

Roman Britain - the Roman Invasion

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Caesar's Summer Vacation

In 55 B.C. Julius Caesar, then general of the Roman armies in Gaul, decided that it would be a good move to try a little summer invasion of Britain. It may have been a move intended to gain prestige back home in Rome, but it was a move that made sense. The Celts in Gaul had been receiving aid from their close relations in southern England. British Celts may even have fought with related tribes in Gaul against the Romans. Certainly J. C. complained that defeated Gauls would slip away to Britain to regroup. Tackling the British Celts made sense in the battle to secure Gaul for Rome.

Caesar's invasion proved successful but inconclusive. Landing in present day Kent, he did battle with several tribes that summer, and did very well, thank you. The following summer he returned for more, easily defeating the first real historical British figure we know of, King Cassivellaunus. Remember that British "kings" at this time were really no more than tribal chiefs. There was no such thing as a unified "Britain", and there was no such thing as a unified Celtic army to meet the Roman advance.

Julius Caesar left after two summers fighting, exacting a promise of tribute from the defeated tribes, but it was not for another century that Rome would try to extend its influence in England. In the meantime, however, the contacts between the Roman Empire and Celtic Britain grew. Trade flourished, and it is suggested that some Celtic princes were sent to Rome to be educated.

One important social change that occurred at this time was that kingship became hereditary, rather than a post awarded to the best war leader. This change was to have disastrous consequences; several princes fled to Rome to appeal for help in succession squabbles. Rome was happy to use this as a convenient excuse for invasion.

The Pretext

In 43 A.D. Claudius became Emperor of Rome. Needing a public relations coup to secure his tenuous position he decided to revive the dream of expanding the Empire to the British Isles. The pretext was conveniently provided by Caratacus, king of the Catavellauni tribe. Caratacus invaded the territories of the Atrebates, whose king, Verica, fled to Rome and appealed for help. Claudius was quite happy to respond.

Britain was regarded with some mystical awe by the Romans, and at first Claudius' troops, 40,000 of them, refused to disembark from the invasion boats. Once they screwed up their courage, however, they made a good job of it, sweeping up from the landing place at Richborough in modern Kent in a three pronged attack. We know more about the southern prong, at least partly because it was commanded by a future Emperor of Rome, Vespasian.

The fight in the South

Vespasian's 2nd Legion marched through Sussex and Hampshire, the lands of the Atrebates, who were friendly to Rome, meeting their first real opposition from the Durotriges tribe in Dorset. They overran the hill fort of Hod Hill, and in an unusual move, built their military camp in one corner of the enclosure, where it can be seen today. Then they pushed on to present day Exeter, capturing twenty hill forts in all.

Maiden Castle

A grim reminder of this invasion is still to be seen at [Maiden Castle](#) in Dorset, where the Romans left behind a war cemetery full of enemy remains. The Celtic inhabitants had attempted to defend the fort with the aid of some 54,000-sling stones brought up from Chesil Beach, but this primitive artillery was no match for the discipline and experience of the Roman legions.

The two other prongs of attack pushed towards north Wales and north to York. By summer Claudius himself was able to land and receive the submission of twelve chieftains.

The new capital (s)

The first Roman capital of the new province of Britannia was at Colchester. It didn't take the Romans long, however, to realize the strategic importance of the Thames river as a communication and transport highway. A small existing settlement was built up to become a trade and administrative centre. The Romans called it Londinium. We know it today as **London**.

London became the hub at the centre of a major network of roads built primarily to serve troop movement and administrative communication. Not entirely by accident, they also served the expansion of trade that quickly made London the most important town, and eventually the capital, of the new province of Britannia.

Client Kingdoms

The Romans followed the formula in Britain that had been so successful elsewhere; rather than try to conquer with force, they established "client kingdoms" on the borders of territory they directly controlled. Basically, this meant that certain Celtic tribes, in return for not being overrun, agreed to ally themselves to Rome. Treaties with tribes in the

north and in East Anglia created buffers on the frontiers while the process of mopping up resistance continued.

Dealing with the Druids

Part of this mopping up took the form of eradicating the **Druids**. By the standards of their time the Romans could be tolerant of the religions of the peoples they conquered. However, the Druids represented not just a religious hierarchy, but real political and administrative authority among the Celts. And to give the Romans their due, they seem to have been genuinely horrified by what they considered the grisly and uncivilized practices of the Druids.

The Romans were big on the benefits of the civilization they were bringing to the people they conquered. They saw themselves as on a mission to expand the Empire and bring the Roman way of life to all the poor souls bereft of its benefits. Curiously, this is the same attitude later employed by those who built the British Empire.

Adapted from <http://www.britainexpress.com/History/Roman_invasion.htm>