



The Great Barbarian Conspiracy and the End of Roman Britain: An Archaeological and Environmental Reassessment

ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines the Great Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 AD and the subsequent decline of Roman Britain in the 4th and 5th centuries. Integrating recent palaeoclimatological data with archaeological and literary evidence, it argues that the 367 AD event was not merely a military failure but a tipping point precipitated by a severe environmental crisis. The paper analyzes patterns of coin hoarding, villa destruction, and settlement abandonment as archaeological indicators of instability, correlating them with documented military withdrawals and systemic vulnerabilities in the late Roman frontier defense system. It concludes that the collapse of Roman authority in Britain was a multicausal process driven by the convergence of climate change, military overstretch, and internal political turmoil, offering a new, integrated model...

Introduction

The end of Roman rule in Britain has long been a subject of intense scholarly debate. Traditionally, the narrative has been dominated by military and political explanations, focusing on barbarian invasions, imperial usurpations, and the gradual withdrawal of Roman legions. The “Great Barbarian Conspiracy” of 367 AD, as chronicled by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, has often been portrayed as a pivotal moment in this decline—a coordinated, multi-pronged assault by Picts, Scots, Attacotti, and Saxons that overwhelmed the province’s defenses and shattered the illusion of Roman security. While the historicity of this event is not in doubt, its interpretation and significance remain contested.

This paper offers a new synthesis of the evidence, arguing that the Great Barbarian Conspiracy and the subsequent collapse of Roman authority in Britain were not solely the result of military pressures but were instead driven by a complex interplay of environmental, economic, and political factors. Drawing on recent advances in palaeoclimatology, which have revealed a period of extreme drought in the years immediately preceding 367 AD, this study posits that a severe environmental crisis acted as a catalyst, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in the Roman military and administrative systems. By examining the archaeological record—including patterns of coin hoarding, the burning and abandonment of villas, and shifts in settlement patterns—this paper will demonstrate how these material traces of instability correlate with both the literary



accounts of conflict and the new evidence of climate change.

This study will proceed in four main sections. The first will provide a detailed overview of the Great Barbarian Conspiracy and other major conflicts of the 4th and 5th centuries, setting the historical context for the subsequent analysis. The second section will delve into the archaeological evidence for instability, focusing on what the material record reveals about the lived experience of crisis and collapse. The third section will analyze the Roman military response, examining the strengths and weaknesses of the late Roman army in Britain and assessing the effectiveness of its strategies. The final section will synthesize these different strands of evidence, presenting an integrated model for the end of Roman Britain that gives due weight to the complex interplay of environmental, military, and political factors. By weaving together these diverse sources, this paper aims to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this pivotal period in British history, and indeed, Roman history.

The Great Barbarian Conspiracy and 4th-5th Century Conflicts: A Historical

Overview

The traditional narrative of the end of Roman Britain is punctuated by a series of increasingly severe military crises, culminating in the final withdrawal of Roman authority in the early 5th century. The Great Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 AD stands out as a particularly dramatic and destructive episode in this process, but it was by no means an isolated event. Rather, it was the culmination of a long period of mounting pressure on the frontiers of the province, and it was followed by several more decades of conflict and instability.

The Pre-Conspiracy Context: A Province Under Strain

By the mid-4th century, Roman Britain was already a province under considerable strain. The usurpation of Magnentius (350-353 AD) had led to the withdrawal of a significant portion of the British garrison, and although these troops were eventually replaced, the episode highlighted the vulnerability of the province to the political turmoil of the wider empire. The military establishment in Britain was also undergoing a significant transformation, with the traditional legions and auxiliaries being supplemented by a new system of frontier troops (*limitanei*) and mobile field armies (*comitatenses*). While this system was designed to provide a more flexible and responsive defense, it also created new logistical challenges and potential points of failure.

More recently, a new and crucial factor has been added to this picture of a province under strain: climate change. A 2025 study led by Charles Norman of the University of Cambridge,



which analyzed oak tree-ring records from southern Britain, has revealed a period of extreme drought in the years 364-366 AD. The study found that summer rainfall during these three years was significantly below the long-term average, with rainfall totals of just 29mm, 28mm, and 37mm, compared to a normal average of 51mm. As the study's authors note, these conditions would have had a devastating impact on the agricultural productivity of Roman Britain, which relied heavily on spring-sown crops like spelt wheat and six-row barley. The resulting crop failures would have led to widespread famine, undermining the economic stability of the province and creating severe logistical challenges for the Roman army, which relied on local agricultural surplus to feed its troops.

