Northumbria Research Link

Chapter Nine

Tyneside's Modern Rome: the North East's Image of its Roman Past and its Lost Englishness

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This chapter is about the relationship between historical and modern cultural identities, a subject that is always fraught and constantly renegotiated. What I want to argue here is that the radical de-industrialisation of Tyneside during the last thirty years of the twentieth century has accompanied an equally radical realignment of its relationship with its own past. I will also suggest that this realignment reveals some important characteristics of the cultural management of past and present identities, and of the relationship between the North East and the various historical identities that overlaid one another in the construction of its current incarnations: Celtic; Roman; Anglo-Saxon; Viking; Hanoverian; Industrial; Proletarian and so on.

In the last decades of the twentieth century the transformation of Newcastle itself from industrial to post-industrial city was accompanied with the expansion of a range of visitor attractions dedicated to the display of aspects of its past. This was characteristic of similar developments elsewhere, but was more pronounced in Newcastle because the city had previously had little popular association with the leisure industries, but by the end of the 1990s had become identified as one of the Britain's premier party cities. This transformation was bound up with the slow abandonment of an identity based on the idea of respectable skilled industrial labour, an identity materially incarnate in the pattern of late Victorian working-class housing that stretches with unrelenting density along both sides of the Tyne.

In 2004 the new social confidence of the post-industrial Tyneside was supposed to have been consolidated by a comparable political transformation. A local "yes" vote would have established an elected regional assembly in the area. This idea, strongly promoted by the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, was intended to reunify Britain on the model of France, by establishing powerful regional centres that would eliminate some of the inconsistencies created by the devolution of Wales and Scotland. The North East was identified as the likeliest region to support devolution within England, precisely because of its strong local culture. If the North East voted for a regional assembly then there would be no good reason to deny it to the North West, or to the Midlands. Since the devolution of Wales and Scotland in 1998 Britain had been divided between the "Celtic" areas and the "Germanic" (Anglo-Saxon) areas of England. That difference would be subsumed in the now inclusive distinction between powerful but equal regions, in which Scotland and Wales would simply play a part among others. In other words, then, there would no longer be any simple concept of "England" in contrast to Wales and Scotland – there would, instead, be a series of regions, comparable to the French system of Departments. In France the nominally Celtic Brittany is distinct

in only the same way as other Departments such as Paris itself or formerly separate nations such as Burgundy.

In fact, Prescott's plan failed utterly. The people of the North East failed to support a regional assembly, apparently because they saw it as no more than another tier of local government, one which would also involve an extra tier of taxation. The vote was an overwhelming 696,519 against to 197,310 in favour. Far from being an act that would liberate local identity it was seen as something that would further *submerge* local culture under a sea of alienating bureaucracy.

This is, I will attempt to show, one of the fundamental paradoxes and problems implicit in North East identity. It is central to both what makes it powerful and what consigns it to institutional inarticulacy. This process, epitomised by the 2004 vote, will, I hope to show, reveal something about the ways in which cultural identities are forged. It tells us why in Scotland an extra tier of government is seen by the majority of the population as a *desirable* development – something that unleashes a long-suppressed sense of national identity. It also allows us to see why, against Prescott's best hopes, an institutionalised regional identity was seen as a *violation* of local culture, an imposition of nannying systems over the free people of a vibrant metropolis.

What I want to suggest here is that these very modern ideas are mirrored by shifting models of very ancient history, and that the decisions made in 2004 were informed by events long lost to most voters in the confusions of the past. But the opposite is also true – that the past is created by the present. Our sense of who we are is strongly determined by how our past makes sense in our present. And this is an equally important aspect of the way in which the past is represented to us.

The North East of England is a uniquely powerful location in which to explore this issue, precisely because its identities have been so varied, so contested and so obscured. It may even with justification be described as an *effaced* borderland between multiple ethnic identities. I use the term "effaced" here because its contradictory and diverse identity is currently submerged by the strong regional persona that has emerged since the industrialisation of the Tyne in the nineteenth century. This distinctive regional personality, going by the name "Geordie", was perhaps originally a reference to the pro-Georgian affiliation of the population of Newcastle at a time when many of the people of the North East were sympathetic to the Jacobites (Colls & Lancaster, 1992: xii). At the time this would have meant that the Geordies were in favour of broadly liberal and progressive politics rather

than the more tribal loyalties of the past, an affiliation later confirmed by the inscription on the prominent monument to Earl Grey in the centre of the city. Now the label often implies the opposite: the existence of a distinctive and resilient local identity that resists assimilation to national norms.

