



Peter Salway

ROMAN BRITAIN

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD



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SECOND EDITION

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Impression: 1

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ISBN 978-0-19-871216-9

ebook ISBN 978-0-19-102097-1

Printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

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Chapter 1

The beginnings of British history

In Roman times Britain had as many people as at its peak in the Middle Ages. For four centuries it was an integral part of a single political system that stretched from Turkey to Portugal and from the Red Sea to the Tyne and beyond. Its involvement with Rome started long before the Conquest launched by the Emperor Claudius in AD 43, and it continued to be a part of the Roman world for some time after the final break with Roman rule. We are dealing with a full half-millennium of the history of Britain.

The origins of Roman Britain go back beyond the Roman period. Aspects of the society the Romans found in Britain were beginning to emerge in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages, and man's impact on the landscape was already very considerable. At the time of the Roman Conquest, the culture of Britain had something like fifteen hundred to two thousand years of development behind it—although prehistorians are greatly divided on the details. By the end of the pre-Roman Iron Age, society had evolved forms of organization similar to those encountered by the Romans elsewhere in north-western Europe, and had adopted versions of the culture and language we loosely call 'Celtic'. This is a term that it is difficult to avoid completely but is nowadays heavily overlaid with recent political and cultural nationalisms that are hopelessly confusing when projected back into the ancient world. It is safer to confine the term principally to its conventional uses primarily as labelling a group of languages whose modern descendants include Welsh and Cornish (and in a separate subgroup Gaelic) and to the visual arts and crafts, just as we use 'Gothic' in the context of later medieval architecture and its subsequent stylistic revivals without necessarily

medieval architecture and its subsequent stylistic revivals without nowadays suggesting any ethnic connection with the ancient Goths. ‘Celtic’ is also convenient as a term to refer to the religious cults that originated in the pre-Roman Iron Age or earlier but survived and influenced religious observance in many different ways under Roman rule, but using it without overtones of any modern practices and beliefs that choose to label themselves Celtic.

There is, however, another question of identity that is more fundamental in estimating the significance of Roman Britain. There is a persistent thread of opinion that seeks for an inherent ‘Britishness’ recognizable before the Roman Conquest, surviving through the period of Roman rule, and emerging after it. The extreme version is to categorize Roman Britain as an interlude in a natural trajectory of national emergence. More to the point are current trends in research that seek to elucidate how people in Roman Britain identified themselves at the time and were identified from outside, though it is nowadays difficult to avoid seeing the Roman period through post-colonial eyes. However, it is not the task of this book to argue the rights and wrongs of imperialism but rather to attempt to discover what happened and why. Rome did not have a grand plan of conquest. The empire was acquired piecemeal over several centuries, mostly in response to events or to circumstances particular to a specific time. It is important to realize that though Rome evolved into a military superpower that was prepared to use ruthless and aggressive force in crushing rebellion or against other peoples when it felt itself or its allies were threatened—and was a society in which (as the orator and statesman Cicero declared) there was more honour and glory in extending the empire than in administering it—nevertheless, Rome was unlike most modern empires in that it gradually extended its citizenship to those it absorbed. In addition to grants to individuals and particular communities—a long-standing practice—one large-scale mechanism was that soldiers in the non-citizen ‘auxiliary’ units of the Roman army received citizenship on long-service honourable discharge. It is interesting that the contemporary Roman historian Tacitus—in the form of a pair of imagined speeches by the opposing leaders before the final great battle at Mons Graupius in northern Scotland in the 1st-century wars of conquest—has the Briton appealing to the auxiliaries (who will have come from various provinces) to make common cause against their Roman oppressors. That this has no effect is telling. By the standard by which identities are often formed, the auxiliaries probably found the Highlanders more ‘other’ than the Romans—not to mention their personal interests remaining with Rome. The process of absorption proceeded so far that two whole centuries before the end of Roman rule in Britain all the non-slave permanent inhabitants

of the empire were henceforth included in citizenship by an imperial act of policy. The exploration of questions of identity has, therefore, to take into account this fundamental difference from the history of more recent times.

Why, one may ask, does 'history' neither start in Britain long before the Romans, nor consign Roman Britain, as some modern writers would have us do, to 'prehistory'? The answer lies in the real distinction between the Roman period and what went before. There is *some* truth in the assertion that the study of Roman Britain is prehistory, in the sense that we have to lean very heavily on archaeology—and this is also true of the early Anglo-Saxon period. However, our evidence for Britain is by no means solely archaeological, and the interpretation of the material remains themselves cannot be divorced from the study of the written sources. It is true that the quantity of contemporary or near-contemporary literary evidence is not great in comparison with later periods, but there is enough to be significant. Moreover, we have the very considerable non-literary remains of the once-huge routine output of a literate society—and in a form not subject to the inevitable corruptions of the Greek and Latin literary texts, which have largely survived only by being copied and re-copied by hand down the centuries. Actual examples of writing found in Britain, mostly as inscriptions on stone but some in other forms, constitute a major primary source for the Romano-British period. They include trade marks on manufactured goods; a small but growing number of personal letters and other documents in a variety of materials discovered in excavations; even graffiti—the everyday writing and reading matter of ordinary people. Nor can we ignore the specialized and difficult but rewarding study of Roman coinage, which played a peculiarly important part in the politics and economics of the Roman world. Not only was the currency itself manipulated by government as money, but also the wording and images upon the coins were exploited as a powerful medium for mass propaganda with all the persistence of a regularly screened television commercial in our own time. The ability to read was, admittedly, very much commoner in the towns than in the Romano-British countryside, but it was compulsory in the army and essential in many other walks of life. It was certainly not, as in other ages, restricted to a small or specialized class.

The critical difference therefore between Roman Britain and what went before is that its society was literate, perhaps more literate than at any other time until the end of the Middle Ages. Alongside and allied to this is the fact that it was a world dominated by the rule of law, which closely regulated the relations between the individual and the State and between one man and another, however

corruptly or inefficiently it might often have been administered. As a society that became more and more dominated by regulations and procedures contained in official documents, the contrast between Roman Britain and Britain as it was at the end of the pre-Roman Iron Age is startling. Then, even at the top of the social scale where the import of Roman luxury goods was a notable feature, writing was totally absent except on the splendid but limited coinage—and even on that the language employed was almost universally Latin and the moneyers, it would seem, themselves sometimes Roman.

Once Julius Caesar's expeditions of 55 and 54 BC had pointed the way, it was more or less inevitable that Rome would try her hand at conquest. Romans did not acknowledge any limit on their right to expand their rule: indeed, they saw it as a divine mission. From Caesar onwards, Britain occupied a particular and significant place in the Roman consciousness. The Roman period is a turning-point, not so much in the underlying story of man's settlement of the land of Britain but in the country's emergence from prehistory into history.

The physical landscape

The character of the physical geography of a country has a great effect on how people live, and Britain is no exception ([Map 1](#)). Its outstanding characteristic is the broad division between ‘highland’ and ‘lowland’—in rough terms, between the north and west of mainland Britain and the south and east—but it is a distinction which can be overdone in historical analysis. Moreover, the inhabitants of Britain have shown a considerable capacity to adapt the landscape, sometimes intentionally, often in pursuit of some other end such as fuel. There have also been important fluctuations in the physical conditions, especially in the relative level of land and sea, with considerable effects on the coastline and inland on the pattern and level of rivers. To what extent the causes were climatic or a matter of movements in the geology is uncertain. In general, such evidence as we have for the Roman period suggests that the climate was broadly similar to present-day Britain’s. A period of relatively high sea level was succeeded by a ‘marine regression’, opening up new lands for exploitation. In the 3rd century AD the onset of rather wetter climatic conditions seems to be revealed by evidence of flooding in many parts of Europe, with serious problems for low-lying land, rivers, and harbours. So it would seem that climatic conditions were by no means constant throughout the period.

The once-popular belief that Britain was largely covered with forest until cleared by the Anglo-Saxons is now discredited. By the Roman Conquest, although there was still a great deal of natural forest, the population had already grown to something of the order it reached under the Romans, two or three times greater than during the reign of William the Conqueror (1066–87). The proportion of forest to open, settled landscape had dropped to the level of the Later Middle Ages. From the latter part of the second millennium BC what was to become the classic Iron Age pattern was starting to take shape: hill-forts, isolated farms or groups of farms sometimes amounting to villages (often surrounded by small enclosures), larger expanses of permanent fields, woodland, and great open stretches of pasture. In the last 750 years before Caesar, Britain adopted many of the characteristics of the successive phases of the Continental Iron Age, though often with insular variations. This has led to unresolved debate among the prehistorians as to whether the changes that succeeded one another primarily reflect actual invasions on a substantial scale, the arrival of relatively small

numbers of influential or conquering newcomers (such as the later Normans), or the exchange of ideas through travel and trade. But whatever the mechanism, Britain had reached the point by Caesar's time where, as he himself says, the tribes he met in the parts he penetrated—the south and east—were very similar to those he encountered in Gaul. Beyond these, archaeology reveals that there were some less advanced peoples, but all of them seem to have shared the same British version of the Celtic language and a broadly similar culture.



Map 1. The topography of Britain.

Social organization

There is some reason to think that the tribal system we find in Britain in Claudian times was not fully developed in Caesar's, and there are other important changes in the period between the Roman invasions ([Map 2](#)). In southern Gaul, the native tribes had largely passed from rule by kings to elective magistracies and tribal councils, but in northern Gaul kingship was still common when Caesar arrived. In Britain it was to remain so down to Claudius, though there are some signs of shared rule by pairs of kings. Society divided broadly into a warrior aristocracy and a largely agricultural commons. The priests—the druids—were a third group whose position and function are debated, though for Britain the balance of the evidence is still against the popular notion of their having a prominent political role. The Celts were characterized by quarrelsomeness, both within the tribe and in their indulgence in inter-tribal warfare. Only on rare occasions, in the face of great danger, would Celtic tribes combine to choose a single leader, though in Gaul at least there was some tradition of periodic gatherings of prominent men from various tribes. There was little or no 'national' sentiment.



Map 2. The principal Iron Age tribes of Britain.

By Caesar's day, close relationships had been established between southern Britain and northern Gaul. The pattern of archaeological finds reveals two main groups of routes by which goods and people travelled between the two countries.

groups or routes by which goods and people travelled between the two countries. The most important at this time was between Brittany with Lower Normandy (in ancient times known collectively as Armorica) and south-west Britain, particularly through a port at Hengistbury Head in Dorset. The other routes were from Upper Normandy and the Low Countries, the lands between the mouths of the Seine and Rhine, to southern and eastern England. Caesar, moreover, reports that 'within living memory' a Gallic ruler had exercised power in Britain as well as his own homeland, and he was not only to find British contingents fighting alongside his Gallic enemies but to be thwarted by fugitives seeking refuge from Rome with friends or kin across the Channel.

The expansion of Rome

To understand why Caesar was in Gaul and what may have prompted his campaigns in Britain we need to look briefly at the condition of Rome in the middle of the 1st century BC. Rome's expansion in the 3rd and 2nd centuries from being an Italian city-state to the greatest power in the Mediterranean had been under her traditional form of government. This was theoretically democratic, with assemblies of the people and annually elected magistrates or senior officers of state, but in practice public office was held century after century by a relatively small number of aristocratic families. The senate, notionally an advisory body, came to have a dominant role, being composed of magistrates and all those who had previously been elected to the qualifying magistracies. The highest offices, the two annual consulships, were almost exclusively held by an even smaller group within the senatorial class, and its families possessed special prestige. Religious and social attitudes, closely intertwined, placed a very high value on veneration of the family ancestors and the preservation of family honour. It was a characteristic of the classical world that a man's reputation—what his peers thought of him—was of the highest importance. In Rome, the individual aristocrat was under constant pressure, both from family duty and personal ambition, to emulate his forebears by pursuing a public career and by striving for the highest office.

Reputation was won by success primarily in two fields: the law and the army. A senatorial career normally included posts in both areas. Of the two, proven military prowess won the greater prestige. Holding certain senior offices, even below the consulship, brought with it eligibility to command armies and govern provinces abroad. In the ancient world, wars of conquest usually showed a handsome profit for the victor. The immense wealth brought into Rome by her conquests and the opportunities and temptations offered by her Mediterranean empire put intolerable strains on the political and social system that had been adequate for a small Italian state. By the middle of the 1st century BC, the Roman Republic was falling apart. The old conventions within the governing class could not cope. Ambition to join the select few at the top had been replaced by an inability to tolerate even equals in power and fame.

Part of the visible prestige of a great Roman aristocrat had long been the number

of people dependent upon him. Indeed, whole communities could regard themselves as among his 'clients'. Such 'patronage' was a feature of society that was to be of great importance to provinces such as Britain, otherwise far from the centre of power. By the 1st century BC, the old citizen armies, raised for a specific war, had been replaced by professionals. The senate made the fatal mistake of allowing these new soldiers to become dependent upon their own generals rather than the State for the rewards of service, particularly the all-important provision on retirement. The conditions for recurrent civil war were now all present and the Republic effectively doomed. Attitudes, practices, and social relationships had been set up that were to haunt Rome for the rest of her history. For Britain, it was not only the great events of the subsequent history of the empire that directly affected her destiny, but also the extraordinary success the Romans had in transmitting their values to the populations they absorbed—particularly to the indigenous ruling classes. Indeed, the creation of a common upper-class culture, critical to the successful working of the empire itself, was in many ways also central in its downfall. The story of Britain in Roman times reflects this fundamental pattern.

Caesar's British Campaigns, 55 and 54 BC

Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul must be looked at in the context of the struggle for power in the closing years of the Republic. We shall probably never know exactly why he launched his two expeditions to Britain in 55 and 54 BC, nor whether he intended conquest—though there is a possible parallel in his punitive foray across the Rhine into Germany. More important were the consequences for the future. In immediate military terms the results were modest, though we do not hear of Britons fighting in Gaul again. Because of the explosive state of Gaul, Caesar was prevented from following up his victories and from taking advantage of the surrender of the temporary confederation of the British tribes. Caesar's British enterprise made a lasting impression on Rome, however. Britain was a remote, almost fabled island across the 'Ocean', a fearsome sea to Romans as yet unaccustomed to the tidal conditions outside the Mediterranean. Britain was beyond the known world. In two brief campaigns Caesar had put Britain on the Roman map. Retaining its aura of mystery, it would henceforth always occupy an alluring place in the minds of those eager for military ambition—and Caesar had set a goal and a precedent for subsequent members of the Julian imperial family. Moreover his experiences—he had a number of close shaves at the hands not only of the British but also of the elements—provided practical lessons for any future expeditionary commanders.

Nevertheless, despite the direct experience of Britain that a considerable number of Romans had now had, a curious combination of fable and practical information about the island persists in the contemporary written sources till the end of Roman rule. In literary sources before the Conquest in AD 43 the island stood in for the end of the world. For the poet Virgil it is the almost unbelievably distant land 'a whole world away, as it were' to which the honest Italian farmer dispossessed to provide land for military veterans might be exiled. This image survived, becoming particularly important in the establishing or boosting of military reputations. Three centuries after Virgil, Britain is described in an oration praising the successes of the Emperor Constantius I in the island as the furthest one could adventure 'because beyond Ocean there is only Britain'. Indeed, in another speech, it could even be given a quasi-mystical status when, in a contrived literary conceit typical of the period, the same Emperor is pictured shortly before his death gazing upon the ocean in the north of Scotland 'where

the almost continuous daylight foreshadows the eternal light of the gods into which he is about to go' (the reference is to the apotheosis of a dying emperor, whose spirit was supposed to be drawn up into the heavens and become a god). This passage draws chiefly on the concept of the feared Ocean surrounding the known world but also has interesting echoes of what anthropologists call 'liminal places'—caves, bogs, rivers, and sacred groves—where man can feel himself on the threshold of the supernatural and into which, at least since the Bronze Age, he had cast prized possessions as offerings to the deities of the Underworld. Indeed, traditional Roman religion itself was not without similar feelings about encounters with numinous landscapes, whether physical such as the Sibyl's cave on the Bay of Naples or mythological like the River Styx. The notion of the extreme reach of the victor could even be extended to include other sorts of conquest than in war. In the context of a meeting of the leaders of the Christian Church being held in Asia Minor, Constantius' son Constantine the Great (elevated as emperor at York) was proud of the fact that he had established freedom of Christian worship right across the empire, all the way from Britain. One may also suspect in the case of emperors planning war for propaganda purposes that Britain had the advantage that the barrier of the Channel meant that adverse consequences on the ground could be contained. Nor were those the only benefits that commended the perceived watery isolation of Britain to the official mind. Exile in Britain was not only a Virgilian poetic notion: as late as the 4th century we can find Britain used for a particular penalty often employed in the case of high-ranking offenders against the State, exile to an island (*relegatio in insulam*).

After Caesar

Caesar had also set important political precedents for intervention in Britain. He had received the surrender of powerful kings and accepted the friendship of others. A tribute or annual tax to be paid to Rome had been imposed. He had also installed as king of the Trinovantes of Essex a young prince who had fled to him in Gaul. The father of this prince had been killed by Cassivellaunus, the same Briton who was elected by the British confederation to lead them against Caesar—and who was now forbidden to interfere with the Trinovantes. Rome could, therefore, claim some sort of overlordship, the right to exact payments and an obligation to protect her friends, if she chose to move. (Rome rarely did so in fact, unless it was in her own interest: many small countries under her nominal protection failed to appreciate this basic fact of ancient life, with unfortunate consequences). But precedent, we may remember, was important to the Romans, and after Caesar they had ample.

For two decades after Caesar, the attention of the Roman world was monopolized by the series of civil wars that brought the Republic to an end and put Caesar's adopted heir Octavian (later to assume the name Augustus) into power. Caesar had himself taken no action across the Channel when his erstwhile Gallic friend Commius, whom he had installed as king of the Atrebates in Gaul, joined the great revolt. The crushing of that revolt saw Commius in flight to Britain—where he had earlier been used as Caesar's agent—to found a dynasty among the British Atrebates, perhaps already centred on Silchester in Hampshire. The lack of Roman interest in Britain at this time is understandable. More interesting for us is that we are now beginning to identify tribes and plot the history of dynasties. Commius' own case is particularly intriguing. His rule, over a Roman-devised 'client' kingdom of Gallic Atrebates and the Morini of the Channel coast north of the Seine, when still an ally of Caesar, had put him in control of much of the area through which the routes from the main concentration of 'Belgae', straddling the Meuse, ran towards Britain. Somewhat earlier than Caesar, there seems to have been the beginning of a movement from the Belgic part of Gaul into Britain, which probably accelerated as Caesar's conquests progressed, establishing, at the least, related royal houses in Britain.

Rome, particularly but not exclusively under the Early Empire, made great use of what modern historians of the period call 'client kingdoms' This is where

of what modern historians of the period call 'client kingdoms'. This is where friendly local rulers—inside or neighbouring the physical boundaries of the empire—could provide Rome with effective control without the burden of occupation and the infrastructure of government, not unlike the princely states in British India. In the case of peoples outside the empire this could be particularly effective where long proximity had led to peaceful adoption of many aspects of Roman culture. This was often strengthened by the sending of the children of the local elites to Rome to be educated and develop mutually advantageous personal ties, again not unlike the Indian princely class. With Rome, there was certainly an element in this of acquiring hostages for the good behaviour of the clients.

In the course of the 1st century BC, 'Belgic' culture became dominant in southern Britain, even among tribes themselves not Belgic. The pattern of life was changing. The division of labour in society became more pronounced, with more and more activities, such as pottery-making, becoming the preserve of craftsmen rather than domestic production. British art reached a magnificent peak, especially in metalwork, all swirling motifs and fine enamelling, but it concentrated on the equipping of warrior chiefs and their ladies and possibly the adornment of shrines. In the most Belgicized areas, hill-forts tended to give way to large settlements on lower ground, sometimes with their approaches defended by great running earthworks. These have been seen as the forerunners of Roman towns, though some were more in the nature of royal residences than urban in the contemporary Mediterranean sense. But for the future of the British landscape the most interesting change is the widespread emergence, particularly in the period between Caesar and Claudius (54 BC–AD 43), of a more permanent pattern of rural land settlement, with regular boundaries that suggest regular tenure. There is a growing feeling among archaeologists that this period may mark the beginning of a framework of land-division that has persisted to the present day. Those who worked and owned the land have certainly changed many times. The skeleton of the landscape, in this credible hypothesis, has survived into modern times.

In the year before his first British expedition, Caesar had fought and destroyed the fleet of the Veneti of Brittany, whose ships had controlled the carrying trade between Armorica and south-west Britain. About this time, archaeology shows a dramatic switch in emphasis to the routes between Belgic Gaul and the south and east of Britain. Henceforth, the sea passages from the Seine to the Southampton area, the short crossings from Boulogne to Kent, and the route from the Rhine and the Low Countries to the estuaries of Essex were paramount. It is not,

perhaps, surprising to find that the greatest wealth and sophistication were now in these areas of Britain. From 12 BC, indeed, when Augustus launched his armies on the conquest of Holland and Germany, the new importance of the northern links with Britain must have further sharply increased. Although in the long run Augustus' attempt to extend the empire to the Elbe failed, from this time large Roman armies were permanently on the Rhine. Britain was exporting corn, hides, cattle, and iron to the empire, all items of vital importance to the Roman military effort. Research has indicated that the technologically efficient British agriculture was producing, at least in grain, a large surplus over the subsistence needs of its people. We may reasonably surmise that the increasing wealth, the changes in society, and even the new pattern of British agriculture were stimulated, perhaps even caused, by the opportunities offered by the needs of the army of the Rhine and the emerging civil markets of the new Roman provinces across the Channel.

