



Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400 to 1070

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The enormous hoard of beautiful gold military objects found in a field in Staffordshire has focused huge attention on the mysterious world of 7th and 8th century Britain. Clearly the product of a sophisticated, wealthy, highly militarized society, the objects beg innumerable questions about how we are to understand the people who once walked across the same landscape we inhabit, who are our ancestors and yet left such a slight record of their presence.

Britain after Rome brings together a wealth of research and imaginative engagement to bring us as close as we can hope to get to the tumultuous centuries between the departure of the Roman legions and the arrival of Norman invaders nearly seven centuries later. As towns fell into total decay, Christianity disappeared and wave upon wave of invaders swept across the island, it can be too easily assumed that life in Britain became intolerable - and yet this is the world in which modern languages and political arrangements were forged, a number of fascinating cultures rose and fell and tantalizing glimpses, principally through the study of buildings and burials, can be had of a surprising and resilient place.

The result of a lifetime of work, Robin Fleming's major new addition to the *Penguin History of Britain* could not be more opportune. A richly enjoyable, varied and surprising book, *Britain after Rome* allows its readers to see Britain's history in a quite new light.

Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400 to 1070 Details

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Author : Robin Fleming

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From Reader Review Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400 to 1070 for online ebook

Matt says

An extremely thorough examination of ancient graves.

Chris Wright says

Excellent overall, and with a broad approach both geographically and chronologically which avoids the usual trap of histories of this period; namely, over-focus on Alfred the Great and the generations either side of him in Wessex and southern England. My one criticism is that, in her attempt to avoid obsessing over high politics, Fleming perhaps glosses over political developments a little too readily. Still, a fascinating study and well-worth reading.

Riversue says

This is the best history of the little people ever. A few Archbishops and a king or two are mention but the majority of the text is about the average person and their lives during the Dark Ages. Full of amazing details.

David says

Robin Fleming very consciously takes a less traditional approach to the Anglo Saxon period than most; there's relatively little about political history, though there is some, and it might well be argued that this is a more balanced approach, and much less focus on what the textual history tells us.

I really enjoyed it; it has a distinct flavour which is at times challenging and invigorating, and at others mildly annoying - it's a book I think that makes you react. I loved the real insights that the focus on archaeological evidence gave into the lives of everyone, not just the social winners; though at the same time, there's sometimes too much of the archaeology - the detail can get int he way, and the frustrating thing is that there are often no answers, of course, to the story burials tell - for example the woman buried on top of another, probably buried alive half crushed by a big stone.

The bit I found least convincing was the idea that much of the early migration was peaceful, migrants fitting into a kind of egalitarian community building. There's no doubt that generally the author's vision of the real world of the migrations is much more convincing than the older, traditional view of the migrations would have it, but I help but feel it must have been accompanied, even in the early years, by a substantial degree of violence.

The last chapter and the attempt to paint a picture of what life must have been like is brilliant, and I'd say this book, accompanies by others, is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand the Anglo Saxon age.

Ken Burruss says

Any book on the history of Britain from 400 to 1070 that begins by referencing George W Bush Jr. on its very first page is going to be a bit of a mixed bag. I realize authors should be open about their influences but the fact that the author had to live eight years under a Bush administration does not make her stand out from the hundreds of millions of others who also did, nor does it really have anything to do with the subject matter at hand except to allow the author to vent a little in print. Lastly it's an unwelcome note to those of us reading about the distant past precisely so that we might escape having to think about the present.

The book is supposedly an introductory history text for that era. The problem is the prose is just a little too dense to make for casual readers while also being too simplistic and lacking necessary rigor (ex. no footnotes) for more academic readers. Add to that the author's occasional personal statements added in that border on sanctimonious. Yes, it's a shame that most histories of the era tend to favor the rulers, as the author bemoans at one point, and not the common people. Maybe it's because we've all ignored commoners up to this precise moment. Or maybe it's because there are few if any historical records on commoners from those centuries to draw from.

The author does do excellent work in drawing from recent archaeological finds to supplement the gaps in historical records, an approach that hopefully current and future historians will continue to utilize. There is also quite a bit of knowledge in the book and almost any reader will walk away from it having learned at least something.

Charles says

I found this book to be very 'lumpy'. That is, there were chapters that I found terribly interesting and others that I wanted to page through as quickly as possible. For example, I found the final chapter, and the chapters at the beginning of the narrative to be the best. The ecclesiastic-related chapters were less interesting.