This strange inversion of identities is precisely what I wish to explore here, with particular reference to the ways in which modern Newcastle has defined itself in terms of an abandonment of local identification with great industrial heritage of the nineteenth century. It did so, I will suggest, by the increasing equation of the North-East with the legacy of ancient Rome, a legacy which allows for a distinctive negotiation between modern leisure or service based industries and the idealisation of lost heavy industry itself. This articulation of post-industrial identity for the region reveals the ways in which historical cultures are reconfigured in the name of the revitalisation of regionality itself. These historical identities often work in ways that differ meaningfully from the more explicit representations of the changing city in popular culture, as explored in this book by Peter Hutchings and David Martin-Jones. They also work to complicate the relationship to general forms of modernity – in fashion, design and art – examined here by Hilary Fawcett, Cheryl Buckley and Shelagh Wilson.

Imagining Rome on Tyne

The role of ancient Rome in the modern imagination has always been powerful. While the most important aspects of Classical culture have been traced to the ancient Greeks it has always been the imperial Romans who have been the template for later imaginary models of the struggle between Civilisation and Barbarism. While the sacred status of the Greeks went unchallenged, Rome was almost as much vilified as it was praised for its glories. It always came to stand for what modernity needed to see in order to make itself anew. It is Rome that dominates the history of artistic and of cinematic representations of the ancient world, and it is Rome that has worked to signify changing cultural priorities. The Rome of the Renaissance and the Rome of the late twentieth century are very different, but both stand as exaggerated, primary-coloured versions of the world in which the makers of the images lived. This is especially evident in the late twentieth century.

This was also very clearly in evidence in the North East, when the early images of Roman achievement were allied to the claims that the region was growing to create

a new identity for itself. William Bell Scott's paintings in Wallington Hall depict the history of the region beginning with the creation of Hadrian's Wall and ending with the urban-industrial modernity of the nineteenth century, towards the painting of which the Roman officer on the wall points, as if the advent of Roman engineering on the Tyne inexorably led to the full majesty of Victorian industrialism. For Scott these two moments in history are intertwined and, ultimately inseparable. One creates the other. As the Roman centurion who oversees the construction of the wall gestures authoritatively to his resentful Celtic workers he points beyond his own known world to the alien and overwhelming modernity opposite him in the space of the room he occupies. Only a few feet away, but representing the struggles and aspirations of millennia, is the scene of industrial production on the Tyne known as *Iron and Coal*, or, more properly, as *The Nineteenth Century*.

The paradoxes implicit in the early North Eastern commentaries on the Romanisation of the Tyne have been explored in detail by Paul Usherwood, who points to the conflict between Scott's desire to present Rome as a modernising force and the liberal traditions that associated it with alien tyranny, antithetical to the modernising processes productive of free peoples (Usherwood, 1996).

Shortly after the huge success of Ridley Scott's epic movie *Gladiator*, a new Roman-themed visitor centre opened near to Scott's own hometown of South Shields. Over the river, at Wallsend, the Roman fort of Segedunum had been chosen to be developed as a major "family" oriented local attraction. Posters advertising the venture depicted young boys dressed up in Roman military costume and advised parents that a visit would be a great day out for their "little soldiers". Wallsend Metro station – a couple of minutes walk from Segedunum – was even decked out with pictures depicting an imaginary Romanised version of the modern town-centre, in which road signs, street names and even familiar shop-names were given in Latin. The local outlet of Woolworths is renamed "Domvs Lana Dignorvm", while the nearby Jobcentre becomes the "Forum Venalicium" (*see Figure 1*). Inside Segedunum itself this conceit continues, as a map is displayed, in the style of the local Metro map, depicting the line of Hadrian's Wall and the roads leading up to it, with the mile-castles listed as though they were stations. The design was "created as part of the PONTIS art project to link the Metro station at Wallsend with Segedunum" (*see Figure 2*).

The imagery creates a fantasy of a kind hitherto confined to alternative-history novels: that the Roman Empire had never fallen. Here we have a mirror of modern

Wallsend, a nondescript suburban shopping centre reinvigorated and re-enchanted – a place that had recovered the status it once had as the final outpost of Western civilisation confronting the wild wildernesses of the north.

