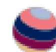

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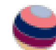
'All this in their ignorance they called civilisation': Analysing the relationship between nationalism and the display of Roman archaeology in Britain's national museums

William Givens

Gravestone relief of Roman soldiers displayed in the National Museum of Scotland, 2nd Century CE. Image credit: W. Givens

This article evaluates how nationalist narratives affect the display of Roman artefacts in national museums. The unique nature of national museums as 'cultural constitutions' and arbiters of the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' is discussed. This article builds upon previous work by demonstrating how nationalist influence affects the display of Roman artefacts, specifically through the use of two case studies: the British Museum in London and the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Museum displays are assessed for indications of nationalist influence through



consideration of the use of space and collection composition as well as textual analysis of gallery signage and artefact descriptions. The two museums' divergent approaches to national narrative are then compared.

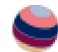
1. Introduction

As museum curator, author, and activist Sumaya Kassim has noted, 'Museums are not neutral in their preservation of history' (Kassim 2017). This is certainly true of the prestigious and culturally dominant institutions that are found in capital cities around the globe – national museums. These institutions help their nations outline the borders of cultural inclusion and exclusion while creating long-arcing narratives that give their state a *raison d'être* (Berger 2015, 28). From the 19th century, when many national museums were formed, to the present day, archaeological collections have been one of the most important tools used in forging the various national master narratives propagated by these museums (Berger 2015, 14). According to Aronsson (2015, 173) the national museum serves as a 'cultural constitution' for the nation, arbitrating 'long-standing tensions between creativity and social cohesion, individual desires and social needs'. This is a valuable tool for perpetuating the stability of the state.

Archaeology museums can stretch the story of the nation into the distant past, making their ability to instruct the public in the national narrative especially potent. Simultaneously, the museum is arguably the main channel of dispersing archaeological knowledge to the broader population. According to polling, over 50 per cent of United Kingdom residents visit a museum annually (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2020). Furthermore, museum goers typically view museums as trustworthy sources of 'learning opportunities and authoritative knowledge' (Smith 2016, 121). Therefore, the influence of nationalist narratives in national museums has the potential to distort the general understanding of humanity's past as presented in the archaeological record (Trigger 1995). If archaeological discovery, theory, and material are to be used as a pillar in the construction of national mythologies, it is important for archaeologists working in the field to be cognizant of these realities.

As Hodder (1992, 3) notes when discussing the theory of praxis, 'the archaeologist is using and furthering a system of academic prestige, authority and privilege which has impacts on the conduct of education'. This system is maintained by the 'Authorized Heritage Discourse' (AHD) (Smith 2006). The AHD outlines the objects, practices, and sites that are to be preserved for nebulous 'future generations', but in so doing disempowers the present from rewriting social and cultural meaning (Smith 2006, 29). The AHD also delineates who can contribute to the heritage discourse by privileging expert opinion (Smith 2006, 4). Given the status that the AHD bestows upon archaeologists and historians, Smith argues that they are the only actors who can introduce change (Smith 2006, 29). The national museum as cultural constitution participates in the formation of the AHD. The cultural constitution 'discriminates in culture by picking out the elements most important to carry the burden of upholding an organized society over time' (Aronsson 2015, 175).

According to Aronsson (2015, 177):



> The meaning of national museums could and indeed needs to be multilayered, ambiguous and even contradictory…the representation needs to connect knowledge with political and social relevance without being exposed as propaganda or dismissed as irrelevant; it needs to be highly visible, symbolic, explicit and yet open enough both to the conflicts to be negotiated and to the change that is to be facilitated…Museums are multidimensional and material, forming hypertexts with more complexity than a political constitution or treaties.

The cultural constitution's ability to appear contradictory and to serve multiple stakeholders necessitates and facilitates dialogue, compromise, and the forging of new perspectives (Aronsson 2015, 177-79). Thus, the national museum is in fact the best tool at hand for archaeologists, historians, and curators, empowered by the AHD, to redefine a nation's relationship with its past. Given the AHD's tendency to maintain outdated perspectives of heritage (Bonacchi *et al.* 2018), it is important to assess and understand the historical environment that engendered and enshrined them. At 'a time of apparently resurgent nationalism in many countries', Gardner (2017, 3) notes, 'archaeologists need to work harder than ever to understand identity dynamics with the benefit of time-depth'.

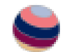
It is therefore imperative to analyse how archaeological interpretation is currently imparted to the public and how that knowledge affects the structure, discourse, and self-understanding of a society. Museums, being the most common source from which the public absorbs archaeological insight, should be a focus of this analysis (IPSOS/SAA 2018, 5; Ramos and Duggone 2000, 21). A reflexive approach would be incomplete without including consideration of the future impact of archaeological interpretation (Gramsch 2000, 15).

While historiographers and sociologists such as Stefan Berger and Peter Aronsson have studied the role of museums in transmitting nationalist messaging, less has been written concerning how these forces affect interpretations of specific periods of history. Perhaps no period in European history has been more influential than Classical antiquity in the creation of national and cultural identities across Western civilization (Berger 2015, 17; Wingfield 2011, 134). Ancient Rome in particular has been an aqueduct that Western nations have sought to use in irrigating and nourishing the germinating seeds of nationhood and empire. Owing to Rome's ubiquitous influence across Europe as a cornerstone of national identity, displays in national museums regarding the regional Roman past are prime candidates for a case study. Two of Britain's national museums, the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland, demonstrate divergent examples in how nationalist influences can affect the presentation of the Roman past.

2. Methodology

2.1 Selection of case studies

The two museums serving as case studies were selected based upon their status as national museums, and the quantity of Roman archaeological material displayed. Museums of nations on the island of Great Britain were selected to narrow the scope of research and to add depth to the analysis. The interplay of national sentiments



between the politically united, but historically antagonistic component parts of the United Kingdom, offers a unique dynamic to assess. Whereas the National Museum of Scotland represents one nation inside Great Britain, the British Museum is positioned as a representative of the collective constituent nations, and formerly of the entire British Empire.

The non-existence of an English national museum complicates the study, but also sheds light on key themes that influence the dynamic of nationalisms between the three British nations. The British Museum will be used in lieu of a true English counterpart to the National Museum of Scotland. While the term 'British' in theory encompasses Wales and Scotland to an equal degree, the creation of a collective British identity has been seen by some as an act of cultural imperialism – a way of solidifying English hegemony (Colley 2003, 12). This study accounts for the duality of the British Museum's nature both as a *de facto* English institution and as an ambassador for the island's manufactured collective identity. The National Museum of Scotland serves as a more traditional national museum as it has explicitly aimed to propagate national narratives through its archaeological displays (McKean 2000; Open University 2009a).

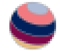
2.2 Collection of data and analysis

The examination of the effect of national narratives on Roman collections at the selected case study museums will comprise two parts. First the history of the museums will be addressed, tracking the shifts in nationalist influences over time. Building upon the histories of these museums, the next aspect of the case studies will be an investigation of the physical museum galleries covering ancient Roman populations that lived in Britain. Museum visits were made throughout 2021 and 2022 and created several paths of enquiry. While in the gallery it is possible to not only assess the composition of a collection in terms of material, but to also take note of the layout of a gallery and any subconscious messages the use of space can instil. According to Lee and Kim (2022, 3), 'spatial arrangements themselves play a decisive role in structuring the museum experience'.

Additionally, it is possible to record the 'authorial voice' of the museum as relayed to the visitor through display labels and exhibition commentary (Kassim 2017). Fairclough (2003, 193) contends that textual representations of social events, such as museum texts discussing the archaeological past, can be assessed by asking a series of questions:

> What elements are…included or excluded, and which elements are most salient? How abstractly or concretely are social events represented? …Are there instances of…metaphor? How are social actors represented (activated/passivated, personal/impersonal, named/classified, specific/generic)?

To provide a consistent basis for the identification of nationalist messaging, John Breuilly's (2013, 2) definition of nationalism from the *Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* will be used:



the political ideology of nationalism [is] one which claims that there exists a unique nation, that this nation has a special value and therefore right to existence and recognition, and that to secure this right the nation must possess autonomy, often understood as a sovereign nation state.

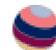
3. The British Museum

Figure 1: The neoclassical exterior of the British Museum with pediment sculpture 'The Progress of Civilization'. Image credit: W. Givens

When it opened its doors in 1759, the British Museum became the world's first national museum (Elgenius 2015, 154-55). By nature of being the first, it has served as a model and inspiration for other national museums around the world.

