

# ROMAN BRITANNIA (43 CE TO 410 CE)



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## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how and why the Romans conquered Britannia, how the Romans brought their culture to the island over the span of 400 years, why the Romans left Britain in the first decade of the 5th century CE, and finally what evidence Roman Britain is left in the United Kingdom today.

## Subjects

European History  
World History  
Anthropology

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Hadrian's Wall
- British Museum, London
- Roman Wall, London
- Roman Baths, Bath
- Roman Legion Museum, Wales
- Roman ruins around the UK

## Essential Questions

- When did the Romans conquer Britain?
- What changes did the Romans bring to Britain's culture?
- Why did the Romans abandon Britain in the 5th century?
- Is there a legacy of Roman Britannia in the United Kingdom today?

## Academic Summary

There is a good example of the Roman adoption and modification of a native camp at Hod Hill in Dorset. The Romans cut off a rectangular portion within the north-west corner, utilizing the old lines for the north and west sides, and completing the enclosure by their own, on the south and east. The remains were partially destroyed many years ago, when many Roman relics were found, including coins ranging from Augustus to Trajan.

*From "Military Remains" in Roman Era in Britain by John Ward, London: 1911*

The most civilized of all these nations are they who inhabit Kent, which is entirely a maritime district, nor do they differ much from the Gallic customs. Most of the inland inhabitants do not sow corn, but live on milk and flesh, and are clad with skins. All the Britains, indeed, dye themselves with wood, which occasions a bluish color, and thereby have a more terrible appearance in fight. They wear their hair long, and have every part of their body shaved except their head and upper lip. Ten and even twelve have wives common to them, and particularly brothers among brothers, and parents among their children; but if there be any issue by these wives, they are reputed to be the children of those by whom respectively each was first espoused when a virgin.

*Julius Caesar, The Gallic Wars, approx. 45 BCE*

There are two principal races of the Britons, the Caledonians and the Maeatae, and the names of the others have been merged in these two. The Maeatae live next to the cross-wall which cuts the island in half, and the Caledonians are beyond them. Both tribes inhabit wild and waterless mountains and desolate and swampy plains, and possess neither walls, cities, nor tilled fields, but live on their flocks, wild game, and certain fruits...They dwell in tents, naked and unshod, possess their women in common, and in common rear all the offspring. Their form of rule is democratic for the most part, and they are very fond of plundering; consequently they choose their boldest men as rulers....They can endure hunger and cold and any kind of hardship; for they plunge into the swamps and exist there for many days with only their heads above water, and in the forests they support themselves upon bark and roots, and for all emergencies they prepare a certain kind of food, the eating of a small portion of which, the size of a bean, prevents them from feeling either hunger or thirst.

*Cassius Dio, Roman History, 229 CE*

Most of Britain is marshland because it is flooded by the continual ocean tides. The barbarians usually swim in these swamps or run along in them, submerged up to the waist. Of course, they are practically naked and do not mind the mud because they are unfamiliar with the use of clothing, and they adorn their waists and necks with iron, valuing this metal as an ornament and a token of wealth in the way that other barbarians value gold. They also tattoo their bodies with various patterns and pictures of all sorts of animals. Hence the reason why they do not wear clothes, so as not to cover the pictures on their bodies. They are very fierce and dangerous fighters, protected only by a narrow shield and a spear, with a sword slung from their naked bodies. They are not familiar with the use of breast-plates and helmets, considering them to be an impediment to crossing the marshes. Because of the thick mist which rises from the marshes, the atmosphere in this region is always gloomy.

*Herodian, History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus, 238 CE*

The barbarians beyond the Rhine, attacking in force, reduced the inhabitants of Britain and some of the Celtic tribes to the point where they were obliged to throw off Roman rule and live independently, no longer subject to Roman laws. The Britons therefore took up arms and, braving the danger on their own behalf, freed their cities from the barbarians threatening them. And all America [Brittany] and the other Gallic provinces followed their example, freed themselves in the same way, expelled the Roman rulers, and set up their own governments as far as lay within their own power.

*Zosimus, Historia Nova, approx. 500 CE*

In the summer of 54 BCE, Julius Caesar, fresh off of victories on the European continent against Gallic tribes, crossed the English Channel with approximately 800 ships from across the empire and landed on the southern coast of what is today England (somewhere around Kent). After a short campaign to consolidate his beachhead, Caesar marched inland towards the Thames River with his army, defeating native Briton armies along the way. Eventually Caesar's invasion failed, and he abandoned his campaign of Britain, but in the meantime he had opened the door to other Roman armies. Although Augustus planned further expeditions after he turned Rome into an empire after the Civil War, these campaigns never got off the ground, and the relationship between Rome and Britain developed into one of a mutually grudging respect. By 43 CE, however, under orders from Emperor Claudius, a new Roman invasion of over 40,000 soldiers was successful in capturing the southeastern portion of the island, establishing Roman control.

