

# PROVINCIA BRITANNIA

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From the westernmost extremities of Lusitania to the eastern deserts of the Levant, and from the Rhine and the Danube to the edges of the Sahara, the Romans cemented their rule and legacy over much of Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. Originating as a petty kingdom from the region of Latium, and almost collapsing after Germanic tribes plundered Rome, the Romans would rebound and flex their newfound military might and incorporate large swathes of land under their rule. Nonetheless, a part of the Roman Empire that cannot be ignored is Roman Britannia. Even though the Romans were known as swift conquerors, their colonization of Britain was everything but easy. In comparison to their continental cousins who were crushed under the Roman boot, the insular Britons valiantly resisted Roman attempts to take their land. The Romans took many attempts to conquer this section of land, notably the failed ones in 55 and 54 BC by Julius Caesar and finally a successful conquest of Britannia in 43 AD by Emperor Claudius. After the successful effort, the borders of Rome would expand even further up to the famous Hadrian's wall, which separated Roman Britain from Caledonia. The Romans would imprint their culture and language onto their newly incorporated subjects, bringing them the Latin language and, subsequently, Christianity.<sup>1</sup> These long-lasting influences would linger on even when the Romans gradually retreated from the island, which took place in 383-410 AD when Roman soldiers needed to return back to help defend Rome as they were constantly being attacked by neighboring Germanic tribes. Thus, the history of Roman Britannia is worthy of intense scholarly study. Not only is this period of history a vital part of Roman history, but also a vital part of British history that is a major part of British identity.

The Roman presence in Britain began with Caesar's campaigns in Gaul. During Caesar's great expansion of the Roman Empire, many native tribes fell to Roman rule or suzerainty like dominoes tumbling down. Notable examples of these tribes included the Belgae, a tribal confederation that sought to protect their independence against Rome and the Celtic Gallic tribes. Other tribes like the Germanic Suebi had engaged in skirmishes against Caesar and even though they were not outright conquered by Caesar, they were pushed back over the Rhine to their ancestral homelands. Caesar then decided that his next target was the island of Britain. However, Britain was mostly unknown to Caesar at this time and an invasion of Britain was considered by many Romans at the time to be a challenge and unknown territory, which meant that a

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, J.N. "The Regional Diversification of Latin 200 BC - AD 600." Google Scholar. Accessed July 17, 2023.  
[https://books.google.co.th/books?id=yu9zSREo0bkC&pg=PR4&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=latin&f=false](https://books.google.co.th/books?id=yu9zSREo0bkC&pg=PR4&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=latin&f=false).

successful invasion would only add to Caesar's glory and reputation. Britain also had a reputation of being a land of mystics, which instilled fear into the superstitious Romans. At the same time, a great deal of Romans were also getting tired of the British tribes since they were constantly supplying the Gallic tribes and other enemies of the Romans with both weapons and mercenaries.<sup>2</sup> In his first attempt in 55 BC, despite taking two legions with him, Caesar only managed to land on the coast of Kent and was reluctant to land at harbors such as Dubris (Dover) since massive cliffs overlooked the shores which meant that his legions could be easily attacked. In Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*<sup>3</sup>, he often mentioned how the geography of Britain made it hard to land legions and start campaigns there since they would often have to land at natural harbors and were lower grounds. Thus, the invasion did not see further progress and there simply were negotiations between the Romans and Britons which resulted in the Britons giving allegiance and sending hostages to Rome. Caesar's second invasion was in 54 BC, a year after the first attempt, although Caesar was more successful in his initial campaigns and even managed to cross the River Thames, he still did not manage to take control of the entire island. Like the previous invasion, the British tribes gave word to pay tribute to Rome while maintaining a degree of political autonomy. Thus, even though he sporadically engaged with the native tribes, Caesar did not establish Roman rule on the island and turned back towards Gaul to focus on subduing rebellions and an upcoming civil war that would see the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. Thus, although Britain technically remained within the boundaries of the Empire, a combination of geographical and political factors prevented the Romans from ever fully incorporating the territory into their domains.

Finally, in 43 AD, the Emperor Claudius, the great-great-grandnephew of Julius Caesar, managed to successfully subdue the southern half of Britannia. Nevertheless, Roman control of Britain was met with fierce resistance and regular rebellions from the native people. An especially notable uprising against Roman control occurring during the reign of Emperor Nero by Boudica, the queen of the Iceni tribe. After the husband of Queen Boudica, King Prasutagus died, the Romans refused to follow his will and adhere to previous agreements. Thus, Boudica gathered neighboring tribes together to revolt against the Romans. Under Boudica's plan, these tribes who were unified under a common enemy, which was the Romans, had a goal to ravage and destroy Roman

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<sup>2</sup> "Celtic Life in Iron Age Britain - Google Arts & Culture." Google. Accessed July 18, 2023. [https://artsandculture.google.com/story/celtic-life-in-iron-age-britain-the-british-museum/\\_AWRz1O9u3piJg?hl=en](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/celtic-life-in-iron-age-britain-the-british-museum/_AWRz1O9u3piJg?hl=en).

