imperial Cult:
colleges at London,
Lincoln and York, a temple
at Colchester, small busts
in eastern England



Also 'mystery religions':
Mithras,
Cybele and
Atys, Isis and
Serapis, and
Bacchus



6723
MITRA SACRIFICANTE IL
TORO.
POSILIP.

Lots of deities from the north-west parts of the empire (nearest and also spoke Celtic):
Rosmerta, the Matres,
Epona



Native deities
were also
honoured (by
Romans and
natives):
Belatucadros in
Cumbria



Antenocitus, at Benwell



Coventina, at Carrawburgh



CARRAWBROUGH : COVENTINA'S WELL.

Great localism: many deities only recorded once, many must be lost

- On the whole native gods stand for activities and functions: war, protection, trade and travel
- Goddesses more of the land - hills, rivers, wells
- But not exclusive: gods of rivers (Condatis in Co. Durham) and woods (Rigonemetis in Lincolnshire)



Plus Hybridisation:
the classic
example, Sulis
Minerva at Bath

Hybrid Deities

- Mars has 21 known in Britain (war, healing, agriculture and rulership)
- Maponos (musician god) paired with Apollo
- Silvanus (hunting) has three, Mercury has one
- My favourite Apollo Cunomaglus (at Nettleton Shrub, Wiltshire)
- Not standardised: some native gods paired both with Mars and Silvanus
- What does it mean: assimilation or repression?

Living With Polytheism

- With so many deities and demi-deities around, how do you cope?
- Superstition = excessive fear of the divine
- Solution: deities are not very interested in individual humans, don't give them laws or monitor performance.
- Require respect – shrines and rites. Kept up by public money and magistrates perform rites at colourful festivals, which public enjoy
- At home, lares and penates, for which you leave out food and drink
- Private people have to attract the attention of the divine, with offers of honour in exchange for favour. The truly religious found own shrines or join mystery religions.

Other characteristics

- The great act was sacrifice – offering. Nature was overwhelmingly powerful, human life and civilisation fragile and transitory. Need was to keep deities in a good mood.
- Anybody could start a new cult if legal and decent: for public one, go to Senate or local oracle, for private, just do it.
- Everybody had to burn incense to emperor's 'numen'. Christians didn't, so occasionally persecuted (only 30 years in 300).
- No theology – ritual was vital, a theatre to catch the attention and approval of a deity. Speculation about the nature of the universe or the fate of the soul was left to philosophers, with an open market.

