

2 Roman Britain AD 43 - 410

Up to this point the British Isles had remained well outside the main centres of civilisation owing to their northerly location and the fact that they were separated from Europe by sea. Whereas in Egypt, Greece and Rome advanced urban cultures had prospered, the British Isles were devoid of large towns or even large domestic buildings. The craft of metal-working had reached quite a high standard, known to the Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) who wrote about 'the Tin Isles'. In the next century Pytheas of Massalia, a Greek explorer, learned from the Celtic inhabitants that they called their islands *Pretanike*, later written in Latin as *Britannia*. Pytheas also noted that they called the larger island *Nesos Albionon* and the smaller *Ierne*, names later transcribed in Latin as *Albion* and *Hibernia*.

It was the lure of mineral wealth together with the glory of conquest which prompted the Roman general **Julius Caesar** to cross to 'Britannia' in 55 or 54 BC after he had subdued the Celtic tribes of Gaul. His expedition was chiefly exploratory but it had the important result of making Britain better known to European contemporaries. Moreover, Caesar wrote in considerable detail about his experiences in Britain, thus providing the first reliable written account of the island and its people. Caesar's main opponent in Britain was Cassivellaunus, ruler of the Catuvellauni tribe which under his son Tasciovanus and grandson Cunobelinus established a firm hold on the south east of Britain, with a chief town at Colchester. Their main British rivals continued to be the Atrebates though there were at least eight major tribes in addition. Caesar extracted from the main tribes recognition of Rome's supremacy, a situation that continued under the first three Roman emperors and brought Britain slowly under Roman cultural influences. Caesar did not visit Ireland where the rule of local Celtic chieftains continued undisturbed by Roman influence.

In AD 43 the Roman Emperor Claudius, partly for reasons of personal prestige, decided to invade Britain on the pretext that Rome's ally Verica, king of the Atrebates, had been dispossessed by the Catuvellauni. An army based on four Roman legions and led by Aulus Plautius landed in Kent - after overcoming the soldiers' fear of crossing the North Sea which many of them regarded as the boundary of the human world. The Romans defeated the Catuvellauni under Togodumnus and Caratacus (sons and successors of Cunobelinus), at which point Claudius arrived in person to direct the capture of Colchester. He then left his generals to the task of either winning over or defeating the remaining British tribes.

By AD 47 Plautius had established a frontier from Exeter to the Humber and he made a treaty with Cartimandua, queen of the Brigantes, who occupied much of northern Britain. In AD 60 the Romans faced their most serious threat when **Boudicca**, Queen of the Iceni (based in present-day Norfolk) led an alliance of British tribes who sacked the three Roman centres of Camulodunum, Verulamium and Londinium. This proved only a temporary setback because Boudicca's forces were soon destroyed by Suetonius Paulinus, who had been away in North Wales, invading Anglesey. Wales was conquered by AD 78, though Julius Agricola's invasion of northern Britain a few years later failed to bring that region completely under control, largely because of a shortage of Roman manpower. The solution to this problem was found by the Emperor **Hadrian** who in about AD 122 ordered the construction of a massive stone wall with protective towers, stretching across northern Britain from the Solway to the Tyne. The Antonine wall, built of turf, was later constructed between the present Edinburgh and Glasgow but it failed to hold back the tribes of north Britain as successfully as Hadrian's

remarkable wall, recognized to be the most impressive frontier fortification in the Roman Empire.

Meanwhile **Britannia** was being established as a major Roman province ruled by a governor who represented the emperor and at first commanded three legions (about 15,000 men) and 40,000 auxiliary troops. As such he had the status of a senior general of consular rank. Early in the third century the province was divided into two, Britannia Superior, with its capital at Londinium (London), and Britannia Inferior with its capital at Eboracum (York). The Romans governed Britain for the best part of 400 years, during which time the province was mostly at peace and growing increasingly prosperous. The Roman way of life was imported wholesale and imposed on the Celtic Britons who gradually adapted to it. Towns were laid out with streets and impressive public buildings such as temples and baths while stone roads were constructed (in remarkably straight lines) to link them together. Many towns had a population of about 5,000 while the largest were twice that size. The total population of Roman Britain at its peak was probably about two million.

In the countryside Celtic agriculture continued much as before though rich individuals built villas, some of which were lavishly decorated with mosaics and luxuriously equipped with baths and heating systems. The presence of so many Roman soldiers, administrators and camp followers introduced a cosmopolitan element into Britain's life and stimulated the economy through demand. The wool trade prospered, especially in the Cotswolds, and there was a roaring trade in the import of luxury goods. A variety of pagan gods was worshipped, ranging from the traditional Celtic deities to the official gods of imperial Rome. The largest towns were granted the status of *colonia*, which gave citizens rights before the law and the town itself the privilege of a measure of self-government. Well preserved Roman baths can still be seen at Aquae Sulis (Bath), while a substantial Roman castle still exists at Colchester. No temples have survived above ground but several villas have been excavated, the most magnificent of which is the one at Fishbourne, thought to be the palace of Cogidubnus, ruler of the Atrebates. The Romans tolerated friendly British chiefs at first, though by the beginning of the second century all except the tribes of what are now Scotland and Ireland had fallen under Roman rule.

In the north of Britain the mountains proved to be a safe haven for the local tribes and despite the fact that the Romans made persistent efforts to conquer the whole of the area they failed to do so, and after 176 they gave up and withdrew south of Hadrian's Wall. No serious attempt was made by the Romans to conquer **Ireland** which at this time was divided into as many as 80 or so petty 'kingdoms' whose chiefs were essentially war leaders. Though powerful individuals emerged as 'high kings' from time to time there was little political stability and the general historical picture for this period is confused and obscure. However, it is clear that soon after 176 Celtic people called 'Scoti' crossed from Ireland and settled on the western coast of Britain north of Hadrian's Wall, establishing there the kingdom of Dalraida and pushing the original inhabitants (the Picts) farther north and east. The Picts and Scots settled their differences from time to time in order to join together in attacks on the Wall and the lands to the south of it, and they remained a constant threat to the northern frontiers of Roman Britain. Moreover the Scots were increasingly identified with north Britain which came to be called **Scotland** as a result.

For most of its existence Roman Britain was heavily garrisoned by three legions with permanent camps at York, Chester and Caerleon in Wales. This chiefly explains why peace

generally prevailed, though there were upheavals from time to time. In 286, Carausias, a Roman officer, rebelled and for a short time established himself as ruler in Britain until his murder in 293. He was followed by another independent commander, Allectus, but he was not able to withstand the avenging force of the Emperor Constantius I who restored order in 296 and divided Britain into four provinces, repaired the frontiers and reformed the administration. In 367 the Scots and Picts successfully broke through the Roman defences and caused mayhem until they were repelled two years later. Roman Britain's peace and prosperity depended entirely upon the Roman soldiers who defended its frontiers but by the 5th century the Roman Empire itself had begun to weaken in the face of constant attacks from the many tribes which lay beyond its frontiers. In 410 even the city of Rome was sacked by the barbarian Goths and the Emperor Honorius decided that he needed the legions garrisoned in Britain for defence nearer home. Accordingly the Roman legions in Britain were ordered to leave, and the province was instructed to defend itself.