In his early days Augustus was acutely conscious of the legacy of Caesar's memory and the urgent need to establish a military reputation for himself. Even before his final defeat of Mark Antony he seems to have planned an invasion of Britain; and at least two more attempts were made to put it into effect. All were frustrated by more pressing demands. After 26 BC, however, he was content to let the imminent conquest of Britain remain an uncorrected impression that served as useful propaganda at Rome, while developing diplomatic relations that may have sprung out of negotiations we know were already in progress, perhaps to re-establish Caesar's taxation. Strabo, an author writing late in Augustus' reign or under his successor Tiberius, confirms that the Britons were paying heavy customs dues to Rome on their import and export trade. He seems to reflect a party line that sought to justify the shift in policy away from invasion when he claims that Rome forbore to make the easy conquest of Britain because taxation without occupation was more profitable. The Britons, he adds significantly, posed no military threat.

Even where external peoples were politically hostile to Rome, the penetration of Roman culture through trade and other contacts could be very strong. Indeed, one may suspect that the adoption of prestigious elements of the material culture of the superpower by some elites politically hostile to Rome was part fashion and the desire for exotic status symbols and part a gesture of showing themselves as cultivated as their enemies ([Figures 1a](#) and [1b](#)). This should make us very cautious of assuming that the presence or absence of items of Roman

material culture necessarily indicates political sympathy one way or the other, a trap into which archaeologists can easily fall when only the objects themselves survive. No-one thinks that the 18th-century English or Dutch were politically aligned with China or even had an affinity with Chinese society, but if only the porcelain survived we might think otherwise. In the earlier part of the century after Caesar, for example, a lack of harmony between taste and politics was probably true of the Atrebates, amongst whom Roman cultural penetration was particularly high without their being at first pro-Roman. Equally, the political scene could change without any corresponding change in culture. This also seems to have happened with the Atrebates. Caesar's old enemy Commius was succeeded on his British throne by a son, Tincomarus, and around 15 BC there seems to have been a reversal of attitude which put this important kingdom at the British end of the Seine–Southampton route into friendship with Rome. The reason may have been the growing power of another British kingdom, the Catuvellauni, centred in Hertfordshire. Whether they had recently coalesced from smaller clans or had already been the force behind Cassivellaunus is uncertain; but the history of Britain up to the Claudian conquest is now dominated by Catuvellaunian expansion. For the time being, however, Rome chose to turn a blind eye. Even the expulsion of Tincomarus and another British king and their seeking refuge with Augustus were only treated by Rome as support for the Augustan claim to exercise virtual sway over Britain, propaganda for internal consumption. Indeed, there is every sign the Catuvellauni were careful not to display open hostility.



1a. The British aristocracy. Roman silver cup decorated with vine leaves and olives, one of a group of silver vessels of Italian workmanship of the Augustan period, probably imported before the Claudian invasion, found at Hockwold, Norfolk.



1b. The British aristocracy. Chain intended for a chain-gang, possibly from the pre-Conquest slave-trade. Found among an Iron Age votive deposit, Llyn Cerrig, Anglesey, but thought to originate in East Anglia.

The balance was mutually profitable to the governing classes on both sides. British aristocrats were enjoying the imports from the empire, while the list of exports that the Roman author Strabo thinks worthy of mention shows that the Britons were not only paying for these luxuries with supplies important to the army, but by sending gold, silver, slaves, and hunting-dogs they had also become a source of commodities of personal interest to the emperor and the aristocracy at Rome. After the 'Varian Disaster' in Germany in AD 9 in which Rome lost three legions when a whole Roman army commanded by his general Quinctilius Varus was lured into an ambush, the Emperor Augustus and his successor Tiberius erected non-intervention by Roman forces outside the empire into a principle—the absolute opposite of previous Augustan practice. It must, however, be a measure of the satisfactory nature of a working relationship that Cunobelinus, Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, now king of the Catuvellauni, managed to avoid Roman retribution even when he took over the territory of Caesar's old protégés, the Trinovantes, and transferred the centre of his kingdom to

Colchester. He now had command of the lucrative route to the Rhine. Within Britain he could cut the supply of their status symbols to many other British princes at will, while preventing the export of commodities such as slaves to pay for them. Whether by conquest or other means, the expansion of the power and influence of his kingdom continued unchecked.

Chapter 2

The Roman Conquest

The state of mutual toleration, satisfactory as it doubtless was for Rome and the Catuvellauni (but perhaps not so welcome to other Britons), started to crumble when the unstable Emperor Gaius (Caligula) succeeded Tiberius. At some point in this period, Cunobelinus expelled one of his sons, who eventually fled to the emperor to whom he made a formal act of submission. Gaius not only claimed the surrender of Britain, he also gave orders for an invasion. These he subsequently countermanded, but only at the last minute, and it is this that is important. The staff work had been done, the whole massive process of build-up to an invasion had been gone through, not as an exercise but as a real operation, and the Roman public had been reminded of unfinished business. Everything lay ready for a more determined hand.

The murder of Gaius hoisted his uncle Claudius unceremoniously to the throne. Previously ignored by the rest of the imperial family under the mistaken notion that he was of defective intelligence, Claudius in fact combined common sense, an original mind bordering on the eccentric, a professional interest in history, and a profound veneration for Roman tradition. Faced soon after his elevation by a serious military revolt, the need to establish his reputation with the troops and gain respect at Rome must have been obvious to him. Such a man could hardly miss the chance of military glory offered by Britain and the opportunity not only to carry out the invasion cancelled by Augustus and Gaius before him but even to outdo Julius Caesar himself. Personal and family reputation could not be better served.

There was a pretext, too—and one which could be referred back to sound precedent and provided a strategic reason for intervention. Cunobelinus was now dead, and his realm had fallen into the hands of two aggressive sons—Caratacus and Togodumnus. The eastern entrance to Britain was, therefore, unreliable. In the south, pressure on Tincomarus' old kingdom had reduced it to a rump on the coast; now that entrance, too, closed when an internal coup expelled Tincomarus' successor, Verica. A remarkable coin portrait of the latter had shown him with the trappings of a Roman emperor. Whether this indicated some official Roman status as an ally or was simply emphasizing his local position with the highest symbols of authority known to the age we do not know. It does make certain that at least one British ruler presented his public persona and perhaps felt his personal identity in Roman terms, probably also—though not conclusively—accompanied by political affinity with Rome. It is no surprise then that, in the time-honoured fashion, Verica fled to the emperor when deposed. In Roman eyes all Britain seemed to be turning hostile, and the valuable traffic between it and the empire was threatened. Like Caesar, Claudius could respond to an appeal from a British prince.

Caesar had relied upon inspired generalship and the devotion of the troops who had long served under him. The new standing regular army that Augustus and his successors had created still depended on generalship, but was more firmly based on meticulous organization and training and the permanence of its institutions. At this period, the legions, the backbone of the army and recruited only from Roman citizens, still drew most of their men from Italy ([Figure 2a](#)). Gradually, the citizen colonies founded in the older provinces outside Italy were to provide men for the military. Each legion had an establishment of something over five thousand men, mostly heavy infantry, backed by small cavalry contingents, catapults, and other engines of war. The legions also provided a wide range of skilled craftsmen and administrators; and individual soldiers, all of whom were required to read and write, could be used on a vast range of government tasks. The 'auxiliary' units were, in the first half of the 1st century AD, evolving from native irregulars under their own chieftains into regular regiments of provincials, mostly non-citizen, but with Roman commanders ([Figure 2b](#)). These regiments were mostly about 500 strong, cavalry, infantry, or mixed, with status and pay inferior to those of the legions. Both legionaries and auxiliaries, however, enjoyed those extreme rarities in the ancient world, a regular money wage, an assured career, and provision for retirement. Education, training, and opportunities for self-advancement—not to mention self-

enrichment—made the army a major force in social mobility. Both serving and retired soldiers were persons of consequence in their communities. Auxiliaries automatically received Roman citizenship on retirement and their sons were eligible to join the legions. These units thus provided a continuous process of turning unlettered barbarians into literate Roman citizens and were a major element in the assimilation of new peoples into the empire.



2a. The army under the Early Empire. The legions: tombstone of Marcus Favonius Facilis, a centurion of the Twentieth, buried at Colchester. The stone was overturned during the Boudiccan revolt and consequently preserved intact.



2b. The army under the Early Empire. The auxiliary troops: bronze parade helmet with decorative face-mask, used in formal cavalry exercises. From Ribchester, Lancashire.

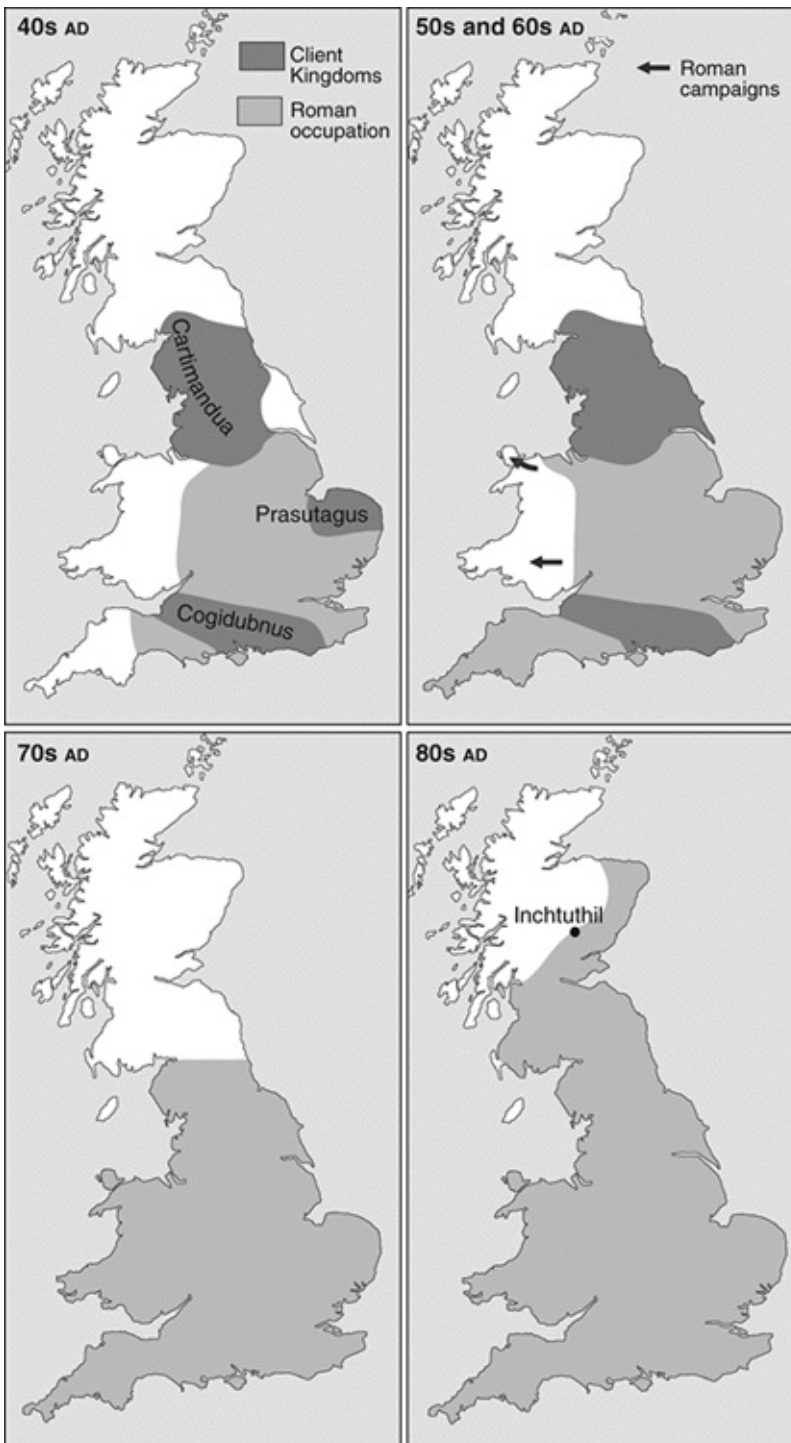
The force assembled to sail to Britain in AD 43 comprised four legions and about the same number of auxiliary troops, around 40,000 men in all. Facing this disciplined machine, the British forces retained their old character. The permanent warriors were the aristocracy; their favourite weapon was the chariot, which they used for rapid transport in and out of battle and in the handling of which their drivers were extremely skilled. The exact status of the cavalry is uncertain: they were probably men who could provide their own horses, but it is not clear that their prime occupation in life was fighting. The mass of the British armies was made up of levies: ordinary countrymen summoned from the farms. Unlike the armoured Romans, Britons mostly wore little or no body protection and depended on speed, impetus, and the long slashing sword. Before they could get near to Romans in battle order they were liable to lose many men to the clouds of Roman javelins; and in hand-to-hand combat their long blades were at a disadvantage faced with the closed ranks and short stabbing swords of the enemy infantry. As the Romans had discovered in Gaul, successes by these

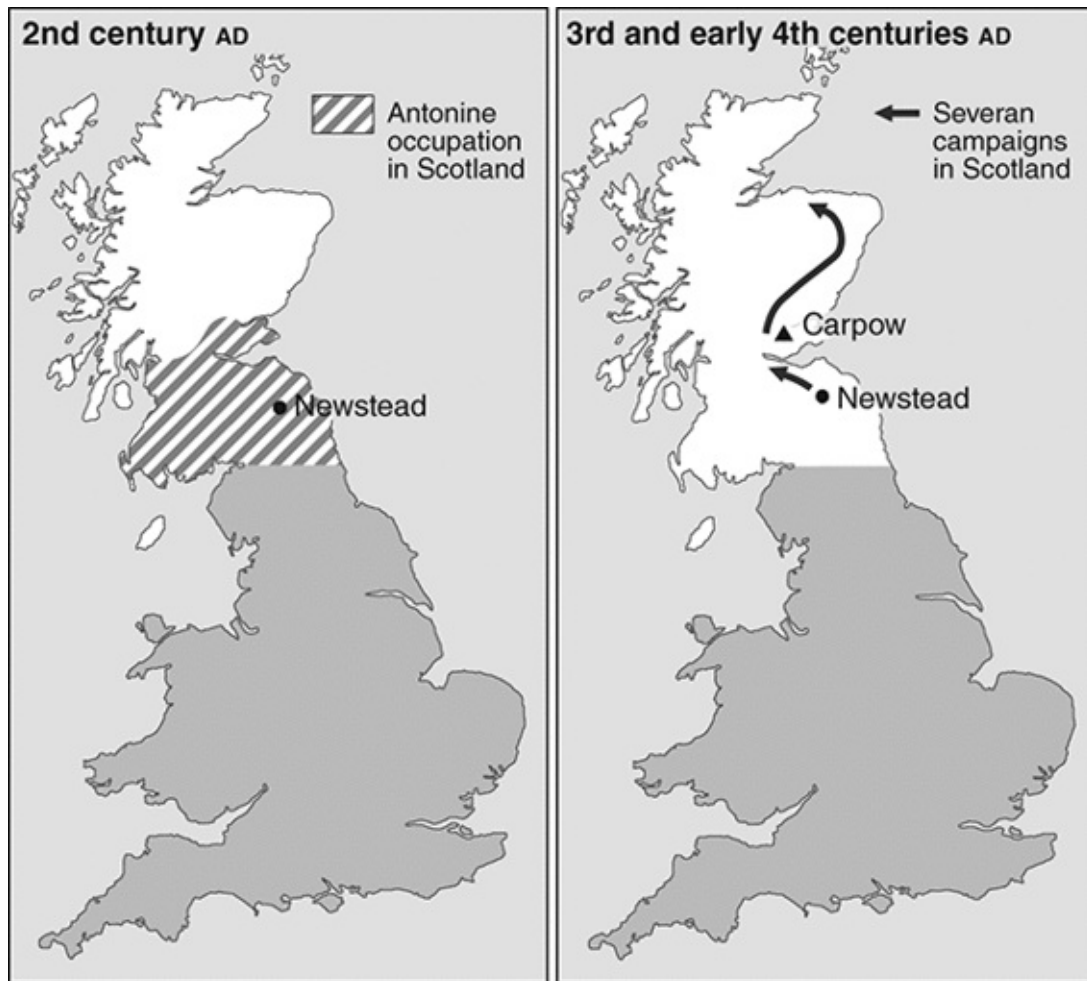
troops against the Romans were usually gained in surprise attacks, in ambushes, and when overwhelming detached units by sheer numbers. They could rarely match the legions in pitched battle, and Roman commanders aimed to force them out into the open or to pen them behind ramparts where Roman siegecraft and artillery could beat them down or starve them out. But perhaps their greatest disadvantage in the face of the Romans was that as farmer-soldiers they could only stay in the field for a short part of the year. If they were not sent home, the population starved. The supply system of the Roman army, on the contrary, permitted it to campaign as long as the weather permitted, and to build fortified, well-stocked camps in which to sit out each winter. Such a system permitted a war to be carried on for year after year, and provided the basis for the garrisoning required for permanent occupation. Faced with such an opponent, it is remarkable that the British resisted so long and so hard.

The invasion met with fierce resistance from some of the British tribes. Others, no doubt not sorry to see the Catuvellaunian hegemony in southern Britain destroyed, surrendered easily or joined the Romans. The campaign was crowned by the submission of eleven British kings to the emperor and his triumphant entry into Colchester, for which he had joined his advancing forces, complete with elephants. His delight was marked by the revival of ancient rituals once performed by Republican victors and the proud proclamation of the extension of empire, in which the Conquest of Ocean figured large (and that was no hollow boast: the army had at first refused to sail).

Becoming a Roman province

By AD 47 the Claudian armies occupied Britain as far as the Severn and the Trent ([Map 3](#)). The work of organizing Britain as a regular province was now in progress. Its governorship enjoyed high status. It was reserved for ex-consuls and carried with it the command of an exceptionally large group of legions. In its first century-and-a-half as a province, men of particular distinction were regularly chosen. It was not only a military challenge where reputations could be won, but—though we shall never have the figures to compare income from Britain with expenditure on its defence and administration—it was regarded as a land of natural abundance as late as the 4th century. By AD 47, indeed, the exploitation of Britain's mineral resources—one of the chief objectives of victory—had begun (the silver-bearing lead of the Mendips was being mined under state control by this date). It might have saved Rome much trouble and expense if she had limited her conquest to the area she already controlled; but it is very doubtful whether Roman ambition could long have been restrained, even if the warlike and unstable tribes of the north and Wales had not been a threat to the peaceful development of the south. As it was, the events of the next two or three years committed Rome to a different course.





Map 3. The ebb and flow of Roman occupation.

Roman practice in the provinces was always to shift as much of the burden of administration onto loyal locals as soon as possible. Claudius' intention seems to have been to employ client kings as far as he could—the most economical method where they were reliable. A substantial part of the south, including Verica's old kingdom, was put in the hands of one Cogidubnus or Togidubnus, who may not have been a native Briton. The Iceni of Norfolk were kept as 'allies'; and an understanding was reached beyond the border of Roman rule with Cartimandua, queen of the Brigantes (a vast grouping of clans that encompassed most of northern England), with the object of securing the province from attack from the north. One success of this policy was when Cartimandua handed over the fugitive Caratacus to Claudius ([Figure 3](#)); another was the enduring loyalty of Cogidubnus, which was almost certainly of critical importance during later crises in Britain.

The rest of the province the governor would expect to administer chiefly through the tribes, reorganized as Roman local government units (*civitates*) with their nobles holding local office and formed into councils. The formal structures of these *civitates* were scaled-down versions of the Roman constitution, in fact, but often adapted existing institutions. In addition, throughout the province ran the writ of the chief financial secretary of Britain, the *procurator provinciae*. These provincial procurators reported directly to the emperor. This was natural enough, since they had particular responsibilities for imperial land (the emperors automatically acquired the royal estates of defeated enemies, besides much else by inheritance or confiscation) and imperial monopolies; but they also acted as a check on the governor, the emperor's military and judicial representative. Friction was not uncommon and not wholly unintentional.



3. Bronze head from a public statue of the Emperor Claudius, found in the River Alde, Suffolk, and probably looted from Colchester during the revolt of Boudicca.

The train of events that made it certain the province would not remain confined to the south started in AD 47 with the Roman response to raids from outside. Measures taken included not only counter-attacks but also the disarming of Britons within the province. This was bound to have come eventually, since

civilians were forbidden to carry arms within the empire except in certain very limited circumstances—something that says much about everyday security in Roman times—but those who had voluntarily submitted to Rome had not expected it to apply to them. The Iceni revolted and were put down by force: the true status of the client kingdoms had now been made plain. The next step was the moving forward of the legion that had been stationed at Colchester and its replacement in AD 49 by a colony of Roman legionary veterans. This was intended as the seat of the Imperial Cult—the formal worship of Rome and the Imperial Family which focused the loyalty of the province—and the veterans were to act as a bulwark against possible revolt. In practice, Colchester was now an ungarrisoned civil city. Perhaps at the same moment, London was founded as a supply port. It is possible that from its beginning it was intended in due course to become the administrative centre of Britain as well. It was in all probability created as a deliberate act, rather than emerging out of a casual settlement of traders as was formerly thought. The pre-eminence of the Essex coast was now challenged by the Thames, and London's position at the hub of the radiating system of main roads now being built, designed for official purposes, very soon made it also the business centre of the province.

