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THE ROMAN WITHDRAWAL FROM BRITAIN – 410 OR 435? A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: This article discusses the evidence to support a continued official Roman imperial presence in Britain after the traditional date of 409-410, with the possibility of the final loss of the British provinces occurring sometime around 435-440. It will explore the reasons why the later date is to be preferred, commencing with an analysis of why any dating of events based on Zosimus and Gildas should be ignored, including why the replacement of Britain with Bruttium is consistent within Zosimus's narrative. It then assesses the remaining evidence, looking first at how other official Roman withdrawals were managed, and what the evidence for the continued existence of the *Limitanei* implies for any official withdrawal around 410. This is followed by an analysis of how ongoing religious appointments to Britain within the framework of an imperial church would co-exist with ongoing civil and secular appointments. It then assesses the material evidence for both pottery and coinage before concluding with an analysis of the empire's economic situation in 410 compared to 435-440 and its ability to hold on to the British provinces.
Keywords: *Roman Britain; Honorius; Zosimus; Gildas; Limitanei.*

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For centuries, the consensus amongst historians has been that in 409/10, the western Roman emperor Honorius effectively abandoned Britain, withdrawing the legions and advising the Romano-British to look after their own affairs.[1] Nevertheless, the proposition that Roman rule continued in Britain for a time after the fall of Constantine III in 411 has been put forward in the past by various authors.[2] Certainly the latest archeological evidence suggests that continued, though diminished, Roman rule into the third and even fourth decade of the fifth century cannot be ruled out.[3] So why does the traditional date of 409/410 continue to persist?

The original source material that forms the basis of this position is Zosimus, citing a so-called 'Rescript of Honorius', Gildas and, to a lesser degree, Procopius. Although doubts about the accuracy of Zosimus and Gildas in this matter have been raised, those doubts have generally not changed the basic outline of events during those years[4]. However, there is an argument that this interpretation is fundamentally flawed; that if Zosimus was not referring to Britain, then the remaining evidence points to a later date of the loss of the British provinces, of sometime around 435.

[1] GIBBON 1781, Ch. 31, specifically his interpretation of the state of Britain from 410-445.
[2] Thus BURY 1958, 201-202; SCHARF 1990, 473-474.
[3] ESMONDE-CLEARY 2011, 18.
[4] MILLETT 1990, 217 goes so far as to state that it is irrelevant whether Honorius did or didn't write to the British cities, as the Roman abandonment of Britain in 409/10 is clear, even without the Rescript of Honorius.

THE ISSUE WITH ZOSIMUS

Zosimus, in Book Six of his *Nova Historia* is seemingly very clear: "Honorius sent letters to the cities of Britain, counselling them to be watchful of their own security."[5] The timeframe within his history where this letter was sent is dated to around 409/410 and follows the rebellion of the British legions and their march into Gaul, so based upon a literal reading, there should be no debate about what has happened. As to why Honorius would send this letter to Britain, it is Gildas who apparently provides the answer with reference to repeated letters to the Romans asking for help across several years, of which this may have been one of them. Therefore, the traditional sequence of events is that the British legions rebel in 407, eventually elect Constantine as emperor, after which they march into Gaul leaving Britain undefended. The British cities then appeal to Honorius in 409 who tells them to look after their own affairs, whereupon they expel the Roman officials in 409/10. However, the situation is not so clear cut.

It has long been noted that Zosimus is a dreadful historian. Writing at Constantinople in the early sixth century, his narrative is full of errors, chronological inconsistencies, and muddled content. For a man who would, among many other things, transport the city of Paris to somewhere within Germania, it should therefore come as no surprise that this mention of Britain appears in the sequence where Zosimus is busy discussing the Gothic king Alaric's activities in Aemilia where he was attempting to build up support for his puppet emperor Priscus Attalus.[6] This is followed by a description of Honorius's security being upheld through the support of Heraclianus, the *comes Africae*. The interposition of a brief note concerning Britain in this sequence has led several scholars beginning with Gothofredus to believe that this is a textual error, and that Zosimus was in fact referring to a letter from Honorius to the cities of Bruttium, in southern Italy. As noted by Anthony Birley, the terms in Greek are very similar, making this is quite a convincing argument from a palaeographic perspective.[7]