<sup>3</sup> Caesar, Julius. "The Internet Classics Archive: The Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar." Translated by W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn. The Internet Classics Archive | The Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar. Accessed July 13, 2023. <http://classics.mit.edu/Caesar/gallic.html>.

outposts in cities such as Londinium, Camulodunum, and Verulamium.<sup>4</sup> However, even though Boudicca and her armies fought ferociously and valiantly for their former freedoms to be restored, the Romans were able to retain their control of Britain since they annihilated the armies of Boudica.<sup>5</sup> For quite some time, these rebellions and uprisings will be swiftly crushed by Roman legions in order to ensure Roman control of Britannia.

Future Roman emperors would pursue the expansion of Roman Britannia to encompass the region of Caledonia, now corresponding to Scotland. However, all of these attempts would end in failure, and the Romans under Emperor Hadrian would build Hadrian's wall stretching from the Irish Sea to the North Sea and separating Roman-ruled lands from still-unconquered territories. The Romans attempted to expand further north with the construction of the Antonine Wall in present-day Scotland, however the Picts and the Caledonians proved to be too much for the Romans. Also, there was little need or incentive to expand to an area of land so far from Rome. Therefore, the Romans decided that expanding was not worth it and would construct walls to maintain the status quo. Thus, these policies showed that the Romans did not want to pursue the territorial expansion of Roman Britannia. The same applied for the island of Ireland, or Hibernia as it was known back then.<sup>6</sup> Hibernia was also viewed as undesired territory, and left the island to Celtic self-rule. Thus, the greatest extent of Roman Britannia encompassed the modern regions of England and Wales and would never expand to encompass the entire British Isles.

As Roman rule on the southern half of the island commenced, the Britons were not immediately Romanized. The island was far from the major centers of the Empire. However, as the Romans cemented their presence on the island, some of the native population began to be influenced by the Roman way of life. These successive waves of Romanization were most apparent in the south and east of the island, where Roman infrastructure such as roads and *castras* (forts) were built. Even though the northern and western portions of the province of Britannia were controlled by the Romans, those regions experienced far less Romanization than the southern and eastern portions. Furthermore, Roman innovations such as aqueducts, sewage systems, and *thermaes* (bath houses) also became a crucial part of life in Roman Britain. Roman culture emphasized cleanliness and hygiene, and these beliefs were reflected in the architecture and knowledge that they brought to Britannia. These constructions still

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<sup>4</sup> Doughty, Susan. Boudica's Revolt AD 60-61. Accessed July 18, 2023.

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/warwickclassicsnetwork/romancoventry/resources/boudica/revolt/>.

<sup>5</sup> Dio, Cassius. "Roman History." Translated by Herbert Foster, Project Gutenberg. Accessed July 13, 2023. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10890/10890-h/10890-h.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Maxwell, Nick. "Hibernia Romana? Ireland & the Roman Empire." History Ireland, February 21, 2013. <https://www.historyireland.com/hibernia-romana-ireland-the-roman-empire/>.

stand today and are particularly concentrated near Hadrian's wall, which was built by the Roman emperor Hadrian in 122 AD. The various tribes on the island of Britain even started to adopt the Roman language. Latin was slowly integrated into their lives which gave rise to 'British Latin' a combination of Celtic language and Latin terminology. In fact, the name of the island of Britain, which is the name used today, derives from the Roman name of Britannia, which the Romans used over the old name of Albion which is derived from Greek. In fact, many residents of Britannia would later join the Roman army, ultimately giving them citizenship and making them become more "Roman".

The Britons' beliefs closely resembled that of their continental brethren. The British tribes believed in various Celtic religions, which were generally polytheistic. Nonetheless, the Roman invasion of Britain would influence the Celtic religion and create a new hybrid religion that combined the elements of Roman religion and Celtic religion together. In fact, the Romans often pressured the native tribes to abandon their regional religions and adopt the Roman one. According to Tacitus, once the Romans noticed that the Druids worshiped oak groves, they decided to cut down as many oak groves as they were able to find across the island since the Romans were afraid of the native religions interfering with Roman plans.<sup>7</sup> However, in some instances the Romans and the British were able to find common ground. British gods were paired with Roman counterparts to create a hybrid religion. This helped join the two religions together and helped them exist in harmony. This arrangement would last until a new religion that was formerly heavily repressed came to be tolerated and overtime became the state religion of the Roman Empire. The spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire also impacted the Roman province of Britannia, which reached the island by sea, which was different from other areas that received Christianity in which missionaries came to spread the religion. Saint Gildas wrote that, like in many other regions of the Roman Empire especially during the reign of Diocletian, overt symbols of Christianity in Roman Britannia were repressed. In Gildas' words, the reign of Emperor Diocletian was "when the churches throughout the whole world were overthrown, all the copies of the Holy Scriptures which could be found burned in the streets, and the chosen pastors of God's flock butchered, together with their innocent sheep."<sup>8</sup> Gildas also writes down the names of Romano-British Christian martyrs who resisted Roman persecution. One of those martyrs, Saint Alban, reportedly hid another Christian practitioner who was being hunted by Roman authorities and walked across the Thames leaving the Roman authorities shocked and in awe. However, the treatment of Christians radically changed in the wake of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, and many Romano-British

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<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, Cornelius. Translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb. *The Annals*. Accessed July 14, 2023.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078%3Abook>.