The Boudiccan revolt

The 50s were a decade of urban development. The agricultural hinterland remained largely unchanged, at least on the surface, and progress towards the adoption of the money economy was slow. By AD 60, however, with the governor, Suetonius Paullinus, about to subdue the troublesome tribes of North Wales, the province looked set to progress steadily. What went wrong? Why did the provincials, led by Rome's erstwhile friends the Iceni and Trinovantes, turn into a raging horde, set on destroying every trace of Rome?

We have only the Roman account, but it is enough to reveal maladministration ranging from the callously negligent to the undeniably criminal. Tacitus makes a general comment on the British character: 'The Britons bear conscription, the tribute, and their other obligations to the empire without complaint, provided there is no injustice. That they take extremely ill; for they can bear to be ruled by others but not to be their slaves.' The responsibility for the catastrophe cannot be confined to the procurator Decianus Catus alone, the traditional villain of the piece. The governor, Suetonius Paullinus, has to take a share, and it cannot stop there. The young Nero, now on the throne, can hardly be blamed directly, for he was under the influence of his 'good' advisers, Burrus, the praetorian prefect, and the philosopher and dramatist Seneca. Of these two, it seems very likely that Seneca, at least, knew what was going on in Britain because he suddenly recalled, in a ruthless manner, large sums of money he had been lending to leading Britons at a high rate of interest. This was probably cash the tribal aristocrats needed to fulfil their new duties as civic dignitaries and which they would have found it difficult to raise from their existing wealth, based as it must have been in traditional and non-monetary forms. Reports coming out of Britain may well have indicated unrest that might put Seneca's investment at risk. In the event, the action fuelled the flames. There are two main threads to the grievances, represented respectively by the Iceni and the Trinovantes. At his death, Boudicca's husband, Prasutagus, the client king of the Iceni, had left half his possessions to the emperor, expecting that this would protect his kingdom and family. Agents of the procurator and of the governor, however, had treated this as if it were the unconditional surrender of an enemy. The king's property was confiscated, nobles were expelled from their lands, and taxation and conscription enforced. The Trinovantes were suffering other insults. The main

burden of the Imperial Cult, designed to promote loyalty to the emperor, had fallen on their nobles, while the Roman colonists—significantly with the encouragement of serving soldiers—seized their lands and treated them with contempt. They (and probably the aristocracies of other *civitates*) were facing financial ruin, the last straw being the reclaiming of grants made by Claudius, the previous emperor, and the recall of Seneca's loans. The Imperial Cult, as represented by the Temple of the Deified Claudius at Colchester, was, ironically, the focus of British hatred.

In answer to Boudicca's protests, she was flogged and her daughters raped. Rousing her own tribe and her Trinovantian neighbours and carrying other *civitates* with her (but clearly not Cogidubnus), she swept through southern Britain, burning Colchester, London, and Verulamium (St Albans), torturing every Roman or Roman sympathizer she could catch, and inflicting devastating defeats on the few Roman units that had been left in that part of the country. The governor only just avoided the total loss of the province. After the eventual victory when he had brought her to battle, his retribution was all the more extreme. For a while it looked as if the ruin of the province of Britain would now be achieved at Roman hands. Nero, indeed, at one stage in his reign—possibly earlier, perhaps now—had been inclined to abandon Britain altogether. In the end two factors saved the province: the intervention of a remarkable new provincial procurator, Classicianus, himself of Gallic origin, and the recall to Rome of the governor.

The recovery that occupied Britain for the decade after Boudicca was genuine but unspectacular. There is some evidence that under the last governor appointed by Nero it was beginning to accelerate. But the outbreak of civil war across the empire in AD 69 ('The Year of the Four Emperors') revived the spectre of generals fighting for supremacy. However, the outcome of the wars brought in a vigorous new administration in the persons of the Flavian emperors, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. For Britain, this spelled provincial renewal and the expansion of Roman power. As Tacitus says, 'Now come great generals and magnificent armies, and with them the hopes of our enemies fall into ruin.'

While the Roman world had been distracted by the civil wars, a fresh outbreak of strife among the Brigantes had lost Cartimandua her kingdom and embroiled the Roman army. The north of Britain was no longer secure. The old policy of client kingship, already shaken by Boudicca and previous Brigantian

disturbances, was finally discredited. Within a few years even Cogidubnus was probably pensioned off to live in the splendid coastal villa of Fishbourne. By AD 83 or 84 a succession of first-rate governors had carried Roman arms to the far north of Scotland and garrisons to the edge of the Highlands—and were pressing ahead with Romanization. Tacitus, in describing the work of his father-in-law Agricola, uses words that characterize the Flavian period as a whole:

In order to encourage a truculent population that dwelled in scattered settlements (and was thus only too ready to fall to fighting) to live in a peaceful and inactive manner by offering it the pleasures that would follow on such a way of living, Agricola urged these people privately, and helped them officially, to build temples, public squares with public buildings (*fora*), and private houses (*domus*). He praised those who responded quickly, and severely criticized laggards. In this way, competition for public recognition took the place of compulsion. Moreover he had the children of the leading Britons educated in the civilized arts and openly placed the natural ability of the Britons above that of the Gauls, however well trained. The result was that those who had once shunned the Latin language now sought fluency and eloquence in it. Roman dress, too, became popular and the toga was frequently seen. Little by little there was a slide toward the allurements of degeneracy: assembly-rooms (*porticus*), bathing establishments and smart dinner parties. In their inexperience the Britons called it civilization when it was really all part of their servitude.

The Roman view of the peoples of Britain has several strands. What we can learn of it comes almost but not quite all from classical literature. As with the location of the country at the end of the world, there is a persistent stereotype of the proud and fierce barbarian. This stereotype is interestingly transmuted by Tacitus elsewhere into the notion of the noble savage, whose character he uses to compare with what he portrays as the corruption and decadence of the civilized Roman. He does, however, make a clear distinction between those British tribes who have been conquered by Rome and those who have remained free. There is relatively little evidence for a consistent imperial policy of ‘Romanization’, but where he describes the public and private encouragement given by his father-in-law Agricola to the Britons to adopt Roman ways (‘the toga was frequently seen’) Tacitus uses it to portray them as deluded: unaware that what they were adopting were symbols of their own servitude. He does, though, allow them some retention of nobility, as in his description of the provincials’ attitude to taxation: ‘they remain cheerful under this burden, provided that there is no abuse’.

Much has been made of the contemptuous description of ‘miserable little Britons (*Brittunculi*)’ in a very rare instance of a non-literary view. This occurs in one of the well-known letters found at the northern frontier fort of Vindolanda. Is this a

fair reflection of everyday Roman opinion of the Britons? It needs to be set in context. The date (early 2nd century) is at a stage when the army was still relatively distinct from most of the civilian population of the province, still being a 'foreign' force of troops raised elsewhere. Are we hearing the authentic voice of the soldier on a colonial posting in any age, expressing his attitude towards the 'natives'? We probably are, but there is an important proviso. The context in that letter is the writer's opinion of the military quality of the Britons, particularly of how they are equipped. That implies hostilities—perhaps encountered in local risings, but more probably featuring enemies beyond the frontier. It is not of the general run of provincials. On the other hand, another Vindolanda letter contains a complaint from a civilian from somewhere outside Britain that he received a beating at the hands of the soldiery. This, he says, is all the more outrageous because he is from 'abroad' (*trasmarinus*), with the clear implication that the locals are trash. However, there is a complicating factor in the picture here of Roman and native. The troops at Vindolanda were not Mediterranean Romans but from northern Gaul, whose people themselves had been pacified within living memory. This even seems to have applied to the officer class, which included commanding officers drawn from the old tribal elite. The latter is all the more remarkable since to be appointed to one of those commands implied equestrian status—membership of the second rank in the Roman upper class—and that bore a property qualification as high as 40 per cent of that for senators. These were men who—themselves or their parents and grandparents—had acquired serious wealth and a high level of Roman culture through much the same process as Tacitus describes in Agricola's programme of civil development in Britain.

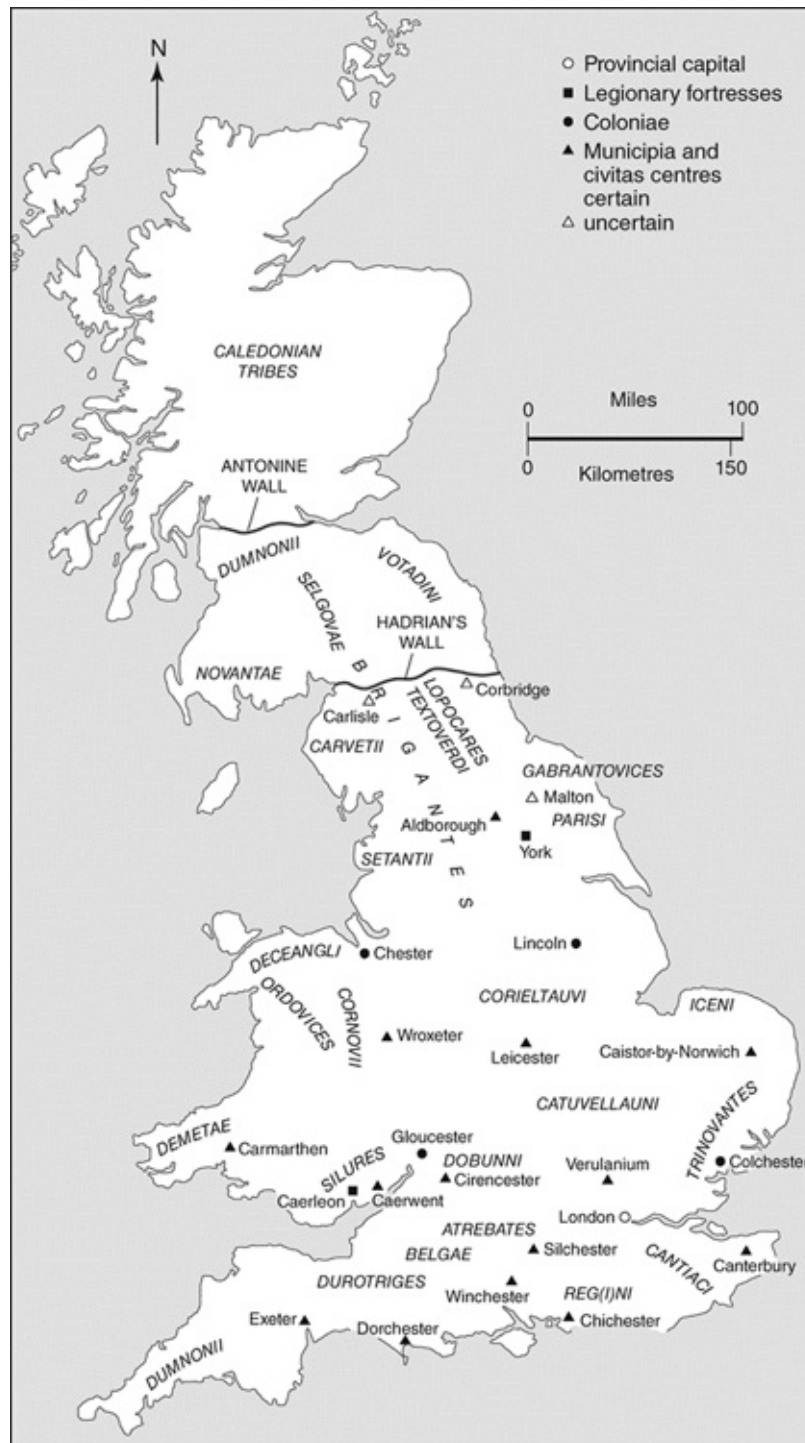
Nevertheless, stereotypes of the 'other' did survive. Even as late as the 4th century in the case of the thugs sent in AD 350 to murder the Emperor Constans it seems to imply an extra horror that they were *British* thugs. Yet large numbers of Romans will have been perfectly well aware that Roman Britain was not like that, not least the multitude of military and civil officers who were rotated in postings around the empire, not to mention traders from across the Roman world. The explanation is comparatively simple, that it is easy to retain both stereotype and reality in the mind at the same time. Nowadays we have no difficulty in instantly recognizing in cartoon or as a literary device the German with a spiked helmet or Frenchman with beret and striped vest, and we recognize the journalistic shorthand when a lazy TV news editor backs every Parisian scene with accordion music, though we are very unlikely to encounter any of this

in their home countries. It is somehow fitting that one of the most durable of all national stereotypes is the woad-painted ancient Briton, created by Julius Caesar's report that 'all of them were thus adorned'.

A second wave of urban development

To a certain extent the urbanization under the Flavians was less than completely successful. The core of its more securely based development can reasonably be associated with the visit of the Emperor Hadrian to Britain in person in 122, when existing schemes were revived or replaced and vast new works put in hand. But, looked at in longer perspective, the period from AD 70 to the 160s is the age when Britain truly became Roman and its lasting features as part of the empire emerged ([Map 4](#)). Central to this absorption into the Roman system was the more or less universal devolution of the burden of routine administration to the local aristocracies that replaced the client kingdoms. It was crucially important to this policy to win over the native aristocracy whose confidence had been so disastrously lost in the reign of Nero, and it is in this context that Tacitus must be read. To achieve this end the provincial elite needed to feel themselves Roman, and Tacitus—though his purpose is to make a satirical and moralizing point—points to the outward signs of a Roman identity, some of which can be recognized archaeologically. The provision of baths, for example, marked a society that prized what immediately identified a person as Roman: personal cleanliness and general grooming differentiating them from those they would regard as unwashed barbarians. The pre-Conquest coin of the British king Verica not only had the laurel wreath of a triumphant Roman but also the carefully arranged short hair and clean-shaven face of the Roman elite of his day that showed the presence of the barbers and personal grooming assistants who accompanied the provision of baths. Romans remained very conscious of this difference to the end of the empire in the West. A 5th-century AD Gallo-Roman aristocrat describing one of the Germanic kings taking over Roman Gaul piecemeal remarked on his body odour and the stink of his clothes. Moreover, for the provincial elite right from the beginning a predilection for the Roman habit of meeting together socially in public rooms such as the baths or the forum or privately for fine dining—and in those settings showing off one's education and taste in the Latin classics—all helped to bind this class together in a new identity. At this stage as far as Britain is concerned the empire was still a colonial empire in the modern sense of an occupying power governing a population in which not many had its citizenship. Yet it managed to control the vast territories across its empire with a remarkably small army overall and relatively few administrators from the centre. The secret was the adoption by local elites of the classical Mediterranean practice of competing amongst

themselves through the scale of their public benefactions to their communities and their devotion to public service by holding local office. Thus the principal function of the provincial governor in relation to the general population in a developed province was a matter of monitoring rather than detailed administration. In modern terms, this was 'small government'.



Map 4. Britain in the 2nd century AD.

Town and city

Archaeologically, we can observe in the late 1st century and in the second the development of the cities and towns of Roman Britain to their full extent. The client kingdoms had disappeared with the spectacular failures of that policy. The administrative centres of the *civitates* were provided with civic centres: the forum and public hall (*basilica*) that accommodated market, law courts, civic offices, and council chambers; the public baths which in the Roman world provided facilities for relaxation and social life; engineered water supplies; public monuments honouring imperial figures and local worthies; in a number of cases theatres or amphitheatres, and in at least one case (Colchester) a *circus* or race-track. This archaeological evidence is all the more significant—since it was normally the local notables themselves (in council or as individuals) who paid for such amenities, not the State or emperor. Sometimes a great private magnate with local connections might favour the town with a benefaction or by acting as friend at court. Distant provincial communities often had such a ‘patron’ at Rome who acted as an informal advocate for their interests, perhaps an ex-governor whom they trusted. It was a mutually advantageous arrangement, as the number and importance of the ‘clients’ a Roman noble possessed was a critical element in his reputation, and intervening on their behalf was regarded as an obligation of honour, not the exercise of undue influence. Only in fairly rare and well-publicized instances did emperors take a part in funding non-military public works in the provinces, but, in a system where the emperor in person was expected to make bureaucratically recorded decisions on a vast range of matters that we would now regard as minor, permission from the top was often vital as planning permission is today.

The urban expansion in Britain could not, of course, have rested solely on the basis of an urban-based native aristocracy taught to accept Roman ways. Indeed, this spread of town life was followed by the appearance of many ‘villas’ in the countryside. This is a term that sometimes causes confusion. Archaeologists use it to describe a dwelling in the countryside of recognizably Roman appearance. In Latin, however, it simply refers to a country property or (in the Late Roman period) to the house on a country estate. It was not necessarily a farm, though a much-read Roman pundit advised the prospective purchaser to ascertain that a property would provide some income. Most must in fact have been supported by agriculture, some by other rural enterprises. At this stage in Britain they were

mainly modest but comfortable Roman houses—often replacing native homesteads—except in the south-east of England where some large villas appear early. On the whole, however, smart town houses seem to date a little earlier than villas in the surrounding countryside. This may partly be a reflection of towns being more likely to have incomers from elsewhere in the empire and partly because this was where the local gentry felt it most necessary to conform to Roman standards to maintain and enhance their status among their contemporaries. However, the grander town houses took quite a long time to appear. Early towns tend to be fairly densely populated with small structures (apart from the usual Roman public buildings), and the general impression is of artisan and trading activity. Over the centuries they seem to become increasingly gentrified, with large, well-equipped town residences in fairly generous plots giving the feel of a more open urban landscape. This may reflect the Late Roman tendency for public business to be conducted in private space—a curious return to the practices of the great magnates of the old Roman Republic—and a concomitant decline often being seen in the public institutions such as public baths and basilicas (town halls).

Back in the country, many ordinary farmers will have shared the local elites' prosperity and benefited from the new markets opened up by the towns. In this period, too, veterans discharged from the legions formed a new urban middle class, all with full Roman citizenship and for the present probably mainly concentrated in the 'colonies' (*coloniae*: high-status cities deliberately created to take them), with many probably farming the territories designated to support these new foundations. The flourishing of the towns as a whole depended not only on the formation of an urban elite originating chiefly in the local gentry but also on the emergence, well attested, of a lively urban population made up of officials, the professions, traders, ex-soldiers, and skilled artisans, not to mention people in less respectable occupations. Nor should we forget that until modern times towns in Europe normally also housed a substantial population working the land close by or employed in suburban industries.

Some of these townspeople, particularly among the craftsmen and traders, were immigrants or visitors, and many officials were on short-term postings to the province. Most of our information comes from urban or military contexts, and it is clear that the towns and forts had a very diverse population. By contrast there is very little information on ethnicity from the countryside, but there is so far no reason to doubt there was relatively little change overall since the Conquest. Since perhaps 80–90 per cent of the population of Roman Britain was involved

Since perhaps 80–90 per cent of the population of Roman Britain was involved in agriculture or other rural activities, it can be assumed that overall it remained overwhelmingly indigenous. Moreover, in the special case of the army, the ethnic make-up across the empire was changing with the balance tipping in the direction of local recruits. Allowing for the fact that units were posted in and out of Britain and might originally have been raised anywhere, nevertheless, some stayed in the province for centuries. The ranks were increasingly recruited from the provinces in which units were stationed: gradually Britons who had been, like the mass of their fellows, without the distinctive Roman citizenship when they joined the army, must, as discharged veterans with their grants of citizenship and substantial gratuities, have formed an important part of the solid centre of the Romanized society now emerging. In the towns, slaves were set up in business by their masters; and the frequent use in the Roman world of the power to set slaves free (often in wills) or to allow them to purchase their liberty expanded the skilled free labour force and added to the body of businessmen. We have no means of discovering what proportion of the population was slave, but one can reckon that very many had dreadful existences, particularly working on the land or in certain industries. However, whatever the condition of the agricultural labourer, slave or free, social mobility was high in the skilled and educated portion of society, which included many freedmen. Whilst the vast bulk of the ordinary people of Britain undoubtedly remained on the land, the towns of the Early Empire came to provide centres of public life, exchange, and services for the rural hinterland, while the appearance of many new forms of economic activity provided wide opportunities of jobs and advancement at different levels of society.

The towns and cities were not legally separate from the countryside. The Roman term *civitas* is rather feebly translated as ‘local authority area’, or rather misleadingly ‘county’, which has too many Saxon overtones. In the Roman world the concept derives ultimately from the Mediterranean city-state and—since the urban centre (however big or small) was broadly inseparable from its overall territory—could be extended to peoples without an urban tradition, organized essentially on tribal lines (though that, too, has difficult overtones for us from more recent history). It is interesting to see how this is reflected in what we can deduce of how people saw themselves. A sculptured gravestone from the civil settlement outside the the fort of South Shields at the mouth of the River Tyne can serve as an example. It is the gravestone set up by a Syrian named Barates for his British wife Regina, a former slave whom he had freed and married. He does not, however, describe himself as Syrian or Regina as a Briton.

Instead he calls himself a Palmyrene, from the territory centred on the great city of Palmyra, and his wife as Catuvellaunian, a native of the *civitas* whose urban focus was Verulamium. Their self-perceived identities were determined by their home *civitates*, not their provinces of origin or any general notion of race. Nor were these ties merely sentimental. They were directly underlined and reinforced by the practicalities implied in the laws of citizenship. Even becoming a full Roman citizen did not release the individual from the obligations owed to his or her birthplace (*origo*): Augustus, the first emperor, had made it clear that being a citizen of one's home *civitas* remained valid for ever, and duties imposed by it (*munera*) continued for life.