The British Museum opened at a time when the concept of 'Britishness' was solidifying, and the British Empire was emerging (Colley 2003; Elgenius 2015). The British Museum was used to help strengthen the union between England and Scotland by using the language of imperialism, and the power and prestige that it brought, to aggrandise and perpetuate nationalist myths of British superiority (Berger 2015, 16). Wingfield (2011, 123) contends that the British Museum does not speak explicitly in terms of the nation but, 'instead [in] the identity discourse of "civilization". Although the concept of "civilization" is not itself inherently national, it is nevertheless linked to particular political histories'.

Many foreign artefacts within the British Museum were acquired during the 19th century through dishonest dealing or violent seizure, made possible by the military might of the British Empire ; Patrizio Gunning and Challis 2023). These plundered artefacts were used by the British Museum to project the power of the Empire and to 'claim the mantle' of ancient Greece and Rome (Berger 2015, 16-17). These



artefacts were displayed in such a way as to lay out a timeline of the history of civilisation and to solidify the concept of 'British' identity by crowning 'Britishness' as the culmination of this cultural evolution (Colley 2003; Elgenius 2015; Wingfield 2011, 124).

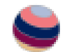
> The Trustees of the British Museum, as recipients of a classical education, and frequently also of noble birth, seem to have understood themselves as the inheritors of an ancient tradition of civilization (Wingfield 2011, 124).

In the late 1840s, when the Museum required new accommodation to properly display the growing collection, the Greeks were the pre-eminent models of civilisation for the Trustees (Wingfield 2011, 124). In fact, this Grecian influence is stamped on the façade of the British Museum to this day. Architect Sir Robert Smirke was hired to create a neo-classical temple to civilisation (Caygill 2002, 24-35). What remains Britain's largest neo-classical building was dubbed a pinnacle of English Greek Revival architecture (Caygill 2002, 35). The sculpture that adorns the pediment is quite tellingly titled 'The Progress of Civilization' (Caygill 2002, 35), further emphasising the museum's aim of surveying the totality of 'civilisation' (Jenkins 2012, 388).

While the Romans were not held in as high esteem as the Greeks by the museum trustees of the early 19th century, influential British political and academic figures would find themselves increasingly identifying their national values with those of the ancient Roman state as the century progressed, and Britain's national museum was necessarily influenced by these sentiments (Berger 2015, 17; Butler 2012).

As a by-product of the classical education of the upper and middle classes responsible for the administration of Britain's vast overseas empire, the Roman Empire was viewed as the most appropriate template from which to structure British governance (Butler 2012, 20-21). Modelling modes of administration after Roman precedent encouraged closer association between Britain and Rome more generally. Conceptions of national heritage at this time began to promote the idea that modern Britons were the direct successors of the Romano-British (Butler 2012, 86). It was possible for Britons to view their society as the mirror image of republican Rome, championing liberty, aristocracy, and patriotism, balancing class interests through a mixed constitution, and using their vast dominion to introduce 'civilisation' where once there was nought but barbarism. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 shattered the British perception that their Empire could and would benevolently 'civilise' the peoples it subjugated (Butler 2012).

Into the 20th century, respected and influential archaeologists and academics such as Oxford University's Camden Professor of Ancient History, Francis Haverfield, were propagating the idea that, unlike the Britons who were racially capable of being civilised by the Romans, the people over which the British ruled were too inferior to be properly assimilated (Butler 2012, 4; Haverfield 1923, 13). Haverfield viewed himself as an advocate for the development of scientific understandings of the past that could be clearer and more precise than the interpretation of ancient sources (Butler 2012, 98). Using archaeological evidence, he constructed a theory of 'Romanization' to understand how the Celts of Britain had been forged into the civilised Romano-British (Butler 2012, 98; Haverfield 1923). His analyses betray the



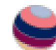
strong influence of nationalist and imperial narratives, as they enquire after the fortitude of the British 'race'.

In more recent times, celebration of Imperial power has become distasteful, and British nationalism has had to adapt to the disintegration of the Empire following the Second World War (Berger 2005, 641-43). Also at this time, nations that had once been under colonial control began to request that the museums of the pre-war powers begin the process of repatriating stolen collections (Hughes 2011, 193).

Figure 2: The new face of the British Museum – the Great Court. Image credit: W. Givens

To retain these dubiously acquired collections and rebuff demands for repatriation, museums such as the British Museum have refuted their status as national institutions (Hughes 2011, 193). Instead, the British Museum claims to be a universal museum providing a home for and a survey of the 'global heritage of mankind' (Hughes 2011, 193). To this end the museum shies away from their old neoclassical exterior with its imperialist and euro-centric connotations. Instead, in publications and on web pages, the British Museum chooses to promote the futuristic and post-modernist re-design of the Great Court as the face of the globalist institution. According to curator Jago Cooper in a video posted on the British Museum website: '[The Great Court] has reformed how the British Museum sees itself, connecting up the cultures of the world in one united public space' (British Museum 2020a).

Within this new self-image, the nationalist and imperialist history of the museum is explicitly erased, and a new narrative of universalism is projected back over 250 years to the museum's genesis (Hughes 2011, 200). Per the British Museum website 'Enlightenment ideals and values – critical scrutiny of all assumptions, open debate, scientific research, progress and tolerance – have marked the Museum since its foundation' (British Museum 2023). The museum now claims to be 'the first national



public museum of the world', aiming to be a focal point of international scholarship (British Museum 2023; Hughes 2011, 199). By adopting this universalist livery, the museum seeks to distance itself from the nation that funds it, and it must by nature reflect. But this self-declared shift in purpose and audience is not reflected in how the institution chooses to portray the Roman past.

3.1 The collections as currently displayed

The Roman collections of the British Museum are a result of over two-and-a-half centuries of shifting power dynamics and evolving academic attitudes. The manner in which these assemblages are currently displayed, however, is a result of the interaction between this history and modern thought, culture, and scholarly consensus.

British Museum, Roman Britain Galleries - walkthrough

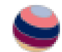
Currently in the British Museum, Roman archaeological material is mostly split between two separate spaces. These two areas occupy parallel hallways on the upper floor separated by the Great Court (Figure 3). These hallways are categorised as 'Europe' and as 'Ancient Greece and Rome'. Within the European corridor is the Weston Gallery of Roman Britain (Room 49), while the Roman collections from the rest of the Empire are situated in rooms dedicated to 'Greek and Roman life' (Room 69) and 'Roman Empire' (Room 70). The severance of Britain from the rest of the Empire might be a vestigial arrangement from the Victorian era, where the Romano-British were seen as less civilised than the Romans living in the heart of the Empire. As a result of this, efforts to collect Romano-British material, most notably by influential curator A.W. Franks, came under the purview of a separate department from the rest of the classical antiquities (Caygill 1997, 70). This distinction remains, giving special attention to what the museum dubs the 'rich' Romano-British culture. While the British Museum claims to be a universal museum, the existence of a separate Roman Britain gallery underscores that it is still serving a national function by educating the nation about its past and fleshing out the national narrative.

British Museum, Roman Empire Galleries - walkthrough

While the majority of artefacts from Roman Britain are housed on the other side of the museum, the Wolfson Gallery, which surveys the art, artefacts, and history of the entire Roman Empire, still uses a British example to discuss the cultural changes that occurred in lands forcibly annexed by the Roman state.

Tacitus (Ag. 21) describes how the Romans perceived this process transpiring in Britain:

> …they who lately disdained the tongue of Rome now coveted its eloquence. Hence, too, a liking sprang up for our style of dress, and the 'toga' became fashionable. Step by step they were led to things which dispose to vice, the lounge, the bath, the elegant banquet. All this in their ignorance, they called civilization, when it was but a part of their servitude.



The 'People of the Roman West' text seems to paraphrase Tacitus and, using Haverfield's concept of 'Romanization', paints the process of cultural change in Spain, France, and Britain in broad strokes, based on the British example, stating:

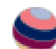
At first there were many revolts against Roman rule…Gradually, however, the local populations accepted and embraced Roman customs and traditions. There was competition to hold office in the new towns, to learn Latin and to serve in the imperial administration army or priesthoods. People built Roman style houses and bought Roman clothes, furniture and other goods, including food and wine. Communities did not forget their own local customs and traditions, but adapted and absorbed Roman culture, to create their own distinct identities.