<sup>8</sup> Gildas. "On the Ruin of Britain." Translated by J. A. Giles, *Project Gutenberg*, 1 July 2023, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1949/pg1949.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1949/pg1949.html).

Christians began to express their faith openly. These remnants of Roman cultural influence include the fresco at Hinton Saint Mary, which shows a depiction of Jesus with the Greek letters chi and rho.<sup>9</sup> Saint Patrick, who is Ireland's patron saint, had his origins as a Romano-British person and came to Ireland to spread Christianity. Therefore, Christianity has an outsized impact on the history of Roman Britain and also the surrounding tribes.

In the later stages of the Roman Empire, the empire itself was partitioned between the Western and Eastern Empires, the latter of which became the Byzantine Empire. Even though the East at this point would take a millennium to finally fizzle out of existence, the Western empire would be so unstable that it would only take a few decades to mark the end of the West. The West's history was rocked with its invasion by migrating tribes and barbarians and Roman Britannia was certainly no different. Saint Gildas tells the story of how the neighboring Picts and Scots launched raids across the border into Roman Britannia and how the Romans attempted to fend them off by building fortifications.<sup>10</sup> An 11th century reproduction of *Notitia Dignitatum*, a source which documents Roman military positions during the fourth century, shows that the Romans built fortifications running through the coastal areas of the island.<sup>11</sup> For example, the *Dux Britanniarum* covers the regions of Cumbria and Yorkshire and may have extended to Wales and the Saxon Shore covers the regions of southeast Britain. This shows that the Romans were trying to defend their possessions even when faced with hostility from the neighboring Picts. However, as other regions of the Western empire became very chaotic, the Empire saw the need to withdraw from Britain. Thus, after about 400 years of Roman rule on the southern half of the island, Rome finally withdrew from Roman Britannia, finally leaving the Britons to govern themselves once again. However, once Rome withdrew from the island, the traces of Roman presence were not immediately washed away. Even though Rome did not have administrative control over the island at this point, the Romano-Britons themselves remained on the island together with Roman bureaucrats and officials who settled on the island. Saint Gildas documents a futile attempt by the Romano-Britons to request aid from the ailing Western Roman Empire to defend against the Picts and Scots who were like "worms which in the heat of the mid-day come forth from their holes."<sup>12</sup> A Romano-British delegation would describe the situation to Aetius as "The barbarians drive us to the sea;

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<sup>9</sup> Solomon, Tessa. "Archaeologists Unearth Roman Mosaic in Rural British Town." ARTnews.com, July 12, 2022. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/mosaic-dorset-hinton-st-mary-1234633956/>.

<sup>10</sup> Gildas. "On the Ruin of Britain." Project Gutenberg, July 1, 2023. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1949/pg1949.html>.

<sup>11</sup> "The Notitia Dignitatum ." Roman Britain, September 19, 2022. <https://www.roman-britain.co.uk/classical-references/the-notitia-dignitatum/>.

<sup>12</sup> Gildas. "On the Ruin of Britain." Project Gutenberg, July 1, 2023. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1949/pg1949.html>.

the sea throws us back: thus two modes of death await us, we are either slain or drowned.” The Western Romans were breathing their last gasps of air before their demise, and so could not help the Romano-British. The sub-Roman period of British history would then last a further 200 or 300 years until the first Anglo-Saxons invaded and set themselves up in Britain.

The history of Roman Britain is a complex and fascinating tale. The exploits of the various Roman conquerors and the adversaries who resisted them every step of the way to keep their land free should be preserved and admired for the test of time. Elements of Roman and Britannic ways of life, culture and language would ultimately blend together to create a syncretic cultural blend that still leaves traces in the present-day United Kingdom. From Hadrian’s wall which still stands today to the valorization of Roman culture during Victorian England such as in artworks depicting various scenes from the Roman Empire by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, it can be unequivocally said that Roman rule has left a deep influence on Britain. Even though the influence of Roman culture has been diluted by other cultural influences such as Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Norman cultures, the period in which the southern half of Britain was under control remains a vital part of Roman and British history. Moreover, the pivotal role that the native Celtic Britons played in the history of Roman Britain showed that even though the Celts were becoming less prevalent and influential throughout continental Europe, their culture and legacy still persist in Roman Britain and in later periods of British history. Many modern British cities including London and Colchester were once known under Latin names. Therefore, together with later cultural influences, the history of Roman Britannia forms a vital part of the overall history of the Roman Empire and forms part of the British historical consciousness. Without Roman rule in southern Britain, history could have gone down a very different path.

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