2 Colonisers and the African Iron Age

This chapter derives from a Cambridge conference on Rome and the British Iron Age and was designed to explore possible parallels between Portuguese colonisation and the Roman colonisation of an earlier age. It challenged the concept of colonisation as a repopulation of cleared land and emphasised the importance of the creolisation of indigenous peoples who adapted themselves to new linguistic, religious and material influences which brought Latin culture to colonial enclaves in Africa. Slight revision and abbreviation have modified the version originally published by Barry C. Burnham and Helen B. Johnson in Invasion and Response: the Case of Roman Britain (British Archaeological Reports, Oxford, 1979).

When looked at from a distance, one might assume that the impact of Rome on Iron Age Britain was so different from the impact of Portugal on Iron Age Africa as to make comparison impossible. The Romans, according to received wisdom, rolled back the Celts, dug a few ditches to hold them at bay, and brought on the Roman steamroller. The invasion – so it seemed – brought in a nicely synthesised, homogenised, integrated, instant package of coins, villas, roads, settlers, Latin, literacy, gods, laws, political orators and soldiers, all neatly labelled 43 AD. It is therefore stimulating to discover that this stereotype is in the course of fundamental revision and that the interest is now focusing on questions of continuity and change in Roman colonial society.

Some years ago a theory comparable with this caricaturised version of Romanisation in Britain flourished also in connection with the Arab conquest of the North African coast in 642 AD. The theory was a simple one. The Berbers, the Byzantines, the Vandals, the Greeks and everyone else in North Africa were rolled back into Morocco and then North Africa was completely re-seeded with a new Arabic population of good faithful Muslims. This hardy thesis of Arab conquest has gradually been replaced by a much slower and more varied concept of cultural Arabisation. It took years to entrench an ‘Allah’ who suited the eclectic spiritual needs of the varied cultural strands of North Africa. It took North Africans
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centuries to learn Arabic, and pass for Arabs, preferably with well-constructed pedigrees. The process of Arabisation began in army camps, spread slowly to the towns, and more slowly still to the cultivators and the nomadic pastoralists. In the end, however, after perhaps 400 years, much of North Africa had absorbed Arabic language, law, custom, culture, art, architecture, faith, dress and cuisine.

With this picture of continuity and change in mind, what was the consequence of 400 years of Portuguese familiarity with the Atlantic seaboard of Africa? At first sight the resilience and adaptability of Atlantic Africa’s Iron Age societies might appear to be in stark contrast with the comprehensive Romanisation of Iron Age Britain or Arabisation of Iron Age North Africa. But the contrast between an effective resistance of Atlantic Africa to cultural, colonial and economic transformation and the apparent inert subservience of some parts of Britain in the face of the Roman legions may not form a wholly valid antithesis. Was not continuity more significant than change in the process whereby Iron Age Britain absorbed the Romans? Despite violent hiccoughs, such as the revolt of Boudicca, was not change more gradual and unevenly distributed than hitherto supposed? The matter might be elucidated by a few specific questions which a historian of Africa would like to ask about the history of Roman Britain. Are the answers to the questions about invasion and response in colonial Britain so different from those found in colonial Africa?

To what extent was Roman colonisation an all-male affair and how deep was its cultural impact on domestic life? Portuguese colonisation involved the establishment down the African coast of Portuguese trading fairs which were almost exclusively staffed by men. The effects of this lack of any significant migration of women were obvious. In the year 1683 a venerable old warrior, António de Cadornega, wrote sentimentally about Angola as the country where one’s sons were swarthy, grandsons were dusky, great grandsons were completely black and all was darkness.\(^1\) The immigrants were few in number compared with the host populations, only a few hundred a year even in areas of maximum impact. As a result family life and family culture were African rather than European despite a high level of racial consciousness. Although racial distinction had made the differentiation between free and slave easy to determine, black consorts and their children could nonetheless aspire to high levels of responsibility and accumulate significant commercial wealth. The language of the colonial compound was often African rather