Acknowledging the creation of hybrid cultures is a slight alteration to Haverfield's conception that the native culture of townsfolk was subsumed and that native practices only survived in the country (Haverfield 1923).

The rustic poor of a country…have a curious persistent force. Superstitions, sentiments, even language and the consciousness of nationality, linger dormant among them, till an upheaval comes, till buried seeds are thrown out on the surface and forgotten plants blossom once more (Haverfield 1923, 22).

However, this framing of Roman colonialism by the gallery's authorial voice still centralises the concept of Romanisation, even if it is not explicitly named, and perpetuates the Roman-Native dichotomy (Ghisleni 2018, 153). The museum's description of the Romanisation process adheres to a conceptual dynamic of continuity versus change, casting the Roman administrative apparatus as the sole catalyst of change while ignoring the inherent permutations that take place within continuity over time (Ghisleni 2018). Additionally, the text implies a uniformity of culture change across the West. However, places like Hispania and Britannia varied in patterns of Italian colonisation as well as pre-Roman settlement and trade, which significantly influenced the course and outcome of culture change in these regions (Haverfield 1923; Tsirkin 1996). Likewise, the processes of Romanisation and urbanisation, which proceeded quickly in Gaul through the inducement of local elites, was far more gradual in Germania (Carroll 2001, 60-61).

The emphasis placed on Romanisation in the Wolfson Gallery demonstrates that the museum still attempts to trace the movement of 'civilisation' from the classical world to modern Britain. Bonacchi *et al.* (2018, 187) highlight that the continued prevalence of the Romanisation narrative, despite over thirty years of post-colonial critique, is not unique to the British Museum, but instead has been preserved by the Authorised Heritage Discourse in museum displays, on-site interpretations, and other educational materials.



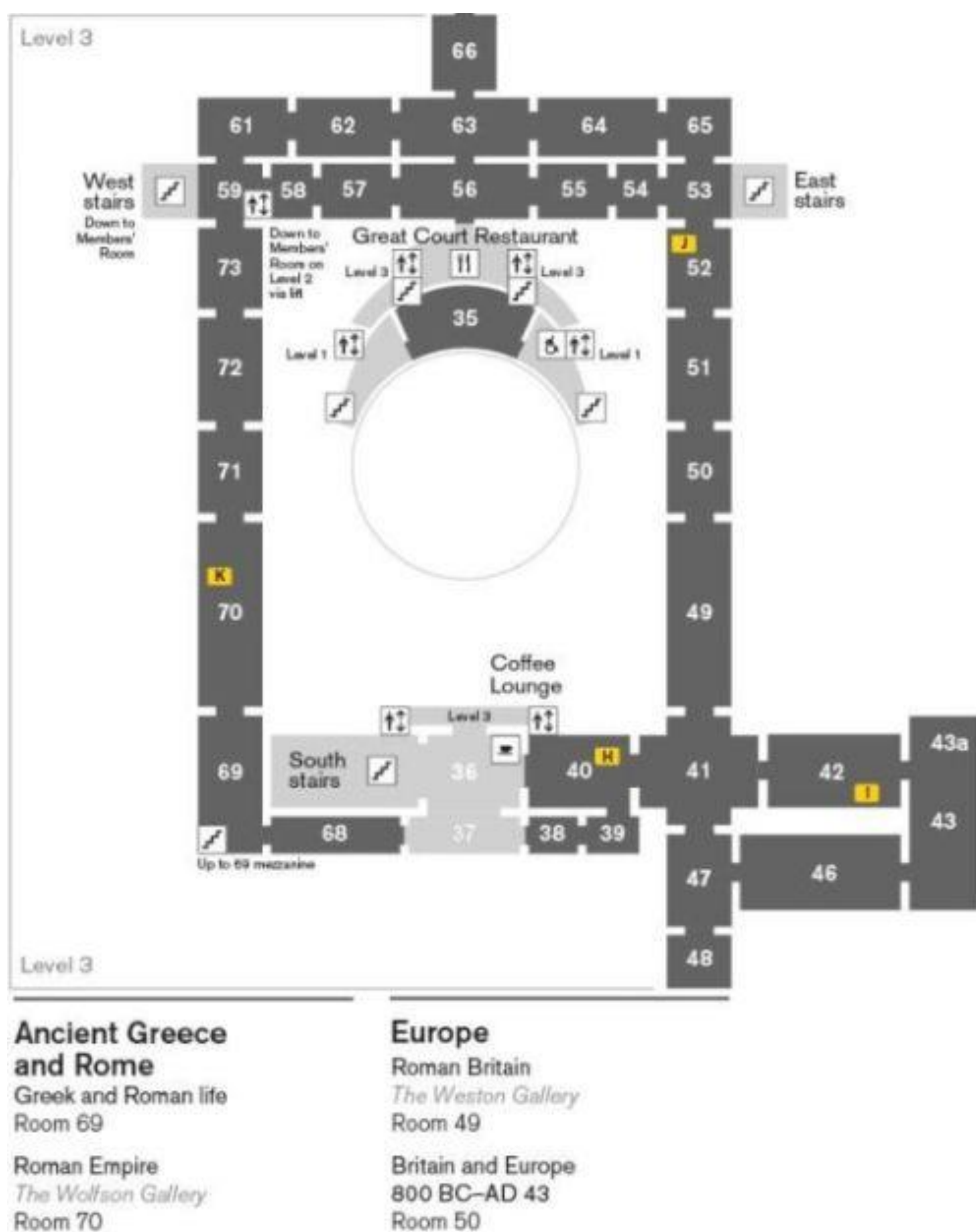


Figure 3: Map of the British Museum upper level (British Museum 2020b), legend adjusted by author.

In the 'Europe' hallway, on the other side of the museum, the Roman Britain display further develops the concept of Romanisation, beginning in the adjacent Iron Age room. Before the threshold of the Roman Britain gallery lies a reconstruction of 'the richest Iron Age burial to be found in Britain'. The cremation burial, dating to the late 1st century BCE and found in Hertfordshire, is notable for its Italian wine amphorae and silver cup (Stead 1967). These distinctly foreign items in a burial that is otherwise composed of native products indicate that trade routes had begun to connect the peoples of Britain to the rest of Europe prior to the Roman invasion and that the elite had begun adopting some Roman customs (e.g. wine drinking) of their own volition.

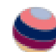


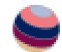
Figure 4: Reconstruction of Hertfordshire burial with Italian amphorae in British Museum (Room 50). Image credit: W. Givens

The adjacent Weston Gallery of Roman Britain, is introduced by a sign featuring the following paragraph:

The Roman Emperor Claudius invaded Britain in AD 43. By AD 100, England and Wales and some of Scotland had been conquered. The Romans built towns, roads and villas. Latin became the official language and Roman law and money were introduced. A Romano-British culture developed as new settlers from across the Empire mixed with the local population. The province collapsed in the early 5th century as continental peoples from beyond the frontiers invaded.

The wording of this text does not dissuade the reader from understanding the past in a nationalist context. Using the names England, Wales, and Scotland has two important effects. Discussing the Roman invasion in terms of modern geopolitical units projects social and cultural affiliations backwards in time. This verbiage casts the Roman invasion as something that happened to pre-existing nations as opposed to it being an influential event leading up to the creation of these states. A visitor from a British country, because of this wording, may be inclined to think about Roman-native relations in terms of 'them and us'.

By singling out each component nation of Great Britain as having been subject to Roman invasion, the museum is creating a unifying narrative. The geographical areas which now constitute the three nations each had fundamentally different relationships with the Romans. The portion of Britain that is now England became the home of Roman civilian settlements, while what is today Wales was not as thoroughly immersed in Roman material culture and was home to a much more concentrated military presence (Guest 2008, 35; Haverfield 1923; Wheeler 1925,



242). Roman occupation in 'Scotland' was but an Iron Age 'interlude' (Breeze 2002, 4), a drastically different circumstance in comparison to the rest of Britannia. In effect, by simplifying the historical and archaeological records the museum has forged a shared British narrative by substituting the different Roman histories of western and northern Britain with the 'English' experience.