On the surface of it though, this doesn't appear any more likely – why discuss a threat to the cities of Bruttium which seems equally as irrelevant, and this apparent irrelevancy was used by Thompson in 1982 to refute the textual error argument, citing among other things an opinion that Honorius would not have been writing to the cities of Bruttium, but rather to the *corrector Lucaniae et Bruttiorum*.[8] Thus, Honorius was writing to cities who no longer were under direct Roman provincial administrative control through the governors – i.e., the British cities who were in revolt. Thirty years later, Thompson's arguments were effectively refuted by Woods in 2012, forcefully (and in the author's view correctly) arguing that Zosimus's reference to Britain is wrong, and that there was precedent for the emperor to communicate directly with the provincial *civitates* and bypassing the governors.[9] But Wood too doesn't know quite what to substitute in the place of Britain or Bruttium, proposing that perhaps Zosimus meant to write Raetia.

Assuming that Zosimus had not simply confused this passage chronologically (which with Zosimus is always a possibility)[10], and he is therefore accurately describing an event that happened contemporaneously with the rest of the narrative, it is possible to reconcile the conjectured reference to Bruttium if one looks at what connects the preceding and proceeding parts of his narrative – the interaction of Attalus and Heraclianus.

In 409 Honorius was safely ensconced in Ravenna, while his imperial rival, Attalus, was in possession of Rome. Of the two, it was Attalus's situation that was more precarious, as grain from North Africa was being withheld by Heraclianus, who was at that point still loyal to Honorius, leading to the possible starvation of Rome. Strategically Attalus needed to deal with Heraclianus, and in fact he was being heavily pressured by his Visigothic sponsor, Alaric, to do exactly that by sending send an army down to Africa to deal with the situation.

While Attalus was contemplating what to do (eventually deciding not to send an army under the leadership of the Visigoth Drumas, an act which led to Attalus's eventually deposition by Alaric), it was this evolving crisis that triggered Honorius's court to write to the cities of Bruttium. Why? Because to reach Heraclianus at Carthage, an army needed transportation. There were, in all likelihood, insufficient ships at Portus for the task; the fleet at Ravenna was held by Honorius, so the only other option was to go south to gain access to the *Classis Misenensis* at Misenum to transport the army across to Africa. However, it is unclear who controlled the *Classis Misenensis*, or if there were sufficient vessels berthed there, so it was possible that Attalus's army was going to march down to the toe of Italy and take ship at Rhegium, limiting the amount of time a hastily gathered collection of ships would be at sea. Under these circumstances, the possibility of cities being sacked along the way was a distinct possibility. Note that this is an identical route to the one Alaric himself would take only a few months later after he sacked Rome and was seeking to make his own way to North Africa.[11]

It was clear that Honorius was in no position to intervene were this march southward to occur, hence his decision to advise the cities of Bruttium to take care of themselves if the Visigoths did move southward to launch an attack against Heraclianus. Attalus's decision not to proceed soon rendered this point moot; consequently, Honorius's letter to the cities seems to be out of context, especially with its being rendered as the cities of Britain in Zosimus's text. This is the historical context of the letters of Honorius,

[5] Zosimus, *Nova Historia*, 6.10.2.
[6] Zosimus 3.9.1, describes the elevation of Julian as emperor at Paris in 360. Zosimus 6.10.2-11.1 describes the events around the sending of the rescript.
[7] BIRLEY 2005, 461-462.
[8] For the full arguments, see THOMPSON 1982, 445–462.
[9] For the full arguments, see WOODS 2012, 818–826.
[10] BIRLEY 2005 points out the possibility that Zosimus's account may have been confused chronologically, with the letter to the cities of Bruttium written six months later when Alaric descended with his Visigoths into Bruttium after the sack of Rome.
[11] In Alaric's later march south, he could not take Misenum and was forced to attempt to board a fleet at Rhegium, which was sunk at sea before he could make the trip. See ATKINSON 2020, 77-78.

which clearly can be seen as a sensible strategic approach to the, at the time quite probable, march of Visigoth led armies into the south of Italy. This, together with Woods's analysis refuting Thompson's arguments, point to a clear answer that there was no letter by Honorius to the cities of Britain.