Maps could have been used better. As an American, my knowledge of contemporary Britain's geography is as hazy as the exact boundaries of Mercia. While there were adequate historical maps, the contemporary place names sent me to other references.

Finally, what to believe? The book has more than one incongruity. For example, the 'Follow the Money' explanation never explained what the primarily agricultural, and backward by continental standards British were trading for all the foreign silver that entered Britain. This book is food for thought.

Hans says

What a boring book . I'm really having trouble getting through this one. I can't understand why people are so enthusiastic . The archeological evidence up to the eighth century is not very compelling. It's still a lot of guessing and this period remains pretty dark.

John Nebauer says

Britain after Rome is the second volume of the new seven-volume Penguin History of Britain series. It updates the old nine-volume Pelican History of England, which I greatly enjoyed back in the day (and which still gather dust on my shelves).

Fleming's introduction sets out the framework established by series editor David Carradine. The first of these are that there are no footnotes or discussions of historiography. The third is that it should appeal to, 'general readers, undergraduates, graduate students and professional historians'.

Though Fleming doesn't ignore written evidence, much of the evidence comes from archaeological sources, which gives the work an interesting texture. Firstly, it means that a straightforward narrative account is ruled out. Chronology and archaeology are weaved into a rich and dynamic account of the formative years of post-Roman Britain. Each chapter features extensive archaeological evidence drawn largely from burial sites.

It's a pity that historiography isn't discussed, because the manner in which archaeology is used to frame our view of the period is quite single-minded. Fleming argues that the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons was far less bloody than is traditionally supposed. This rests on two factors. The first is the commonality of grave goods found among Britons and Anglo-Saxons alike. This suggests a level of peaceful trade and 'rubbing along' that that wouldn't occur if the two communities were constantly at war. The second is that there are few burials that suggest the kinds of violent deaths that would occur when a community resists invasion.

An unstated corollary is that accounts emphasising the terror brought by the newcomers is thus greatly exaggerated. But while it's almost certainly true that such accounts are exaggerated, it also doesn't follow that the process was therefore largely peaceful. Men that perish in battle will tend to be buried where they fell, and not near their settlements (though 'non-combatant' victims presumably will be if their compatriots continue to occupy the site afterwards).

Secondly, we often imagine that sustained conflict means large numbers of dead. Imagine a village of 50 or so Britons. Six years later, their population is down to 43 following a series of skirmishes with newcomers. That sounds like quite low levels of violence, but it's about 14% of the population. In the titanic struggle between Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II, the Soviet population sustained enormous losses, but from 1941 to 1946 it actually fell by a slightly lesser percentage. I'm not suggesting that this imagined example represents what actually occurred. It simply illustrates that not finding many victims of violence is not necessarily a sign that the process was entirely (or even mostly) peaceful.

The opening chapter on the end of Roman power in Britain shows that the economy, structured around supplying the needs of the three legions based there was radically altered during the crises of the third century. Local pottery takes up a larger percentage of the archaeological record. It is in many ways a smaller economy, but one not so distorted so much by the needs of the military and imperial bureaucracy. Towns became smaller. But late-Roman Britain also saw larger villas that were by and large economically self-sufficient. This replicated trends on the continent.

Unlike the continent, urban life didn't survive the end of Roman power. Roman Britain simply imploded, with virtually no help from the newcomers. The picture of rapidly decaying towns is quite haunting;

At Canterbury, the sewers started clogging up around 350, and a thick layer of silt began to form in the city's baths and on its streets... The ruined and empty city of York...reverted back to marshland in the fifth century... By 420 Britain's villas had been abandoned. Its towns were mostly empty, its organised industries dead, its connections with the larger Roman world severed: and all with hardly an Angle or Saxon in sight.

As Fleming reveals the decomposition of the old and composition of the new, I found at times that I grew heartily sick of yet another burial description. Yet many of these descriptions were fascinating. Naturally the Sutton Hoo descriptions rank highly. But as I worked my way through, I found that the great strengths of this book slowly revealed themselves. History is more than simply the deeds of great kings and their entourage. We get innumerable glimpses into the lives of women, herders, cheesemakers. These are people who don't write, and thus are generally invisible in the written historical record.