This unified British narrative is visually reinforced by a map (Figure 6) in the gallery labelled 'The Roman Empire at its greatest extent, c. AD 100' showing Roman control extending to a line along the Forth-Clyde isthmus. This border presumably represents the defensive works erected by Agricola (Hanson and Maxwell 1980). More commonly, 117 CE is selected as the date of Rome's territorial peak. This later date would include Trajan's conquests in Mesopotamia. However, by 117 CE the limit of Roman control in Britain no longer included part of modern-day Scotland. According to Senior Curator Richard Hobbs (pers. comm.) the decision to select 100 CE was made to show the Roman Empire at its greatest extent at which time 'Britain had been fully conquered (or at least up to the line that became the line of Hadrian's Wall)'. Hadrian's Wall has become deeply politicised and its function is often simplified to that of a hard barrier dividing civilisation and barbarism (Hanscam and Buchanan 2023, 1004). The effect of using a delineation steeped in this meaning would be to exclude modern Scotland from the Romano-British identity the museum cultivates. In depicting a border that exceeds the limits of Hadrian's Wall, however, the museum centres the narrative of the Roman Empire on Britain by equating the height of the Empire in Britain with the height of the whole empire while including the most populated areas of Scotland in the shared British narrative of Roman occupation.

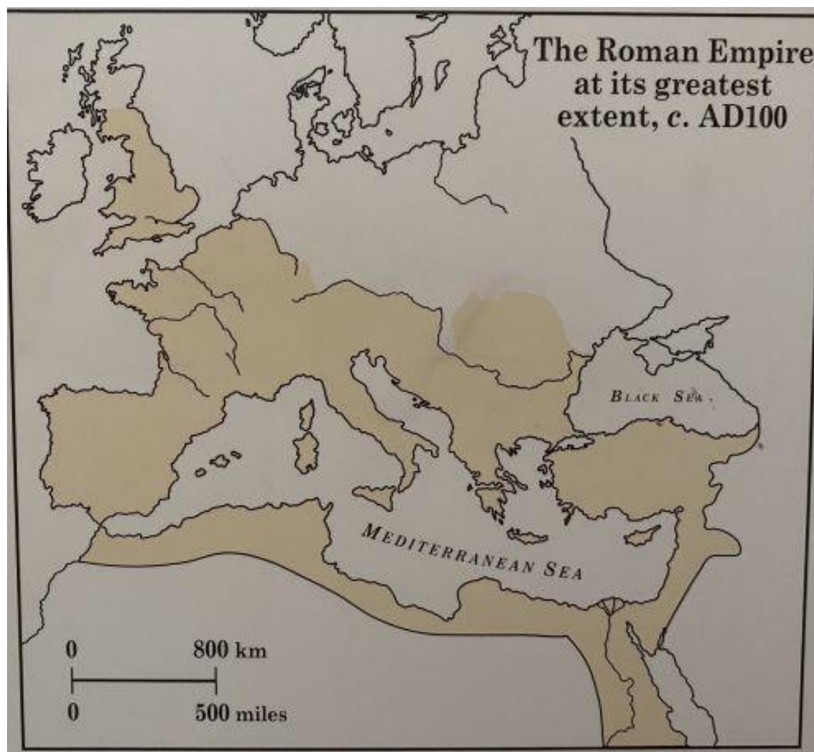
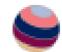


Figure 5: Map of the 'Roman Empire at its greatest extent' from the Roman Britain gallery, British Museum. Image credit: W. Givens



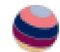
The gallery itself is trifurcated, with a central promenade and two smaller paths along the sides. This division of space lends greater weight to items in the central display cases, as higher visibility increases the likelihood that an artefact will be engaged with and later remembered by visitors (Krukar and Dalton 2020). Whatever is placed in these cases, in the heart of the gallery, reflects what the curators believe was central to the Romano-British experience.

Several cases in the central path cover the presence of the Roman military. Perhaps most conspicuous is a case with a legionary's silhouette, kitted out with excavated Roman armaments. The soldier's gladius, pilum, helmet, and pugio make an eye-catching display. In some museums, such as the Royal Armouries, or the Art Institute of Chicago, armour is posed in an aggressive combat position to give the gallery a sense of action. The silhouette in the Roman Britain gallery stands at ease rather than in a fighting pose or a rigid display (Figure 6). This relaxed pose suggests that this soldier is not an aggressive threat, but a ready defender, emphasising the legions' role in maintaining order in Britannia rather than their part in conquering it.

Figure 6: Roman Legionary gear displayed against a silhouette in the Roman Britain Gallery, British Museum. Image credit: W. Givens

This choice to focus on the role of the army after the consolidation of Roman rule in Britain is further exemplified in the display titled 'The Role of the Army in Britain', where combat responsibilities are brushed over.

In Britain after the first century AD, large-scale warfare was rare. A soldier's life, as today, was largely one of training and manoeuvres. In peacetime the armed forces were also employed in constructing and maintaining buildings and roads. Initially, such work was the responsibility of legionaries, many of whom were skilled craftsmen and engineers, but it was soon shared by auxiliary forces. The army also helped with administration, supervising, for



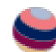
example, mining of metals…The monotony of peacetime was relieved by regular festivals and parades.

This excerpt gives the impression that the army was only in Britain to improve the standard of living through civil engineering and project management. It ignores the fact that legionaries stationed in northern and western Britain were encamped as an ever-present threat against rebellion or raiding, and glosses over the extractive nature of Roman resource gathering. The case features a helmet, but no weaponry or other armaments, instead featuring a brick made in a legionary camp, and personal effects of soldiers. This 'pacification of the past' was a general trend across Roman scholarship in the 1990s when the Weston Gallery first took shape and this pacification played into a long-standing British identification of the Romans as 'benevolent, civilising imperial people' (Gardner 2020, 1640). In portraying the army as a positive force of civil development, the museum seems to more subtly follow its concern of tracking civilisational progress. By favourably admiring the Romanisation of Britain the museum is heralding the introduction of civilisation and social organisation as formative events in the national narrative of British identity.

The Roman Britain gallery provides a comprehensive survey of Romano-British life with a wide variety of valuable and mundane objects that paint a clear portrait of Roman Britain. However, the creation of this portrait is still guided by curatorial choices that transmit an echo of the imperialistic conception of Romanisation, whitewash the more brutal elements of Roman occupation, and create and celebrate a unique Romano-British past shared between England, Wales, and Scotland.

4. The National Museum of Scotland

The displays in the British Museum are the products of centuries of collecting, moulded by evolving social forces and a long line of curators and keepers. The National Museum of Scotland in its current form, founded in 1984, and planned out all at once, can be more exactly described as the result of the dialogue between the Museum's first Board of Directors and former Keeper of Archaeology David Clarke and his team (McKean 2000; Open University 2009a).



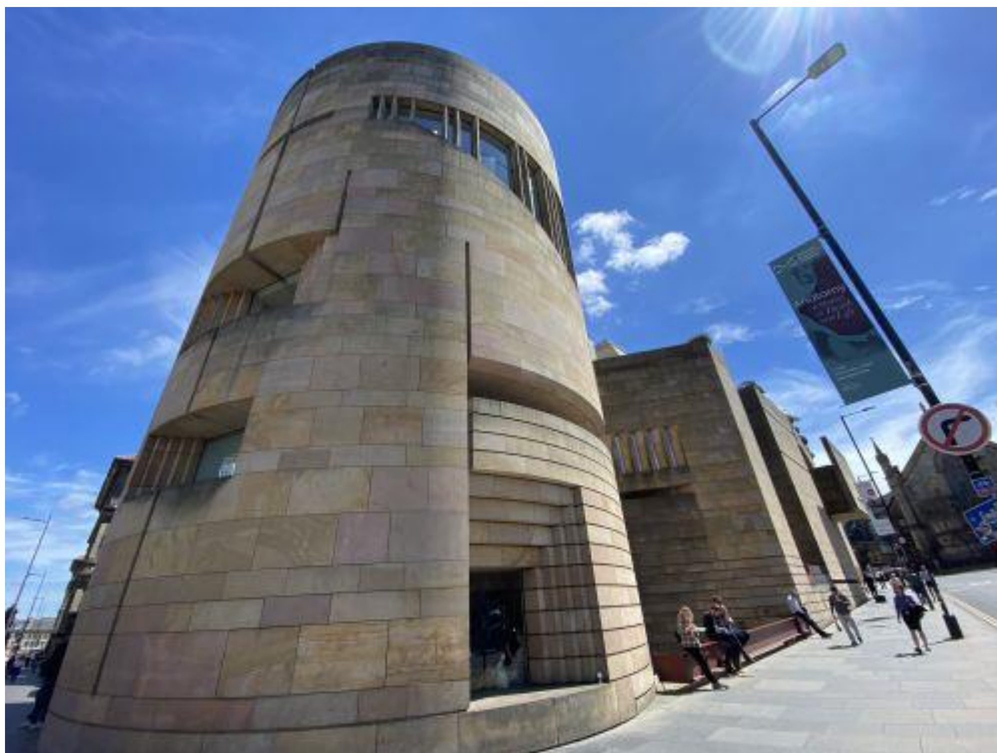


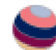
Figure 7: The exterior of the new National Museum of Scotland building, faced with Scottish Clashach stone, designed as an allusion to medieval fortifications. Image credit: W. Givens

The merger of the Royal Scottish Museum and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1984 necessitated the construction of a new building. The Sixth Marquess of Bute, chairman of the Trustees of the National Museum of Scotland wanted to make the creation of the museum an 'act of distinction' and so held a contest for architectural design, a decision that would become controversial and burdened by national interests (McKean 2000, x). The competing architects strove for this building to be the hallmark of end-of-the-century Scottish architecture. As McKean (2000, xii) states, people had 'aspirations [for the museum] of national identity far beyond a mere collection of antiquities'.