Hadrian's revival of flagging Flavian urban initiatives was of major importance. But his impact on the province was great in other ways. A man of restless and extraordinary character and energy, much of his reign was taken up with tours of the provinces ([Map 5](#)). One of the few emperors deliberately to set himself against the tradition of expansion of the empire, he was personally unpopular with the Roman aristocracy and many of his vast enterprises were only partially successful, though whether due to internal opposition or to flaws in planning is not always clear. In Britain there are at least three major examples. Hadrian's Wall ([Figure 4](#)) was constructed on the line to which Roman forces had been withdrawn in stages from most of Scotland over the 30 years since the extreme point of expansion, partly because of demands for troops elsewhere, partly due to fairly serious local reverses in the field. Such a policy suited Hadrian's general inclination to limit the empire, and the design of the Wall was brilliantly original. In part because of this, however, detailed study of its early history has revealed a remarkable series of changes of plan within Hadrian's reign; and it must have cost many times the original estimates of the expenditure and time required for completion. Similarly, the agricultural colonization of the Fenlands of East Anglia involved water engineering on a grand scale, yet many of the farms failed after only a few years. Hadrianic London, too, saw the demolition of the substantial Flavian forum and basilica and their replacement with a complex twice the normal size. In Gaul and elsewhere Hadrian intervened to help cities erect public buildings. In London this was probably related to the presence of the emperor himself during his visit to Britain in AD 122, which is supported by the erection of a permanent fort in the city at about this time—something almost unparalleled in the cities of the empire outside Rome. But when a great fire had swept through London later in Hadrian's reign, the effort to reconstruct areas that had been devastated was relatively short-lived, and in the later years of the

2nd century London shows signs of urban decay.



Map 5. The Roman Empire at the accession of the Emperor Hadrian in AD 118.

Hadrian's frontier line from the Tyne to Solway Firth represents broadly the limit within which the province settled for most of its history. Yet there were at least three major wars of conquest northwards subsequent to Hadrian, two of them commanded in person by emperors; and for long periods garrisons were maintained at points beyond the Hadrianic line and a degree of control exercised. Indeed, within months of his death in AD 138 plans were in hand to launch a new invasion of Scotland; and by 142 the armies of his generally unmilitary successor, Antoninus Pius, had, like those of Claudius, provided a new emperor with a conquest in the prestigious field of Britain. Scotland as far as the Firth of Tay was in Roman hands again, and work commenced on a new, shorter, and more simply-built linear barrier to run from the Forth to the Clyde. Elaborate commemorative stone relief sculptures, set at positions along what we know as the Antonine Wall, record the confident mood of what was to be the last period of unconstrained expansion of Roman rule (Figure 5).



4. Hadrian's Wall and Housesteads Fort. The fort was inserted into the continuous wall itself in the second phase of Hadrianic development of the system, and the latter can be seen on the right running from the corners. In the centre is the headquarters building, with the commanding officer's house on the left and a pair of granaries on the right. Behind lies the military hospital. In the bottom right corner are three barracks and, bottom left, a latrine block. Outside the fort can be seen a few of the many houses, shops, and temples of the dependent civil settlement.



5. The Antonine Wall in Scotland: 2nd-century cavalry trooper riding down barbarian enemies, depicted on a 'distance slab' recording a sector constructed by a named unit, the Second Legion Augusta. From Bridgeness, on the Firth of Forth.

Countryside

It is no longer believed that the Romano-British countryside was sparsely occupied, with vast tracts of forest. Aerial photographs (and now lidar, airborne laser scanning that can penetrate tree-cover), together with large-scale archaeological excavation ahead of development in recent years, have revealed that areas once thought devoid of ancient occupation had, by the time of the Roman Conquest, long been cleared for agriculture. We have to imagine a busy countryside, not unlike that of medieval England before the Black Death, with a population to match, most of it employed in agriculture but with a sizeable minority in industry, particularly the extractive industries such as quarrying and mining and the production of salt. Manufacturing on any scale, too, was essentially rural in sharp contrast to the modern world, for example the potteries of Oxfordshire and the New Forest.

Wide variations occurred in the character of settlement across the regions. In broad terms, England from the Humber to the West Country (certainly as far as and including Somerset) and the eastern part of South Wales had a similar pattern of closely spaced agricultural settlements, in form mostly derived from Iron Age predecessors with some new elements, including a fairly small minority of examples of development into Roman-style villas. It is becoming clear from the material remains that there were very considerable regional variations in the internal workings of the farming settlements and in the layout of their field-systems, and that ways of working the land and the ways in which society was structured and behaved were powerfully influenced by Iron Age tradition, locality by locality and perhaps tribal area by tribal area. To an outside observer the diversity of local identities would have been obvious, not least in how individuals dressed, ate, and adorned themselves, and by the extent to which Roman material culture played a part in displaying status within the social group. To the individuals themselves, however, the two most obvious everyday impacts of inclusion in the empire must have been the imposition of taxation and that of enforced peace between communities and individuals. The former stimulated the production of agricultural surpluses (however unwillingly), while the latter provided a stable environment, of huge importance in the operation of the rural economy, particularly in the domains of tenure and inheritance, and of everyday contracts. The Iron Age communities will, of course, have had a long tradition of customary ways of settling such issues; fortunately, the Roman legal

system could cope admirably with this situation by applying customary rules in transactions between non-citizens (as almost all of the rural population will have been for the first two centuries) and holders of Roman citizenship. As to how the mass of country people saw themselves, it is extremely unlikely that they worried about how Roman they were. As in England before the railway age, few will have travelled far outside their home villages, and they will have been indifferent to the status symbols that were important to urban dwellers but had their own directly related to the land. The setting and points of reference for their individual identities were as members of a farming community.

Villas were on the whole modest in size in the first two centuries, except for the early examples in the south-east. The construction of the road network over the second half of the 1st century, initially for military and security purposes, introduced new factors into the rural economy, including the development of large roadside villages or small towns ([Map 6](#)). These provided local markets for the countryside, through which Roman consumer goods trickled down to the country population. There were important exceptions to this largely farming scene. These included the iron industries of the Forest of Dean and the Weald, a remarkable gold mine at Dolaucothi in Wales, and the lead/silver mines and processing plants of Derbyshire and the Mendips, the latter leaving such soil pollution that it still causes problems on site today, giving a glimpse into the horrendous working conditions that must have prevailed. Together with logging in existing forests and probably the growing of trees from scratch for timber, these industries reflect entirely new markets created by the introduction of Roman building techniques, by infrastructure projects, and by the demands of the Roman army. Control of these strategic and highly lucrative industries seems largely to have been in the hands of the State. The lead industry was originally under direct military control, later run through contractors, called *conductores*. This was a device widely used across the empire for a substantial range of enterprises by which middlemen—the *conductores*—took on leases and employed subcontractors to carry out the operations. The same system was probably used for the vast agricultural exploitation of the Fenland in East Anglia, if that was an imperial estate, property of the emperor. The iron of the Weald, however, we know from stamped tiles was controlled by the Channel fleet (*classis Britannica*) based in Boulogne and Dover, though it is unclear whether the purpose was primarily to secure supplies for ship-building and repair, or to transport the iron to the near Continent where the mainly civilian market was enormous.



Map 6. The road system of Roman Britain, originally developed for military and administrative purposes, was also of great economic and social importance. Heavy freight mostly travelled by water: many ports and harbours are known but there is insufficient evidence to map the routes. There was also at least one inland canal.

North of the Humber as far as Hadrian's Wall the pattern is different, but not as different as it might appear on the surface. The outstanding visible feature of the landscape is the proliferation of military establishments. The civilian element—outside the relatively small number of towns and the city of York—was formerly thought to be divided between, on the one hand, small but thoroughly Roman civil settlements (*vici*) housing army families and traders living off the tempting market provided by the soldiery (possessed of that assured income and quasi-urban tastes) and on the other a scattered indigenous rural population benefiting from the presence of the army as a market for produce but following a traditional way of life without 'Roman' elements other than occasional possession of low-value consumer goods. The same rural way of life was formerly thought to continue in the large number of similar settlements that have been mapped north of the Wall. Recent archaeology however has indicated a radically different picture. The region north of the Wall seems blighted once the Wall was occupied, with little continuity with life before. The contrast between north of the Wall and south of it is now much greater. The *vici* were much larger than previously appreciated, forming a network of settlements linked by patrolled roads (an incidental benefit of the system of garrisons originally installed to contain and control the upland communities). These settlements probably present a considerably higher-spending market than many of the equivalent small towns of the south. They certainly evolved a degree of formal internal organization. The same term (*vicus*) was used for them as for the wards of a city, and local officials (*vicanorum magistri*) are attested. The existence of these semi-urban agglomerations will have stimulated the economic and social development of the countryside, and occupation sites with Roman structural features (including the occasional small villa) are, if still rare, beginning to be discovered as a component of the landscape.

In the Early Antonine period, the developments we have seen in town and country reached their first peak. Elsewhere, the empire is generally considered to have been enjoying a golden age of tranquility and prosperity. Britain was now broadly integrated into the economic system of the Early Empire, fundamentally based on a money economy. Among other factors, the presence of an exceptionally large military establishment—four legions at first, not dropping below three in the first two centuries AD—implies the presence of massive buying power, both official and by individual soldiers. The actual usage of coins in the Early Empire was patchy by modern standards, and varied between the

different categories of metal. Gold and silver coinage was struck for the direct purposes of the State, principally for the routine payment of the army and imperial administration and for the maintenance of public buildings and other assets, but also to enable the emperor of the day to carry out the politically vital acts of beneficence on which his popularity and personal security depended. These included the by now unavoidable ‘bread and circuses’ to keep the populace of the city of Rome itself sweet, involving a huge permanent logistics operation which included a fleet of exceptionally large ships to transport the grain across the Mediterranean. On an occasional but cumulatively substantial basis there were gifts to individuals and grants to favoured communities, not to mention the great imperial building projects in which many emperors indulged. And there were also the ‘donatives’ (bonuses) paid to the troops on particular occasions such as the accession of a new emperor, expectation of which could sometimes be the opposite of promoting stability. It was a prime object of fiscal policy to recover the precious metal coins in circulation, and this was done principally via the tax system and by exchanging them for bronze. The latter were used for everyday purposes, but the supply of new bronze coinage was often erratic. It has been suggested that the coin evidence for Britain implies that day-to-day use of coins grew relatively slowly, though this does not necessarily mean that transactions were not calculated in monetary terms. In passing, the intriguing suggestion has been made that the inflation which was a notable feature of the 3rd century encouraged the everyday use of coinage by the unintended availability of small change in the form of abundant low value coins. However, in whatever form it is collected, taxation itself stimulates the production of surpluses to pay it. Moreover, military and civil service salaries were in cash or other valuables, and much of that must have been spent locally. Overall, the large-scale spending by the central imperial government implied in the exceptional size of the military establishment—especially the highly paid legions—must have meant that economic activity ran at a much higher level than if there had been no imperial government requirements driving it.

The sheer quantity of imported objects found on sites in Britain dating from the Early Empire indicates the strength of large-scale, long-distance trade, and implies the everyday use of pricing in cash terms, though physically there may have been much barter and exchange. The finds include both items from overseas such as fine ceramics from Gaul and amphoras containing olives and fish-sauce (*garum*) from Spain, and from specialist producers within Britain such as potteries making the food-mixing bowls (*mortaria*) that were a feature of

every good kitchen. Environmental evidence for foods such as grapes or figs prove a wide range of new imports—probably both as produce from abroad and the growing of newly introduced plants—and underline the extent of consumer choice now existing. The extraordinary prevalence of oyster shells on Roman sites, even far inland, underlines the existence of a highly efficient distribution network within the province, even for perishable goods. It has been argued convincingly that a substantial amount of trade across the empire piggy-backed on the vast official communications network—the Imperial Post (*cursus publicus*)—that shipped official goods as well as documents and personnel travelling on government business with imperial permits. Express couriers (the *cursus velox*) could carry urgent messages. As well as facilitating the everyday business of administration, it doubtless also carried intelligence reports from the emperor's secret agents (the *frumentarii*, later *agentes in rebus*) without whom it would have been very difficult for him to know reliably what was going on across the empire. Access to the service was strictly controlled. The Emperor Trajan insisted on personally sending out to the provinces batches of time-limited permits for free travel. There is no reason to doubt that the Post operated within Britain, where official rest-houses (*mansiones*) have been identified in towns and outside forts, and main roads had small staging posts at intervals for changing horses (*mutationes*).

Culturally, Roman fashions were dominant, and classical art and decoration widely adopted. Perhaps, historically, the most important artistic impact of Roman conquest on the Britons was the introduction of figurative styles, particularly in sculpture, wall-painting, and mosaic, but also in a vast range of minor arts and crafts—jewellery, pottery, furniture, and household goods of every description. First-rate works of art from Roman Britain are relatively few compared with, say, southern Gaul, but they do exist. The middle range of material is, however, quite plentiful and it is abundantly clear that mass-produced articles were freely available. It is these, rather than the few works of high art that have survived, that reveal an everyday revolution in the way of life since the pre-Roman Iron Age. Roman pottery alone reveals the existence of a 'throwaway society' that is quite different from what went before or came after.

The occurrence of themes from classical literature in the visual arts underlines what Tacitus said about Agricola's encouragement of the provincial elite and his support for the education of their children. In Roman terms this essentially meant education in the major works of Greek and Roman literature, in the skilful

use of the Latin language through training in rhetoric, and in Roman law. All of these involved the absorption of Roman values and ways of thinking, and at this level in society was based in literacy. How far down the social scale literacy went in general is an important point. Examples of writing—all the way from formal inscriptions, through gravestones and votive offerings, down to graffiti—occur mainly in towns, at religious centres, and in and around military establishments. It is clear that although these examples stem principally from the upper and middle classes (including soldiers and their families), everyday literacy was not confined on a class basis or between slave and free. On the whole the determinant was occupation. One may guess that among the vast bulk of the provincial population—that which worked on the land—individuals who could read or write were fairly thin on the ground. However, it has been pointed out in connection with the Vindolanda letters from Hadrian's Wall that ordinary people's transactions and therefore their assumptions and perceptions of how their society worked were fundamentally based on writing, whether or not they themselves were literate. Possession of land, for example, was based on documents, the relationship between landlord and tenant and between master and servant were circumscribed by written law and the case-specific records, and no one could avoid the calculations involved in paying rent, marketing produce, or, most unavoidable of all, liability to taxation. Letters have survived recording a consignment of wagon parts, the reliability of a slave-girl, the deposit of a sum of money, and from London a proposed site meeting regarding a wood in Kent, all apparently private business rather than official. And all the documents are in Latin—as were the laws which underpinned them—whatever the day-to-day speech of the community, with the subtle influences on thought, action, and convention that are well known to arise from operating in any particular language. The everyday conventions of life were based on the unspoken assumption that transactions were in the end founded on the existence of a power that could enforce them. In the case of a frontier province that was the governor, invested with both civil and military authority directly by the emperor whose personal deputy (*legatus*) he was both in law and practice, since the emperor himself held the governorship of all the provinces in which substantial armies were stationed, personally appointed the *legati Augusti*, and monitored their actions.

Religion

Because it affected the deepest levels of consciousness, religion provides the most telling evidence for the assimilation of Roman and native. Roman Britain was a religious kaleidoscope, ranging from the formal rites of the Roman State—Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva in particular—and the Imperial Cult that had more recently been grafted on to it, through a wide range of religions imported both from the neighbouring West and from the East, to the local Celtic cults. People from overseas often retained their own favourite practices: Diodora, a Greek priestess, dedicated an altar at Corbridge in her own language to the demi-god Herakles of Tyre; soldiers from the Netherlands set up others at Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall to their native goddesses the Alaisiagae, Boudihillia and Friagabis, Beda and Fimmilena. But for our purpose the most significant are the 'conflations' or amalgamations of classical and Celtic deities. This was a difficult and uncertain process, since Celtic religion identified its deities much less clearly than Roman, but it was very widespread. That its acceptance was more than superficial is clear, for example, from an altar in the great complex of temple and baths at Bath erected to Sulis Minerva (the indigenous healing spirit of the hot springs conflated with the Roman goddess of wisdom) by Lucius Marcius Memor, *haruspex*. The function of the *haruspices* was divination of the future from the entrails of sacrificial animals. This ancient practice, held in the highest honour, went back to very early Etruscan strands in Italian religion, yet it is here related to a half-Celtic deity. Again, on Hayling Island, a major shrine of the pre-Roman Iron Age—more than likely associated with the kingship of Verica—was rebuilt subsequently in Roman materials, perhaps by an architect from Roman Gaul commissioned by Cogidubnus. It is a particularly fine example of a very large class of distinctive shrines known to archaeologists as 'Romano-Celtic temples', found right across Britain, Gaul, and Roman Germany, and quite clearly the expression in Roman architectural terms of a pre-existing type peculiar to the Celtic peoples. They are instantly recognizable, being square, circular, or polygonal structures, usually box-like with a concentric 'ambulatory', and often set within enclosed precincts which may sometimes have preserved sacred groves from pre-Roman times.

At a much less formal level we find in Weardale a cavalry officer giving thanks to Silvanus (a Celtic rural god in Roman guise) for 'a remarkably fine boar no

one had previously been able to catch', or at Greta Bridge two ladies setting up an altar to the local nymph. These are typical of the deep belief of both Celts and Romans that every place had its own deity (*genius loci*). Romans found no difficulty in accepting these deities of place in the lands they conquered. Indeed, they showed real anxiety to find out their names and honour them, as a precaution if nothing else. The darker side was a belief in ghosts and the need to placate them. Here we are at the heart of Roman religion, very congenial to the Britons, the animistic belief in the localized spirits of hearth, home, family, and ancestors, and of places and objects outside, which long pre-dated the public adoption of the classical gods of Olympus. The black element is represented archaeologically by written curses, some still sickening to read. From Clothall near Baldock comes a lead tablet bearing a message written backwards (a practice common in magic) declaring that 'Tacita is hereby cursed, and this curse shall reveal her to be putrefying like rotting blood'. Another tablet, found at the Roman temple of Lydney in Gloucestershire, curses the thief of a ring. Remarkably, what seems to be the same gold ring has been found at the Roman city of Silchester, and is displayed by the National Trust at The Vyne nearby. It is surely not just chance that excavation of a temple at Uley in the Cotswolds approximately doubled the total of curse-bearing tablets known from the entire Roman world. The Britons, we are told by a classical source, were obsessed with ritual. The specifically Roman contributions were to provide new artistic and architectural forms to express religious feelings, and written language in which to make those sentiments clear and permanent. Roman religious practice, with that same sense that informed Roman law, depended on the exact performance of every act and word. The care with which the Romano-Briton phrased his dedications and curses demonstrates how well the new capacity to set wording down indelibly accorded with his own ritual inclinations.

Defence and security

After his invasion of Scotland, Antoninus Pius waged no more aggressive wars anywhere in the Roman world, and in the 160s the mood began to change. In Britain something had gone seriously wrong around 158. There is some evidence that the Brigantes had to be suppressed, a situation perhaps made possible by premature thinning out of troops on the ground in the Pennines under the demands of the occupation of southern Scotland; and it seems the Antonine Wall itself was given up, accompanied by a definitive return to the Hadrianic line. In the reign of the next emperor, Marcus Aurelius, barbarian pressure on the frontiers of the empire generally became serious. The initiative, though Rome did not recognize it for centuries, had passed from her.

For a traveller arriving from the Continent, there was one particularly striking fashion in which Britain would have seemed different from northern Gaul, whose development it had in so many ways paralleled. The permanent military presence would have made him aware that a primary concern of governors in Britain was always one of defence: there were three legions, two in the west in fortresses at Chester and at Caerleon in South Wales, and one in the north at York, together with a very large number of auxiliary units, many occupied in containing the nominally pacified tribesmen of the hills inside the province by means of the network of forts and patrolled roads. But the most visible difference in the south was the presence of town walls. The building of these walls was not—other than at one period—a general response to a particular crisis. It was a leisurely process, starting in the 1st century with towns such as Winchester and Verulamium and still in progress in the 270s. By the early 2nd century the three prestigious colonies had walls; and an element of civic rivalry may have stirred elsewhere. The main reason for their walls, however, had to be something sufficiently important to overcome the reluctance of Roman emperors to allow the construction of fortifications that might be held by an enemy or insurgents (locals paid for the walls, but the emperor's express permission was required), and permanent enough for the process to be allowed to continue even though Britain was several times implicated in major challenges to the incumbent emperor. The total lack of defences to the villas rules out a disorderly countryside or fear of peasant revolt. The reason must be the same factor that kept the legions in the province and the auxiliary units stationed where they were: apprehension of barbarian incursion from outside and risings in the hills

within the province. The cities and towns, lying on the main roads, were the obvious targets for tribes or war parties on the move. In the ancient world, city walls were more or less impregnable except to armies with sophisticated siege machinery and the logistic support necessary to sustain a prolonged siege, or where the attackers had friends within the town. Against tribesmen, therefore, walls were a first-rate form of civic defence; and their prevalence in Britain must indicate a much greater awareness of threat abroad in the island than in Gaul.

