



Did ordinary people suffer under a tyranny, when Rome seized power in Britain, or were there advantages to foreign rule? Dr Mike Ibeji explores the realities of British life at the time of the Romans.

Striving to be Roman

The Roman invasion of Britain was arguably the most significant event ever to happen to the British Isles. It affected our language, our culture, our geography, our architecture and even the way we think. Our island has a Roman name, its capital is a Roman city and for centuries (even after the Norman Conquest) the language of our religion and administration was a Roman one.

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For 400 years, Rome brought a unity and order to Britain that it had never had before. Prior to the Romans, Britain was a disparate set of peoples with no sense of national identity beyond that of their local tribe. In the wake of the Roman occupation, every 'Briton' was aware of their 'Britishness'. This defined them as something different from those people who came after them, colouring their national mythology, so that the Welsh could see themselves as the true heirs of Britain, whilst the Scots and Irish were proud of the fact that they had never been conquered by Rome.

Yet perhaps Rome's most important legacy was not its roads, nor its agriculture, nor its cities, nor even its language, but the bald and simple fact that every generation of British inhabitant that followed them - be they Saxon, Norman, Renaissance English or Victorian - were striving to be Roman. Each was trying to regain the glory of that long-lost age when Britannia was part of a grand civilisation, which shaped the whole of Europe and was one unified island.

The truth about Roman Britain is much more subtle and surprising...

I am usually asked five questions whenever people talk to me about Roman Britain, and they find the answers profoundly surprising. People's view of Rome is of a grand, monolithic dictatorship which imposed its might upon an unwilling people, dictating how they lived, how they spoke and how they worshipped. They see the Romans as something akin to the Nazis (which is hardly surprising since the fascists tried to model themselves on Rome). The truth about Roman Britain is much more subtle and surprising, and serves to show why on the one hand their legacy has endured so long, and on the other, why their culture vanished so quickly once they departed from these shores.

Roman invasion

Rome invaded Britain because it suited the careers of two men. The first of these was Julius Caesar. This great republican general had conquered Gaul and was looking for an excuse to avoid returning to Rome. Britain afforded him one, in 55 BC, when Commius, king of the Atrebates, was ousted by Cunobelin, king of the Catuvellauni, and fled to Gaul. Caesar seized the opportunity to mount an expedition on behalf of Commius. He wanted to gain the glory of a victory beyond the Great Ocean, and believed that Britain was full of silver and booty to be plundered.

His first expedition, however, was ill-conceived and too hastily organised. With just two legions, he failed to do much more than force his way ashore at Deal and win a token victory that impressed the senate in Rome more than it did the tribesmen of Britain. In 54 BC, he tried again, this time with five legions, and succeeded in re-establishing Commius on the Atrebatian throne. Yet he returned to Gaul disgruntled and empty-handed, complaining in a letter to Cicero that there was no silver or booty to be found in Britain after all.

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Caesar's military adventurism set the scene for the second exploitation of Britain - by the Emperor Claudius. He was to use an identical excuse to Caesar for very similar reasons. Claudius had recently been made emperor in a palace coup. He needed the prestige of military conquest to consolidate his hold on power. Into this situation came Verica, successor to Commius, complaining that the new chief of the Catuvellauni, Caratacus, had deprived him of his throne.

Like Caesar, Claudius seized his chance. In AD 43, he sent four legions across the sea to invade Britain. They landed at Richborough and pushed towards the River Medway, where they met with stiff resistance. However, the young general Vespasian forced the river with his legion supported by a band of 'Celtic' auxiliaries, and the British were routed.

Vespasian marched west, to storm Maiden Castle and Hod Hill with such ruthless efficiency that the catapult bolts used to subdue them can still be dug out of the ground today. Hod Hill contains a tiny Roman fort from this time, tucked into one corner of its massive earthworks. Meanwhile, Claudius arrived in Britain to enter the Catuvellaunian capital of Colchester in triumph. He founded a temple there, containing a fine bronze statue of himself, and established a legionary fortress. He remained in Britain for only 16 days.

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It took another 30 years to conquer the rest of the island (bar the Highlands). Once in, Rome was prepared to defend her new acquisition to the death. Yet Britain was originally invaded not for its wealth, not for strategic reasons, not even for ideology, but for the plain and simple reason that it furthered a politician's career. It has been said that Rome conquered an empire in a fit of absent-mindedness. Britain is a case in point.