Of course the transformation of Wallsend was one of the principal aims of Segedunum. As its name suggests, it had grown up around the end of the Roman wall, its very identity defined by its buried Roman past. Modern Wallsend was a product of the late nineteenth century, when Tyneside's industrial urban landscape expanded rapidly and completely along both sides of the Tyne, swallowing up all the pre-existing villages into a sea of terraced houses and Tyneside flats. The remains of the area's more ancient past were also absorbed into this new, densely urbanised, strip along the riverside, though there was a paradoxical element of disinterment that accompanied the expansion (Divine, 1969: 72). Over the river, directly opposite Wallsend, lay Jarrow, a town with an almost equally ancient past, but one that was also transformed into a hugely concentrated centre of working-class housing. The Anglo-Saxon church and monastery in which the Venerable Bede had written his histories of the early English peoples had become an isolated outpost of pre-modernity in an environment defined by shipbuilding and heavy industry. Elsewhere Roman and Saxon remains were either completely buried or left as unintelligible fragments of an alien world littering industrial suburbia.

The opening of Segedunum, then, represented a kind of *disinterment*, both literal and cultural, of this once-neglected past. During Tyneside's heyday as an industrial centre the Roman and Medieval past was left more or less where it lay, playing little part in the social lives of the local communities of Jarrow and Wallsend. Since the precipitous and almost-complete obliteration of heavy industry in the area, these two locations have been more severely affected than most other parts of Tyneside. Situated in the middle of the urbanised strip along the river, they have not been able to retain the relative prosperity of Newcastle itself and of the coastal regions of Shields and Tynemouth. The rediscovery of lost Roman glory as a form of leisure is closely bound up with the transformation of the area and the emergence of the "weightless economy" of knowledge-based, service and entertainment industries.

Ironically, perhaps, the Segedunum building is adapted from part of the Swan Hunter shipyard, still operational just a few feet away from the visitor centre itself and from the remains of the fort and of the wall's end (*see Figure 3*). On a jutting fragment of fort, Wallsend's late Victorian worthies have inserted a stone commemorating the wall and its builders, whose names appear, inscribed into a

plaque on the back. Picked out in now-disappearing red paint, this list of Latin names resembles a war memorial, recording lost engineering glories. This isolated rump of Roman achievement now stands alongside the massive cranes and slipways of Swan Hunter's yard, dwarfed by instruments of modern engineering, as if in vindication of Bell Scott's vision in Wallington Hall (*see Figure 4*).

This is even more of a paradox when set against the emphatically consumer-centred imagery of Romanness at the Metro station, in which the wall-cum-Metro link suggests the facilitation of personal movement across the country. The links are, however, not without their ironies, in particular that very classical-looking Job Centre itself, resplendent with a grand white Doric portico, and rejoicing in the name Hadrian House. The real Job Centre does indeed continue imagery of Roman magnificence, creating a sense that a real Roman modernity might not indeed be so different from the Anglo-Saxon one. A "Forum Venalicium" might still be required, and life may not be so enchanted after all.

Roman Wallsend, then, is replete with paradox, caught in strange transitional position between celebration and melancholic connoisseurship of decay; locked into the assertion of Rome as the fount of industrial engineering and equally as the epitome of a post-industrial economy of retail.

That Tyneside's Roman past has come to epitomise this in recent years is perhaps a product of the fate of the first major example of the modern heritage industry in the area; one which stressed the very weighty traditional industries of the North East. The Beamish Museum was established in 1970 as an open air museum to preserve objects, machinery and other material relating to the history of the area. Its sheer physical "weightiness" is emphasised by its large collection of industrial machinery, and by its reconstructed houses, workshops and railway lines. Beamish was created when the local area was still strongly defined and identified with the mining and shipbuilding industries. It was not simply a memorial to the past, it was repository of memories – defining the process by which the present *came into being*. Since the 1990s this aspect of the Museum has changed its significance, as the communal coherence and industrial progress it celebrates is so much less in evidence.

The Beamish Museum may be said to be related to the concept of *Theatres of Memory*, articulated by Raphael Samuel in his seminal 1994 book on the construction of the modern heritage industry. Samuel's thinking grew out of the traditions of the History Workshop, which sought to recover the details of lived,

mostly working-class experience, during the period of industrialisation, as part of a classically Marxist ideology that seeks to promote the formation of a suitable class-consciousness and of independent communal networks in which it can be expressed. In his book this is the aspect of the past that is most fully articulated. He only refers to ancient histories in passing, in particular to early antiquarian historians and to modern re-enacters of the ancient past. It is in this context that a glancing reference is made to the Roman North East, in particular to the:

> ...*ever growing extensions to Hadrian's Wall (a new stretch has recently been opened outside Newcastle) and the building of replicas such as the brand new Roman Gateway at South Shields, which now supports its own legion, the Quintagalorum, a locally recruited re-enactment society which makes a speciality of fourth century drill. (Samuel, 1994: 169)*

Samuel's comments here are unmistakably slightly satirical in tone, playing on the idea that the Roman wall itself is not simply being uncovered but is being artificially extended in some way, and that it is moving away from its natural location in the Northumbrian countryside *towards* the urban centre of Newcastle itself, in which – or rather beyond which – an artificial fort has been constructed, creating a simulacrum of revived Rome. It is not difficult to see the recently faked Latin Wallsend of the Metro station as an extension of this very process – situated between the ever-extending wall and the brand new Roman Gateway in Shields on the coast. In other words, the Roman experience designed for visitors at Segedunum might be defined in opposition to that of Beamish. While Beamish attempts to construct a model of continuity and authenticity – remembered and recovered objects – the new Roman experience is defined in terms of radically reinvented and far more historically alien past.

This tendency to ignore or dismiss the Romanisation of North Eastern popular history is evident in other commentators. Even Usherwood ends his 1996 article with a negative comment on the "Roman forum" in the Gateshead MetroCentre, construing the fantasy of Romanness as a means of "sidestepping the nineteenth century", which was associated with industrialism and squalor (Usherwood, 1996). Similar assumptions are evident in Bill Williamson's 2005 article *Living the Past Differently*, on "historical memories in the North East", which assumes that such memories only legitimately focus on the industrial past, and the marketing of the past transforms "older solidarity" into "nostalgia" (Williamson, 2005: 168). If Williamson retains Samuel's traditional socialist assumptions about history, Stan Beckensall's book *Northumberland: Shadow of the Past*, also published in 2005,

Figure 1: Below: Wallsend Metro Station.

Figure 2: Right: Metro Map of Hadrian's Wall and carved statue of a Roman Soldier, Segedunum.