Walls, however, take a long time to build, and a speedier remedy was sometimes needed. An indication of impending crisis is the appearance on a large number of urban sites in Britain of earthwork defences, apparently in the second half of the 2nd century. At Cirencester, for example, an earth rampart was thrown up to link monumental stone city gates and interval towers already built, as if an urgent decision had been taken to interrupt the leisurely construction programme and put the defences into immediate commission. Of the various candidates that have been proposed for this period of crisis, possibly the most likely was the outbreak in the north around 180 which included penetration of the frontier, reports of widespread damage, and the death of a Roman general. A much less likely context is the candidacy of a governor of Britain, Clodius Albinus, for the imperial throne in the years 193–7.

The events surrounding his attempt, however, herald a new age in the history of the empire, in the course of which Britain's fortunes diverged much more sharply from those of neighbouring Gaul. Marcus Aurelius' great wars on the Danube, which in the event marked the beginning of the unrelenting barbarian pressure in the West, might, had not his death intervened, have led to his achieving his aim of conquering Central Europe north of the Danube. Instead, the year 180 saw the breakdown of the system of nominating successors to the imperial throne that had produced a century of moderate and extremely able emperors. The accession of Marcus' dreadful son, Commodus, may have coincided in Britain with the outbreak of the serious warfare in the north already mentioned. In Britain and elsewhere, attempts to tighten up discipline in the Roman army had ironic consequences. A short period that saw a return to a rapid succession of murdered emperors and fresh outbreaks of civil war ended not only with the army in a much stronger position in society but with other profound changes in the system. The final victor, after the defeat of Clodius Albinus in Gaul, was the immensely tough Septimius Severus. The modern overtones of describing him as an African because his home town was in Libya are misleading. His mother was of Italian descent, his father's family was of

are misleading. His mother was of Italian descent, his father's family was of Punic (Carthaginian) origin, ethnically descended from colonists sent out by the Semitic city of Tyre, now in Lebanon. In Severus' day the family was already of Roman senatorial rank, and his rise to power underlines the fact that for a century before him emperors had had their origins in the great classical cities of the provinces but a public career at Rome, starting with Trajan and Hadrian, both citizens of the same city in Spain. But, far from bringing the army back to the disciplined loyalty of the previous hundred years, Severus' strategy for the survival of his own dynasty was to subordinate everything to the interests of the troops.

Modern historians like to divide history into neat periods such as the Early and Late Roman Empires, though often disagreeing when they began and ended. Contemporaries, of course, were blissfully unaware of these divisions in time, while the ancient world did not have the concept of 'progress' and traditionally thought the Golden Age was in the past. There are, however, good reasons for seeing the Severan emperors as marking the beginning of the Later Roman Empire, if not the Late. In the first place, Septimius' policy of favouring the army above anything else brought the long-established but unacknowledged military dictatorship out into the open. Following this, further change under his son Caracalla fundamentally altered the constitution by recognizing how far the gradual process of extending the Roman citizenship had gone, decreeing that all free permanent residents within the empire—possibly with one or two obscure exceptions—were now to be citizens. His reasons are uncertain, possibly fiscal (extending the tax take by including everyone within the scope of certain taxes that were applied to citizens alone). But what it also did, if unintentionally, was to recognize that Rome was no longer a colonial empire in which Roman citizens ruled over 'others'. The days in which the provinces were indigenous populations occupied by a foreign army were long gone, but Caracalla's *constitutio Antoniniana* marks the final stage. This makes many modern discernings of parallels with recent empires highly misleading, especially those that do not make the distinction between the Early and Late Roman periods.

In practical terms these developments had put significant strain on the structure of the State across the Empire. Up to now the framework of civil society had incorporated a fundamental divide. Transactions between non-citizens had been regulated by 'peregrine' law, not the full Roman system. This arrangement employed the laws of the local community that applied to their own free members, and was even used in cases of disputes between Roman citizens and

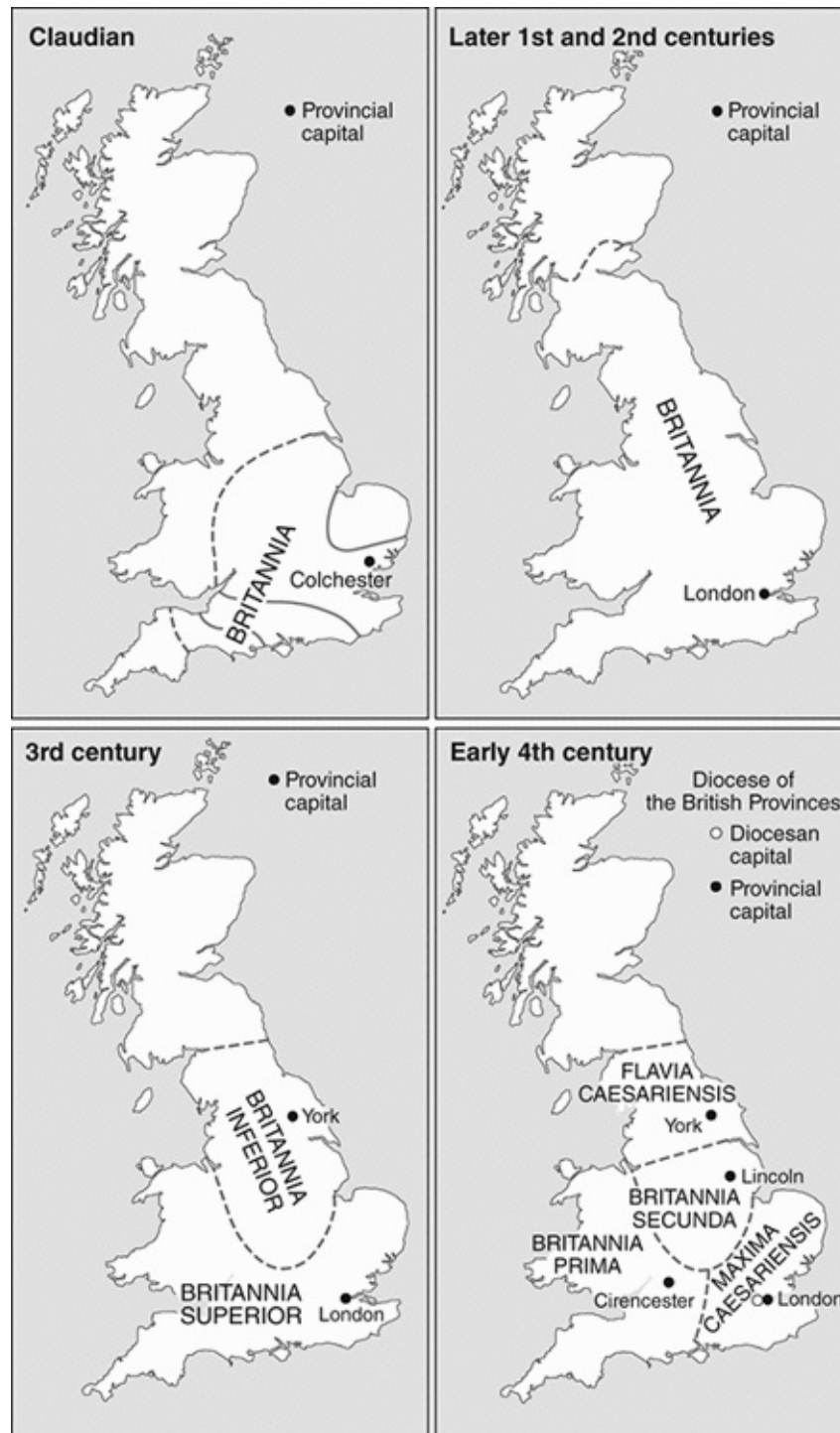
non-citizens. Provincial governors had much more power of arbitrary action against non-citizens than citizens, as illustrated by biblical reference to ‘appeal to Caesar’ by the latter. Now, instead of local aristocracies administering non-citizens with a relatively small bureaucracy of centrally appointed officials mostly operating at arm’s length, the imperial system was now taking on a much larger task. It was not to get major structural reform for nearly a century, but the seeds of the ‘big government’ of the Late Empire were sown.

The 3rd-century emperors abandoned the pretence of rule by consent. The senatorial class, which the 2nd-century emperors had, with varying degrees of sincerity, tried to keep involved in the responsibilities of government, both civil and military, lost ground to the career soldiers who were providing the professional senior officers whom the army, under pressure, required. Many of them rose from the ranks, and the new breed of officers in time came to dominate and sometimes occupy the imperial throne itself. The traditional aristocracy was increasingly excluded from the real levers of power, as opposed to the old offices of state. The re-emergence of a traditionalist aristocratic opposition to the emperors—which had faded under the ‘Good Emperors’ of the 2nd century who had been seen as people of their own sort—is an important feature of the Late Roman Empire. Moreover, that old distinction between Roman citizens and provincials without citizenship, already fading in everyday terms as more and more of the latter won Roman status, was swept away and replaced by a new class structure before the law—an upper division (*honestiores*) and a lower (*humiliores*). Significantly, soldiers fell into the former category. On top of these legal and social upheavals rampant inflation had severely damaged confidence in the currency by the middle of the century; and the old economic pattern of major centres of production serving very large areas of the Roman world by means of long-distance trade was tending to be replaced by more localized industries.

For the first quarter of the 3rd century, Septimius Severus and his dynasty seemed to offer a renewed stability, albeit one based on unabashed military autocracy. But that in itself was an insecure foundation. In the middle years of the century one assassinated emperor followed another in rapid succession as army officers changed their allegiances. The old, fatal weaknesses of personal ambition and the readiness of the Roman soldier to follow his commander were unchecked. At this point almost total disaster struck as enemies attacked in both East and West. In the East a newly invigorated Persian Empire captured the Emperor Valerian, while successive Germanic invasions damaged the unwallled

cities of Gaul and caused Rome to withdraw from shielding with a permanent military presence the long-established towns and territories across the Rhine. By 260 much of the empire was in a sorry state.

It was formerly believed by some that Britain had been similarly devastated when that unsuccessful campaign on the Continent by Clodius Albinus against his rival for the imperial throne in 197 was supposed to have stripped Britain of troops and opened the way for a major barbarian invasion. The archaeology will no longer support such a hypothesis. Problems with the tribes beyond the northern frontier towards the end of Severus' life were, however, to give the latter a reason to choose Britain in which to launch a new war of conquest. There was no slackening of Roman ambition. Here the intention was the total subjugation of Scotland, to complete the conquest of the island. There is, indeed, cause to think that the interest of the Severan House in Britain revived a province that had become somewhat run down. Perhaps in connection with the imperial visit itself, London was tidied up, given new public buildings, provided with the longest circuit of walls in Britain and, at some time in the Severan period, its waterfront magnificently re-equipped with continuous quays running for more than half a mile. While the war was being planned, the imperial household itself settled at York. Much work had already been undertaken on the forts of the north behind the Wall, many of which seem to have been neglected since the defeat of the barbarian intruders in the early 180s. There is some reason to think that York itself had assumed some of the governmental functions formerly located at London, perhaps when the Antonine reoccupation of Scotland extended the lines of communication. Sometime early in the 3rd century the city that had grown up alongside the legionary fortress was dignified with the honorary rank of Roman colony. It certainly had a major boost when Severus himself was resident there, as such an imperial residency brought with it not only the imperial family and its court but also much of the apparatus of the government of the empire at large. It is not, therefore, surprising to find London and York being chosen as twin capitals when, at some not entirely certain point in the Severan period, Britain was divided into two provinces ([Map 7](#)). This was in line with a new policy to reduce the number of legions under the command of any one provincial governor and thus the temptation to revolt.



Map 7. The changing general arrangement of provinces down to the early 4th century (details uncertain, particularly for the 4th century).

The planned conquest of Scotland was called off—but only after substantial

successes—owing to the death of the emperor and the pressures on his successor. Security of the frontier was, however, accomplished. Britain as a whole shows every sign of having escaped the disasters of the age elsewhere. There was a slowing of new development, but the towns remained active. In particular the provision of walls expanded, probably less because of any perceived imminent threat than a switch in the means by which competing local aristocrats displayed their munificence. One may suspect that the provision of the other categories of public buildings over the previous century meant that they were running out of projects to sponsor. There may have been rather fewer villas overall, but—particularly in the later 3rd century—considerable numbers display substantial upgrading. That fact may reflect a general movement in the land economy towards fewer but larger holdings, with wealth increasingly concentrated in the hands of a smaller number of families. On the wider stage of the empire at large the presence of a class of super-rich—including individuals with properties in more than one province—is certainly a major feature of Late Roman society, and in these villas we may be seeing a reflection of this general trend. Industry, if pottery is an indication, benefited from the problems of its rivals on the Continent. A sharp reduction in the import of fine wares used to be seen as a sign of decline, but one might argue that self-sufficiency within provinces was a good as far as the provincials were concerned. It certainly indicated that local producers could compete, whether the principal reason was disruption abroad or ability at home to take advantage of lower transport costs to offer lower prices. Some public works that might have been expected were not undertaken: restoration in the Fenlands after severe flooding, for example (though even there a trend towards fewer but larger occupation sites is detectable). But the external defences of Britain continued to be refurbished, and new forts built on the south and east coast, at Brancaster and Reculver, probably for purposes of political control of the routes to the Continent and not yet indicative of an acute threat from sea-borne barbarians. In Gaul, AD 260 saw yet more trouble from the Germans—not yet by any means the worst—and the central government in Rome lost control for some years. Germany, Gaul, Spain, and Britain adhered to an independent emperor, comprising together the ‘Empire of the Gallic Provinces’ (*imperium Galliarum*). This grouping had been foreshadowed under Clodius Albinus and re-emerged later as a structural part of the restored empire. For the time being, however, possession of peaceful, prosperous Britain with its powerful and undamaged forces and its almost legendary propaganda value must have been a considerable comfort to the Gallic emperors.

Chapter 3

Britain in the Late Empire

In the 270s the imminent collapse of the empire—imminent, that is, with hindsight—was averted. Romans did not behave then or later as if Rome could ever fall. Emperors and would-be emperors or emperor-makers did not cease murdering one another, but a series of great soldier-emperors nevertheless restored the military balance against the barbarians, put down rival administrations, and began to repair the physical and institutional fabric of the State. This was done to such an effect that the imperial system was enabled to survive another two centuries in the West (and might have lasted much longer) and twelve in the East. In 274 Britain was brought back under the central government when the Emperor Aurelian eliminated the Gallic Empire. Britain's immediate fate, however, was very different from that of the Gallic part of the former independent north-western state. In 276 towns in Gaul were still mostly unwallled when, as a literary source tells us, the worst yet of the barbarian invasions saw the capture of fifty or sixty of them and their retaking by the Romans. In north-eastern France archaeology has revealed the abandonment of villa after villa in the late 3rd century, in what had been a region outstanding for its extraordinarily dense pattern of really large country houses and their estates. These houses were not to be reoccupied.

In Britain the contrast is acute. In the period 250–70 there are signs of a modest amount of building and none of universal neglect, while archaeologists are tending to date an increasing amount of new construction, particularly of villas or of enlargements and improvements to villas, to around 270–5, for example in the villas of Great Witley and Eboracaster Court on the western edge of the

the villas of Great Wilcombe and Frocester Court on the western edge of the Cotswolds. An interesting hypothesis has been advanced that there was a 'flight of capital' from Gaul to Britain. As yet there is no positive evidence for this theory, but if modified a little it is attractive. It is certainly true that the great age of the Romano-British villa, long recognized as being at its peak in the 4th century, must have had its beginnings in the 270s. It seems unlikely, however, that landowners could have extracted their 'capital' from their ruined Gallic estates (in other words, sold them at a good price). When these estates were reoccupied at the end of the century, at least some of them were abandoned land given over to settlers imported by government. Behind the argument, however, lies too parochial a view of land ownership: an unspoken assumption that the typical provincial landowner possessed a single estate and lived in its villa most of the time. Possession of more than one estate was common among the upper classes of the Roman world, where wealth and status were quintessentially marked by landed property, sometimes in many parts of the empire simultaneously. For the pattern of Britain and Gaul at this period, more likely than any transfer of assets is the hypothesis that owners with land on both sides of the Channel simply decided to move their personal residences from their Gallic villas to their British lands if they already had them, or bought such property if they did not. The island must have seemed an exceptionally secure haven in an age of extreme uncertainty; and the movement may already have started among the more cautious under the Gallic Empire. Perhaps a small piece of circumstantial evidence is that when the cities of Gaul were finally walled after 276, the circuits, though very strong, were in general short (quite unlike those of Britain), often appearing more like those of very powerful fortresses than walled towns. This is just what one would expect if there were no longer enough magnates with active local interests who could be tapped for the funds to defend the whole urban area. If central government—either directly or by coercing the local elite—had to be the principal funding authority, it is much more likely to have been keen on protecting its own locally based administrative functions, both civil and military, in a series of mini-Kremlins. However, some evidence now suggests that the provision of these new defences was quite leisurely, and the implication is that the building of walls—whoever paid for them—was still primarily a matter of prestige rather than a response to immediate hostile pressure.

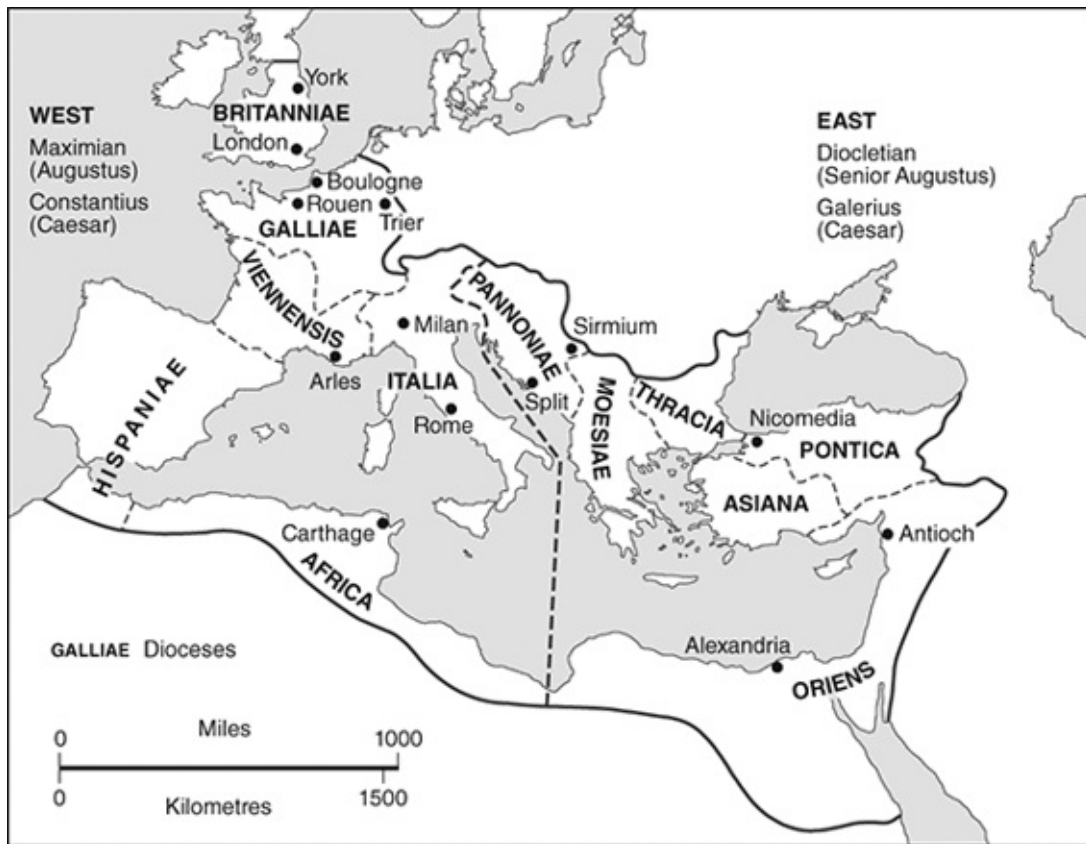
Architecturally, these Gallic fortress cities do have close relations in Britain, but the closest are not the towns. A number of new coastal fortresses were built in southern Britain after AD 250, with the later examples displaying the same

pattern of very high stone walls and massive projecting towers. At a much later date—at the end of the 4th century or the beginning of the 5th—they are listed under a commander of ‘the Saxon Shore’, which has persistently suggested that they originated as a planned system of defence against Saxon sea-pirates. This is probably an anachronism, and the dating evidence from the individual forts indicates that they were not built all at the same time. There is some reason to think that Aurelian’s successor, Probus, commenced the creation of a tighter system of control of the seas between Britain and Gaul with—eventually—similar strings of coastal forts, but the prime purpose has not been proven. The fact that Probus had more than once to quell serious moves against his authority in Britain may suggest that the ‘Saxon Shore’ had more at this stage to do with political security within the empire than frontier defence. Britain was an important asset—even more so in these straitened times—but control of the Channel was essential to its retention.

This fact was demonstrated in a remarkable fashion. In 287 a senior Roman officer named Carausius, who had been put in charge of a campaign to clear an infestation of pirates out of the Channel, came under strong suspicion of allowing the raids to happen and misappropriating the loot when it was subsequently seized by his fleet. Anticipating execution, Carausius rebelled and took control of Britain. Once again Britain was under the rule of a local emperor. This episode has attracted much romanticizing, but the fact is that neither Carausius nor other Romans before or after him who claimed the imperial title regarded Britain as something separate. Carausius is typical in blandly claiming on his coinage equality and fraternity with imperial colleagues, who, in fact, held the rest of the empire but with whom his fiction implied shared rule of the whole. The Carausian regime proved remarkably hard to dislodge, protected as it was by the sea. Carausius himself was unseated and murdered by Allectus, one of his own men, when he had lost a foothold on the Continent with the end of the siege of Boulogne in 293; but it was another three years before the central Roman government could launch a successful invasion. The Channel had proved formidable again.