THE ISSUE WITH GILDAS AND OTHER SOURCES

If there was no letter from Honorius, then what do we make of the remarks in Gildas's work, *De Excidio Britanniae*, specifically 18.1:

> The Romans, therefore, left the country, giving notice that they could no longer be harassed by such laborious expeditions, nor suffer the Roman standards, with so large and brave an army, to be worn out by sea and land by fighting against these unwarlike, plundering vagabonds... and, because they thought this also of advantage to the people they were about to leave, they, with the help of the miserable natives, built a wall different from the former, by public and private contributions, and of the same structure as walls generally, extending in a straight line from sea to sea, between some cities, which, from fear of their enemies, had there by chance been built. They then give energetic counsel to the timorous native, and leave them patterns by which to manufacture arms. Moreover, on the south coast where their vessels lay, as there was some apprehension lest the barbarians might land, they erected towers at stated intervals, commanding a prospect of the sea; and then left the island never to return.

This passage follows on from mentions of previous appeals which the Romans responded to, with them sending the legions to fight the barbarians to the north. Thompson used this passage to support the veracity of Zosimus's text, referring to Britain and not Bruttium. However, the account is both vague and confused, as it should be expected from someone writing in the mid-sixth century where the Romans had not been seen in a century. As clearly shown by Woods, the passage makes no mention to any emperor to whom an appeal was made, and so, if it actually happened, could equally apply to the period around 435 as to the supposed setting of 410, while the so-called responses by the Romans to previous appeals are most likely by then legendary accounts seeking to explain the presence of Hadrianic and Antonine walls to the north, and the Saxon forts to the south-east. Proponents of the letters of Honorius found this a useful piece of circumstantial evidence to support the British being told to look after their own affairs, but independent of those letters, it adds nothing of substance to the events of 409/10.

Further, however, there is a significant flaw in any supposed appeal to Honorius in 409, which ignores a fundamental piece of evidence that would suggest that any appeal at that date would not be sent through to the court at Ravenna. In 409, there were officially *three* members of the Imperial college governing the empire – Honorius at Ravenna, Theodosius II at Constantinople, and the former usurper, now emperor, Constantine III at Arelate in Gaul. Unlike Attalus at Rome, Constantine had (rather unwillingly it must be said) been recognized by Honorius as co-emperor in the west, not to mention he had also been made consul after his elevation. Therefore, it would have been to Constantine that any official appeal would have been directed, and given that he was still in communication with Britain in 409 (his significant reversals of fortune begin in mid-410), an appeal to another emperor makes no sense given the situation on the ground. However, by 440, there was no rival emperor in the west, only one ruling from Ravenna – Valentinian III.

So, if Gildas can't be relied upon, do any of the other sources that have been traditionally used to support the loss of Britain in 410 actually stand close scrutiny?

Firstly, the *Narratio de imperatoribus domus Valentinianae et Theodosianae* states that:

> Honorius reigned for thirty-two years . . . many serious wounds afflicted the commonwealth during his principate... The Gauls and the Spains were entirely destroyed by barbarian nations, Vandals, Suebi, and Alans. The Britains were lost to the Roman name for ever.[12]

Aside from the fact that, at most, Honorius ruled for thirty years, its mention of the complete destruction of Gaul and Spain during his reign is not correct. Spain was held together reasonably well, especially once the Vandals passed onto North Africa in 429. Roman control was not seriously undone until at least 439, so beyond the reign of Honorius. The same applied to Gaul, where the larger devastations of the province don't begin until years of Aetius's dominance in the 440s. The linking of the loss of the British provinces with the events in Spain and Gaul is probably accurate, however, their being dated to the reign of Honorius is not. The better dating of these events is the 440s, during the reign of Valentinian III.

The second source is Procopius, *De bello vandalico* 3. 2. 31, 37–8:

> And after Alaric died from disease, and the army of the Visigoths, with Ataulf leading them, went into the Gauls, Constantinus, being worsted in battle, died with his sons. However, the Romans could no longer regain Britain, but it remained under usurpers from that time.

Again, this appears to be very unambiguous, but writing in the sixth century, it is clear from other passages that Procopius is somewhat confused about the British provinces. At one point later in the *De bello Gothico* (4.20), he authoritatively points out that Britain comprised of 2 separate islands, the first, Britain, 'to the west about in line

[12] MGH AA IX, Chron. min. i. 630.

with the far end of Spain' and then Brittia, 'towards the rear of Gaul' (4.20.5). His dating of the loss of the British provinces to local usurpers contemporaneously with the death of Constantine III again may have more to do with the lack of intimate knowledge of events in the west and when they occurred.