The new building was planned to have the archaeological collections of Scotland's early peoples contained within a subterranean level also containing the geological overview of Scotland. Placing the 'Early People' in a gallery space directly below the more recent collections of Scottish history suggests that these people are the bedrock of Scotland, 'the cultural foundation for what rises, growingly confident, above' (McKean 2000, 135), an idea reinforced by the proximity of the museum's geological exhibition. According to Porciani (2015, 125), this is a common strategy of national museums to connect '*Blut*' and '*Boden*':

In Europe some recently created history museums have reproduced very old-fashioned patterns. [In the] National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, the story begins with rocks and skulls: a soil charged with strong ethnic feelings suited to representing the blood of a population that has always been there.

Other aspects of the gallery were created to give heightened sensory effects. For example, underneath what from the outside represents a castle tower, lies a



designed 'circular sepulchral subterranean chamber', which is reached by descending through a dark narrow passageway (Figure 9) (McKean 2000, 136). The overall effect of the Early People's level of the museum is that of a 'tomb-like womb-like space' (McKean 2000, 135). The Museum's Board of Directors hoped through the interplay of architecture and collections 'to present a national narrative while maintaining the depth of knowledge embodied in the collections' (McKean 2000, xiii).

Figure 8: The narrow passage (left), and the 'sepulchral chamber' into which it leads (right), together create a powerful effect, National Museum of Scotland. Image credit: W. Givens

During the architectural competition to design the Museum's new home, Clarke argued with the Museum Board of Directors and the architects against the imposition of a national narrative through architecture (McKean 2000, 101). However, curatorial choices within the 'Early People' galleries currently further the goals of the museum's board to define Scotland's national identity.

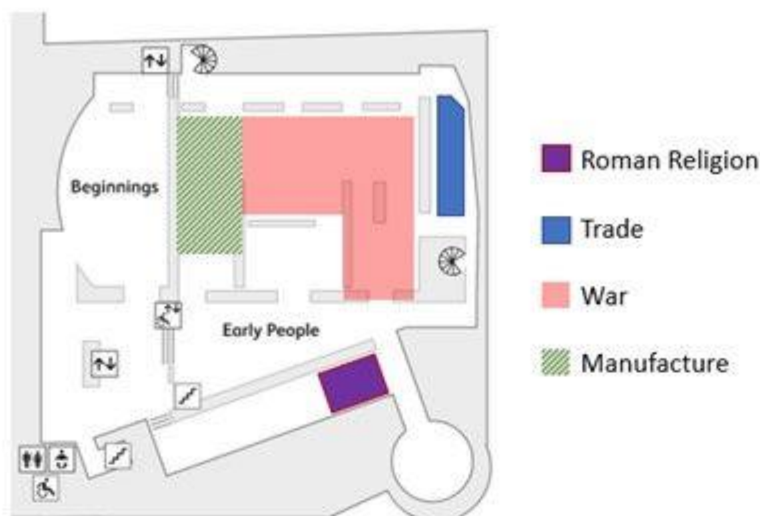
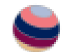


Figure 9: Map of the lower level of the NMS (National Museums Scotland 2021b), shading and legend added by author.



Clarke desired the space to present time in a nonlinear fashion, insisting that prior to the Middle Ages time is better understood as cyclical and wished to organise the gallery in a way that would draw comparisons between different cultures (McKean 2000). The end result is that the gallery is divided by topic rather than chronology. Roman displays make up a sizeable portion of several of these sections: Religion, Trade, War, and Manufacture among them. The positioning and size of these sections weights them with varying levels of importance.

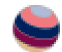
National Museum of Scotland - walkthrough

Most notably, the centre of the space is dedicated to conflict. While Viking raids take up some space, the vast majority of material is from the Iron Age and comes from either a Roman or anti-Roman context. The quantity of Roman material and space provided to cover Roman-native warfare casts the Roman legions in a role of main antagonist. Other aspects of Romano-British life are given relatively short shrift. The collections displaying remnant material from the vast Roman trade networks that linked northern Britain to the rest of the Roman Empire are relegated to a confined space against the far wall of the gallery, which is relatively hard to reach. Similarly, discussion of Roman religion is placed in a far corner.

The coverage of Trade, War, Manufacture, and Burial intermixes Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, and Viking artefacts within close proximity. However, on the topic of Religion, different belief systems are subdivided and separated. Christian belief, Roman paganism, and native practices each have their own dedicated areas. Christian monuments greet the visitor's entrance to the subterranean level and the native religions are given a theatrical home in the aforementioned 'sepulchral chamber'. Roman paganism, by contrast, is placed in a much less prominent position, highlighting the museum's opinion that it is of secondary importance to Christian and native religious practice.

These decisions are reaffirmed as intentional through analysis of the museum text. The museum's authorial voice that passes along knowledge to the visitor through artefact descriptions and thematic overviews of gallery sections is decidedly not an objective narrator of the archaeological record. The museum's preference for accessible and straightforward language allows for effective communication (McKean 2000, 93-94). However, a connection is repeatedly drawn between past inhabitants of northern Britain and modern-day Scots by the use of the first person in display material. The choice to make this connection is seemingly in stark contrast to the former Keeper of Archaeology's perspective. McKean (2000, 101) states that Clarke was 'sceptical…about the value of constricting archaeology within a national history'. McKean goes on to quote Clarke as stating in an internal memo: 'For 90%, in terms of time, of the human occupation of the geographical area of Scotland, the concept of a Scottish nation, as we now understand it, is meaningless…' (McKean 2000, 101).

Although this distinction was advocated at the creation of the galleries, current gallery language seems to erase any sign that a non-narrative archaeological understanding once guided curatorial decision-making. Part of the planning for the new museum space comprised a grand tour of European and North American museums by high-ranking NMS staff (McKean 2000, 44-45). One aspect of this tour



was to analyse museum labels and their impact (McKean 2000, 45). Thus, gallery labels at the National Museum of Scotland must be understood to be carefully written, with solid understanding of their subtext and their effect on readers.

Bowell (2021), who conducted research on the history of the Museum's labels, states on the official National Museum of Scotland blog:

> what all the labels in the archive show, is that there has never been a one-dimensional, singular story for anything in the museum. The ways that objects, people, and ideas are presented and interpreted has always changed, shaped by a myriad of influences both inside and outside the museum. For all the trust that we can, and should, place in museums, it's incredibly important to remember that museums don't present *the* truth, they present *a* truth.

Clarke and his team reassessed their opposition to narrative-making due to the scope of the project at hand (Open University 2009a). Clarke comments that:

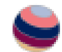
> In one sense of course, the displays are a commentary on Scottish identity, but their very existence now is a factor in the development of future identity. Because what they've brought to people will change their perceptions about what they think about Scotland. I don't think that we discussed the idea that this was a creation of Scottish identity, but I think it was always there. And it was always there because this is something truly momentous. Most curators never get a chance to do even major galleries. Even fewer get the chance to create a museum (Open University 2009a).

The way Clarke and his team would present the Romans in the museum would be guided by two other factors. First among these was Clarke's interest in how the archaeological record can express dynamics of power and societal structure (Open University 2009a). Clarke therefore opted to tie in the basement level displays, with the themes of Scottish involvement in the British Empire on the higher levels. This resulted in the focusing of the Roman collections on warfare and imperialism to, as Clarke says, 'remind [the Scottish public] that they had once been the toe end of somebody else's empire' (Open University 2009a).

