

# Britannia, Roman Empire

HANNAH PLATTS

Britannia was one of the last provinces to be added to Rome's empire. Initially known as Albion (Mattingly 2006: 31), its more common early name was the Greek Prettanike (later Britannia). The Latin form, Britannia, was employed from first century CE. Sources suggest various forms of leadership in iron-age Britain; however, all Britons were organized into regional tribal communities with strong farming bases. Recent archaeological evidence has shown the highly developed agrarian skills and artistic style of Britons prior to Roman conquest (Mattingly 2006: 54–64). There is evidence for contact and trade between the Iron Age communities of southeast Britain and the tribes of Transalpine and Northern Gaul (see GAUL (TRES GALLIAE)). Finds, including remains of wine amphorae, suggest trade between them from 120 BCE (Frere 1987: 9–12).

JULIUS CAESAR'S governorship of Illyricum, Cisalpine, and Transalpine Gaul from 58–50 BCE provided opportunities for invasions of Britain between 55–54. Britain was not conquered, but Caesar imposed a tribute on Cassivellaunus, a British chieftain, and established Mandubracius of the Trinovantes tribe as a friendly king. Contact between Rome and Britain continued under AUGUSTUS, who referred to supplications by British kings in the *Res Gestae* (RG 32, cf. Strabo 4.5.3). Invasion was apparently considered by Augustus (Cass. Dio 49.38; 53.22; 53.25) and CALIGULA (Suet. *Cal.* 46; cf. Cass. Dio 59.25), but actual conquest occurred under CLAUDIUS.

In 43 CE, four legions with *auxilia*, some forty thousand men, embarked from Boulogne. The initial landing place of Rome's troops in Britain is traditionally believed to be Richborough, Kent (Frere 1987: 49), but some have suggested landings elsewhere, which could draw on assistance from existing pro-Roman relationships. The principal early objective of the invasion was the conquest

of CAMULODUNUM (COLCHESTER) (Cass. Dio 60.19–23; cf. Suet. *Claud.* 17; *CIL* V 920), a siege in which Claudius himself took part.

Success at Camulodunum was followed by further Roman incursions during the remaining years of the Julio-Claudians (see BOUDICA), initially into Wales and the Midlands south of the River Trent (Cass. Dio 60.21; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 12.31–40; 14.29–39.). Under the Flavians, expansion continued in Wales and into Scotland (Tac. *Hist.* 3.45; Tac. *Agr.* 17; Tac. *Agr.* 29–38) and the Caledonians were defeated by Agricola, governor of Britannia from 77/8 to 83/4 (see AGRICOLA, GNAEUS IULIUS) at the battle of Mons Graupius (83/4). Scotland remained unconquered after Agricola's withdrawal and there followed a gradual retreat to the Tyne-Solway isthmus, where HADRIAN'S WALL was developed as a frontier from 122. Scotland was briefly occupied again by Rome on two further occasions. Under ANTONINUS PIUS between 139 and 143, the frontier was extended into Scotland and the ANTONINE WALL was built north of Hadrian's wall on the Forth-Clyde line. This was soon abandoned and Hadrian's Wall remained the northern frontier of Rome's empire until the Romans left in the fifth century. The second brief incursion into Scotland came during SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS' campaigns of 208–11.

As a new and remote province of Rome's empire, located in unknown *Oceanus* (see OCEANUS), far from the Mediterranean, Britannia was heavily garrisoned with around fifty thousand troops comprising three legions based at ISCA (Caerleon), DEVA (Chester), and EBORACUM (York), as well as an auxiliary contingent, of possibly seventy-five units, located mainly in the northern frontier areas of the province.

The provincial system of government was organized on a cantonal system similar to that in Gaul, and sixteen *civitates* are known. In addition, there were four *coloniae* (see COLONIES, ROMAN EMPIRE (WEST)) located at Camulodunum (founded 49 CE), Lindum (Lincoln 90–6), GLEVUM (Gloucester 96–8), Eboracum



**Figure 1** Britannia. Drawn by Ancient World Mapping Center.

(early third century), while LONDINIUM (LONDON) was the provincial capital. During the third century, Britannia was divided into Britannia Superior (Upper), with its capital at London, and Britannia Inferior (Lower), with its capital at York. These were in turn divided in 293, Superior into Maxima Caesariensis (capital at London) and Britannia Prima (capital at Cirencester), Inferior into Britannia Secunda (capital at York) and Flavia Caesariensis (capital at Lincoln). A further provincial subdivision may have been made during the later fourth century CE to create the additional province of Valentia, but its location is uncertain (Mattingly 2006: 228; 236; 334–5).

Art, culture, and society in Roman Britain developed in a mixture of styles, with Celtic and classical attributes. Latin was widely adopted, the written evidence being found mainly around military and urban sites (see VINDOLANDA TABLETS). The gods of the Mediterranean regions spread to Britain via the army and imperial administrators, while Celtic gods also remained, taking on new forms, including Romano-Celtic temple architecture (see RELIGION, ROMAN; RELIGION, CELTIC). Soldiers often worshipped Celtic gods whom they identified with Roman gods. There is also evidence of Christianity in Britain, although it is difficult to assess its impact before the fourth century CE.

Britain's economy under Rome remained agricultural, with most of its inhabitants living in the countryside (see AGRICULTURE, ROMAN EMPIRE). Most dwellings were small, traditional farmsteads rather than villas (see VILLA), although some villa development did begin soon after conquest and continued to increase both in opulence and numerical extent up to the fourth century CE. Other economic activities, with a peak in the fourth century CE, included the widespread production of local crafts, confirmed by archaeological finds in numerous settlements. In addition, metals such as gold, silver, and lead were mined.

From the third century CE, disquiet in Britain produced regional usurpers, including Carausius (286–93), Allectus (293–7), and Magnus Maximus (383–8). Moreover, the construction

of “Saxon Shore” forts along the south and east coasts of Britain at this time points to increased military threats. However, the absence from late Roman Britain of a field army suggests a more peaceful situation than elsewhere in the western part of the empire in the fourth century. Apart from increasing barbarian attacks from the north during 367, which required a military response, there is little evidence to suggest serious military attacks until the early fifth century, by which time the reduced garrison remaining in Britain could not meet such threats. Rome, also under significant pressure, was unable to send aid. Consequently, Britain succumbed to Saxon invasion.

SEE ALSO: Army, Roman Empire; Caledonia; Cogidubnus; Economy, Roman; Hadrian; Legions, history and location of.

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