EVIDENCE AGAINST OFFICIAL ROMAN ABANDONMENT IN 410 (I): PREVIOUS WITHDRAWALS

If Honorius had officially relinquished the British provinces in 409/10, then it would be instructive to reflect upon how the Romans had done this in the past and see a) if there was a pattern and b) was this pattern followed.

After the age of the Antonines, and prior to 410, there were 2 instances where the Romans had officially withdrawn, fully or partially, from provinces that they possessed – Aurelian's complete withdrawal from Dacia in 271/3 and Jovian's substantial withdrawal from Mesopotamia in 363.[13] Of the two, it is Aurelian's which would have been comparable with any so-called Honorian withdrawal. In the case of Dacia, Aurelian withdrew the legions from the province, and re-established the Danube as the northern frontier of the empire. However, it was his actions in the reconfiguration of the provinces south of the Danube which is the most instructive. Aurelian carved out a new province out of Moesia Inferior, labelling it *Dacia Aureliana*. He did this to salvage Roman pride and to give the impression that the Romans still controlled a province called Dacia.[14]

In the case of Jovian, although it was not a complete withdrawal from the Severan conquests, the rump of the province that remained in Roman hands was still called Mesopotamia.[15] The point of the matter is that in the case of Britain, it was clearly Roman convention that any withdrawal from a province would subsequently involve reconfiguring of the adjacent provinces to maintain a fiction that the empire continued to possess these provinces. However, it is clear that after 410 there was no province that had been renamed or carved out to form a new province of Britannia. The *Notitia Dignitatum* certainly does not mention any change in the listed provinces, with all present and accounted for in the western half of the empire. Given that for the Western Empire this document was still being updated through to the mid-420s, such a momentous change in 410 would have been noted, with the expected absence of the five British provinces and a new province being documented in their place – *Britannia Honoria* perhaps?[16]

So what about the so-called withdrawal of the legions? Doesn't this imply a de-facto withdrawal of Roman authority, instead of a de-jeur one? But in fact, what does the phrase "the withdrawal of the legions" actually mean? It is well understood that by this period the legions of popular imagination had gone. In their place was a two-tiered military force instituted by Constantine I decades before: the well-paid Field Armies (*Comitatenses*) and the poorer resourced Frontier Troops (*Limitanei*). The field armies were the Empire's strategic reserve troops, tasked to respond to crises as they arose; in Britain, they were situated at Caerleon (Chester) and York, and were dominated by heavy cavalry. The frontier troops, as their name suggests, were placed along the edges of the provinces, and were principally infantry based. In the case of Britain, they permanently manned Hadrian's Wall, and were housed along the Roman forts that lined the Saxon Shore on the east coast of the island.[17]

It is without a doubt that the military units that accompanied Constantine to Gaul in 407 were the *Comitatenses*, and it is to these forces that the appellation 'legions' was ascribed, particularly as they were housed at the older legionary bases created centuries before. But the *Limitanei* remained in Britain to hold the frontiers.[18] Not only was this prudent on a strategic level, but their withdrawal from Britain was also unnecessary – Constantine had won over the commanders of the *Comitatenses* in Germania and northern Gaul, as well as the *Limitanei* who had fallen back from the Rhine, increasing the forces at his disposal.

Further, it is also clear that the *Comitatenses* were not returned to Britain after Constantine's fall in 411. So, was this an indication of an official withdrawal from Britain, simply one of neglect, or an inability to hold the British provinces due to the military weakness of the empire? The author would argue neither. The more likely scenario was this: This change in military dispersements, in effect not to re-instate the two British field armies back into Britain after the fall of Constantine III, but rather to hold them in place in Gaul, was made by the new *magister militum* of the West, Constantius. There were several strategic reasons for this.

Firstly, the immediate military crisis meant that all available troops that were at hand were required to chase down the barbarians which, apart from the group of Vandals who had crossed into Spain, the Roman military were eventually able to do.[19] Secondly, their presence would be more beneficial preserving the increasingly brittle Rhine frontier instead of lounging around in relative comfort in their British legionary bases. And thirdly, the imperial court would not want another recurrence of rebellion in Britain. The British legions had rebelled repeatedly in the past fifty years; apart from 407, they had rebelled in 383 under Magnus Maximus, in the late 360s they had conspired with barbarian tribes to overthrow imperial authority, and in 350, they had raised another usurper, Magnentius. Given this track history, central Roman authorities would not have