Secondly the Romans are consistently alienised in a reversal of the common historical framework, utilised for instance by the British Museum, which is heavily reliant on Roman written material. This 'otherisation' is a by-product of what the Archaeology Department at the National Museum of Scotland saw as a critical need to define and contextualise the native Scots of the Iron Age. This was owing to an absence of a clear identity for the resident populations of Scotland at the time, for whom there are no known names, identifiers, or trademarks of personal appearance. Clarke states:

> …we deliberately adopted 'we' to cover all those people we don't have a name for and to try and suggest that they are alongside us guys, they are our ancestors, then we could consciously name the Romans and Vikings from time to time, and they appear as different (Open University 2009a).

These choices when placed together cause an effect that obscures the reality that Clarke previously expressed, that the past peoples of Scotland would not commonly



identify themselves with one another and that the Modern Scottish are a different people from the prehistoric inhabitants.

One way the difference is drawn between natives and Romans is through the use of the term 'alien'. The museum text titled 'Roman Invaders' provides the first instance of this terminology:

They were alien, the Romans. We had seen nothing like them. Three times they came and left again and we didn't know why they came at all. Some tribes hated them and never gave them peace. But other chiefs saw advantage in them and gained their trust. The Romans gave them silver and other marvellous things to amaze the rest of us. And they drank wine, the Roman drink. After they left the third time, the Romans gave even more to the people they knew. They needed friends then, when they had grown weak and everyone was attacking them. They were desperate.

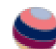
The use of the first person in this passage is particularly powerful. In the present-day context the average visitor to the National Museum of Scotland is arguably likely to know far more about the Romans than the native Iron Age population of Scotland given the historical records of the Romans and the cultural gravity given to the classical world. The first-person language facilitates the desired effect of making the Romans seem strange and imposing. To this end even Roman religious practice is discussed as inherently martial, ruthless, and bizarre. In the corner of the gallery that contains Roman religious artefacts titled 'In Touch with the Gods' there is a sign on the wall labelled 'Gods of the frontier, God of the Book'. This sign reads (emphasis added):

To hear the soldiers tell it, there were never gods so powerful as those of Rome. Jupiter of the lightning bolt ruled the heavens as their divine emperor ruled the world. And all the others, all shaping destiny. How they loved their gods of war, *commanding and pitiless,* fighters. Even *our* gods they honoured, because they always wanted more gods on their side. No small thing for them, this religion of vows made and contracts struck, of temples, shrines and altars.
The Christians had but one god and he was *our* father. As he was father of Jesus who died on a cross for *us*. Their message found favour with *our* leaders. So *we* followed them into the church.

It is not mentioned that the Romans would have been the first to introduce the population of northern Britain to Christianity; instead it is discussed as either a separate force, or an extant cultural component. Perhaps most importantly it implies that Christianity is just as foundational a component of Scottish identity today as it was in the early history of Scotland.

The 'alien' messaging is utilised further in 'The Roman army - an alien phenomenon', which also reinforces the 'commanding and pitiless' portrayal of Rome's bellicosity:

To native peoples the Roman army was an alien phenomenon in just about every way. It was an organisation of unimagined complexity and scale. Its Imperialist motives for being in Scotland were incomprehensible to native peoples. The technology it used had never been seen before.



This paragraph provides an example of Clarke's stated goal to link Roman Imperialism with Scotland's involvement in the British Empire (Open University 2009a). Introducing the term Imperialist into this ancient context invokes many modern connotations, and continues to cast the Roman Empire as a uniquely malevolent force. These modern connotations operate in dialogue with the national narrative. Benton notes that the Romans stand in for the English in the museum's conception of the past (Open University 2009b).

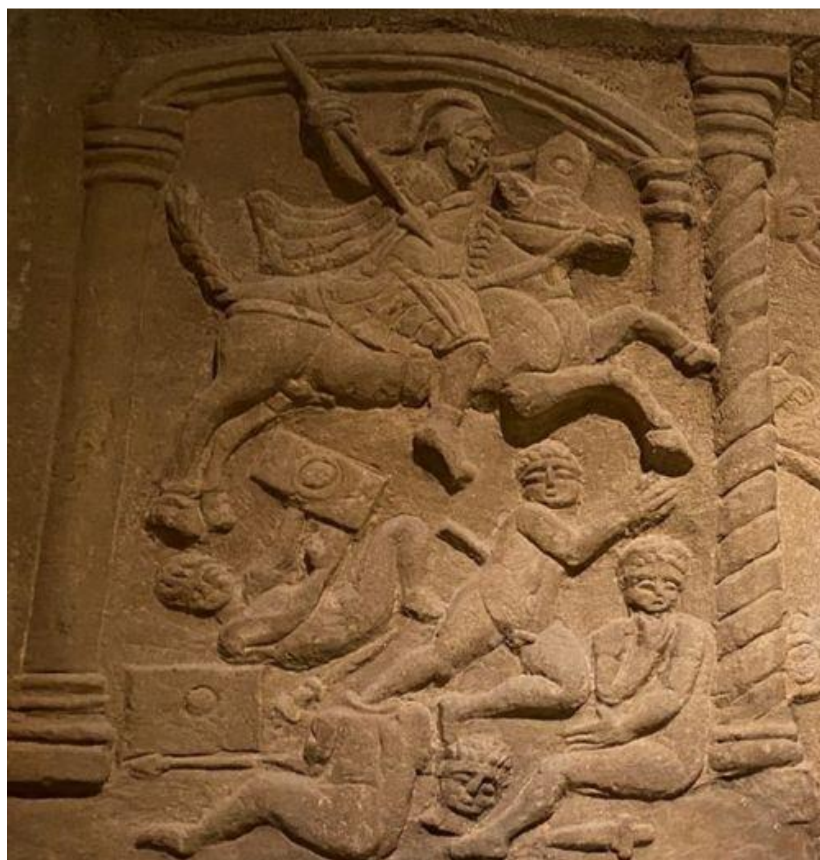
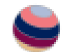


Figure 10: Stone relief from a Roman dedication in the National Museum of Scotland. Image credit: W. Givens

National narratives are powerful, and often cause historical accounts and understandings to reflect the most memorable, glorious, or traumatic episodes of a national history. In this manner, the Roman incursions into Caledonia, where an Imperial army from the South challenged an existing way of life only to be rebuffed, echoes the medieval Wars of Independence, and invites the layering of Anglo-Scottish conflict and tensions on top of Romano-Pictish history and archaeology.

Nationalist messaging is also expressed in the display 'Everyday Relations'. Most of the surrounding cases emphasise Rome's martial involvement in Scotland, with displays of weapons and other military equipment. This easily overlooked display conveys important information detailing the nature of most Romano-native interactions. The text states that the two groups lived 'side by side and, for the most part, peacefully'. The 'Everyday Relations' display also plays into national narratives. The text reiterates multiple times that the Scots were not 'Romanised' and did not benefit from luxuries of Roman civilisation. This could be seen as drawing an



important distinction between English and Scottish heritage, creating space for Scottish exceptionalism. Whereas the English readily accepted and adapted Roman customs, Scottish heritage is being presented as unblemished by Roman contact, creating a unique attribute of authenticity for the nation worth celebrating.

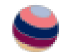
The bringing together of national narrative and archaeological displays culminates in the section heading 'Them and Us'. Clarke has stated that the first-person language used in the Early People gallery was adopted as an expedient, since the identities of these people are not clear (Open University 2009a), but it also accomplishes the aim of the museum's Board of Directors to draw the national narrative further back into the past. Additionally, instead of educating visitors about the gaps in scholarly knowledge regarding these cultures, it passively invites the guests to flesh out these peoples based upon their own personal customs, ideas, and values.

The introduction of writing as a result of the Roman occupation is described completely differently in the British Museum compared to the National Museum of Scotland. Whereas the British Museum speaks about writing as a helpful and paradigm-shifting technological innovation for Britain's native inhabitants, in the National Museum of Scotland it is quite provocatively called a 'weapon of the Roman state'. These drastically different perspectives can be sourced to the divergent national myths of England and Scotland. In England, the Romans have been heralded for introducing the Britons to elements key to the national character – sophistication, philosophy, and globalism (Haverfield 1923; Butler 2012, 20). The Scottish nationalist identity, however, champions egalitarianism and the struggle to preserve political freedom and identity (Hearn 2002; Young 2018). The text of this section highlights the use of writing in Imperial propaganda and military logistics used to maintain supremacy psychologically and militarily over the local populations.