The Great Barbarian Conspiracy: A Coordinated Assault

It was in this context of environmental crisis and military vulnerability that the Great Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 AD unfolded. According to the contemporary historian Ammianus Marcellinus, the conspiracy was a coordinated, multi-pronged assault on the province by a coalition of barbarian peoples. The Picts from Caledonia, the Scots from Ireland, the Attacotti (a people of uncertain origin), and the Saxons from Germania all launched simultaneous attacks on different parts of the province. The attack was made possible by a rebellion of the Roman garrison on Hadrian's Wall, which allowed the Picts to cross the frontier unimpeded. The situation was further exacerbated by the betrayal of the *areani*, a network of local intelligence agents who were supposed to provide early warning of barbarian movements but who had instead been bribed by the invaders.

The result was a catastrophic failure of the Roman defensive system. The western and northern parts of the province were overrun, cities were sacked, and the Romano-British population was subjected to widespread murder, rape, and enslavement. Nectaridus, the *comes maritime tractus* (count of the coastal region), was killed, and Fullofaudes, the *dux* (duke), was either besieged or captured. The remaining loyal Roman army units were forced to retreat to the southeastern cities, leaving much of the province to the mercy of the invaders.

The Theodosian Restoration: A Temporary Reprieve

The Roman response to the crisis was initially hampered by the fact that Emperor Valentinian I was campaigning against the Alamanni in Gaul and was unable to intervene personally. However, in the spring of 368 AD, a relief force commanded by the senior general Flavius Theodosius (the father of the future emperor Theodosius I) was dispatched to Britain. Theodosius, a skilled and experienced commander, was able to restore order to the province with remarkable speed. He established his base at Londinium (London) and, after offering an amnesty to deserters, was able to regarrison the abandoned forts and drive the barbarian invaders back to their homelands. He also appointed a new *dux*



Britanniarum, Dulcitus, and a new vicarius, Civilis, to head a new civilian administration. The areani were removed from their positions, and the frontiers were refortified, with new treaties being made with some of the border tribes, such as the Votadini. The Theodosian restoration was a remarkable achievement, but it was ultimately only a temporary reprieve. The underlying vulnerabilities that had led to the crisis of 367 AD remained, and the province would face further challenges in the years to come.

Renewed Instability: The Usurpations of Magnus Maximus and Constantine III

In 383 AD, the Roman general Magnus Maximus, who had served under Theodosius in Britain, launched his own bid for imperial power. He crossed to Gaul with a large portion of the British garrison, and although he was initially successful, he was eventually defeated and killed by Theodosius I in 388 AD. The withdrawal of troops by Maximus once again weakened the defenses of Britain, and the province was subjected to renewed raids by the Picts, Scots, and Saxons.

A similar pattern was repeated in the early 5th century. In 401-402 AD, the Roman general Stilicho, who was facing a major invasion of Italy by the Visigoths, stripped Hadrian's Wall of its remaining troops. Then, in 407 AD, the remaining Roman troops in Britain, fearing a Germanic invasion of the province, rebelled and proclaimed their own emperor, Constantine III. Constantine, like Maximus before him, crossed to Gaul with the remaining mobile troops in Britain, leaving the province effectively defenseless. Although Constantine was initially successful in establishing his own empire in Gaul and Hispania, his authority soon crumbled, and he was defeated and killed in 411 AD.

The End of Roman Rule: The Rescript of Honorius

By 410 AD, the situation in Britain had become untenable. The province was suffering from severe Saxon raids, and with no Roman troops to protect them, the Romano-Britons had expelled Constantine III's magistrates and had begun to look to their own defenses. In that year, the Romano-Britons sent a desperate appeal for help to the Emperor Honorius, but Honorius, who was himself besieged by the Visigoths in Ravenna, was in no position to help. His famous rescript, in which he told the cities of Britain to "look to their own defenses," effectively marked the end of Roman rule in the province. From this point on, Britain was on its own, and the stage was set for the final collapse of Roman civilization in the island and the emergence of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Archaeological Evidence of Instability: Hoarding, Burning, and Abandonment

The literary sources for the end of Roman Britain, while invaluable, provide only a partial



and often biased picture of the period. To gain a more complete understanding of the lived experience of crisis and collapse, we must turn to the archaeological record. The material remains of 4th and 5th century Britain—the buried hoards of coins and precious metals, the layers of ash and rubble that mark the destruction of villas and towns, and the shifting patterns of settlement and land use—provide a rich and often poignant testament to the turmoil of the era.

