

Romans in Britain I: Invasions and conquest

Week one will look at the invasions of Britain by the Romans, starting with Julius Caesar's account of his own activities in southern Britain (55 and 54 BCE). We shall consider the historical and political context for his exploits and the more successful first century invasion instigated by the emperor Claudius, and examine the different responses of British leaders, including those of Boudicca and Cogidubnus.

It will be helpful to have read chapters I and II of Stan Ireland's Roman Britain, A Sourcebook, before attending this lecture.

Throughout this short course we shall be considering the evidence for the arrival and history of the Romans in Britain. The evidence will include:

- Literary (primary or secondary sources)
- Epigraphic (words incised in stone or other materials – tombstones, foundations stones, etc)
- Numismatic (coins and the words and designs on them)
- Archaeological (ancient remains – building materials or evidence of digging, etc, mosaics and other artefacts)

Literary sources can be primary (contemporaneous with events) like Caesar's narrative or secondary (relying on earlier records) like the accounts of Dio Cassius and Suetonius.

Caesar is his own propagandist. His Gallic Wars is still in print after more than two millennia. Even he cannot claim that his invasions of 55 and 54 BCE amounted to conquest, however, and Tacitus is quite clear on this (source **25**).

After a short (but apparently triumphant) military campaign in Britain in the summer of 54, Caesar returned to his province (Gaul) and in 49 declared *de facto* war on the Roman state. Civil war followed from which Caesar emerged the victor. He was made dictator for life and then assassinated in 44 BCE. More civil wars developed until Octavian (Augustus), Caesar's nephew and heir, established dynastic rule through empire. Augustus is usually regarded as the first emperor (*princeps*).

There was no further Roman invasion of Britain until 43 CE (almost a century after Caesar's departure, though there had been "rumblings" of plans to invade, along with a bizarre episode involving the emperor Gaius Caligula (Source **53, 54 and 55**).

The "real" invasion of Britain, the one that led to the long-term romanisation and occupation of the island of Britain took place in 43 CE. It was led by Aulus Plautius, who would become the first governor of "Britannia", and the emperor himself crossed the channel to oversee the conclusion of this initial campaign. The victory was consolidated with swift agreements with local tribal leaders (client kings) in the eastern part of the island; a permanent base was established in Colchester (Camulodunum); from there the four invading legions, with their accompanying auxiliary armies spread westwards across the southern part of Britain. Evidence of Claudius's own propaganda is the coin pictured in Sources **63 and 64**.

Numismatic Evidence

Coins were frequently used to send important, albeit necessarily brief, messages across the Roman world and wherever they would have been received as legal tender. The message was obviously controlled by the person backing the currency (usually the emperor but see also sources **49-52** for evidence of the influence of British tribal chiefs during the period before the Claudian invasion). Numismatic evidence can be helpful in identifying specific

dates, events, and significant persons. Their message is without nuance and the purpose of the message is often to advertise the power or achievements of powerful individuals.

Epigraphic Evidence

The epigraphic evidence backs up the literary sources' description of the spread of the legions from their initial eastern base in Colchester northwards and westwards. Source **66** gives evidence of the twentieth legion at Colchester; we know that the ninth were in Lincoln in the first century (source **68**) and that the fourteenth were in Wroxeter (source **69**). The second legion's history is better documented than the others since it was commanded by the future emperor Vespasian, with Agricola as one of his lieutenants, and it advanced into the west country, taking in the Isle of Wight (source **65**).

The legions

Four legions with their accompanying auxiliaries and expensive supply chains, not to mention the building of three cities (Camulodunum, Verulamium and Londinium) proved a considerable drain on resources. Rebellions led by Caratacus and later by Boudicca were also expensive to quash. It is not surprising that the emperor Nero considered withdrawing from Britain altogether (source **72**).

Rebellion

In particular, the literary sources give us vivid pictures of certain individuals, including Caratacus (source **70**), Cartimandua and Venutius (**70, 71** and **95**). The most vivid of them all is Boudicca, who led the Iceni in the (initially) most successful uprising against Roman rule (sources **73 – 79**). Even here, it could be observed that, if Roman diplomacy had been pursued with as much energy as it had been during and after the initial conquest, this rebellion might have been avoided.

The part played by Classicianus, procurator (finance manager), is emphasised by Tacitus (source **79**), and Classicianus is one of the few characters for whose role in history we also have epigraphic evidence (source **80**).