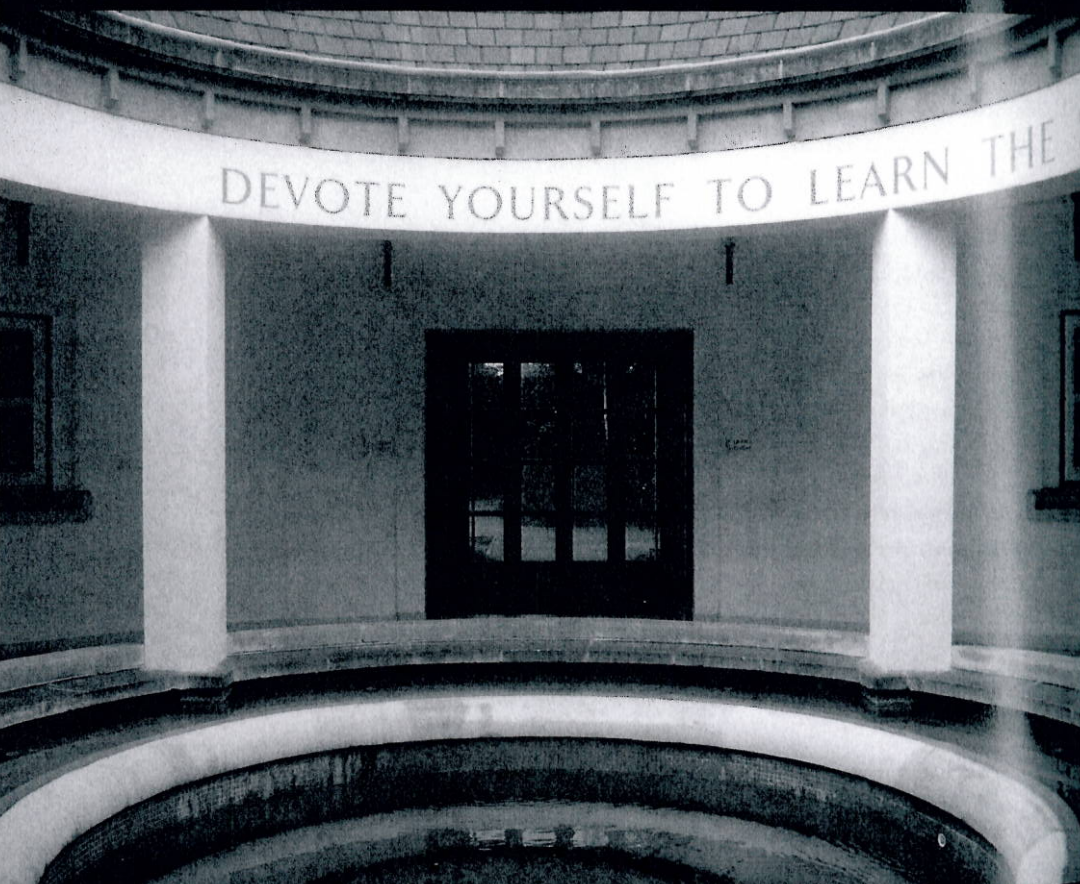Figure 3: Bottom: Segedunum visitor centre, seen from the remains of the fort.
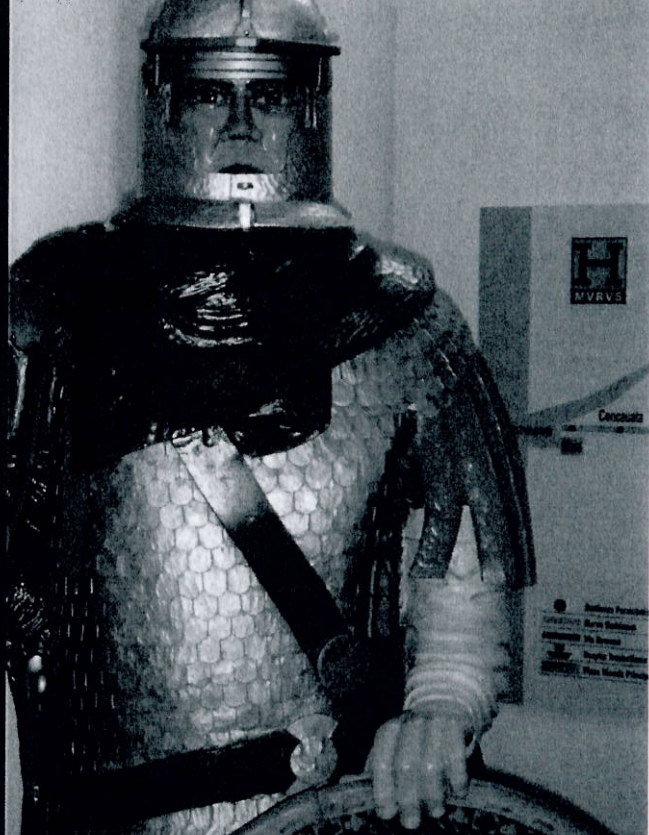
Figure 4: Above: Memorial to the builders of the wall, beside Swan Hunter shipyard.

Figure 5: Below: The entrance to Bede's World.

DEVOTE YOURSELF TO LEARN THE

adopts a longer model of historical continuity, centring on communion with the ancient and medieval past. Beckensall's "modern antiquarianism" borrows from nineteenth century Tory emphasis on mystical continuities with Christian and pre-Christian monuments, locked into the landscape. Again, Rome is virtually ignored, a temporary and "alien" presence, almost effaced from the narrative (Beckensall, 2005: 53).

Of course both of these attitudes are built on assumptions about the relation between history and cultural authenticity. Samuel and Williamson view the nineteenth century as "real" history which is being displaced by fakery, while Beckensall seeks a transcendent communion with locality that the ancient engineering works of Rome violated. In fact, Segedunum can reasonably claim to be rather more authentic than Beamish and to meaningfully link ancient and modern engineering in a way that Victorian industrial culture would (and did) understand. It is built over the real site of an excavated Roman fort. Visitors can see the authentic remains of the buildings laid out on the ground. They can also identify the remains of objects uncovered in the nearby museum and can compare these objects with the reconstructed buildings that also form part of the site. Much the same can be said of the South Shields fort (called *Arbeia*: "fort of Arab troops"), in which the excavations continue at the remains, while the reconstructed Gateway and stable-block stand nearby. In these places the reconstructions form part of a continuum of experiences of objects and entertainment, based in the historical authenticity of the remains themselves. They are associated with elaborately family-oriented attractions, particularly evident at Segedunum, which regularly hosts Roman cooking, bathing and other events – accompanied, of course, with the sale of related recipe books and scented bath oils. Here again, community is defined by family and consumption, through which the past merges with the present. The arts initiatives such as Pinsky's map and the locally carved wooden statue of a Roman soldier donated by Scaffold Hill Wood Carving Club in 2000 further promote this process.