A pluralistic, multi-faith, multi-ethnic society, like ours

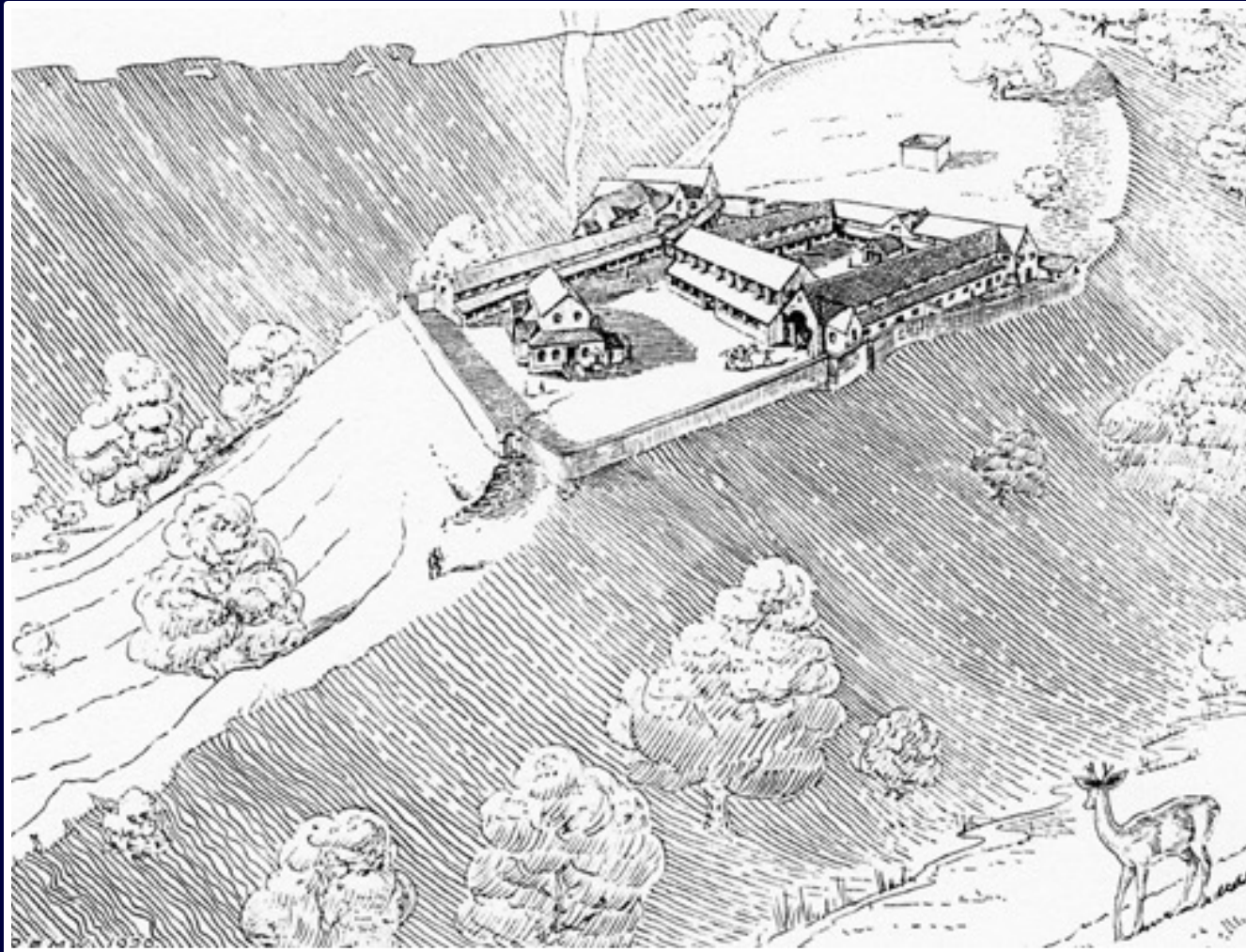
- Animal sacrifice (in theory) humane: a consecration of meat-eating
- Deities very specialised: Ceres ‘the plougher’, ‘the harrower’, the ‘sower’, ‘the fertiliser’, ‘the weeder’, ‘the reaper’, ‘the raker’, ‘the sheaf-binder’, ‘the storer’ and ‘the distributor’. Plus other deities to deal with the fertilisation of seeds (Tellus Mater), the protection of the granary (Promitor), and even the manure heap (Sterculinus).

