

Roman Emperors in Britannia: Imperial Visits, Breakaway Regimes and the Armies That Left Britain

ABSTRACT

This study examines Roman emperors who were physically present in Britannia, rulers whose power was proclaimed or exercised from the province, and figures whose connection with Britain was indirect. It argues that the island's large garrison created a persistent imperial paradox: the forces needed to defend the province could also give governors and commanders the means to challenge Rome. Repeated withdrawals for continental civil wars were not the sole cause of Roman Britain's ending, and their scale is often uncertain, but they formed a central thread in the province's political and military depletion. Particular attention is given to Clodius Albinus, the breakaway regime of Carausius and Allectus, Constantine's acclamation at York, Magnus Maximus and his transformation into Macsen Wledig, and the final usurpations of AD 406–411.

1. Introduction

Britannia occupied a paradoxical position within the Roman Empire. Its distance from the imperial centre and its exposed northern and maritime frontiers required a substantial permanent military establishment. For much of the Principate, three legions and numerous auxiliary regiments were stationed in the province. That concentration of trained soldiers protected Britain, but it also gave senior commanders unusual political leverage.

Legitimate emperors came to Britain to complete conquest, inspect frontiers, conduct campaigns or restore imperial authority. At other moments, troops in Britain supported governors and generals who claimed the purple for themselves. The distinction matters: some rulers were physically present on the island; some were proclaimed there and carried their forces abroad; others, such as **Magnentius**, were associated with Britain without launching their revolt from it.

The defining pattern is therefore not simple abandonment, nor a single moment when “the Romans left”. It is one of repeated mobilisation and depletion. Forces transferred to continental wars could sometimes be replaced or reorganised, and the surviving evidence rarely allows exact troop totals. Nevertheless, from **Clodius Albinus** to **Magnus Maximus** and **Constantine III**, civil conflict repeatedly redirected British manpower, finance and loyalty away from the province. This was a central mechanism in the weakening of imperial government, alongside fiscal strain, frontier pressure, political fragmentation and local change. [16] [17]

2. An Integrated Timeline of Emperors and Usurpers

Legitimate rulers and rebels are best viewed in one chronology. Imperial visits, breakaway regimes and military proclamations formed a connected sequence: one usurpation could provoke a later reconquest, while each movement of troops changed the political balance within Britain.

Date	Figure	Status	Key Action in Britannia
55–54 BC	Julius Caesar	Pre-imperial commander	Two expeditions; temporary submissions and client ties. [1]
AD 43	Claudius	Legitimate emperor	Visited Camulodunum; received surrenders during the conquest. [2]
AD 122	Hadrian	Legitimate emperor	Visited Britain; Hadrian's Wall followed. [3]
AD 193–197	Clodius Albinus	Usurper	Moved substantial British-backed forces to Gaul. [4]
AD 208–211	Septimius Severus	Legitimate emperor	Court at York; northern campaigns. [5]
AD 208–211	Caracalla and Geta	Imperial heirs / Augusti	Shared the expedition; returned after Severus died. [5]
AD 286–293	Carausius	Breakaway emperor	Ruled Britain/northern Gaul; independent coinage. [6]
AD 293–296	Allectus	Breakaway emperor	Succeeded Carausius; ruled until reconquest. [6]
AD 296; 305–306	Constantius I	Caesar, later Augustus	Recovered Britain; returned north; died at York. [7]
AD 306	Constantine	Army-acclaimed ruler	Acclaimed Augustus at York; accepted as Caesar. [8]
AD 350–353	Magnentius	Associated usurper	Rebelled in Gaul; Britain was associated, not the launch point. [9]
AD 383–388	Magnus Maximus	Usurper	Proclaimed in Britain; took forces to Gaul and ruled from Trier. [10]
AD 406	Marcus	Usurper	Raised by the army; killed after a short reign. [12]
AD 406–407	Gratian	Usurper	Succeeded Marcus; killed by dissatisfied troops. [12]
AD 407–411	Constantine III	Usurper	Crossed to Gaul with substantial forces as control unravelled. [12][13]

EVIDENCE NOTE

“Physically present” means that literary or material evidence places the individual in Britain. “Proclaimed or ruling from Britain” identifies a direct political base in the province. “Associated” indicates support, ancestry or military participation without evidence that the revolt began on the island. Ancient accounts are uneven and often hostile to defeated claimants; precise troop numbers and the direct archaeological effects of a single withdrawal are therefore treated as interpretation rather than certainty.