Romans in Britain

The Roman empire was based on two things: lip service to the emperor, and payment to the army. As long as you acknowledged the imperial cult and paid your taxes, Rome did not really care how you lived your life. In one respect, there were very few 'Romans' in Britain. There were Batavians, Thracians, Mauretanians, Sarmatians: all brought in through service in the army, and all eventually granted citizenship and a packet of land after their 25 years' service. They settled all over Britain, becoming naturalised British citizens of the Roman Empire, erecting a wealth of inscriptions which attest to their assimilation and prosperity. Most of them settled in or near the fort where they had served, staying close to their friends. Gradually, these urban settlements outside the fort grew into townships, which were eventually granted municipal status. In certain cases, such as Colchester ('the Colonia by the camp'), the city was an official colony of veteran soldiers imposed upon the local population; but usually the evolution was more generic. Chester (or 'the camp') is an example of this. Standing on the city walls, you can still look down upon the remains of the amphitheatre that stood outside the military camp. In this way, the army acted as the natural force of assimilation.

The evidence for what life was like in these places has largely been eradicated by the cities' urban sprawl, but in more remote areas, like at Vindolanda up on Hadrian's Wall, you can still see just what the original Roman settlement looked like. Vindolanda housed several units in its history, among them the Ninth Batavians - from whom a large pile of correspondence was found written on thin wooden writing tablets, deposited in one of their rubbish tips. There were over 200 of these writing tablets dating to AD 95-115. Mainly official documents and letters written in ink, they are the oldest historical documents known from Britain.

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Among them is a set of letters between Sulpicia Lepidina, wife of the camp commander, and her friend Claudia Severa, wife of the commander at Housesteads, around ten miles up the road. They paint a picture of life on the frontier very much like that of a British officer's wife on the north-west frontier: full of empty days, relative discomfort, boredom and loneliness. Life for the ordinary people of the vicus or village seemed a little more interesting than that of the upper classes, but it remained harsh and unforgiving. One soldier complains of being beaten with rods; another refers disparagingly to the local British population as 'Brittunculi' (little Britons).

In the third century AD, marriage for soldiers was permitted, and the *vicus*, where their concubines had always lived, was rebuilt in stone. They constructed a beautiful little bath-house where the soldiers could relax, and a guest-house called a *mansio*, with six guest-rooms and its own private bath suite - for travellers on official business - along the wall. The *vicus* at Housesteads was rebuilt at the same time (incidentally, an excavation of one of its houses uncovered a murdered couple hidden under the floorboards). By this time, all adults in the empire had been granted blanket citizenship and the 'Romans' in Britain had become fully assimilated with their British neighbours.

Religion of the Romano-Britons

Both Rome and Britain had polytheistic religions, in which a multiplicity of gods could be propitiated at many levels. At one end of the spectrum were the official cults of the emperor and the Capitoline Triad: Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, linked to other Olympian gods like Mars. At the other end, every spring, every river, every cross-roads, lake or wood had its own local spirit with its own local shrine. The Romans had no problem in combining these with their own gods, simply associating them with the god(s) or goddess(es) who most resembled them.

At Bath, the famous temple bath complex was founded on the site of a local shrine to the water goddess Sul of the hot springs. She was linked to Minerva, for her healing qualities, but images of other gods and goddesses were also set up in the temple, most especially Diana the Huntress, to whom an altar was dedicated.

Over 6,000 coins were cast as offerings into the waters of Bath, along with vast quantities of lead or bronze curse tablets, asking Sulis-Minerva to intercede on behalf of the worshipper. These were also nailed up on poles within the temple precinct and provide an interesting glimpse into the everyday (and not so everyday) lives of the people who visited the shrine. This did not just happen in Bath: two hundred curse tablets were recovered from the temple to Mercury at Uley - approximately one third of all such tablets known in the empire - and others were found elsewhere:

'May he who has stolen VILBIA from me become as liquid as water... who has stolen it or her. Velvinna, Exsupereus, Verianus, Severinus, A(u)gustalis, Comitianus, Minianus, Catus, Germanilla, Jovina.' (Bath)

'To Minerva the goddess of Sulis I have given the thief who has stolen my hooded cloak, whether slave or free, whether man or woman. He is not to buy back this gift unless with his own blood.' (Bath)