In these respects Segedunum encourages a kind of self-conscious *reimagining* of the present, so different from the continuity implied by Beamish. Its interactive displays encourage the visitor to live possible pasts by playing ancient board games and experiencing the effort of holding onto a chain that would lower you into a mine shaft. A mirror above the chain allows you to see yourself in the act.

In part these devices are a development of the somewhat more staid and long-standing visitor centres at Vindolanda and other locations along the wall. The Vindolanda mile-castle has been open to the public under the auspices of the Vindolanda Trust since 1970, containing a traditional museum of antiquities, plus explanatory material, along with the remains of the castle itself (Birley, 1977). This is, needless to say, standard fare at most visitor centres attached to comparable sites of historical interest.

A somewhat closer comparison to the Segedunum experience is the Museum of Antiquities at Newcastle University, which contains the reconstruction of a Mithreaum: an enclosed temple of the god Mithras of the type common in the late Roman Empire. This is presented in its own semi-secret space at the back of the small museum, which is mostly occupied by the usual collection of stelae, jewellery, weapon-fragments, broken statuary, and remains of day-to-day objects. For a small expenditure, the Mithraeum can be activated as a dramatic, almost cinematic presentation in which a Roman soldier explains his religious beliefs to the viewer, while the Mithreaum itself flickers with mysterious and lurid faux candle-light, bathed in a bloody red glow within which can be seen the body of a sacrificed chicken.

In part this event mirrors the unknowability of the Mithraic religion itself, a strange mystery cult, the full content of which was only known to initiates – who never wrote down their knowledge (Ulansy, 1991). The bizarre astrological decorations of the cultic buildings are reconstructed in the Newcastle Mithreaum, along with the totemic costumes, representing various animals, which were used by the initiates in their ceremonies. At the back is a cast of the classic Mithraic altar, representing the god slaying the primal bull. Such imagery functions as part of an attempt to make vivid for modern viewers the presence of a radically alien culture, but the language employed by the actor portraying the Roman officer is thoroughly consistent with the conventions of modern multiculturalism. He invites us to recognise his idiosyncratic activities as a legitimate and equal way of life and belief to our own.

This notion of Rome as both alien and familiar has been a feature of modern encounters with the ancient past ever since the Renaissance, which confronted both the irredeemably alien "paganism" of the empire and its cultural and civic authority as a model for the present. Since then, Rome has persistently been used, openly or implicitly, as a foil for contemporary culture. In the eighteenth century artists such as J.L. David painted scenes from Roman history in a way that

mirrored the debates of the day about social values (Lee, 1999: 262–68). David portrayed the disciplined civic virtues on which the Republic was built, in a subject and style that seemed to represent the needs of new revolutionary cultures. Later, when the Revolution collapsed into factional strife, the civil wars of Rome provided a model to represent these modern power struggles. During the reign of Napoleon the glamour of the Imperial phase was co-opted. Later artists used Rome to suggest the corrupting influence of wealth, implicitly connecting Roman decadence to modern cultures of conspicuous consumption and emergent consumerism. This theme was plainly present in early films about Rome, typically connected with imagery of sexual allure and the moral corruptions attending wealth. As in the Biblical *Book of Revelations* Rome became the "new Babylon". Throughout these representations the corruption of Rome was typically tied to its Paganism – Christianity being used as a model of moral virtue through which the empire was both to be judged and potentially redeemed. By the 1950s and 1960s this model was merged with the connotations of fascism and Nazism that Rome could be so easily be used to suggest. At the same time it often came to represent the declining powers of European empires, as its luminaries were typically played by British actors, speaking their lines with classical cut-glass diction. In partial contrast, the twenty-first century Rome of Scott's *Gladiator* was plainly the post cold-war America of George Bush senior's New World Order. Rome, like modern America, was presented as the world's only superpower, portrayed as a corrupted beacon of civilisation surrounded by a sea of bleak and barbaric violence, a culture in which ruthless power politics is mirrored by corrosively lurid forms of popular entertainment used to keep the plebeians happy.