Roman rule in Britannia (today's England and Wales – Scotland was never brought under Roman control) brought "civilization" to the island. Roman baths, villas, forts, roads, walls and amphitheaters dot the English landscape today, although many of the sites require a little imagination by modern visitors to picture their ancient grandeur. The Romans founded London shortly after the invasion of 43 CE and the city grew quickly over the next couple of centuries. Roman imperial leaders would control (at least tacitly) Britannia for the next four centuries, until the early 5th century. During the Anglo-Saxon invasion, with much of the western part of the empire falling apart, local Britons rose up and expelled the Romans from the island. In reality, the end had been coming for over a decade, but in 410 the last Roman soldiers left Britannia. Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how and why the Romans conquered Britannia, how the Romans brought their culture to the island over the span of 400 years, why the Romans left Britain in the first decade of the 5th century CE, and finally what evidence of Roman Britain is left in the United Kingdom today.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why the Romans conquered Britannia.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Romans brought their culture to Britain over the span of 400 years of rule.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why the Romans abruptly abandoned Britain early in the 5th century CE.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Was the Roman policy of expansion too much for the empire to handle? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture – Brief overview of Roman Britain. (10 min)
- Video – Roman Britain (30 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Roman Britain, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/photographs to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Why did the Romans invade Britannia? What elements of culture did the Romans bring to Britain over the span of 400 years of rule? Why did the Roman era end in Britain early in the 5th century? What legacy of Rome is left in Britain today? (20 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail how and why the Romans conquered Britannia, how the Romans brought their culture to the island over the span of 400 years, why the Romans left Britain in the first decade of the 5th century CE, and finally what evidence of Roman Britain is left in the United Kingdom today.

# Extension

## On tour: Roman Baths in Bath, England

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit the Roman Baths in Bath, England, where they can see for themselves perhaps the best preserved example of a Roman bathhouse in Europe. Established as a Roman spa over an old Iron Age hot spring in the 60s AD (the only such naturally hot, mineral rich waters in the UK), the bath complex gradually expanded over the succeeding three centuries to a complex compound of many separate buildings. After the Romans left, the baths fell into disrepair and were lost for centuries, although the town retained its name. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Britons rediscovered the benefits of hot bathing, and the baths were reopened as a health resort for the wealthy, becoming available to all classes in the 20th century. Unfortunately, in 1978, the pools were closed after a local young girl contracted meningitis from a water-borne amoeba, and the baths were shut down permanently. Since 2006, bathers have been able to take a dip in a new modern bath, one that uses modern filtering and chemical processes to keep it clean, and one not connected to the old Roman system of lead pipes. There is also a Roman museum at the complex that contains thousands of Roman artifacts, including over 12,000 Roman coins found in the complex and presumed to be offerings to Roman goddesses. Over 100 “curse tablets” have also been found and are displayed in the museum. They are apparently messages asking the goddess to curse certain individuals (many of these tablets accuse the cursed individual of stealing the writer’s clothing at the baths).

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia\\_romana/britannia/miscellanea/geography.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/britannia/miscellanea/geography.html)  
Roman Perceptions of Britain (primary sources)
- [elfinspell.com/PrimarySourceTacitus.html](http://elfinspell.com/PrimarySourceTacitus.html)  
Tacitus' Description of Britain (primary source) – from Readings in English History Drawn from the Original Sources by Edward Cheyney, Boston: 1908
- [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/romans\\_in\\_britain.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/romans_in_britain.htm)  
Romans in Britain (website) – from History Learning Site (UK)
- [www.athenapub.com/caesar1.htm](http://www.athenapub.com/caesar1.htm)  
The Landings of Caesar in Britain, 55 and 54 BC (website)
- [www.csad.ox.ac.uk/rib/ribiv/jp4.htm](http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/rib/ribiv/jp4.htm)  
A Corpus of Writing-Tablets from Roman Britain (website). Contains mostly primary sources. From the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents at Oxford University – recommended for advanced/AP students and classes.
- [www.oxforddnb.com/public/themes/92/92733.html](http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/themes/92/92733.html)  
Roman Britain (website) – secondary source essay by Peter Salway on the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography website.
- [www.iadb.co.uk/romans/index.htm](http://www.iadb.co.uk/romans/index.htm)  
Roman Britain (website) – from the Integrated Archaeological Database System (UK), a service of the York Archaeological Trust (UK)
- [www.localhistories.org/romlife.html](http://www.localhistories.org/romlife.html)  
Everyday Life in Roman Britain (website) – great basic information for all students
- [archive.museumoflondon.org.uk/Londinium/](http://archive.museumoflondon.org.uk/Londinium/)  
Living in Roman London (website) – from the Museum of London. Contains primary and secondary sources on Londinium, both in Roman times and today.
- [www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Visit\\_Roman\\_Britain\\_KS2b.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Visit_Roman_Britain_KS2b.pdf)  
Roman Britain (pdf) – from the British Museum
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdXBCfczn0A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdXBCfczn0A)  
The Romans in Britain – Fact and Fable (video). 30-min video from the BBC's Open University.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=buH5xdTWRTw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buH5xdTWRTw)  
The Roman Invasion of Britain (video) – 45-minute video designed for British high school students. May be too long for most classes, but it is well worth it. Highly recommended for students and classes.

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Britain)  
Roman Britain – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Londinium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Londinium)  
Londinium – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End\\_of\\_Roman\\_rule\\_in\\_Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_of_Roman_rule_in_Britain)  
End of Roman Rule in Britain – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Baths\\_\(Bath\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Baths_(Bath))  
Roman Baths (Bath) – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile)  
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/bath](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/bath)  
On the Road: Bath – from Passports Educational Travel

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall)  
Roman Britain – Hadrian's Wall
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars)  
Roman Gaul – The Gallic Wars

## **Key Terms**

- Britain
- Caesar
- Celtic
- Culture
- London
- Roman
- Roman Baths