We see the processes in which emerging royal dynasties invent for themselves genealogies to justify the concentration of economic and political power. It is kings, and the church, that have been the subject of the histories written about this period. But not even all kings, but merely the successful. We also get glimpses of the historically might-have-been-but-didn't-happen. Archaeological evidence reveals the efforts of the kings of Brycheiniog to maintain their power into the ninth century. The crannog (a settlement build in a lake, common in Ireland) tells us that the kings had the resources and links to hire foreign workers with the expertise needed to build such a settlement, the resources to have it done, and the expectation that their efforts would be successful. Yet by 934 it disappears:

...Alfred the great was not the only extraordinary innovator in ninth-century Britain. Brycheiniog, too, had an extraordinary king, who was as interesting and inventive as Alfred the Great, and yet the Welsh king and his strategies are simply not part of the story. The kingdom and its kings have disappeared from our histories, not for lack of evidence, but because the evidence detailing their history is material, rather than textual, and because of this, historians have simply ignored it.

If you prefer historical narrative, you may find this a bit of a slog. But this is a fascinating example of archaeology revealing the lives of those historical writing usually ignore.

Steve Bivans says

Absolute MUST READ, if you want to know what life was like for the 99% that weren't kings or bishops. Fascinating narrative, woven together with thousands of threads of material evidence. If you want to write history using archaeology, you have to read this book. This is how history should be written, but so rarely is.

Nikki says

Britain After Rome is a rather exhaustive, not to say exhausting, history of Britain after the Romano-British period. It focuses on material culture like grave goods and excavations, rather than the texts and what we think we know. Sometimes these contradict each other, and sometimes they fit together in illuminating ways; Fleming takes her time unpacking both situations. It results in a broader look at society than we might see elsewhere, including the lives of women and the fashions of clothing, as well as the big questions of politics, commerce and religion. (Not that the role of women is a small question, but it's one about which we know less.)

I did enjoy reading it, but I had to take it in little parcels rather than sitting down to read right through. Despite the avoidance of extensive footnotes, it feels scholarly, dense, lengthy. There's a lot of material and some of it is lingered over very lovingly.

Originally reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Lauren Albert says

It's funny how this book contradicts the first one in the series--Rome here has a much stronger influence. I'd love to get the two authors in a room together and hear them argue it out. They both make good cases which would make it an interesting argument.

This one was much easier to read than the first. Not surprising because the earlier the time period, the less evidence there is. It is well worth reading.

I'm on to the third volume now.

Roger Burk says

The writer is a professor of history, but in this book she concentrates on what we can learn about early medieval Britain from archaeology and physical anthropology. She is not so much interested in the high politics that interests contemporaneous writers and most historians. The usual historical narrative is there only as a framework. For example, the crucial dynastic events from the death of Edgar the Peaceable in 975 to the Conquest in 1066, including the rise and fall of the Danish dynasty, are dealt with in one page. Maybe that's all they deserve. Instead, we get an illuminating emphasis on the lived experience of people in ordinary life--building prosperity, coping with depredations, and so forth. The breadth of scholarship is amazing, and the integration of archaeology with documentary history well done. Most (but not all) of the author's judgments seem soundly based on the evidence.

The author wants to present what everyday life was really like, for the laboring classes as well as the aristocracy. Considering the paucity of written sources and the limitations of archaeology, this requires the use of imagination. However, I think she tells us a little too freely of what the medieval Britons "must have," "could have," "would have," or "might have" done. Some of this is necessary if we are to say anything at all about the subject of everyday life. However, it's dangerous--human beings very often see only evidence that confirms their previously-formed opinions when confronted with a mass of randomly selected data. Can we be confident that Dr. Fleming's judgments are not colored by preconceived notions? Alas, this book is marred by a pervasive class-oriented Marxist point of view. Whenever luxury items appear in the archaeological record, it means not that society is getting richer, but that income disparities are increasing as the powerful expropriate the labor of the weak. The rich apparently never get that way by unusual talent or effort. People in rich graves are pronounced "privileged," though all we really know is that they were rich. People "scramble" to the top of society (p. 96), they don't work their way there. They build barrows to proclaim "rights over the labor of others" (96), not to memorialize the dead. Jewelry is always bought to advertise status, not because it is beautiful. Collecting rent is "extracting surplus." A place called "Chiswick" must have supplied expropriated surpluses of cheese to the lord. The same word is used for "slave" and "foreigner" to claim a spurious ethnic distinction from slaves, not because captured foreigners were often reduced to slavery. (Our own word "slave" comes from "Slav.") The varied diet of the rich is explained as status displays, as if delicious food were not sufficient motivation. Even alms-giving is attributed to status-seeking (p. 311)! Dr. Fleming acknowledges the existence in the late Anglo-Saxon period of a class of prosperous farmers, merchants, etc. (p. 313), but seems to think them insignificant compared to the mass of peasants.