3. Emperors Who Came to Britain

3.1 Claudius and Hadrian: Conquest and Consolidation

The invasion of AD 43 was commanded initially by **Aulus Plautius**, but Emperor **Claudius** travelled to Britain during its decisive phase. Cassius Dio associates his arrival with conspicuous reinforcements, including elephants, while Suetonius describes a brief visit of sixteen days. The spectacle mattered: Claudius received surrenders at **Camulodunum** and converted an army's conquest into an emperor's triumph. The elephant detail is best understood as part of the ancient presentation of overwhelming imperial power rather than as a complete account of the campaign. [2]

When **Hadrian** visited in AD 122, the political message had changed. The later *Historia Augusta* says that he ordered a wall eighty Roman miles long "to separate the barbarians from the Romans". Modern archaeology shows a more complex frontier of forts, milecastles, roads, gates and controlled movement. Hadrian's Wall was therefore not merely a barrier: it was an assertion that security, supervision and managed limits had replaced indefinite northern expansion. [3] [18]

3.2 The Severan Court and Imperial Recovery

In AD 208 **Septimius Severus** arrived with the imperial family, a large expeditionary army and the machinery of court government. For nearly three years, the empire was effectively governed from **Eboracum**. Severus and Caracalla campaigned north of Hadrian's Wall; Geta and Julia Domna were closely associated with the court at York. Ancient writers disagree about the emperor's motives, and the scale of permanent gains was limited, but the expedition demonstrated the resources Rome could still direct towards Britain. Severus died at York on 4 February AD 211, after which Caracalla and Geta abandoned the northern project to secure their position at Rome. [5] [18]

The next imperial recovery followed the breakaway reigns of Carausius and Allectus. **Constantius I** returned Britain to central rule in AD 296 and came back as Augustus in AD 305 for a northern campaign. He too died at York, on 25 July AD 306. The pattern is striking: Britain repeatedly drew emperors to its frontier, yet the presence of an emperor and a concentrated army also created moments when succession could be decided far from Rome. [7]

3.3 Association Without Presence: Magnentius

Magnentius illustrates the need for restraint. He overthrew Constans in Gaul in AD 350 and received support from the British provinces, while ancient reports of British or Frankish ancestry remain disputed. He did not launch his usurpation from Britain and is not known to have ruled from the island. His relevance lies instead in the strain his civil war placed upon western armies and in the reprisals and political disruption that followed his defeat. [9]

4. Albinus: The First Great Withdrawal

Clodius Albinus, governor of Britain during the crisis of AD 193, reveals how the province's garrison could become an imperial power base. Septimius Severus initially neutralised him by granting the title Caesar. When Severus promoted his own son Caracalla and the alliance collapsed, Albinus adopted the title Augustus and crossed to Gaul. British forces formed a

substantial part of his army, although neither ancient texts nor archaeology allow an exact total. [4]

Albinus established his headquarters at **Lugdunum** and was defeated there in AD 197 in one of the largest battles fought between Roman armies. Britain was not literally left without troops, but the transfer exposed the political danger inherent in a heavily garrisoned province. The later division of Britannia into separate provincial commands is often interpreted as an attempt to prevent any single governor from again controlling comparable military resources, though the precise date and motive remain debated. [4] [17]

The soldiers who guarded Rome's north-western province had become the instrument by which its governor attempted to rule the Roman world.