Reform under Diocletian

Despite the fact that an element of inspired seamanship and a good deal of luck contributed greatly to the defeat of Allectus—not to mention what looks very much like lack of enthusiasm for his cause on the part of the regular garrison of Britain—by 296 the rebel administration in Britain faced a much more formidable central power. Major changes had taken place in the central Roman State in those few years which take us into the period conventionally known as the ‘Late Roman Empire’ or ‘Late Antiquity’. The driving force was the Emperor Diocletian. Rooting himself in Roman precedent like Augustus, he initiated through his reforms a period of change that transformed the Roman State over half a century. He attempted to deal with the chronic political instability by creating a system of two senior emperors (*Augusti*) and two juniors as ‘Caesars’, with automatic succession (the system known to historians as the ‘Tetrarchy’ or rule of four emperors). This would not necessarily have been seen as revolutionary, since the notion of collegiality among pairs or groups of magistrates went far back into the Republic, and a number of emperors had previously associated colleagues or designated successors with themselves in the imperial title. The individual provinces were once again reduced in size, and now grouped in ‘dioceses’, under a new tier of civilian officers known as *vicarii* to whom the governors (no longer commanding armies) were now made responsible ([Map 8](#)). These *vicarii* were in turn responsible to a ‘praetorian prefect’ who answered directly to the emperor. Britain fell within the jurisdiction of the Praetorian Prefect of the Gauls (the whole north-western sector of the empire, including Spain). He was based in Trier on the Mosel in modern Germany, a city that often saw the emperor himself and his court in residence, a purpose still reflected in the magnificent remains of the 4th-century buildings in that city. The frontiers were strengthened by approximately doubling the size of the army, under new commanders, and adding or updating very many forts and fortresses. Against domestic conspiracy or military revolt a deliberate attempt was made to create a much greater aura around the persons of the emperors. The overall increases in the civil service were noted as phenomenal. The effects on art, fashion, and manners were hardly less pronounced.



Map 8. The Roman Empire c. AD 300: the civil administration under the system introduced under the Emperor Diocletian and the Tetrarchy.

The economic ravages of the century had been acute. Manpower shortages were now tackled by imposing controls on the movement of labour, making some occupations hereditary. The problem was exceptionally severe on the land. There, the estate system which under the Late Republic had relied on a ready supply of cheap slaves from foreign wars had, in the course of the Early Empire, moved extensively to letting-out to large numbers of free tenant farmers on short leases. The disastrous economic conditions of the 3rd century over large parts of the empire encouraged drift from the land. In reply, Diocletian more or less created a tied peasantry (the *coloni*) by law, though the details and extent are obscure. Inflation was—ineffectually—tackled by detailed price legislation (on British duffel coats, rugs, and beer, for example). Persons in the public service were increasingly protected by being paid partially or wholly in kind. Troops, who had formerly had to buy their personal equipment out of their pay, were henceforth supplied from state factories, while officials' allowances and privileges came to be valued as much as their salaries. There are clear signs of

militarization in society, including the civil service being included within the term *militia* and individual members adopting some of the outward signs of rank such as distinctive military belts. Taxation soared to meet the cost of reform; and the new rigidity of society had to be further tightened against attempted avoidance of the specific tax liabilities imposed on certain classes in the social hierarchy.

The new order must have arrived in full force in Britain soon after the reconquest in 296 by the Caesar in the West, Constantius I, the father of Constantine the Great. His timely rescue of London from a retreating force of Frankish mercenaries who had been in the pay of Allectus was a huge propaganda victory. It will be seen to be prophetic in more ways than one. Most of the disorder seems to have been in the south, confined to the short campaign when Allectus was defeated. In the north, archaeological evidence for rebuilding of military installations probably initiated by Constantius seems to indicate more an intention for the future than repair of damage caused by enemies. The evidence suggests that a lengthy period of peace had allowed maintenance and manning to have low priority. Constantius had different ideas. Indeed, an unconvincing contemporary denial strengthens the impression that he had every intention, when opportunity offered, of launching another of those prestigious campaigns in Scotland that seem to have appealed so much to ambitious Roman emperors. Certainly, he lost no time after he became Augustus in preparing for such a war, and in 306 he was in the field. The sources claim a victory over the Picts (the first time the enemy in Scotland appears under this name); and pottery of the period found at Cramond at the eastern end of the Antonine Wall and from the old Severan fortress on the Tay suggests another sweep up the eastern side of the Highlands as his plan. Like Severus, Constantius returned to York and there died. Like Severus, he had had his successor with him.

Constantine the Great

In the elevation of Constantine the Great by the army, York can fairly be said to have witnessed one of the turning-points in world history. It was a curiously haphazard affair—apparently influenced by a German king called Crocus who had accompanied Constantius, perhaps as one of his officers—and was completely contrary to the spirit of Diocletian's settlement. It was the only successful attempt by a usurper located at the time in Britain to seize the imperial throne conclusively. The critical difference on this occasion was provided by the phenomenon mentioned in connection with Septimius Severus' sojourn in York that the central imperial government normally travelled with the emperor. Thus all the levers of power in the western half of the empire were present in York at that moment, both civil and military. Crucially that included the presence of an army of elite troops loyal to Constantine's father that was celebrating a doubtless well-rewarded campaign and was being readied for another. It set off a long chain of events that ended with Constantine as sole emperor, putting into supreme power a man quite unlike Diocletian in adhering little to the traditional past but like him in being capable of thinking and acting on the grandest scale. Constantine's innovations on the basis of Diocletian's conservative but immense reforms set patterns for centuries to come.

The Late Roman world was very different from the Early Empire, though the Roman dedication to tradition makes the retention of traditional forms and their reworking to suit new circumstances often difficult to see through. However, even on the surface, the character of the age can perhaps best be encapsulated for the modern reader in the word 'Byzantine'. This is not a word the Romans themselves used. For centuries they continued to call themselves Roman, and modern historians of the classical world would not use it. However, the establishment of Constantinople in 324 as a new imperial capital on the site of the former city of Byzantium symbolically marks a new beginning. The empire was not definitively divided till the very end of the 4th century, and the fiction that Eastern and Western emperors were colleagues in the whole was maintained long thereafter. But what we can see in the 4th century are many of the characteristics conjured up by the word 'Byzantine': centralized 'big government', complex and strictly hierarchical administration, the power of the Christian Church, and magnificence. Romans had always liked colour (forget Hollywood's white marble and white togas), but now the outward forms of the

imperial court and the rich gloried in ostentatious personal display. The austere woollen toga of the upper-class male (always an inconvenient garment) had almost entirely given way to colour and fine fabric, with tunics and cloaks sporting broad stripes and large embroidered motifs in striking shapes. Women's dress had changed less overall, but stripes were popular with them too, while the wearing of massive, chunky jewellery allowed a fashionable lady to show off her wealth and taste. Servants, too, could be clad in the new styles, suitably varied in detail from those of the upper class to match their social status but underlining the riches of their masters in the same manner as the liveried retainers of later eras.

The emperors themselves had come a long way from the 'first gentleman among gentlemen' ideal of the Early Empire, gradually adopting the aloofness and untouchability of a semi-divine ruler for their own security. The object was to make it unthinkable that such a figure could be deposed. An emperor now appeared in public looking straight ahead, like the portrait busts of Late Antiquity, no longer acknowledging the crowds. Even Constantine's eventual adoption of Christianity made much less difference than one might expect. From being gods themselves the Christian emperors simply became God's representative on earth. For the rest of the elite of Late Antiquity it became necessary to appear magnificent in appearance and lifestyle to be recognized as elite.

It has long been acknowledged that the first half of the 4th century was something of a 'golden age' for Roman Britain. We can now see that this was based on sound foundations from the previous century and continued trends already emerging in the 270s. This period of great prosperity certainly continued till the 340s, probably until some way after the middle of the century. It can legitimately be suspected that the most brilliant phase owed something to the favour of Constantine. There is some reason to suppose that he returned to Britain and celebrated military success here. We certainly know that for part of his reign he promoted to major status the mint at London that had been set up by Carausius. It is not impossible, too, that it was he who was responsible for changing London's name to 'Augusta'; and some think that the superb river face of the walls of the fortress of York was a deliberate expression of the power of the man who had been proclaimed there and who shared Hadrian's pleasure in vast architectural gestures, though it may date from Severus' residency.

The spirit of the age is typified by the great villas of 4th-century Britain. Socially and economically, the Late Empire in the West was marked by a polarization of wealth—and to some extent power—between the greater landed aristocracy on the one hand and emperor, court, and army on the other. These forces were often in conflict, but gradually tended to merge. Between them they left relatively little for the old urban middle class and the lesser gentry. Generally in the empire it was on the members of the local councils, the *curiales*, that the burden of paying for the new order fell most heavily. What had once been an honour now became a hereditary burden, and ways out were gradually sealed off by legislation.

Who, then, can have been the obviously wealthy owners of the larger Romano-British villas? Some may have been rich citizens who had transferred themselves from elsewhere or bought property here as an investment. If senators, or imperial officials of appropriate standing, they would have been exempt from the duties of *curiales*. Yet the curious persistence in Britain of forms of Latin indicative of educated speech but tending to be peculiar to the island does suggest that the native aristocracy remained a significant element in society. It is highly probable that they, exceptionally, had not been too badly hit in the previous century. It is tempting to wonder, too, whether Constantine may not have shown them special favour.

Like the 18th-century English country house, to which they may in many respects reasonably be compared, these villas vary in plan, complexity, and size (Figure 6). Certain features are generally present, notably construction in permanent materials, central heating (in the form of wood-or occasionally coal-fired hot air systems), glazing, mosaic floors, and one or more elaborate bath suites. Agricultural buildings normally adjoin, and like their Georgian counterparts it is probable that most had landed estates attached. It is clear from Roman literature that the degree and importance of a villa's economic activity to its individual occupier could vary enormously, from being a major source of income to little more than an amusement. Significantly, the great houses such as Woodchester, Chedworth, or North Leigh did not stand alone, but formed the top of a very broad pyramid of villas. The modest villas that had developed in earlier times out of Iron Age farms survived, improved, or were replaced by new small and middle-range villas. This is the best evidence for the survival a solid gentry in Britain. Some villas, it is true, disappeared, but this is in the natural order of things even in a completely settled age, while the replacement with fewer but grander villas is what one would expect if great estates were expanding and the

gap between the very rich and the rest was widening. In this age the villa is becoming a more prominent feature of the landscape, not less.



6. Artist's impression of the great villa at Chedworth at its maximum extent c. AD 360. It is set at the head of a narrow Cotswold combe for maximum effect. Access to the upper court is deliberately restricted, with a grand reception suite on the right, a banqueting suite straight ahead, and kitchens to the left. The private apartments are on the high ground above the lower court, with another kitchen and a dining room looking out over the estate.

It has been observed that villas often display duplication in their main facilities. This has led to a somewhat complicated hypothesis, suggesting that surviving Celtic custom caused a widespread shared (or divided) use of one complex by two families or two owners. There are infinitely simpler explanations. The world of the Late Roman elite was increasingly one of display and elaborate social ritual, and one in which the social interaction was played out in the setting of the palace or private house. Rigid social hierarchies meant that different people were admitted to different parts of the residence. As early as 1st-century Pompeii the archaeological evidence has shown that the deeper into the house one was permitted to penetrate the higher one's status. Moreover, the complexity of life in the higher echelons of society seems to be reflected in the architecture.

Summer and winter dining rooms had long been seen: the immensely complicated villas of the Late Empire are marked by grand halls in which to receive guests and to conduct business, and dining suites in which to stage the formal entertaining that provided a major forum for the social and political interplay of the day, conducted in accordance with strict rules of procedure and etiquette.

With overtones for us of the Edwardian house party, such events are recalled in the letters of the 5th-century aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris in Gaul even while his Roman world was falling apart around him. Sidonius is anxious to reflect the intellectual and personal aspects of such a visit. For others the pleasure was heightened by the opportunity of hunting which was extremely popular among the Late Roman gentry. A visit might start with the hunt, continue with relaxation in the villa baths, and culminate in fine dining at which one might show off one's wit and learning. Moreover, as in more recent times, a Roman aristocrat travelled with a considerable retinue of servants and friends, and accommodation was needed for them as well. On the road, the reputation of inns was so evil that anyone with the right connections preferred to travel by moving from one acquaintance's villa to another.

Most Romano-British villas seem to have been connected by a drive or lane to a public road and the majority were within ten miles or so of a town. Their social relationships to the towns, and perhaps even more to one another, are therefore likely to have been as important as their economic effects. Intriguingly, they seem to have been differently regarded as status symbols by the wealthy in different parts of the country, with the largest concentration of grand late villas occurring in the south-west, with a particularly dense pattern in the region of Bath and Cirencester. Conversely it is striking that most of the great Late Roman hoards of plate and other valuables for which Britain is famous such as the Mildenhall Treasure have come from eastern England. We know nothing about the actual owners of these hoards, but it is certain that plate formed a very important part in imperial rewards and payments to favoured people in the Late Empire, particularly senior officers. A preference for displaying wealth in the form of plate and other portable valuables over grandeur in their houses perhaps indicates a greater prestige of military over civil society. Such a division is much clearer across the Channel, where the dearth of large villas in northern France in this period—where they had earlier been abundant—contrasts with the enormous houses in the south-west of that country.

How much the development of the large villas changed the agricultural scene we do not know. As early as the 2nd century an occasional pattern of villa and village has been observed which seems not unlike the association of manor house and village in later ages. It may be that in 4th-century Britain there were comparatively few Diocletianic *coloni* (tenant farmers who were not slaves but in certain circumstances obliged by law to remain on the land)—or that political changes made little difference to a situation that had long existed in this relatively undisturbed region of the empire. However, there are some signs of consolidation into bigger settlement units, and of a shift towards larger-scale grazing and the adoption of some new agricultural techniques. It has been suggested that these developments may have been associated with the increased scale of villas and reflect a preponderance of a ‘domainial’ or manor-estate pattern. However it is clear that there was a vast range of different patterns of exploitation of the land and of tenure, and of regional characteristics. At a local level, the fact that land was both inheritable and freely alienable under the Roman system must have meant piecemeal change of ownership and usage of individual parcels over the years. On the macro scale we know that big landowners often possessed very scattered holdings—not necessarily monolithic estates—sometimes in more than one province. At the micro, we have that fascinating original of a document from London relating to a wood in Kent mentioned earlier.

An important stimulus to the 4th-century economy must have been the encouragement given to the various trades that served the decoration and maintenance of the great houses. The best-known of these are the regional ‘schools’ of mosaicists—firms or groups of firms with workshops centred respectively on Cirencester, Water Newton, Dorchester (Dorset), Brough-on-Humber, and somewhere unknown centrally in the south. Other trades, working in more perishable materials, perhaps operated in similar fashion—for example fresco-painters (of whose work just enough survives to demonstrate its importance and the quality it could reach); furniture-makers; and other suppliers of major items for the well-to-do household.

The ancient countryside was not exclusively agricultural—nor only for the pleasure of the rich. The falling-off of long-distance trade in the 3rd century had given encouragement to more than one British industry, for example the vast potteries of the Nene Valley. In the 4th century we can observe how a similarly huge ceramic industry in Hampshire which had also expanded in the 3rd century—mostly within the area of the later royal forest of Alice Holt—now captured

mostly within the area of the later Royal Forest of Mincinghram, now captured the London market and flourished greatly.

Government and administration

In these early years of the Late Roman period the principal features of the administrative system had emerged into which the new-style provincial governors fitted. Ultimate decisions might emanate from Milan (which emperors had for some time found more convenient than Rome) or, after 324, Constantinople. However, from the time of Constantius I the central government of the north-western part of the empire was for routine purposes situated at Trier. The head of the civil administration as far as Britain was concerned was the praetorian prefect of the Gauls, to whom the *vicarius* of the British diocese was responsible. The prefecture grouped together Britain, northern and southern Gaul, Spain, and an enclave across the Straits of Gibraltar. The headquarters of the British *vicarius* was almost certainly in London. The title of *vicarius* referred to his function as deputy to the praetorian prefect, acting as governor-general in Britain. Under him were four provincial governors—of Maxima Caesariensis (also probably based in London), Britannia Prima (Cirencester), Flavia Caesariensis (York?), and Britannia Secunda (Lincoln?), each with his own staff (see [Map 7](#)). As well as normal civil duties, this structure had a vital military role in being in charge of supply, including the new state factories and warehouses (a weaving-mill of the sort that supplied the Late Roman army with material for uniforms is, for example, recorded in Britain). These factories replaced the somewhat haphazard previous system of military supply, and constituted a whole new form of government intervention that must have had both economic and political effects in the provinces. It had become necessary partly due to the overall increased size of the army across the empire and partly because the enlarged civil service was itself becoming militarized and required supplying in the same way as the army. A 5th-century document, showing unusual insignia for the *vicarius* of the Britains, may denote that by that time at least he had, exceptionally, some troops under his command. More important is the fact that with supply in civilian hands there was some potential check on the army. Socially the senior members of this new administration were drawn from the educated middle and upper part of Roman society. The British vicariate could be an important stage in a professional career, and the men in the post about whom we have any information were not mediocrities. Into the beginning of the 5th century it remained policy not to employ men in their own provinces in senior posts, and most would expect to serve at some stage at the imperial court.

The financial administration of the provinces was very different from that in the Early Empire. Though the financial headquarters was again in London, the old provincial procurators had disappeared. The governors of the individual British provinces were responsible to the *vicarius* for the taxation in kind which the municipal councils were expected to raise from the individual taxpayer.

Independent of the *vicarius*, however, were two other separate financial departments each with a diocesan chief officer, eventually responsible directly to the imperial secretariat. One handled taxation in cash, controlled the issue of coinage, and administered mines and certain other operations. The other was responsible for imperial property throughout Britain, and to it reported the local procurators who acted as agents in charge. These two branches, however, often worked closely together and could call on the assistance of provincial governors to carry out their functions in the field.

Military command

The command structure for the army no longer had to correspond with provinces. At the same time the old distinction between legions and auxiliaries was replaced by a new one categorizing units into garrison, or frontier, troops (*limitanei*) and new, mobile field forces (*comitatenses*), the latter having higher status and remuneration. Many of the old units retained their identity, especially in Britain, where much of the old frontier remained substantially unchanged even if the internal character of units altered. At this time most of the units stationed in Britain were classified as *limitanei*, emphasizing its character as a region to be defended rather than a place from which a field army might rapidly be deployed. The commander of a garrison army was entitled *dux*, the *dux Britanniarum* being one such. Mobile forces, on the other hand, tended to be led by a *comes rei militaris*, of superior rank. Under Constantine himself there was only one central field army. But under his warring sons several major field armies emerged, under generals of even higher rank. Certain of these army groups achieved permanence; and smaller task forces drawn from them became operative under such *comites rei militaris*.

The field armies contained both old units that had been retained or reformed and many new ones. Among the latter, an important proportion was raised from peoples of Germanic origin; and in the 4th century there were also many individual German recruits. Something like a quarter of the regular army in the West was German, including the officer corps. The *dux Britanniarum* defeated by barbarians in 367, for example, bore the Germanic name Fullofaudes. By the end of the century, German generals were occupying the very highest commands. Though it was no longer fashionable for such men to adopt wholly Roman names, they fully absorbed the attitudes and ambitions of their native-born Roman equals. However, as a group the 4th-century army officers tended to be noticeably different culturally from their counterparts of equivalent rank in the civil service. Important cultural prejudices, not to say dislike and contempt, appeared between certain emperors and their officers on the one hand and leading civilians on the other; and stresses between emperors, their courts, and their new capitals, and the old aristocracy that still looked towards Rome became socially and politically important.

The rise of Christianity

The final element in the Constantinian equation was the Church. The traditional public religion of the Roman State had sufficed for public purposes but offered little to the individual. The breakdown of the Antonine peace and the crises of the 3rd century coincided with a widespread desire for a more personal religion that offered consolation and meaning in this world and a better life in the next. Concomitantly, close contact with the East brought about the spread of various Eastern 'mystery religions' offering mystic revelation and personal contact with a deity. Hadrian himself had worshipped at the ancient shrine of the Eleusinian mysteries in Greece and a variety of mystery religions had long become respectable and accepted. The Persian cult of Mithras gained a powerful hold in military and commercial circles, where its insistence on high standards of probity and discipline and its tightly bound brotherhood matched the ideals and interests of businessmen and officers. Unlike Christianity, it was not politically suspect, and therefore not persecuted. In Britain, its chapels appear exclusively where the army or trading community was strong—at Rudchester, Carrawburgh, or Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall, and in London. Its weakness was its very exclusivity, closed to women and largely restricted to one social class. Its rites were sufficiently close to those of Christianity to make them appear blasphemous, and there are possible signs in London and at Carrawburgh, for example, of Christian attack during the Christian ascendancy, and it largely faded away during the 4th century.