Scott's portrayal of Rome as a mirror image of modern America brings us back to the Rome of Tyneside and the encounter with the Mithraeum, since the film was notable for its complete avoidance of any Christian content or imagery. The central characters are all pagans, whose rituals are centred on the gods of home and family, or of the empire itself. As in the much earlier *Spartacus*, the film portrayed the gladiators as a multi-racial and multi-ethnic group whose class-free camaraderie provides a model of human interaction outside the corruptions of the imperial system itself. This emphasis on the experience of the ordinary individual is repeated at most of these Tyneside attractions. At Arbeia emphasis is placed on artefacts that reveal the interconnections between local people with the Arab-Roman troops, and at Segedunum the information on Romano-British life is intermingled with material relating to work-centred experience during the nation's more recent high-industrial past.

This conflation of different historical moments is perhaps most evident at Bede's World, the principal rival of Segedunum, almost directly opposite it on the south side of the river in Jarrow. Before 2000 this was a small exhibition space in a building close to the church of St Paul and the remains of the Anglo-Saxon monastery in which Bede himself had lived and worked during his scholarly career, in the eighth century. It contained little more than photographs and a few artefacts, along with explanatory material relating to Bede. After a period of closure the building was dramatically reopened in December 2000 as a family-oriented attraction of a type that was mirrored by Segedunum. The rebuilding included the creation of a large new building which mimicked a Roman villa, and through which the visitor was to enter, to be confronted with sententious moral truths in precise roman-font capitals (*see Figure 5*).

The early history of the area was, again, defined by Rome, as the visitor was taken through a dramatic series of rooms providing interactive systems of display which included smells and costumes – in particular monks' gowns in children's sizes. The principal attraction, however, was the farm in which early medieval forms of husbandry were portrayed with live animals of various species and breeds, along with reconstructions of Saxon settlements. Children were encouraged to feed the animals and to participate in other activities.

The Roman-style entrance was designed by the architects Evans and Shalev. Its style was justified on the grounds that it referenced the kinds of building that St Benedict Biscop, the founder of the monastery, would have seen when in Rome. It seems at least as reasonable to assume that the Roman entrance signified a form of secular spectacle of the ancient world that successfully put to one side any intrusive imagery that might be associated too strongly with religion. For this aspect of the visitor centre is one of its most interesting features. Though the bookshop contains literature on the history of the monastery, the display itself thoroughly marginalises Bede's own religious and monastic world. Though there is some discussion of the dispute between "Celtic" and "Roman" forms of Christianity, the centre operates between imagery derived from Rome, which emphasises the mechanics of popular entertainment, and the portrayal of the farm, which reproduces communal life. The actual church itself is kept clearly separate from the visitor centre, which inducts us into its space through the imagery of a villa in a garden – a space representing worldly wealth, power and leisure, if one mediated by imagery of calm, harmony and philosophical contemplation. The experience of the museum conjoins the imagery of leisure and the community.

This then seems to represent the nature of the "Roman" experience as it is articulated in these leisure centres. Rome comes increasingly to represent a kind of consumer-society defined by multiculturalist values but unified by common disciplines. This, I suggest, represents the current self images of the North East more fully than the now slightly-embarrassing lost utopia, represented by the solidarities of mining and shipbuilding industries: communal values sanctified by the museum of Beamish and the writings of Raphael Samuel.

Paradoxes in Imagining North Eastern Ethnicity

This brings us back to that surprising 2004 vote, and its apparent rejection of regional autonomy. It suggests another reason why Rome has come to be the North East's most powerful image of its relation to its past. What that increasingly reconstructed wall always meant was the separation of two realms – the dividing line, as Scott's paintings assert – between modernity and the past; between primitivism and progressiveness. The wall is an emblem of belief in powers of progress that transcend ethnicity.

It has always been the "borderland" quality of the North East that has made it so difficult to construct a mythic continuity of ethnic identity that would stabilise the Geordie persona of the region as a natural outgrowth of ancient tradition. This contrasts powerfully and significantly with Scotland, in which this claim is typically allied to the construction of Celtic identity as a unifying feature. The Celticity of the Scots sets them apart from the Saxons ("Sassanachs") or English. It also confirms the idea that an ancient ethnic barrier has always existed between northern Britain and its central and southern areas. In nationalistic *mythology* "Scotland" was always a separate place – even though in reality the Scots were an invading Irish tribe who did not even arrive until well after the departure of the Romans. The mythic identity of Scotland enables it to appropriate culturally distinctive features into its claims on "Scots" national identity. This is exactly how ancient and modern identities are merged, and powerful myths created. But it can also have the effect that meaning is sucked from other cultures; or at least that another identity is created in order to sustain the mythic continuity and integrity of Scotland itself. The claim that the dialect of "Scots" constitutes a language distinct from the English of England itself has been energetically promoted by Scots nationalists, who either reject pan-Celticism (which of course weakens claims to national distinctiveness) or who feel that the marginality of Celtic

languages makes the claim on Scots distinctiveness a far more powerful tool of national pride.