Coin Hoarding: A Barometer of Insecurity

The practice of burying hoards of coins and other valuable objects is a recurring feature of the Roman world, but it becomes particularly prevalent in times of crisis. The 4th and 5th centuries in Britain saw a significant increase in the number of hoards being deposited, and the distribution and composition of these hoards can provide valuable insights into the nature and extent of the instability that plagued the province.

One of the most famous hoards from this period is the Hoxne Hoard, discovered in Suffolk in 1992. This massive treasure, which consists of over 15,000 coins, as well as numerous items of gold and silver jewelry, is the largest hoard of late Roman gold and silver ever discovered in Britain. The coins in the hoard date to the late 4th and early 5th centuries, with the latest coins being issues of the usurper Constantine III (407-411 AD). The burial of the hoard is therefore likely to have taken place in the chaotic years following Constantine's departure from Britain, a time when the province was facing severe Saxon raids and the final breakdown of Roman authority.

Another significant hoard from this period is the Thetford Hoard, discovered in Norfolk in 1979. This hoard, which consists of gold jewelry, silver spoons, and a number of gold rings inscribed with the name of the god Faunus, is thought to have been a collection of ritual objects belonging to a pagan cult. The latest coins in the hoard date to the reign of the Emperor Gratian (367-383 AD), suggesting that it was buried in the aftermath of the Great Barbarian Conspiracy. The hoard's religious character has led some scholars to suggest that it may have been buried as a votive offering, perhaps in an attempt to appease the gods and restore order to a world that had been turned upside down.

While the Hoxne and Thetford hoards are exceptional in their size and richness, they are part of a much wider pattern of hoarding that can be observed across Britain in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. The distribution of these hoards is not uniform, with a particular concentration in East Anglia and the south-east, the areas most exposed to Saxon raids. This suggests that the hoarding was a direct response to the threat of barbarian attack, with people burying their valuables in the hope that they would be able to recover them once the danger had passed. The fact that so many of these hoards were never recovered is a grim testament to the fact that, for many people, that day never came.



Villa Destruction: The End of a Way of Life

The Roman villa was the heart of the rural economy in Britain, and the fate of the villas in the late 4th and 5th centuries is a key indicator of the health of the province as a whole. The archaeological evidence from villa sites across Britain paints a picture of widespread decline and destruction during this period. Many villas show signs of having been violently destroyed, with layers of ash and rubble indicating that they were burned to the ground. Others seem to have been simply abandoned, with their owners either fleeing in the face of barbarian attack or no longer able to afford the upkeep of their luxurious country estates. Lullingstone Roman Villa in Kent is a particularly well-documented example of a villa that met a violent end. This magnificent villa, which had been in continuous occupation for over 300 years, was destroyed by fire at some point in the 5th century. The exact date of the fire is uncertain, but it is likely to have been the result of a Saxon raid. The destruction of the villa was not a clean break, however. The archaeological evidence suggests that the site was partially reoccupied in the post-Roman period, with a small Anglo-Saxon settlement being established in the ruins of the old villa. This pattern of destruction, abandonment, and partial reoccupation is one that is repeated at many villa sites across Britain, and it provides a vivid illustration of the gradual and often messy process by which Roman civilization gave way to the Anglo-Saxon world.

Settlement Abandonment and Shifting Land Use

The decline of the villas was part of a wider pattern of settlement abandonment and shifting land use that can be observed across Britain in the late 4th and 5th centuries. Many smaller farmsteads and villages were also abandoned during this period, and there is evidence of a general contraction of settlement, with people moving away from the more exposed rural areas and congregating in the relative safety of the larger towns and fortified centers. The archaeological evidence also suggests a significant change in agricultural practices, with a decline in the cultivation of arable crops and a shift towards a more pastoral economy. This may have been a response to the increased insecurity of the countryside, as livestock could be more easily moved to safety in the event of a raid. It may also reflect a decline in the population, as a smaller population would have required less land for arable farming.

The archaeological evidence for the end of Roman Britain is complex and often difficult to interpret. However, the overall picture that emerges is one of a society in crisis. The buried hoards, the burned-out villas, and the abandoned settlements all tell the same story: a story of fear, violence, and the gradual unraveling of a way of life that had endured for over 300 years.



The Roman Military Response: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Strategic Failure

The Roman army in Britain, even in its diminished late 4th-century state, was a formidable fighting force. It was well-equipped, well-trained, and had a long and successful track record of defending the province against its enemies. However, as the events of the Great Barbarian Conspiracy and its aftermath demonstrated, it was not invincible. The army had a number of inherent weaknesses that were ruthlessly exploited by its enemies, and its strategic response to the mounting crisis was ultimately a failure.