Temples

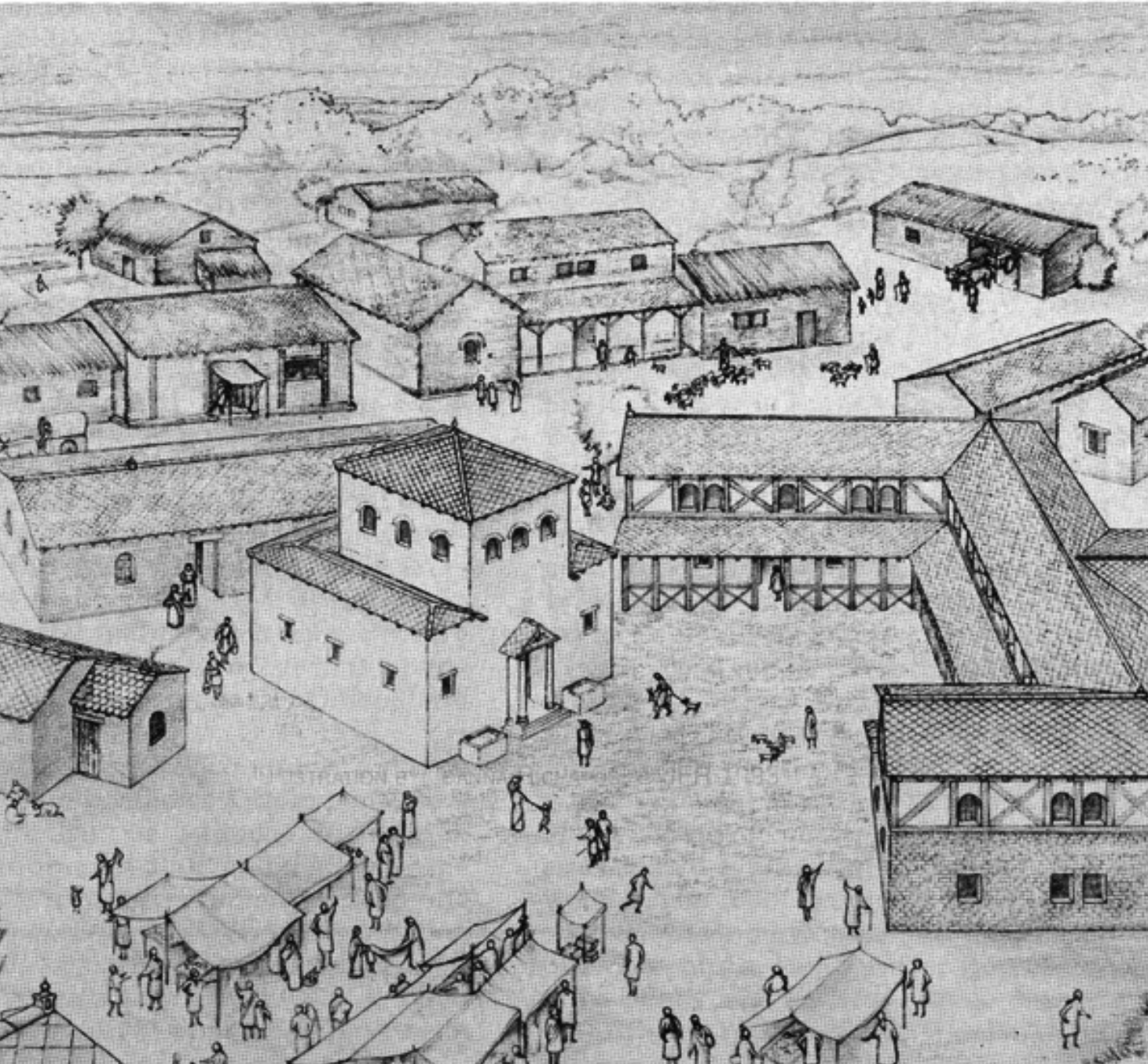
- 140 known so far, of many different styles and shapes. Most small – for a dozen people – so divine houses and places for private prayer. The big festivities happen in front.
- Rural and urban from start, but in 3rd and 4th centuries the rural pilgrimage temple appears in southern Britain. In remote countryside, needing effort, set up for visitors - hotel, baths, souvenir shop. Source of income, religious merit, perhaps to avoid Christians.



An urban
temple
complex:
Bath



A rural pilgrimage temple: Lydney (dug by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, perhaps to Mars Nodens)



A rural pilgrimage temple: Uley
(dug by Anne Woodward,
rededicated to Mercury)

What have we lost in experience?

- Height, windows and natural lighting
- Artificial lighting, windows, draperies, incense-burners, paintings, flowers, reflections (pool at Uley)
- Music, dance, wine, temperature
- Ceremonies, theatre, stalls for votives (like India)
- Reception on arrival?
- But we can relate to real individuals, like Saturnina at Uley and Magnius and Mercatilla at Bath