This pervasive class-conscious reductionism is easily recognized and accounted for, and much can be learned

from Dr. Fleming's impressive scholarship despite it. However, one is left with lingering doubts when she gives judgments without giving adequate evidence behind them. We are assured that late Roman aristocrats in Britain spoke "hypercorrect Latin" (p. 79), though we really have no evidence at all about how they spoke. Rather too much is deduced from clothes fashions. We are told that the wealth of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the 7th century was "more likely to come from conquest than long slow development," though it must have been created by some sort of development before it was conquered. We don't know why she is so sure that kings were not involved in the founding of the first AS towns (p. 204)--is this concluded simply from the absence of evidence to the contrary? She believes that the growing imposition of the king's justice was harsher and more arbitrary than village justice (365), without giving a reason. She describes at length how the famous 2009 Staffordshire hoard was a valued collection of heirlooms and mementos, but I have seen the hoard in a museum exhibit and I think this random collection of broken gold bric-a-brac is much more likely the result of stripping the aristocratic dead on some forgotten battlefield. She makes the interesting point that the only AS coin minted (the silver penny, worth 1/4 of a sheep carcass) was too valuable for the ordinary transactions of life, and was probably only needed to pay rent and taxes (p. 312). There must have been a secondary barter and subsistence economy. This is reasonable enough, but she attributes the great social divisions of the time to the lack of low-denomination coins, even though similar wide division are common enough in societies with small coins, and those without any coins at all.

The period from the departure of Rome to the establishment of the AS kingdoms is particularly interesting to me, and Dr. Fleming's approach this period is particularly odd. The figures of the conventional and plausible documentary history--Vortigern, Ambrosius Aurelianus, and Arthur--are not even mentioned, so we do not know why Dr. Fleming ignores them. The usual story is that the British strongman Vortigern invited Saxon mercenaries to come in and help fight the Irish, but they revolted and invited their families and friends to join them in settling the land. Then Ambrosius and Arthur organized a British counter-attack that stopped the Saxon progress for a generation. Instead, Dr. Fleming sees an egalitarian and almost peaceful Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain, pointing to AS homesteads on marginal land and British jewelry in AS burials from the period (and vice versa). She portrays small groups of AS settlers moving into ungoverned areas and living next to British neighbors. I suppose their children played together. The later AS kingdoms were the result of a gradual (but startlingly rapid) indigenous growth in a mixed British-Saxon society, as local leaders became more and more powerful by subjecting other local leaders. As far as I can tell, she concludes this mostly from the absence of evidence for anything more organized, or for any large-scale violence. I say, if their children played together then far more Celtic words would have made their way into English than the paltry few that we have. I don't find the egalitarian mixed society to be plausible. Some law, either Romano-British or Saxon, must have been used to settle disputes--which was it? If the AS kingdoms were a natural local growth from a kind of Rousseauian state of nature, then some of the small kingdoms in the area would have been founded by local Roman officials that managed to hang on to power, as happened west of the AS settlements. At the least, some of the eastern kingdoms would have been led by Britons, but none of them were. It seems to me overwhelmingly clear to me that the advent of the Saxons was a conquest, not a peaceful migration, and that the Britons were too weak and disorganized for large-scale resistance. Those who did not flee were subjugated.

Dr. Fleming does give convincing evidence that the British economy had collapsed in the later 300s, before the Saxons arrived. The small market towns around the countryside withered away, as did the walled cities, though without signs of widespread destruction. My guess is that as the Roman armies were withdrawn in this period, local trade became more and more difficult because of thieves and small-scale brigandage, including Irish and Pictish. Eventually things got bad enough that most of the ruling class left for the relative security of the Continent. In the east, the remaining British peasants, with no leadership or martial tradition, were no match for the invading Saxons. In the west, with a little more time, a few remaining families who had governed under the Romans managed to set up small kingdoms. That story seems more likely to me than Dr. Fleming's.