The problem, of course, is that much of the distinctive dialect that makes up "Scots" originated in Northumbria. That fact should not really surprise us, since Northumbria was the focal point of Anglo-Saxon presence in North Central Britain. It was from here that the distinctive form of the English language characteristic of the north emerged and expanded. Northumbria was the beachhead from which the English language spread (Jones, 1995; 1997). It certainly had nothing to do with the Irish Scotti tribes, who intruded into the western coast and expanded from there. The Pictish language, the truly ancient Brythonic (British) version of Celtic speech in the area was assaulted on both sides – by the Irish import from the west, and the Germanic import from the east. Both, of course, were equally immigrant forms of speech, but both rapidly became localised and distinctive to the areas they occupied. North Eastern English spread from its base in Northumberland into the lowlands of what was to become Scotland. The Goeldic (Irish) forms of Celtic obliterated the native Brythonic speech, and soon the two languages were, in effect, competing for control of the nation. Of course it was the expansion of English from Northumbria into the lowlands that proved decisive. This was the area from which modern Scots identity formed itself, even while it fantasised an ancient connection to the old Gaelic clan system of the North.

The result, for Northumbria, is the loss of identity with the ethnic origins of what is – absurdly – termed "Scots". Northumbrian dialect seems as though it is a southern extension of what belongs more properly to the Scottish – something which speaks most fully of *their* identity and distinctiveness.

This loss of continuity applies even to the term English itself, a word which derives from the Angles, a Germanic people who occupied the Northumbria region, and whose dialect was the origin of what became "Scots". The term English is now seen to belong most fully to the south of English. The actual descendants of the Angles are thus less fully English than their Southern compatriots. The Northumbrians are neither fully English nor Scottish, and many of those characteristics that do define them as fully Northumbrian are claimed by other, more powerful, if less plausible mythic identities.

This leads to an important point about the relationship between cultural identity and the dangerous, unstable and myth-violating facts of history. There is, I would

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s of history. There is, I would

suggest, an *absorptive* quality to certain forms of national myth, whereas there is a *dispersive* identity to others. What I want to argue is that the history of Northumbria has become dispersive. This does not mean that its identity has in fact dispersed. The strength of local identity clearly invalidates any such claim. What it does mean is that the historical features – of ethnicity, language, culture – are more effectively appropriated elsewhere. The Geordies are more English than the English and more Scots than the Scots. But they cannot be both.

Here, Rome comes to the rescue. Rome is the defining *origin* of the North East's identity and Rome *in* the North East was characterised by its assertion of a trans-ethnic ideal – of values that negated ethnicity in favour of claims on civilisation and modernity. These were also the very ideals that informed the Hanoverian "Geordie" vision and the model of rational civic progress embodied in the monument to Earl Grey. For many participants in the 2004 debate it was clear that the suggestion that the North should be represented as a separate *region* was felt to be part of the problem. It would "split" England "into bits", as one interviewee put it. Or as another said, "it's kind of like a separation, isn't it, of people?" (BBC, 2004). The Roman wall signifies an inclusion into a modern, sophisticated culture – a decisive rejection of primitive regionality. To reaffirm Rome is also to reject regionalism and to assert that Newcastle is a confidently post-industrial city, a companion to London itself. The New Rome of the Latin Wallsend high street and the visitor attractions of Segedunum and Jarrow builds on the Rome of *Gladiator*, an image of a secularised consumer metropolis of pleasure and prosperity. In this respect the combination of "decadence" and cosmopolitanism that has for so long informed our visions of Rome has come to represent the ambitiously self-disciplined hedonism that is popularly envisaged as the epitome of modern urbanity. Far more than mining, shipbuilding, lost Anglo-Saxon kingdoms or any other aspect of its history that is unique to the North East, the modern city seeks to represent itself as the loyal citizenship of the Roman empire, whose newly renewed wall protects it from descent back into irretrievable provincialism.

Notes

1. The design was created by Michael Pinksy in 2003, and is clearly influenced by Simon Patterson's reworking of the London Underground map entitled *The Great Bear*, in which the station names are replaced by the names of scientists, artists and philosophers.
2. This idea had appeared in same fantasy literature, as well as in *Star Trek*, in which the Romulan Empire represents a high-tech version of Roman culture.

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