Research Biography

As an historian of early medieval lowland Britain, I have worked hard to write the kind of history which includes lots of people doing the kind of things that lots of people did in the early Middle Ages, one that places these actors and activities (rather than the more usual kings, monks, and political events) at the heart of the story. In order to write a more peopled history, I have put aside textual evidence, and depend, instead, on the mountains of contemporary material evidence excavated by archaeologists. I spent the first half of my career working on the tenth and eleventh centuries, Domesday Book, and the Norman Conquest. I am now working considerably earlier, and concentrating my efforts on another major transition in Britain’s history—from Roman to not-Roman.

Example Case-Study: The Material Fall of Roman Britain

My current research project is a book on the Material Fall of Roman Britain. Britain experienced stunning economic and political dislocations in the later fourth and early fifth centuries. One of the results of these dislocations is that many of the most ubiquitous and fundamental categories of Roman-period material culture ceased to be manufactured in Britain. How, materially, did life-ways, identity, burial, and status-marking change in Britain as the Roman state and economy collapsed and as connections to the wider Roman world-of-things unraveled? What happened when people, whose parents’ lives had been shaped by Roman-period material culture, no longer had access to the same kinds of objects? What lengths did people go to get hold of everyday Roman-style objects once they started to disappear? And when they found them, did they use them as they had always been used, or did they deploy them in novel ways? What accounts for the new forms of material culture found in Britain in the last quarter of the fifth century? Were these foreign objects brought to lowland Britain by “Anglo-Saxon” settlers—the standard explanation—or is the genesis of the new material-culture package more complicated? I am confident that The Archaeologies of the Norman Conquest Network workshops will help me think about the relationship between major political and economic shifts and material transformations.

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Relevant Publications

Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise (Penguin: 2010)

“Recycling in Britain after the Fall of Rome’s Metal Economy,” Past and Present, 217 (2012), 3–45.