'Uricalus, Docilosa his wife, Docilis his son and Docilina, Decentinus his brother, Alogiosa: the names of those who have sworn at the spring of the goddess Sulis on the 12th of April. Whosoever has perjured himself there you are to make him to pay for it to the goddess Sulis in his own blood' (Bath)

'I curse him who has stolen, who has robbed Deomiorix from his house. Whoever stole his property, the god is to find him. Let him buy it back with his blood or his own life.' (Bath)

At the windswept hill-fort site of Lydney, where a temple was erected to the god Mars-Nodens in the fourth century, another curse tablet was found, which reads:

To the god Nodens: Silvianus has lost his ring and promises half its value to Nodens. Among those named Senecianus, let none enjoy health until he brings it back to the temple of Nodens. - curse renewed.

It seems likely that both Silvianus and Senecianus had gone to Lydney for its healing properties. Both no doubt stayed in the adjacent mansio (much like the well-preserved guesthouse at Vindolanda), from which no doubt the latter walked off with Silvianus's ring. A further wrinkle is added by the find of a beautiful hexagonal ring bearing an image of Venus in the nearby Christian church at Silchester, on which was inscribed: 'Senecianus, may you live in God.' Is it too much

to surmise that seeking protection against the curse upon him, Senecianus turned to the new religious power which the Emperor had recently adopted as the new state religion? Since the curse was renewed, the ring obviously stayed lost.

Importance of Britain

People are always tempted to view Britain under the Romans as a backwater province of Rome - of little importance to the empire and offering even less profit. Yet throughout its history, Roman Britain acted as a proving ground for aspiring politicians and a powerbase for usurping emperors. Set aside arguments over whether Britain was 'profitable' or not (it certainly was when Julian used it to supply Germany in the 360s!), for such calculations never mattered to the empire. Britain was a frontier province, which contained three legions for most of its chequered history. As such, it was important.

Britain was invaded because it could further a Roman's career. It was conquered for similar reasons. The Boudiccan Revolt was only possible because the governor, Paullinus, was pursuing military glory against the druids. His distinguished subordinate and eventual successor Agricola founded a very respectable career, including a consulship in Rome, on subduing the rest of Britain.

According to Tacitus, he was only prevented from conquering Scotland by the envy of the emperor Domitian and the half-finished legionary fortress at Inchtuthil tends to corroborate reports of a hurried withdrawal on imperial orders (though Domitian did have a German war on his hands for which he needed troops). Domitian's father, Vespasian, had begun an illustrious senatorial career with command of the legion that won the Battle of Medway and took Maiden Castle. He had ended it as emperor.

Scotland remained a holy grail for the Romans...

Scotland remained a holy grail for the Romans, and once the emperor Hadrian had marked out the boundaries with a prestige project of his own, it became a legitimate target for conquest. Hadrian's immediate successor Antoninus Pius had a go, as did Septimius Severus and the father of the emperor Constantine, Constantius Chlorus.

...Britain was an excellent base from which to mount a rebellion.

Constantine proved what many Roman generals before him had realised - that Britain was an excellent base from which to mount a rebellion. When his father died at York in AD 301, the troops immediately acclaimed him as emperor, and he used the British army as the core of the force with which he finally conquered the empire. At the Milvian Bridge in AD 312, he scrawled the Chi-Rho symbol of Christianity onto his soldiers' shields, and won a miraculous victory. In gratitude, he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and at the Council of Nicea established the Nicene Creed of the Catholic Church. In one respect, you could say that Britain was the birthplace of Roman Catholicism.

Its loss was the first ominous death knell of Rome.

In AD 410, the *civitates* of Britain sent a letter to the emperor Honorius, asking him to come to their aid against the Saxon invaders. He wrote back telling them to 'look to their own defences', and Roman influence in Britain was officially ended. The very fact that the citizens of Britain appealed to the Roman emperor for help says much about their self-perception as citizens of the empire, and the fact that the emperor could not oblige says much about the pressure he was under. Britain had already 'looked to her own defences' in AD 259 under the Gallic Empire and AD 284 under Carausius, and both times she had been brought back into the fold. Britain had been conquered to satisfy the need of an individual Roman emperor. Once taken, the imperial image required that it should be held onto tenaciously. Its loss was the first ominous death knell of Rome.

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