5. The Britannic Empire: Carausius and Allectus

5.1 Breakaway from Rome - or Another Rome?

In AD 286 the naval commander **Carausius**, threatened with punishment by Maximian, declared himself emperor and secured Britain together with territory in northern Gaul. The phrase “Britannic Empire” is a useful modern description, but it should not imply that Carausius rejected Roman identity. His regime claimed to be legitimate Roman government conducted from a different political centre. [6]

That claim is clearest in the coinage. Carausius issued silver denarii at a time when good silver had largely disappeared from ordinary imperial circulation, projecting stability and traditional prestige. Some coins carry the Virgilian phrase *EXPECTATE VENI* (“Come, long-awaited one”). The enigmatic mark **RSR** has been persuasively interpreted as an abbreviation of *Redeunt Saturnia Regna* (“The Golden Age returns”), while **INPCDA** has been linked with *Iam Nova Progenies Caelo Demittitur Alto* (“Now a new generation is sent down from heaven above”). These readings are influential rather than beyond all dispute, but they reveal the sophistication of the regime’s classical language. [14]



Figure 1: Silver denarius of Carausius. The reverse carries the RSR mark associated with his Virgilian programme.
(Source image: Baldwin's Auctions)

Carausius also used the plural imperial formula **AVGGG** - “the three Augusti” - and issues associated with *CARAVSIVS ET FRATRES SVI* (“Carausius and his brothers”) to imply that Diocletian and Maximian were his imperial colleagues. Other types proclaimed *RESTITVTOR BRITANNIAE* (“Restorer of Britain”) or paired the emperor with Britannia. The legitimate emperors never accepted this fraternity, but the message was clear: Carausius did not present himself as an anti-Roman king. He presented himself as a rightful Roman Augustus and guardian of Britain. [6] [14] [15]



Figure 2: Antoninianus of Carausius with a PAX AVGGG reverse, struck at the London mint. The “peace of three Augusti” implied a recognition that Diocletian and Maximian did not grant. (Source image: MA-Shops)

Carausius was assassinated in AD 293 by **Allectus**, who maintained the breakaway state for another three years. Constantius launched a coordinated invasion in AD 296; his commander Asclepiodotus defeated Allectus in a battle whose exact location remains uncertain. The reconquest restored Britain to the Tetrarchic Empire, but the decade had demonstrated that the province could sustain an imperial regime, mint its own political message and compel Rome to mount a major recovery campaign. [6] [7]

6. Constantine: The Emperor Made at York

The most consequential imperial event to occur on British soil was not a conquest but an acclamation. When Constantius I died at Eboracum on 25 July AD 306, his soldiers proclaimed his son **Constantine** Augustus. The acclamation challenged the intended succession of Diocletian’s Tetrarchy. Galerius subsequently recognised Constantine only as Caesar, but the army’s decision at York gave him the authority and military base from which his long struggle for supremacy began. [8]

Constantine eventually became sole ruler in AD 324 and founded **Constantinople** as a new imperial capital. His alliance with Licinius produced the agreement conventionally known as the Edict of Milan in AD 313, extending toleration to Christians; he later convened the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. His personal religious development was complex and his baptism came near the end of his life, but his patronage transformed Christianity’s place within imperial government. [8]

York did not merely shelter a claimant. It launched a ruler who would change the structure, capital and religious future of the Roman Empire.

The statue outside York Minster is therefore more than a local commemoration. It marks the moment when an army stationed at the edge of the empire intervened directly in imperial succession - and succeeded on a scale no earlier British proclamation had achieved.

7. Magnus Maximus: Emperor and Army on the Move

In AD 383 the army in Britain proclaimed **Magnus Maximus** emperor. He crossed to Gaul, defeated and killed the western emperor Gratian, and established a court at Trier that controlled Britain, Gaul and Spain. After attempting to extend his power into Italy, he was defeated and executed by Theodosius I in AD 388. [10]

The size and composition of the force Maximus removed cannot be recovered with confidence. Later writers, especially **Gildas**, treated the expedition as a catastrophic stripping of Britain's defenders. Archaeology does show contraction and changing use at a number of late fourth-century military and urban sites, but it rarely permits a direct line from one abandonment horizon to Maximus's departure. The safest conclusion is cumulative: the usurpation redirected soldiers, officers and administrative energy to a continental regime and added to a longer process of military and fiscal strain. [10] [13]

8. Memory Interlude: The Dream of Macsen Wledig

The historical Maximus underwent a remarkable transformation in later British tradition. To Gildas, writing in the sixth century with a moral and providential purpose, he was a tyrant whose ambition weakened the island. In medieval Welsh narrative he became **Macsen Wledig**, a legitimate emperor and a source of dynastic authority. [10] [11]