Recent work on the survival of Roman Christianity in Britain after the end of Roman rule has suggested that it was more widespread and deeply rooted than was formerly thought. It is important, however, not to read too much back from the 5th and 6th centuries into the 3rd and 4th. It is generally agreed that Christianity had little hold in Britain before the 4th century. Third-century Britain had had a small tally of martyrs—St Alban at Verulamium, SS Julius and Aaron probably at Caerleon. However, the fact that Britain was situated in the part of the empire ruled by Constantius I, whose former wife was St Helena, mother of Constantine, and who permitted the last great persecution to go no further in his area than the demolition of churches, may have had the negative effect of preventing a substantial early martyr cult in Britain. On the other hand, it may also have encouraged well-to-do Christians to transfer their residences from more dangerous parts of the empire, unobtrusively increasing Christianity

among the villa-dwelling population.

Britain has produced the earliest set of church plate yet known from the Roman Empire (from Water Newton), almost certainly 4th century in date, while British bishops appear only a year after the 'Edict of Milan' legalized the Church, bearing titles indicating as their sees the capitals of the four British provinces. These facts draw our attention to the fundamental change that came with Constantine the Great. The growth of absolutism in the 3rd century had been accompanied by sporadic imperial attempts to introduce a monotheistic state religion. From the time of Constantine the central new factor in Roman politics (and increasingly in the private sphere as well) was ideology. It was no longer sufficient to observe the customary formalities of the State religion to demonstrate loyalty: Christianity, as the new imperial religion, required belief. Toleration of pagan practices lasted a long time. But it was gradually withdrawn, despite intense opposition during the whole of the 4th century from a powerful section of the Roman aristocracy, who both saw the traditional religion as central to Rome herself and identified with it in opposition to the court. There were even to be short periods when there were pagan emperors. At Cirencester an inscription records—probably during the reign of the pagan convert, the Emperor Julian 'the Apostate'—the restoration by a provincial governor of a monument dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus 'erected under the old religion'.

Within the Church itself, however, there was a further development of immense significance for its future when the Emperor Constantius II decided that it was an imperial duty to ensure unity on doctrine. From the middle of the 4th century the hunting of heresy by the State added a new dimension to the politics of loyalty. Constantius' decision is ironic, as he did not follow the dominant Christian doctrine but what was at the time its principal rival, Arianism. The differences between the two turned on the nature of the Trinity, and were sufficiently basic to create serious sectarian strife and to become a major element in political division and civil war: Catholic and Protestant, as it were, or Sunni and Shia. Other theological disputes caused other conflicts, and Britain has the melancholy distinction of producing a usurper, Magnus Maximus, who was for a time recognized as the legitimate ruler of the West and was responsible for the first use of the death penalty for heresy. Tolerance of non-Christian religions was increasingly unacceptable to Christian emperors, and by the end of the century the performance of non-Christian rites was prohibited by law even in the home, where they had been central to the everyday life of the traditional Roman

home, where they had been central to the everyday life of the traditional Roman family. Nor was it just a matter of acceptance of the creed and observance of Christian rituals. There was a powerful streak of fundamentalism in the legitimate emperors of the late 4th century. Theodosius I ('Theodosius the Great') and his heirs closed the theatres and all the remaining temples and amphitheatres, and also abolished the Olympian Games (which had been held for more than 1100 years) and all the similar competitions. The effects on official and everyday culture Britain in the remaining decade of Roman rule can only be guessed at, though it is a question that ought to be asked. The civic life of the cities of the classical world had always revolved around events connected with these institutions. However, we do not know how long it took for these measures to take effect, particularly in the more remote provinces. Moreover, though their effect was probably quite severe in the major cities, it is likely to have been relatively much smaller in the countryside where the bulk of the population lived, except where they had an enthusiast as a landlord.

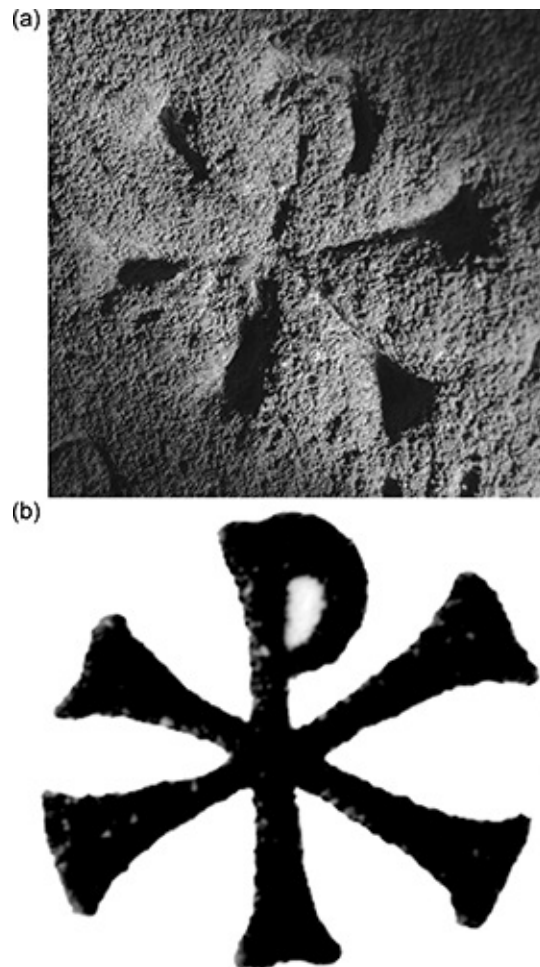
What may surprise us in Britain is not that recent research has indicated a considerable amount of Christianization in the 4th century, but that there is not more. This will lead us to examine the apparent nature of the British Church. The old notion of urban Christianity and rural paganism cannot be sustained. Urban communities under Constantine are certainly suggested by the bishops mentioned. A very small possible church excavated inside the walls at Silchester, and a few probable examples of the much more common cemetery churches over the graves of martyrs and other prominent Christians at Verulamium, Canterbury, and Colchester all point in the same direction. There is so far only one possible large 4th-century church or cathedral—near the Tower of London—and its occurrence in the city which was the seat of the governor-general might suggest imperial involvement. Otherwise the grand monuments of 4th-century Romano-British Christianity are associated with villas: mosaics at Frampton and Hinton St Mary, or the wall-paintings of Lullingstone. The distribution of archaeological evidence suggests that the incidence of Christianity was very patchy. A cemetery outside the Roman town of Dorchester in Dorset indicates a large and wealthy Christian community, supported by the surrounding villas; elsewhere similar cemeteries have nothing. A remarkable series of lead tanks of uncertain purpose but often bearing Christian symbols has not come from cities but rural locations or small settlements, likely to have been under the eye of the landowning gentry, and a very substantial proportion has been found in East Anglia, where there is evidence of personal wealth in the Late Roman period in the equally striking number of hoards of gold and silver.

Constantine had dealt a massive blow both to the pagan cults and to the municipalities—with whose civic life many were closely integrated—by distributing the endowments and treasures of the temples to the Church and by diverting funds from the civic treasuries. Wealth in the 4th century increasingly fell into the hands of the greater landowners on the one hand, and of the State and its institutions on the other. In Britain, where the villas are such an outstanding feature of the period, it is not surprising to find them in the forefront of the development of Christianity. Nor, under these circumstances, is it surprising to find the evidence so patchy. If the strength of Christianity in a district depended on whether or not the local landowner was an enthusiastic Christian (or politically ambitious), then this is exactly what we might predict. At Chedworth villa there is evidence of owners changing sides more than once. The pagan altar of a water-shrine was buried, and the paving surrounding its pool marked with Christian symbols only to be dismantled and reused as footings for steps in a different building during a subsequent refurbishment of the villa (Figures 7a and b). It perhaps reflects an owner encouraged by the official approval of restored paganism in nearby Cirencester and keen to be on the right side.

If the erection of churches and other Christian monuments had depended on an energetic town council supported by generous local worthies, as had the provision of public temples and other civic amenities in earlier periods, then the provision might have been relatively more even. It is clear that substantially more bishops from Britain were present at the Council of Rimini in 359 than were recorded under Constantine, but no titles survive and it is therefore not known whether they were city-based. It is perhaps significant that some, at least, were known to have had difficulty in raising the money to pay their travelling expenses.

If, then, the urban Christian communities were weak—or declined over the century after an initial Constantinian boost—what does this imply for the survival of Christianity after the end of Roman rule? There are certainly signs that pagan worship and some pagan temples survived in Britain right up to the end of Roman rule, however fierce the imperial decrees. The clue is perhaps the eventual reconciliation to Christianity of the landowning class as a whole elsewhere in the West. If this was paralleled in 5th-century Britain among what remained of the Romano-British elite, in that period, quite unlike the 4th century, we ought to see a fairly uniform spread of Christianity among the rural population. Since most of the population had anyhow always lived on the land

population. Since most of the population had, any how, always lived on the land, that should lead us to expect the general persistence of Christianity, at least as a subculture. Indeed, the fact that in Late Roman times the rural clergy, unlike their urban counterparts, were relatively poorly educated and socially obscure (in the country, even bishops could be little more than dependants of landowners) may have assisted their identification with the agricultural multitude and ensured the survival of a Church as well as a faith, whatever eventually happened to the landed proprietors themselves.



7a and b. Christianity: 'Chi Rho' symbol (the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek) on a paving stone at Chedworth Roman Villa, reused in later (Roman) steps. This symbol is quite skilfully cut, presumably with the authority of the villa owner. Two others from the same paving are more like graffiti.

After Constantine

How long did the villa-based society of the 4th century retain its brilliant early prosperity, so different from so many other parts of the empire? Describing a series of raids by barbarians on places near the frontiers of Britain in AD 360, the well-informed contemporary historian Ammianus tells us that at that time ‘a pall of fear lay over the provinces’ and adds, significantly, that they ‘were already exhausted by the accumulation of disaster over the years’. The opinion, moreover, has been advanced, based on the archaeology of the towns, that the latter were ‘finished’ by about 350 (an opinion which we shall have to interpret later). Details apart, however, the picture is startlingly different from the earlier years of the century.

There is some reason to think that the ‘golden age’ did not long outlive Constantine himself. His death in 337 left the empire uneasily divided between three sons, Constantius II, Constans, and Constantine II. Britain came within the dominions of the younger Constantine. Dissatisfied with his share, he attacked Constans in 340 and suffered total defeat. It was a long time since the army of Britain had been involved in a military disaster. Subsequent weakness—and possibly disaffection—are probably reflected in a most unusual and unexpected journey by Constans in person in 343, braving the Channel in winter. The brief surviving references to this event hint at pressures on the northern frontier. Border problems were certainly acute by 360, the moment to which our quotation from Ammianus refers, when Scots from Ireland and Picts from Scotland had broken an agreement with Rome, implying that there had been earlier threats settled by diplomacy (and probably, in the usual style, with gold). In 364 they were back time and time again, now accompanied by ‘Attacotti’, probably also from Ireland, and by Saxons. A massive barbarian invasion in 367 was therefore the culmination of a long period of trouble from outside. But events at least as bad had occurred inside the territory under Roman rule.

In 350 a palace conspiracy ended in the murder of Constans and the elevation of an officer of Germanic descent named Magnentius. The Western part of the empire was now at war with the East, under the surviving son Constantius II. The three-and-a-half-year rule of Magnentius was disastrous in its consequences for Britain, A pagan, but one whose use of prominent Christian imagery on his

coinage showed him keen to present himself as a legitimate emperor in the Constantinian tradition, he sought to enlist the support of orthodox Christians against the Arian Constantius. With the latter's final victory in the Balkans at the end of one of the bloodiest battles in Roman history, Britain came under special scrutiny. The appointment of one Paulus, the head of the imperial establishment records office, to conduct an investigation in Britain was made with the aim of hunting down dissidents in the island. Black humour aptly nicknamed him 'The Chain'. His brief was to arrest certain military men who had supported Magnentius, but he soon extended this, unchecked, into a reign of terror in which false evidence played a dominant part, horrifying even the most loyal officers. Constantius' own *vicarius* of Britain, Martinus, sacrificed himself in a brave but unsuccessful attempt to put an end to Paulus. One cannot but suspect that many leading families which had been implicated in incidents in the past half-century were drawn into this whirlpool, in addition to those involved in current politics. Confiscations, exile, imprisonment, torture, and executions were approved by the emperor without any questioning of the evidence. The confiscations of property alone must have had a profound effect on the landed prosperity of Britain, while the devastation of morale among both civilians and army can only have left them in a weaker state to resist the barbarian troubles now pressing in on them.

Barbarian incursions

The nadir came in 367. Picts, Scots, and Attacotti invaded Britain; Franks and Saxons attacked the coast of Gaul. Both the central imperial command—the Emperor Valentinian himself was in northern Gaul—and the senior officers responsible for Britain were taken by surprise. The *dux* in command of the static garrison of Britain was put out of action and the *comes* in charge of coastal defence killed. The most remarkable feature was the concerted action of such disparate barbarians. Treachery by native frontier scouts in the north is one attested part of the situation, but to account for the total operation we have to suppose an unknown barbarian with extraordinary military and diplomatic ability. Detailed knowledge of Roman dispositions and understanding of Roman military methods were not hard to come by, with so many Germans in the Roman army (though conscious disloyalty to Rome is very rarely indeed to be suspected). What convinces one of inspired barbarian leadership is the fact of simultaneous attacks by peoples with very different cultures, from homelands relatively distant from one another, with a clever division of targets—and, perhaps most of all, with the maintenance of complete secrecy. The Romans certainly called it a conspiracy, and it is difficult not to agree with them.

Once in Britain, the barbarians ranged unchecked in small bands, looting, destroying, taking prisoners, or killing at will. The countryside bordering roads must have been particularly vulnerable and not all walled towns seem to have resisted. Both civil authority and military discipline broke down. Troops deserted, some claiming—unconvincingly—to be on leave. Political opportunists seized their chances. Britain was being used as a place of dignified exile for high-ranking offenders, and one well-documented conspiracy among them was nipped in the bud just after the Roman recovery of Britain. But there is also some evidence that one of the provinces of the British diocese (which had now been divided into five, rather than four) fell temporarily into the hands of rebels.

The response of Valentinian to the calamity was the dispatch of a small but powerful task force of elite troops under a *comes rei militaris*. Theodosius (often labelled ‘the Elder’ to differentiate him from his son) was the father of the later emperor Theodosius the Great and a distinguished general. Such task forces

became a frequent method of dealing with emergencies under the Late Empire: Britain had already been the scene of at least one such an expedition (in 360). At this time these forces were usually made up of *comitatenses*. From the later 4th century, barbarian war bands under their own kings, even whole tribes, became more and more often accepted into Roman armies. Task forces thereafter tended to be made up of a mixture of whatever regular troops could be found and barbarian allies, or sometimes barbarians alone on contract for a specific campaign or operation. Looking forward, it is important to realize that in the 5th century, as military practice evolved out of that of the 4th, 'the barbarians' were not like some hostile aliens from outer space but were a familiar fact of life. Barbarian warriors were frequently employed against other barbarians in the suppression of external and internal disorder, and for the prosecution of Roman civil wars.

Theodosius' conduct of the campaign and subsequent reconstruction of Britain seem to have been effective. London was spectacularly relieved. Garrison troops were reassembled, deserters pardoned, and an effective army re-created. The barbarian war parties on land were picked off one by one and the Saxons defeated at sea. Goods stolen from the provincials were recovered and returned. Civil authority was restored under a new *vicarius*; the province that had been lost to rebels was regained and named Valentia in honour of Valentinian and his Eastern colleague and brother, Valens. We are told that forts were rebuilt and damaged cities restored. Archaeologically there are signs of renewed activity in the latter part of the 4th century that are often labelled 'Theodosian' (though they might more accurately be called 'Valentinianic', as the Emperor Valentinian I, the last emperor in the West known to have had a serious programme of strengthening the frontier defences, will have taken the final decisions). In the case of the civil instances of renewal it is also a question whether they were a consequence of Theodosius' successes in Britain creating political stability for the next decade and a half rather than direct positive action.

Reconstruction and renewal

The remodelling of town defences in Britain, by the addition of prominent external towers that mirror the military architecture of the period ([Figure 8](#)), might be attributable to Theodosius as was once thought; though the variety in design and arrangement suggests that, once again, the cost and responsibility fell on councillors and perhaps wealthy individuals with local connections, just as they had earlier funded public baths and other prestige projects. It may, too, have been over quite a long period. However, the fact that it is always the full circuit that was retained in use—unlike the common pattern across the Channel—has very important implications for the state of the towns in the middle and late 4th century, and an important difference between Britain and the Continent. Such wide circuits cannot have been kept solely to provide military strong points or even as refuges in time of danger for a dispersed rural population. They demonstrate that there was something worthwhile defending and adorning with permanent works. Nor is it particularly surprising that money from the class of people who had once funded prestigious civil works such as baths and amphitheatres should now be spent on adding to the town walls. It could be a further symptom of the militarization of the age. The palaces built by the Tetrarchs for themselves elsewhere in the empire were deliberately planned on military lines—quite unlike the residences of earlier emperors—and their amazing defences were clearly as much about overawing and intimidating the beholder as security, like the portal of a Victorian prison. Funding showy military architecture was now prestigious. Indeed, towns in Gaul seem to have continued commissioning works of this kind well into the 5th century, into the period when the central government's control and resources were fading.



8. Late Roman defence: town wall of Caerwent, Gwent, with added external towers.

What, then, are we to make of the notion among some modern writers on Roman Britain that the towns were 'finished' by about 350? The unspoken assumption that 4th-century towns were of the same sort as those of the 2nd is clearly mistaken. We have, of course, to be careful not to assume that all towns changed in the same ways. Yet the decay or disuse of civic public buildings is hardly surprising in the context of municipal treasuries raided by central government and councils made up of now unwilling members. Fourth-century legislation repeatedly tried to prevent members of the class that now had the hereditary obligation to serve from moving their main residences away from the towns, while those in higher social classes were exempt from municipal obligations. The new element in society was the vastly expanded bureaucracy, and it is in their direction that we should probably be looking. Multiple governors, their staffs, households, companies of guards, and the many others connected with them needed housing; and there were numerous other officials with inflated establishments and lifestyles supported by substantial allowances. At each level in the hierarchies, expectations existed which in the end filtered down from the lavish grandeur of the Late Roman court. Large areas of 4th-century capitals such as Trier or Arles, once normal municipalities, were given over to palaces and other associated official buildings. On a smaller scale, we ought to expect such a pattern in many towns in Britain. In fact, archaeology has demonstrated the building of large town houses in places as different as London and Carmarthen, and urban development into the middle of the 5th century, probably at *Venerulam* (though the dating is disputed) and of a distinctive sort at

at Verulamium (though the dating is disputed) and, of a distinctive sort, at Wroxeter. In the cultivated open spaces of this period observed within the city walls in excavations we should perhaps see the gardens and grounds of the new-style establishment rather than a decay represented by abandoned building sites. Indeed, in London and York at least we may reasonably expect the presence from time to time of emperors themselves to have made a mark on the archaeological record.

There is no reason to think that the Theodosian restoration was other than successful. Archaeologically, it is clear that many villas continued in occupation; some were enlarged and others built from scratch. Hadrian's Wall was occupied to the end of Roman rule, even if individual garrisons were smaller than before. A new system of signal stations was established on the north-east coast. Much industry had been interrupted by the war of 367, but the many changes in pattern after it indicate vigour and new initiatives. Not surprisingly, some pagan religious sites disappear, but others continue in cult use, while still others show signs of conversion to new uses, some perhaps Christian, towards the end of the century. The forty years from 369 do not have the brilliance of the early 4th century, but the island does not provide any evidence for the sort of despair that the historians report for the 350s and 360s. In order to understand what happened in the early 5th century it is important to realize that in the last part of the 4th century Roman Britain had not been running rapidly downhill.

The late 4th century is, in fact, marked by two more occasions on which major attempts on the imperial throne were launched that involved Britain. In 382 a victory over the Picts by a general named Magnus Maximus (Macsen Wledig in Welsh legend) created for him a reputation that led to proclamation as emperor and the rule, for five years, of the part of the empire represented by the Gallic prefecture—Britain, Gaul, and Spain. In Britain, some forts, notably in the Pennines and Wales, were abandoned at this time and the Twentieth legion was withdrawn from Chester, but it remains still entirely uncertain whether Maximus' campaigns and eventual defeat at the hands of the Emperor Theodosius the Great had any significant overall effect on the defensive capability of the army in Britain. Between 392 and 394 Britain was peripherally involved in another palace revolt for the duration of which Theodosius lost control of the Western empire, but the significance of this incident lies more in the appearance of a general, a Frank in this case, overshadowing a compliant emperor in the West. The death of Theodosius in 395 made this new balance of power in the Western imperial government the rule, rather than the exception,

for the rest of its history. The joint accession of Theodosius' sons, Honorius in the West and Arcadius in the East, inaugurated a period in which the pattern of government in the two halves of the empire diverged fundamentally. In the East, it remained firmly in the hands of the emperor or his chief civilian minister. In the West a powerful landed aristocracy, rooted in its estates, vied for influence with the professional soldiers who commanded the armies. After three-quarters of a century, both these parties were to come to the conclusion that they could manage without an emperor in the West.