On the other hand, I think Dr. Fleming is convincing when she says that the foundation stories of the AS

kingdoms were the product of a later period, attempts to add luster to the family that won the later contest for power. That actually fits well with the stories in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle of groups coming over in two or three or five boats--smaller groups than you'd expect from an invading army. I suppose other small groups of boats arrived, but were not memorialized in the Chronicle because the families in them did not enjoy great power later on.

Jur says

Robin Fleming's book is a great counterpoint to the political histories of the period. Because of the archeological evidence the book is strong on demographic, social and economic developments, and this allows stronger focus on the general population and women in particular than the written record.

Especially the last chapter is a showcase for the power of archaeology to (re)create real stories of common people from physical evidence. The first part focuses on the high number of women dying before their 35th birthday (often in childbirth) and its effects on society, like the many orphans. The second part, recording a live burial of a struggling woman suggests punishment or ritual burial of slaves with their masters. And the last one shows the high death toll in towns and the terrible hygienic conditions of people living close to their neighbours and animals.

And there's a host of similar episodes spread around the book that I haven't got time to mention here, but give a fresh look at what we call the Dark Ages based on relatively new evidence. But while the firm foundation in archaeology is the strength of this book, the long, speculative interpretation occasionally becomes a grind.

The archeological data frequently challenges the written record. Fleming suggests that the coming of the 'Saxons' (as most scholars now accept, it was a very mixed population of Germanic people from present day Northern France up to Denmark) was a lot less violent than suggested by the literary sources which were written later, sometimes centuries, than the actual events and who had their own agenda. According to Fleming the kingdoms of the 7th and 8th centuries used conquest myths to stress their legitimacy.

Archeological finds also point towards the conclusion that Roman economic decline started a few generations before the legions left for the continent in 410. Population had been declining during this period and continued even faster as Roman presence ended and political and economic fragmentation set in.

This suggests in Fleming's view that there was room for newcomers, while few graves from this period show violent deaths, nor a heavily militarised society. However, I think even the smaller Romano-British population would maintain a claim to the land and it is unlikely they would have relinquished it totally without struggle. Also, men dying on the battlefield would not be buried in their home villages.

The newcomers mixed easily with the Romano-British. Based on the lack of high status burials in this period, Fleming concludes that the 5th and 6th centuries saw a remarkably egalitarian society. It also contained a wide local variation of combinations of Romano-British and Germanic elements, with individuals picking and choosing elements from different cultures to create their own styles. Identities became very local, as opposed to the Romano-British elite which had focused on the fashions of its continental counterparts. The immigrants also, even though they described themselves as Saxons or Angles, were in fact leading very different lives from their grandparents.

Would social structures be imported from the continent with the immigrants or would they assimilate into some sort of 'melting pot' as in the United States in the 19th century?

From the late 6th / early 7th century there are signs of economic recovery and rapid political concentration. First, a few dozen regional powers developed, which then coalesced into stronger kingdoms, like Mercia, that dominated the others. However, the subjugated kingdoms retained a high degree of independence. But the high level of competition forced all kings to find ways to stay on top of the political food chain. This found expression in increasingly high status burials.

Kings stimulated urban renewal by granting lands (hagae) to lords and monasteries. Two new sources of income for kings in the 7th century were the tolls levied on town markets and industry, as well as coin minting. The increasing number of locally produced coins found in hoards and around commercial buildings shows that money returned to the economy.

Christianity also offered several boons to ambitious kings. First of all, clerics could provide a powerful administrative force to a king, increasing the utility of his resources. Secondly, Christianity became a fashionable status attribute, and as it became more accepted by powerful lords, it became expedient for their followers and subjects to convert as well. This would lead to a chain reaction of conversions down client networks. But the archeological evidence suggests that many pagan symbols and rituals continued or were incorporated in Christian burial rites.

While during the 7th and 8th centuries the general tendency was towards concentration and consolidation, the coming of the Vikings overthrew the status quo. In certain parts of Britain it seems that regular institutions collapsed, and in others it forced them to adapt to the crisis.

The coming of the norsemen for example strengthened the power of the Saxon kings, as they found clerical and secular lords more easily accepted their protection. In the 9th century, the resurgent Saxons strove to bind the recovered territories more firmly to them and transferred their institutions as well as their authority (unlike the 7th century kings).