In *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig (The Dream of the Emperor Maxen)*, Macsen dreams of a woman in a distant country and finds her in Wales: **Elen**, daughter of Eudaf Hen. He marries her and grants authority to her family. When his imperial position is threatened, British allies help him recover it. The tale is not a disguised contemporary biography; it is a later act of memory that binds Roman emperorship to Welsh landscape, marriage and sovereignty. [11]

Genealogical traditions similarly connected Welsh dynasties with Maximus. Such claims allowed later rulers to combine indigenous legitimacy with the inherited prestige of Rome. The reversal is striking: a man remembered in some historical traditions for carrying military strength away from Britain was reimagined as an emperor who bestowed authority upon it.

The historical commander and the remembered Macsen stand almost in inversion: one draws power from Britain; the other becomes a source of British legitimacy.

9. Three Emperors and the Final Crisis

The crisis of AD 406–407 produced three rapid acclamations in Britain. The evidence is thin and transmitted largely through hostile or retrospective sources. **Marcus** was raised by the army and killed after a short reign. **Gratian**, described as a civilian of local standing, replaced him and was also killed when he failed to meet military expectations. [12]

The troops then selected **Constantine III**, perhaps partly because his name evoked Constantine the Great. He crossed to Gaul with substantial elements of the available mobile army and briefly secured recognition as a colleague of Honorius. His regime extended into Spain but collapsed under military pressure; Constantine surrendered at Arles and was executed in AD 411. [12]

It is too simple to say that every Roman soldier departed in AD 407 or that administration ended on a single day. Garrison elements, local officials and Romano-British communities remained, and the chronology of the final break is debated. What changed decisively was the capacity of the western imperial government to command, finance and reinforce Britain. By AD 409–410, communities in Britain had expelled Constantine's officials and were organising their own defence; no later emperor restored durable central rule. [12] [13]

10. The Cumulative Drain of Troops

The withdrawal of forces should be treated as **a central thread**, not a single-cause explanation. Roman armies were mobile institutions: detachments had always moved between provinces, units could be replaced, and the late Roman frontier depended upon changing combinations of field forces, local garrisons, forts, fleets and allied manpower. The number of soldiers taken by Albinus, Maximus or Constantine III cannot be reconstructed precisely. [13] [16] [17]

Yet civil war repeatedly altered the purpose for which Britain's military resources were used. Albinus converted a provincial command into an army for Lugdunum. Maximus used British acclamation to create a western court at Trier. Constantine III carried much of the available mobile strength into a continental emergency from which neither his regime nor an effective imperial recovery returned. Each episode also removed officers, money, transport and political attention - resources as important as the soldiers themselves.

Britain was not simply lost; it was repeatedly spent as currency in continental civil wars.

The ending of Roman Britain therefore emerged from accumulation: civil conflict, external attack, weakening taxation, declining long-distance supply, contested authority and local responses. The usurpers did not alone destroy the province, but they made visible its most dangerous contradiction. The garrison that protected Britain could also decide that the road to power lay across the Channel.

11. Conclusion

Britannia required emperors because it was strategically important and difficult to hold. Claudius turned conquest into triumph; Hadrian converted frontier policy into stone; Septimius Severus brought the imperial court to York; Constantius recovered a province that had sustained its own emperors. These visits demonstrate that Britain was never merely a remote afterthought.

The same military concentration made the province politically dangerous. Albinus drew upon British forces for Lugdunum. Carausius and Allectus governed a breakaway Roman regime. Constantine was acclaimed at York and went on to reshape the empire. Maximus and Constantine III carried British-backed claims into Gaul at moments when the island could least afford continuing depletion.

The final paradox survived the empire itself. In historical interpretation, repeated usurpation helped weaken imperial Britain; in Welsh memory, Maximus became Maccsen Wledig, a source of sovereignty and descent. Rome's armies made Britain part of an empire. Britain's armies then learned that they could make emperors - and, each time they followed one across the sea, the province they left behind became harder to govern, reinforce and defend.

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