Chapter 4

The end of Roman rule

The effective control of the West by the late Emperor Theodosius' chief lieutenant, Flavius Stilicho, son of a Vandal officer in the Roman army and a Roman mother, was accompanied by a claim to the East as well. We hear of plot, counterplot, and threatened war between Stilicho, Honorius (Theodosius' son and heir in the West), the Western senate, the Eastern regime of Honorius' brother, and most disastrously the Goths under Alaric—previously an important Roman ally. This conduct at the top did much to ensure in the long term the collapse of Roman rule throughout the West. In explaining the fall of the Roman empire modern historians have often failed to take sufficiently into account the part played by civil war. There was a fundamental flaw in the system that went right back to the 1st century BC, if not earlier. Under the Late Republic the senate had failed to provide State funding for veteran soldiers on discharge. The latter had had to rely on their generals, which had set up a bond between troops and commanders rather than fidelity towards the State. In times of civil strife this could result in armies switching sides between would-be emperors simply because a new emperor would pay the soldiers an attractive 'donative' on their accession. This was compounded by that ingrained sentiment among the Roman elite—also inherited from the Republic—that in the end personal status, rationalized as maintaining and enhancing the honour and glory of the family, outranked loyalty to the State. When considering the military strength of the Roman army in the Western provinces at the end of the 4th century it is impossible to ignore the consequences of civil war in the previous half-century. From its inception the Roman imperial regular army had depended on the

accumulated experience of its long-serving middle ranks who understood and maintained its hugely complex systems in everything from weapons-drill and maintenance of equipment to supply and secretariat, and passed on the technical skills required, both in war and peace. By AD 400 the Western armies had been defeated in civil war between rival emperors three times in half a century, first under Magnentius in 353 by Constantius II, then under Magnus Maximus at Aquileia in 388 by Theodosius I, finally under the general Arbogast and the Emperor Eugenius by Theodosius again in 395. The defeat of Magnentius at the battle of Mursa was accompanied by a massive loss of life that may only slowly have been replaced. However, the civil wars at the end of the century have also to be seen in context of a more recent disaster, which must have had dire effects on the army of the empire as a whole. In 375 the Emperor Valens deliberately took on the Goths at Adrianople (Edirne, in Turkey) and effectively lost the whole of the very large army he committed to the battle. It is not entirely surprising that when Theodosius recovered the West at the battle of the River Frigidus in 395 it had to be with the assistance of a large force of Goths. This was to be the pattern of Roman campaigns henceforth. Over the next half-century, as the Western empire lost its provinces and with them its taxation base, the regular Western army dwindled away. By the 450s recruitment seems to have ceased completely.

In Britain, initial successes against Picts, Scots, and Saxons, and restoration of defences under Stilicho's direction were probably followed at the very beginning of the 5th century by some posting elsewhere of troops. We do not know the extent of the postings, but the cessation of bulk import of new coinage in 402 may mean that neither remaining regular troops nor civil officials were henceforth paid from central sources. It would not be surprising to find a mood of extreme discontent. The economic effects of the cessation of imperial official spending—the driver of the monetary system—must have been enormous, spreading the disillusion well beyond the military. In 406 the army in Britain—possibly with the support of the civil elite—elevated the first in a rapid succession of three emperors. The coincidence in timing is not quite certain, but a major factor is likely to have been the crossing of the Rhine by large numbers of Germanic barbarians. The city of Trier was overrun and the central government withdrew the administration of the prefecture of the Gauls to Arles. It will have had no time to deal with usurpers in Britain.

The third usurper proclaimed in Britain, elevated as Constantine III, ran true to form seizing Gaul and Spain, gaining some successes against the invaders and

rom, seizing Gaul and Spain, gaining some successes against the invaders, and for some while was recognized as a legitimate colleague by the unwilling Honorius. Once again, we do not know for certain if there was an overall permanent reduction in the garrison of Britain, but some further withdrawal of regular units seems probable. Constantine will certainly have taken a considerable force with him to drive back the invaders, and very likely withdrew more as his rule was opposed on the Continent. The north-western empire of Constantine III, however, was to be the last of its kind, and before it was finally extinguished Britain had ceased for ever to be under any sort of imperial rule.

We know tantalizingly little about the process by which this happened, but something can be pieced together. In 408 the absence of the bulk of Constantine's army in Spain left him unable to deal with heavy barbarian attacks on Britain. In 409 the rebellion of that army under its British-born commander Gerontius (and his deliberate incitement of the barbarians in Gaul) coincided with renewed assaults on Britain by enemies who included Saxons. At this point, Britain itself revolted—along with parts of Gaul—expelling Constantine's administration. Constantine is not likely to have transferred every soldier out of Britain, thus leaving his base entirely unprotected. On the other hand, he may only have left not much more than the soldiers necessary to provide everyday protection to his officials and allow them to carry out their functions. The revolt is hardly surprising, as one may imagine the provincials' dismay as Constantine's Continental adventure drained Britain of troops while doubtless retaining the collecting of taxes to pay for it. The British provincials successfully took on the barbarian invaders by themselves, and henceforth—as it turned out—ceased forever to be under Roman rule. That leaves us with the fascinating question of whether the permanent break was inevitable. It is critical to recall that the revolt was against a usurper. Britain had been under usurping regimes before, and there is no reason to suppose that anyone in Britain would have imagined that normality would never be restored. They had been part of the empire for almost four centuries, and for the past two the whole free provincial population had been full Roman citizens. Much has been made of the so-called Rescript of Honorius of AD 410. A 'rescript' was a formal imperial letter from an emperor in reply to a petition or request for a ruling, in this case giving permission for the provincials to arm themselves (normally illegal for civilians) and look after their own defence. Even if this rescript was really addressed to the Britons (there is some doubt), it is not likely that it was meant as a permanent withdrawal of imperial authority. Honorius, whose court had now retreated to Ravenna, was in no position to send military assistance. Constantine at Arles

was in between him and Britain (Constantine was not defeated till the following year and reimposing central authority in Gaul was never entirely successful), and the now hostile Alaric was threatening Italy, culminating in his sack of the city of Rome itself, a huge psychological shock to the empire at large. If, then, there was no deliberate withdrawal of Roman rule, how does one react to the incessantly repeated assertion that in 410 'the Romans left Britain'? The fact that every free citizen within the Roman frontier—more or less the whole population—was Roman makes a nonsense of the statement. In fact '410' underlines the crucial importance of accidental circumstance behind many great moments in history, not to mention that what is seen in hindsight as a critical turning point can seem at the time relatively unremarkable.

How Britain expelled the invaders for the time being and what was then the state of the country can only be the subject of informed speculation, but we are entitled to consider probabilities. It is most unlikely that any units of the regular army that Constantine had left in Britain continued in their usual fashion when Constantine's officers were deposed, or that the elaborate administrative structure which supported them was kept manned and paid. Under the Late Empire, the landed class strongly resisted both the conscription of the agricultural labour force into the regular army and the payment of taxes that supported it. In the 5th century—in frontier provinces better documented than Britain—we can observe how units whose pay stopped arriving eventually disbanded and dispersed or settled on the land. Occasionally they seem to have been retained by individual cities till the latter fell to the invaders. That happened in a very haphazard manner, so that some cities remained as entities functioning in a Roman manner much longer than others, a pattern that we are probably seeing in the British provinces as research on the afterlife of the urban centres intensifies. In Britain, with no central government, it is all the more likely that in the years from 409 groups of barbarians were paid to undertake the fighting, and some of these may already have been brought in under Constantine III or even Stilicho. On Hadrian's Wall there are archaeological signs of some individual forts being occupied on semi-military lines, but whether by their former garrisons and their associated civilians or by newcomers it is uncertain. Occasional discoveries elsewhere in Britain of burials accompanied by items of Late Roman military uniform—sometimes apparently originating in other parts of the empire—suggest the employment of individual former soldiers by local communities or powerful individuals. Indeed, such veterans may sometimes have become local strongmen themselves. The specific case of what happened after his eventual defeat at Arles in 411 to those troops Constantine had

withdrawn from Britain (along with those of Gerontius who was besieging him but was also defeated by the forces of Honorius' government) is another unanswered question but a reasonable one to acknowledge. Many of these units are likely to have been among those stationed in Britain for a very long time, some for centuries of local recruiting. They and their families were an integral part of the Romano-British community. If the troops did not return after Constantine's initial successes on the Continent, it is reasonable to assume that their dependants had followed them there by the end of Constantine's rule. What then happened to these people remains unknown.

There is no sound reason for thinking that the Britons elevated any more emperors, or re-created any of the mechanisms of central government. It is a striking aspect of Roman Britain as against Roman Gaul that we do not know of any members of the provincial elite who obtained senatorial or equestrian rank. That required imperial favour, most likely to come when the emperor himself came from their own circle or had some connection to them. This may have inclined the British elite to support local claimants over the centuries as potential sources of these honours. One thinks of the Gallic Empire or Carausius, perhaps even starting with Clodius Albinus. One consequence of this probably fortuitous situation is that, unlike the Gallo-Romans, very few of them will have had experience of senior office, a serious impediment to a local takeover of the machinery of government. But they may not even have wanted to do that. One suspects that they are most unlikely to have been ready to reassume the burdens of supporting the system of imperial administration once they had been rid of it. The critical success of the Flavian governors of Britain in the 1st century had been to convince the native aristocracy that its advantage lay with Rome. There is no good reason to think that the events of 409 had destroyed the position of the landowning class. They are, however, very likely indeed by now to have lost confidence in the system of emperor, bureaucracy, and army as the best way of securing their still prosperous way of life. They will not have been encouraged by the ruthless political persecution in Gaul by Honorius' officers after the fall of Constantine III.

The presence of a full paper establishment of military and civil posts for Britain in a Late Roman document known as the *Notitia Dignitatum* suggests that into the 5th century it was assumed centrally in the imperial ministries that Britain would be recovered as it had so often been in the past. There was, in fact, only one short period, from 425 to 429, when a Roman military intervention in

Britain was again a serious possibility. But by that time other groups of well-to-do Roman provincials, particularly in a large area of Gaul, were starting to settle down tolerably comfortably, employing, in alliance with, or under the rule of, barbarians. Where the Romans were now under barbarian kings, the latter were mostly Germanic leaders from across the Rhine and Danube, with a long history of involvement with the empire, either as individuals or as allied tribes. It will therefore have been relatively easy for the everyday mechanisms of Roman provincial administration to be taken over, sometimes with the same officials. In contrast, the Saxon incomers to Britain, broadly from Friesland and Schleswig-Holstein, had generally been less involved with the empire except as raiders.

Provided that the barbarians remained amenable, any of the arrangements operating in Gaul might suit the gentry better than direct imperial rule. But for the weakened middle and artisan classes, who in the 4th century had depended more and more on the army, civil service, and Church for jobs, patronage, or markets, the change must have been disastrous. In Britain, the Roman archaeology supports such a picture. Early in the 5th century, the massive pottery industry comes to an apparently abrupt end; by 420–30 coinage ceases to be in regular use. These facts, incidentally, make the dating of the end of the occupation of Roman sites in the 5th century much more difficult than in earlier periods. However, it is not difficult to deduce why this industry and other enterprises that supplied the high quality, low cost goods across the country to which Britain had long been accustomed were stopped in their tracks. This will have applied right down to the itinerant trader and the local shopkeeper, so that the shock to the everyday life of ordinary people will have been enormous.

We noted earlier the theory that much of the long-distance trade in the Roman world piggy-backed on the empire-wide official communications and transport system. Manning the system required funding. Equally it depended on the upkeep of the physical assets such as roads, bridges, harbour installations, and posting stations. Even more it required security: assured safety from brigands and pirates along the roads and at sea, a consideration affecting the fundamental decisions taken by everyone whose business—official, commercial, or purely private—involved travel, whether directly or because they were in some way dependent on the movement of goods and people. Thus, just as the centralized administration could not have operated without the network represented by the Imperial Post, equally the Roman economy was so specialized that it could not possibly have survived the end of Roman rule.

There is no evidence for villas in general having come to a violent end at the hands of invaders or peasant revolts as was once suggested. There are, though, some signs of demolition at particular villa sites in the late 4th or early 5th centuries or downgrading in how the buildings were used. This used to be labelled 'squatter' occupation, but it now looks more like agricultural reuse of standing structures. The 'industrial' activity noted quite frequently can be attributed equally convincingly to relatively orderly salvage and processing of recyclable materials, either for local use or for sale as long as a market for these items still existed. The latter may have applied particularly to window glass, which implies either that work was continuing on sophisticated buildings elsewhere or that the glass makers capable of melting down and reforming were still in business. What is undisputed, however, is that smart living in the countryside was no longer part of elite behaviour, whether caused by security factors such as the countryside becoming more dangerous as the forces of law and order became weaker, by economic factors, or because of change in fashionable choices—perhaps all three. Conversely, signs of how late towns might be active vary a good deal. Silchester seems to come to a relatively early stop—with some evidence suggesting deliberate ritual closure—and was never reoccupied. At Lincoln we find a main street being resurfaced well into the 5th century; in London imported Mediterranean pottery in the ash of the heating system of one house combines with other evidence to suggest some continued urban occupation in the early 5th century; the forum at Cirencester was being kept up after the cessation of general circulation of coins; and at Verulamium—though the dating is disputed—a sequence of important buildings succeeding one another on the same site is closed, strikingly, by the laying of a new water-main at a time that cannot be far short of the middle of the century. At Wroxeter various stages of 'post-Roman' activity include an ambitious timber-framed house suggesting a personage of power and some wealth, and seem to extend at least a century after 410.

After the break with Rome the Britons, we are told, lived under *tyranni*, or 'usurpers', best interpreted as local warlords who had filled the vacuum left by the removal of legitimate authority. Their background was probably very varied, some perhaps landowners, others military men, Roman or barbarian, who had been invited to take control or who had seized power. At Gloucester, a rich warrior burial with equipment apparently from the eastern part of the Roman world may possibly represent a *tyrannus*, or a *condottiere* in local pay. At Cirencester post-Roman archaeological material suggests both that there were

remnants of authority after the end of Roman rule, and that the city remained an important place into the very early Anglo-Saxon period, well before the Saxons arrived in the south-west as conquerors in the 6th century. In Oxfordshire at Berinsfield, near the Roman town of Dorchester, in a group of nineteen burials dated by radio carbon testing to between AD 450 and 550 all but one or possibly two under isotope analysis appeared to have been of individuals brought up in England. The exception was a male of Continental origin (probably from south-west Germany), intriguingly accompanied by part of a Roman military or civil service belt. This is the second example of such a Late or post-Roman official belt from this town. One wonders whether it is just coincidence that Dorchester had long before been the site of a shrine with an altar dedicated by a *beneficiarius consularis* (an official on detached duty responsible to the governor of the province), or that in the early 7th century it became the seat of St Birinus, one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon bishops, suggesting a very long association with authority in one form or another. And at Wroxeter that grand house may well represent the headquarters of a *tyrannus* or perhaps an ecclesiastic: in post-Roman Gaul large new buildings tend to be associated with the Church. As common on the Continent, it may have been important for leaders in early post-Roman Britain to associate themselves with highly recognizable symbols of Roman authority.

In 429 St Germanus, a prominent Gallo-Roman bishop who moved in high Roman circles, visited Britain to combat heresy, debating publicly with British magnates at Verulamium 'conspicuous for their riches, brilliant in dress, and surrounded by a fawning multitude'. That visit to Britain he repeated around 446/7, though apparently in deteriorating circumstances. At least until the 440s, therefore, and perhaps longer, something may have survived in pockets of Britain that was like 'post-Roman' or 'post-imperial' life elsewhere in the West. This is most likely to have happened where there was a tradition of effective local government, and it is no coincidence that the examples cited are urban. There is no sign of continuing occupation in the villas, other than reuse of derelict buildings for other purposes or salvage of materials. A combination of collapse of the markets for their surplus products and lack of security in the countryside must have disrupted the estate system that was once centred on villas, but did not necessarily destroy it in the short run. There is an intriguing example—at Crickley Hill in Gloucestershire—where 5th-century reoccupation of a prehistoric hill-fort has suggested that the owner of the villa at Great Witcombe may have moved for safety but retained control of the estate. There is some evidence, too, of the survival of Roman estates as blocks of land into the

early medieval period. However, it was to be more than a thousand years before unfortified great houses began to be built again in the countryside.

There are further fundamental reasons why overall life as experienced by most of the provincials cannot have continued as usual. Perhaps the most important of all is that underlying the everyday life of the empire was the all-embracing and interconnected structure of Roman law and administration. This operated both at the public level and also in the interactions between individuals. Moreover, since Roman society had always been very clear about authority, it had always mattered a great deal that those involved in exercising power and taking decisions, even at the lowest level, were properly authorized to act. This was if anything even more important in the immensely hierarchical Late Roman State, in which authority still flowed down from the top and required centrally appointed military or civil officials, but which employed many more of them. In the end, the working of the system required the existence of an emperor, even if he happened to be a usurper. By rejecting Constantine III and not replacing him the Romano-Britons had beheaded the structure of authority. Moreover, they had compounded the problem by expelling his appointees. If the latter had been retained there might have been a chance of cobbling together some sort of a system. But just as we have seen in modern times, the immediate consequences of actions of that sort in the precipitate disbanding of the Iraqi army and police and purging of the civil service after the Second Gulf War, the Romano-Britons, it would seem, had made the dissolution of their familiar world inevitable.

There are almost as many visions of the narrative of the end of Roman Britain and interpretations of cause and effect as there are archaeologists and historians working in the field. Some see a gradual evolution into what used to be called the 'Dark Age' world of petty lordships gradually coming together over the next two centuries as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged in England and Southern Scotland. It has been argued that Wales and to some extent the West of England effectively remained outside this process, retaining a 'sub-Roman' culture till the conquest of Wales by Edward I in the 13th century. Others argue for a 'failed state' with all the consequences that implies for its population. It cannot be denied that everyone will have been profoundly affected by the withdrawal of security—both personal and in the guaranteeing of everyday transactions—that the collapse of Roman authority represented. The phenomenon of an unarmed civilian population going about their everyday lives, maintained for nearly 400 years, represents a remarkable achievement. Nor can the disappearance of the everyday conveniences brought by Roman technology and organization to

everyday conveniences brought by Roman technology and organization, to which Britain had now been accustomed for so long, have been other than a severe shock, not just for the elite but far down the social scale. One recent writer—not without raising dissent—has succinctly encapsulated the fall of the Western Roman Empire as ‘the demise of comfort’.

Chronology

Entries in **bold** denote events belonging to the general history of the Roman Empire.

LATE REPUBLIC (1st century bc)

55–54 BC	Expeditions of Caesar to Britain
49 BC	Caesar defeats Pompey: effective end of Roman Republic

EARLY EMPIRE (1st & 2nd centuries ad)

Julio-Claudian Emperors (27 bc–ad 68)

54 BC–AD 43	Britain between the invasions: period of political and economic change
34–26 bc	Projected expeditions of Augustus
by 12 BC	Permanent Roman bases on Rhine
AD 40	Expedition of Gaius cancelled

Claudius (41–54)

by 43	Death of Cunobelinus
43	Claudian invasion
by 47	Conquest of south and east of England completed
49	Foundation of Colchester <i>colonia</i>
c.50	Foundation of London
51	Defeat and capture of Caratacus

Nero (54–68)

60 or 61	Revolt of Boudicca
68–9	‘Year of the Four Emperors’

Flavian Emperors (69–96)

71–84	Conquest of Wales and northern England completed; conquest of Scotland
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Trajan (98–117)

c.100	Scotland temporarily lost: frontier on Tyne–Solway line
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Hadrian (117–38)

122	Hadrian in Britain: the Wall begun
-----	------------------------------------

Antonine Emperors (138–92)

Antoninus Pius (138–61)

140–3	Antonine advance into Scotland: by 143 Antonine Wall begun
c.158	Serious trouble in northern Britain
c.160	Antonine Wall given up

Marcus Aurelius (161–80): major wars on the Danube

c.163	Hadrian’s Wall restored
193	Clodius Albinus proclaimed emperor in Britain

LATE EMPIRE (3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries ad)

Severan Emperors (193–235)

197/213	Britain becomes two provinces
208–11	Campaigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla in Scotland
235–70	Imperial crisis: civil wars and invasions in East and West
260–74	‘Gallic Empire’
270s	Renewed growth in Britain

The Tetrarchy

287–96	Carausius and Allectus
296	Britain recovered by Constantius I (‘Constantius Chlorus’); <i>after</i> 296 Britain becomes civil diocese of four provinces

House of Constantius (305–63)

306	Campaign of Constantius I in Scotland; Constantine the Great proclaimed at York
324	Constantine sole emperor: foundation of Constantinople
340–69	Period of recurrent stress in Britain: internal troubles, harassment by barbarians
350	Magnentius proclaimed in Gaul
353	Constantius II sole emperor
353	Purge in Britain by Paul the Chain
360–3	Julian sole emperor: official restoration of pagan religion

House of Valentinian (364–92)

367–9	‘Barbarian Conspiracy’, recovery and restoration of Britain by the elder Theodosius
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House of Theodosius (379–455)

379	Theodosius the Great becomes emperor in the East
383	Magnus Maximus proclaimed in Britain; victory over Picts
388	Theodosius defeats Maximus
392–4	Usurpation of Eugenius and Arbogast
394	Theodosius regains western half of empire

Honorius (395–423) emperor in the West

398–400	Victories over Picts, Scots, Saxons
400–2	Possible troop withdrawals by Stilicho
402	Western imperial court withdrawn from Milan to Ravenna
406	Britain revolts from Honorius: two successive usurpers proclaimed
407	Constantine III proclaimed in Britain
407–11	Constantine III rules from Arles
409	Britain revolts from Constantine III: end of Roman rule in Britain
410	Rescript of Honorius?
411	Defeat and death of Constantine III

Further reading

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