The 'Roman occupation of Scotland' display, which shows coins commemorating the three main Roman occupations of Scotland, brings into question the importance of the surrounding displays. It states that Roman occupation only totalled 50 years in Scotland and that no towns were built. This comment is noteworthy for two reasons.

First, the use of the term 'town' skirts around the reality that there were many Roman settlements in Scotland. The Romans never established large settlements that could be classified as a 'town' such as *civitates*, *municipea*, or *coloniae*, but by saying there were no towns while failing to mention smaller settlements the museum is playing into concepts of Scottish exceptionalism and cultural purity. These smaller settlements are, however, detailed in archaeological reports funded by the museum, for example *Roman Inveresk: Past Present and Future*, a collection of papers from a seminar held at the museum, which details the development of a vicus around the Roman camp at Inveresk (Bishop 2002). The establishment of *vici* and other settlements is similarly acknowledged in the book *The Romans in Scotland* by Clarke, Breeze and Mackay, which was published by the predecessor institution of the NMS, the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (Clarke *et al*. 1980, 9). It is the more notable for being authored in part by the Keeper of Archaeology responsible for the current gallery space.

Second, the museum text brings to the reader's attention that in a gallery covering 9,100 years (National Museums Scotland 2019), a sizeable portion is dedicated to



just 50 years. This attention may be an effect of the influence of national narratives. The absence of concrete and complete ideas about who the native peoples of Iron Age Scotland were mean that it is easier to define them by contrast to known peoples such as the Romans (Open University 2009a). The national conception of Scotland as fierce defenders of their freedom has historically been traced back to the repulsion of the Romans by the Picts (Young 2018, 147); thus the presence of Roman collections helps nurture this aspect of the national identity.

The Romans are not the only invading population discussed in the gallery. Often Roman goods are displayed next to those of the Viking peoples who would invade Northern Britain several hundred years after the Roman withdrawal from Britannia. The Vikings are not discussed in the same disparaging way as the Romans. In the section discussing trade, for instance, despite pillaging being a key component of the Viking trade system (Gustafsson 2020, 256), it is not mentioned in the display 'Viking trade - barter and bullion' which features Viking hacksilber. Meanwhile a similar case titled 'Roman supply system', featuring Roman coins, weights, and measures highlights the army's practice of requisitioning native goods under threat of force.

This difference in treatment may be because, if the visitor is meant to see the Romans as a historical rhyme for the English as Benton supposes (Open University 2009b), the Vikings do not fit into the same role. Like the English, the Romans invaded Scotland from the South, at the helm of a resource- and manpower-rich empire attempting to dominate the native population (Clarke *et al.* 1980, 7; Young 2018, 4). Meanwhile the less organised, sea-raiding Vikings more closely resemble the Scottish image of their Celtic forebears, being similarly decentralised. In addition, unlike the Romans, many Vikings permanently settled in Scotland (Ramsey-Brimberg 2015, 17) and adopted many local cultural practices (Ramsey-Brimberg 2015, 87).

Along with the use of space and museum texts, the content of the collections in the displays can also influence visitor perception. However, there does not seem to be any nationalist influence on the selection of items displayed. The National Museum of Scotland displays a wide array of wonderful and diverse objects, with many naturally pertaining to the legionaries who occupied Scotland, as would be expected given the nature of Roman contact in the region. Carved stone slabs dedicated to Roman victories over the Britons, Iron helmets, a leather tent, a chamfron, and a collection of swords are used to illustrate the Roman occupation (Clarke *et al.* 1980, 14-25). In the conflict section, a native carynx is prominently displayed opposite Roman equipment, mirroring the arrangement of an ancient battlefield.

Beside the explicitly martial materials are the everyday Roman goods needed to support the legions. This includes shoes, writing tablets, amphorae, coins, jugs, and samian ware. The Roman pottery is collected for display in two separate contexts, one being as used by the Romans, and the second being as status artefacts of native elites.

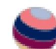
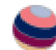


Figure 11: Roman artefacts on display in context of their use by indigenous peoples. Image credit: W. Givens

Roman pottery is contrasted with local wares in the neighbouring cases 'Mass-produced Roman pottery and ceramics' and 'Produced on a small scale'. While the latter praises native wares as 'very high quality vessels' crafted by skilled specialists, Roman pottery is described as robust, utilitarian and industrial. While Romano-British pottery was certainly robust, Millett (1991, 171) contends that native British vessels were actually of an inferior quality. Imported ceramics would have been of a higher level of craftsmanship (Hunter 2007, 5). However, there is no display dedicated exclusively to such goods, rather they are only included when it comes to their use by native peoples. Terra Sigillata sherds, jewellery, and Roman metal products were all used by native groups as objects of power and status, but also as useful raw materials (Hunter 2007, 51). It is only in this context that the aesthetic quality of Roman manufactures is discussed.

Since its inception the National Museum of Scotland has been quite explicit about its desire to help shape Scottish national identity (McKean 2000, xiii; Open University 2009a). This has been effectively achieved in the current exhibition through the inventive use of architecture, the arrangement of displays, and the



wording of museum texts. As a by-product of this desire to connect the current Scottish population with northern Britain's previous inhabitants, the Romans have been cast by the museum as antagonists. Some aspects of Roman life are given less gravity than their native counterparts, but overall the Romans are over-represented given their brief occupations of the region, and the information presented about them is most often accurate, although portrayed with an editorialising authorial voice. The museum set out 'to present a national narrative while maintaining the depth of knowledge embodied in the collections' (McKean 2000, xiii), and on balance it has succeeded.

5. *Nero: the man behind the myth*. Recontextualisation of the Roman Past at the British Museum

While the displays and gallery texts in the Weston galleries of the British Museum reveal vestiges of old Imperial messaging, the 2021 temporary exhibition *Nero: the man behind the myth* displays a deliberate shift away from these old mentalities (Opper 2021). The temporary exhibition, housed in the Sainsbury Exhibition Gallery from May through October 2021, follows a similar tack to the National Museum of Scotland, aligning national identity much closer to the native inhabitants than to the Romans. However, the emphasis placed on Britain in the wider Roman historical narrative present in the Weston galleries is continued in the more recent exhibition.

During the museum's first century, Roman Britain was seen as an uncivilised back-water unworthy of study and representation within the museum. In *Nero*, Britannia is framed as a central focus of Nero's reign. While the exhibition was touted as a re-evaluation of Nero's rule (Opper 2021), the museum also chose to re-evaluate Britain's place in the Roman political landscape.

The gallery frames Nero's foreign policy as having two main concerns: war with Parthia over the Armenian succession and the Boudican revolt. The Boudican revolt of 60-61 CE saw several indigenous tribes, most notably the Iceni, take up arms against Roman rule under the leadership of Queen Boudica (Hingley and Unwin 2006). While Nero's propaganda from the time indicates that he was more focused on the affairs of the Eastern fringe of his empire than he was on those at its western limits (British Museum 2021), much of the exhibition space was filled with presumably easier to source archaeological material from Britain, placing the revolt of the Iceni in a prominent position over the Parthian conflict. A bronze head once identified as Claudius, reclassified as Nero prior to the exhibition, was put forward as a ceremonial victim of anti-Roman wrath. The bronze head was accompanied by chains of enslaved Britons, hoards of wealth never recovered after Brittonic raids, and human remains discovered in the 'Boudican destruction layer' (British Museum 2021). Although the British Museum wishes to be a museum for a global audience (Hughes 2011, 193), these decisions show that they believe their audience either prefers or would benefit from a British reference point.

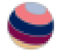


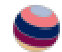
Figure 12: The chains of Roman slaves displayed in the *Nero* temporary exhibition, British Museum. Image credit: W. Givens

Centring the military disruptions of Nero's reign on the Boudican revolt appeals to the nationalist desire for uniqueness and importance. The authorial voice of the exhibition, although telling a narrative about a Roman ruler, seems to approach aligning itself with the Boudican rebels. While this affiliation is not explicit, the absence of markedly pro-Roman sentiment is a noticeable shift. In light of the evolving national narratives that now place an emphasis on Britain's ability to defend her island and the liberty of its people (Berger 2005), this shift in ancestral identification from Roman to indigenous Iceni is to be expected. Despite this shift in mentality shown in the *Nero* exhibition, the Weston galleries still maintain an older conception of Romano-British identity. The concurrent display of the two galleries demonstrate the 'insistent dualities', simultaneously held opposing ideas, that are involved in the British understanding of the Roman 'assimilation of ancient Britain' (Hingley *et al.* 2018, 285).