The Late Roman Army in Britain: A Dual System

The late Roman army in Britain was organized according to a dual system that had been developed by Diocletian and Constantine I in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries. This system consisted of two main components: the *limitanei*, or frontier troops, and the *comitatenses*, or mobile field armies. The *limitanei* were stationed in forts and watchtowers along the frontiers, such as Hadrian's Wall and the Saxon Shore, and were responsible for the day-to-day defense of the province. The *comitatenses*, on the other hand, were based in the interior of the province and were designed to be a rapid reaction force, capable of responding to major incursions and dealing with internal rebellions. In theory, this system should have provided a flexible and effective defense for the province. In practice, however, it had a number of significant weaknesses. The *limitanei* were generally of a lower status and were paid less than the *comitatenses*, which could lead to problems with morale and recruitment. The division of the army into two separate commands also created logistical challenges and could lead to a lack of coordination in the face of a major crisis. The most significant weakness of the system, however, was its reliance on a network of local intelligence agents, the *areani*, to provide early warning of barbarian movements. As the events of 367 AD demonstrated, this reliance on local agents could be a fatal flaw, as the *areani* proved to be susceptible to bribery and betrayal.

The Theodosian Reforms: A Temporary Fix

The restoration of order in Britain by Theodosius in 368-369 AD was a remarkable military achievement, and it was accompanied by a number of important military reforms. The *areani* were disbanded, and the frontiers were refortified. Theodosius also appears to have reorganized the command structure of the army in Britain, creating a new province, Valentia, in the north and appointing a new *dux Britanniarum* to command the frontier troops. These reforms were undoubtedly effective in the short term, and they helped to restore a measure of security to the province. However, they did not address the fundamental weaknesses of the Roman military position in Britain.



Strategic Failure: The Withdrawal of Troops

The most significant strategic failure of the Roman military in Britain was its inability to maintain an adequate garrison in the province. Throughout the late 4th and early 5th centuries, Britain was repeatedly stripped of troops to deal with crises in other parts of the empire. The usurpation of Magnus Maximus in 383 AD, the withdrawal of troops by Stilicho in 401-402 AD, and the rebellion of Constantine III in 407 AD all had a devastating impact on the defensive capabilities of the province. Each of these withdrawals was a gamble, based on the calculation that the troops were needed more urgently elsewhere. In the end, however, the gamble failed, as the repeated weakening of the British garrison created a power vacuum that was eagerly filled by the province's enemies.

The final withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain in the early 5th century was not a deliberate act of policy but rather the result of a series of ad hoc decisions made in the face of overwhelming military pressure. The rescript of Honorius in 410 AD, in which he told the cities of Britain to "look to their own defenses," was not a declaration of independence but rather a desperate admission of defeat. The Roman army had been defeated not by a single, decisive battle but by a long war of attrition that it was no longer able to win.

Conclusion: An Integrated Model for the End of Roman Britain

The end of Roman Britain was not a singular event but a complex and protracted process of transformation. The traditional narrative, with its focus on military defeat and barbarian invasion, provides only a partial explanation for the collapse of Roman authority in the province. As this paper has argued, a more complete understanding of this pivotal period requires an integrated approach that takes into account the interplay of environmental, economic, and political factors.

The Great Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 AD, while undoubtedly a traumatic and destructive event, was not the cause of the collapse but rather a symptom of a deeper malaise. The province was already weakened by a severe environmental crisis, which had undermined its agricultural base and created severe logistical challenges for the Roman army. The military itself was beset by structural weaknesses, and its strategic response to the mounting crisis was ultimately a failure. The repeated withdrawal of troops to deal with crises elsewhere in the empire created a power vacuum that was eagerly filled by the province's enemies.

The archaeological record provides a vivid and often poignant testament to the turmoil of this period. The buried hoards of coins and precious metals, the burned-out villas, and the abandoned settlements all tell a story of fear, violence, and the gradual unraveling of a way of life. By integrating this material evidence with the literary sources and the new data from palaeoclimatology, we can begin to build a more nuanced and comprehensive model



for the end of Roman Britain.

This integrated model does not diminish the importance of the barbarian invasions or the military failures of the late Roman army. Rather, it places them in a wider context, showing how they were part of a larger process of systemic collapse. The end of Roman Britain was not simply a story of conquest and defeat; it was a story of a society that was no longer able to adapt to the challenges it faced. The lessons of this story are as relevant today as they were 1,600 years ago.