A major new Saxon institution was the burh, the fortified town. The support for protection of these towns was linked to landholding. The burhs developed into central places, combining trade and administrative functions, with the sheriff (shire-reeve) as the representative of royal authority. Finds reveal commercial expansion and increasing sophistication.

While the Danes had been able to bring a large area of England under their control, and many of the erstwhile raiders settled, archeological finds suggest that the norsemen mixed as easily with the Saxons and other people in Britain as the Saxons had done with the Celts and Romano-British in the 5th and 6th centuries. And again the genetic mix was matched by social and cultural interaction that defies orderly generalisation.

Fleming puts much store on bottom up agency and tends to interpret developments not as the result of kings' decisions, but of social phenomena driven by local lords and townspeople. Money in this period was not primarily a means of market transactions, but a means to monetise tribute, so lords and kings could easily buy status goods and pay for communal works. Local lords were able to impose tribute on their subjects. The physical evidence for this development shows more high status burials, suggesting more elaborate social stratification. By the 11th century the Saxon thegn had become more like a gentleman farmer than a warrior elite. That role was increasingly played by royal household troops like the huscarls.

John says

This is a classic example of a book that I would see in a bookstore or find in a library and really want to read. I know nothing of early medieval Britain...nothing, I would say to myself, in an attempt to justify spending time on this, when I know full well that I have way too many books assigned for my classes, and can't possibly find time for a few hundred pages on a period of history one thousand years earlier than my field. But then this book was assigned! Hooray! Medieval Britain! I'm lucky Robin Fleming teaches at my school. I just get so irritated when I pick up other history books about England or Scotland or France, and they zip through a thousand years of history in the first few pages. I know it is because the textual sources are lacking. But really, in that massive 900 page history of London you have seen in bookstores, the years 50 - 1066 C.E. are covered in the first 35 pages. There is more to learn about centuries of Roman, Celtic, Angle, Saxon, and Viking settlement and interaction. Because textual evidence is so lacking, and what little text there is inevitably concerns only kings and/or influential churchmen, Fleming must weave together a story from material evidence. She weaves well. Through artifacts found in medieval graves, medical evidence provided by skeletons, the traces of the built environment recoverable through excavation, even the entomology of medieval refuse heaps, Fleming is able to provide both a broader view of medieval British life and one filled with richer human detail. A history from below becomes possible even for a time when hardly any textual evidence exists for a history from above.

This sort of history is particularly good for exploring the lives of women...indeed, it seems as if the farther back in history you go, and the fewer textual sources you have, the more visible women's lives become. Authors tended to be men, but female bones survive just as well as male bones. The stories Fleming is able to piece together here are fascinating as well because of the mystery surrounding them. Historians can speculate about skeletons showing signs of execution, or diseased bodies buried in complex ways, but a certain amount of mystery remains and really fires the imagination. The kind of everyday life factors that Fleming brings in are fascinating too - what was it like to live in a society where hardly anyone was over the age of 35, where most people were in constant discomfort, where gangs of sickly orphans were forever roaming? What a crazy foreign country the past is.

This could be read and appreciated by anyone interested in the time, not just historians. There are no footnotes, and it is compellingly readable.

Juliette says

In more ways than one, grave goods aren't for everybody. Had the world turned on a different axis, and I'd not been so attached to luxuries like Brie or had not been so lazy, grave goods would have been my bread and butter. And even I found Fleming's storytelling boring. It didn't help that she has a reflex towards redundancy in her writing: her text is peppered with "in actual fact" and "standard modus operandi". (I ground my teeth every time I saw those phrases.) But *Britain after Rome* and I profited from how much I loathed *SPQR*.

I enjoyed the archaeology of early Britain. It is worth remembering, as Marc Morris wrote in *The Norman Conquest*, that "scholars who [study the Early Middle Ages] can usually get all their primary source material on a single shelf and still have room for ornaments" (4). The story really gets exciting (comparatively) around the sixth century. The rise of the ecclesia was a highlight — if only because Fleming could then refer to the written sources as well as the physical evidence. The last chapter, "Life and Death in Medieval Britain," is a gem, and I would have begun the book with it. I don't know why medievalists save the humanization of their subjects for last. I bumped up my rating because that chapter was so very good, and it enhanced the preceding twelve chapters.