The British Museum has throughout its history aimed to survey the scope of civilisation. While what the Trustees of the museum have gauged as 'civilisation' has evolved over time, becoming more inclusive of non-Classical and non-Western cultures, what has not changed is that Britain is placed at the pinnacle. The British Museum has tried to distance itself from its Imperial history, and from its role in defining British identity as a cultural constitution, by recasting itself as a nationless 'universal museum'. While the museum no longer trades in the language of empire, it still promotes nationalist narratives. The museum's authorial voice repeatedly underscores the special value and uniqueness of the people of Britain while centring Roman history on British conflicts.

6. Discussion

The National Museum of Scotland and the British Museum both reflect nationalist influences within their Roman collections. There is a stark difference, however, in the manner in which these influences have been instilled.



The National Museum of Scotland made a conscious and acknowledged choice for the inclusion of the national narrative throughout their archaeological exhibitions. Moreover, rather than simply perpetuate existing narratives, the museum has set out to define the national identity (McKean 2000, xiii). This has manifested itself in the architecture of the building and the use of first person plural narration in signage explaining the collection. In the 'Early People' gallery, the museum tries to draw modern people closer to the previous populations of Scotland, to forge an unbroken chain of identity into the prehistoric past (Berger 2015, 14; Porciani 2015, 125).

The British Museum conversely has not acknowledged its role as a state-funded institution that can define national identity, despite historically fulfilling this function. The British Museum casts itself as a universal museum and tries to influence the global AHD from that platform. The 2002 declaration of universal museums demonstrates the museum's desire to secure its place as an unassailable component of the world cultural heritage apparatus (Plata 2020, 485).

Despite claiming otherwise, the museum is still influenced by British nationalist concerns. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the power and glory exuded by the collections of the British Museum helped to stitch the component pieces of the United Kingdom together (Elgenius 2015). In the present, the museum is still dedicated to presenting a unified national history. This is exemplified in the wording and maps in the Roman Britain gallery which try to tie the histories of Wales, Scotland, and England into the same shared and unified Romano-British experience. Unlike the National Museum of Scotland, which is forthright about its propagation of national narratives, the British Museum, which likes to portray itself as a bastion of scholarship (Wilson 2002), does not publicly acknowledge its nationalist influences and perspectives.

A clear reason for this difference is that the two institutions conceive of their social roles and of the makeup of their audiences very differently. This is expressed in the major architecture projects undertaken by both museums near the turn of the millennium. Both the Great Court of the British Museum and the new National Museum of Scotland building have postmodernist elements designed to message that their museum is focused on being a future-orientated factor in cultural development. For the NMS it is a nationalist future, and for the British Museum, a globalist future.

The National Museum of Scotland still achieves a degree of universalism. The first sign that greets the visitor sets out the mission of the museum to bring 'Scotland to the world, and the world to Scotland'. A third clause could conceivably be added, stating that the museum also desires to 'bring Scotland's past to Scotland'. The museum's statement acknowledges two separate audiences, one Scottish and one foreign. The museum has a very clear split between which half of the museum is to bring the world to Scotland and which is to bring Scotland to the world. This is achieved by physically splitting the collections into two sections. This division is the clear result of the merger between the Royal Scottish Museum and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, as the RSM collections remained in the old RSM building and the NMAS collections were transferred to the newer structure. The RSM side contains the museum's collections that display global culture and the new building tells the national history of Scotland.

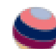
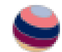


Figure 13: Marking the spot where the two NMS buildings are joined is a reaffirmation of the museum's mission. Image credit: W. Givens

The British Museum does not have this clarity. Instead, within one building the museum claims to provide a home for the heritage of the world so that the whole world can enjoy, study, and connect with it. Despite this global message there are still galleries focused on Britain's past that serve a nationalist function and are not clearly separated from the rest of the museum. The string of galleries starting with Iron Age Britain and then proceeds into Roman Britain, and from there to Sutton Hoo and the Great Migrations on to the Middle Ages, presents Britain's national narrative. In so doing the museum is still performing a hidden nationalist function for its British audience, an audience it does not actively recognise but still caters to, as evidenced by the contextualising of Nero's reign within British history in the 2021 temporary exhibition.

The messaging within these museums does change over time in tandem with evolving national narratives, as evidenced by the divergent messaging between the Roman Britain gallery, and the *Nero* exhibition. However, even through these shifts, the national museum continues to advocate for the nation's 'special value' (Breuilly 2013, 2), whatever that attribute is perceived to be.

Both the NMS and the British Museum partake in nationalist framings of the archaeological record; however, neither one egregiously misconstrues the past. This is not to say that they are completely unproblematic. The decision made by the National Museum of Scotland to utilise first person authorial voice to speak for mysterious Iron Age peoples as a way to compensate for gaps in knowledge is not an appropriate solution. Trigger (1995, 275) notes that a lack of information tends to encourage nationalistic readings of the past. Display writing is difficult and visitors will interpret displays and texts based on their own prior 'knowledge' and biases. As



a result, descriptions and displays must be constructed carefully to avoid false readings.

Archaeology can never be completely 'free from social and political presuppositions', and nationalism is just one of many factors that may influence archaeological interpretations (Trigger 1995, 275-76). Trigger (1995, 277) notes that it is not an inherently negative force:

> When combined with an awareness of the dignity of all human beings, it has helped to provide the basis for resisting colonial and dynastic oppression and for creating more broadly based popular sovereignty that promotes political freedom as well as social, economic, and intellectual development.

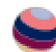
However, he also claims that to enhance the study of the field of archaeology it is nevertheless important to avoid 'the temptation to champion biases on the basis of too little evidence' as the NMS has done in the Early People gallery (Trigger 1995, 279).

Hanscam (2019) adds that even archaeologists whose archaeological research seeks to challenge nationalist readings of the past cannot guarantee that their interpretations will be accepted by the general public. Instead, she suggests archaeologists: 'target [their] criticism at what [they] know to be flawed, like the theory of Romanisation, and persist in bringing this critique into the public sphere' (Hanscam 2019, 15). To this end the British Museum's reliance upon this narrative should be challenged, initiating an opportunity for a reflexive reinterpretation of both the Weston and Wolfson galleries.

7. Conclusion

Examination of the case studies demonstrates that both institutions use Roman artefacts to construct nationalist retellings of the past and interpret material in a way that bolsters rather than challenges prevalent national mythologies. The nationalist influence on displays and gallery text at the British Museum and the NMS emerged under different circumstances and are directly at odds with one another, but together they show the inextricable link between the national museum and nationalist narratives.

Because of this link, it is imperative that museum professionals working in national museums be aware of implicit biases in the writing of museum displays and in the making of curatorial choices. In the case of an explicitly national museum, such as the National Museum of Scotland, it is critical that these institutions continue to be forthright regarding their objectives. It is far easier to read through nationalist subtext when its presence is acknowledged. Institutions claiming to be 'universal' such as the British Museum must decide whether to recognise or remove nationalist influences and outdated concepts such as Romanisation in their displays, as they can have far-flung consequences given the national museum's power as a cultural constitution in defining the Authorised Heritage Discourse. What is needed is extension of reflexive practice into the cultural heritage sector.



According to Gramsch (2000, 15), the creation of a truly reflexive practice will require a dialogue between the cultural heritage sector and sociologists focused on cultural production. Furthermore, it has been suggested by Bonacchi *et al.* (2018, 187) that heritage professionals empowered by the AHD use the pre-existing national myths created by past 'experts' as a starting point for a new dialogue with citizens 'over the meanings of the past'. By engaging in dialogue with visitors, museums could open up artefacts to new interpretations and become a nexus for 'scrutinising things and important matters of the day, prompting wider participation, sharing knowledge, ideas,…and conversation' (Walker 2016). However, implementation of these reflexive practices will require the will of individual national museums to contemplate their own nature and purpose, and to conscientiously choose to either reject or acknowledge their role in shaping national identity.

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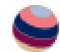

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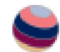

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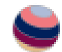

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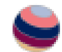

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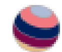

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