[13] The abandonment of the parts of Germania that lay on the eastern bank of the Rhine in 406/7 should not be counted, as this was not an official withdrawal from that territory, but an initial and, it was assumed, temporary reconfiguring of the military forces along the Rhine that was never reversed.
[14] SOUTHERN 2001, 120-121.
[15] POTTER 2004, 519. Although most of the territory handed over was that which Diocletian and Galerius had won in 299, the Jovian treaty also surrendered important parts of Mesopotamia that had been conquered by Septimius Severus.
[16] This is not the place to discuss the location of Valentia, but Valentia's presence is significant, in that the reconfiguring of provinces was occurring even up to 370, and that a new province would bear the name of the reigning emperor.
[17] SOUTHERN 2004, 401.
[18] GOLDSWORTHY 2009, 345.
[19] For Constantius's success at stabilizing the situation in Gaul during the 410s see HEATHER 2007, 238-244.

been eager to see history repeating. Therefore they, quite pragmatically, probably decided that Britain's security was better served by defeating the barbarians along the Rhine; that the Frontier troops would be sufficient to defend the northern and eastern frontiers against the occasional raid, and that once the situation in Gaul and Spain settled, that the two Field Armies could be restored at a later date. If this proposed scenario is accurate, what did this mean for the military structure of the British provinces?

In the western half of the empire, the military structure had the army under the overall command of the Master of Soldiers of the West (the *magister militum*). Under him were the Military Counts (*comes rei militaris*), and Britain had two of these: the *comes Britanniarum* (or Count of Britain), who commanded the two Field Armies, and the *comes litoris Saxonici* (the Count of the Saxon Shore), who commanded the frontier troops along the seaside Roman forts. The remainder of the frontier troops were under the command of the *dux Britanniarum* – the Duke of Britain, who reported to the Count of Britain. Any military decisions would be taken by these three military officers collectively, after gauging the opinion or the mood of the troops under them.[20] Under the new circumstances post 411, the Count of Britain's office was probably left vacant, but the Count of the Saxon Shore and the Duke of Britain in all likelihood remained occupied, for a time at least. They (officially at least) would have reported to the Master of Soldiers, but in reality were probably largely left to their own devices.

The continued existence of the *Limitanei* in Britain is unquestionably demonstrated by the battle against Pictish raiders in 428/9 that involved (or was possibly led by) Germanus, the Bishop of Auxerre, and former *dux tractus Amoricani et Nervicani*.[21] According to the *Vita Germani*, Germanus was sent to Britain on the recommendation of a Gallic Synod to deal with an outbreak of Pelagianism amongst the British clergy. Whilst there, not only did he have an interaction with a military tribune, but he was asked to lead a military force against raiders who were harassing at least one of the British provinces.[22] While the *vita* was a hagiography, not a history, it does contain enough material to form a good estimation of the condition of Roman Britain at the end of the 420s. Apart from demonstrating a still functioning civic life, it is the battle against the Picts that is most telling. This is a battle that was probably not led by Germanus, as his biographer's desire to make him the star of the show puts him at the centre of everything, but did involve him in some form, as his previous experience as a *dux* would have been a welcome addition. More importantly, it was a victory for the Roman forces. If there was no centralised military organisation, if the civic functions of the provinces had indeed broken down at that point, it would be highly unlikely that a hastily gathered group of townsfolk and farmers would have been able to arm and train themselves sufficiently to defeat a hostile armed force who was adept at raiding. This was a military force that could be deployed as needed, which still employed military tribunes, and could defeat raiders in battle conditions.[23] There is only one logical conclusion to draw from this, and that is the *Limitanei* were still functioning as late as 430.[24]

This conclusion also answers another of the mysteries of this period. With the *magister militum* Constantinus's success in Gaul bringing about a substantial degree of control and order, just what was preventing him bringing the rebellious British provinces to heel in 417-421, or even making some attempt to do so? The forces at his disposal were quite sufficient for the task, especially as the traditional narrative has it that there were no rebellious soldiers still present in Britain who could offer resistance. The long-standing argument is that he was unable to do so, as he was preoccupied with other more pressing concerns. But the more likely proposition is that it was unnecessary for him to do so, as the British provinces at this point had not abandoned their allegiance to the emperor.

The usual argument deployed against the continued existence of any imperial army units in Britain after 410 was one of pay. If no new money was coming into Britain from the imperial mints, the army would not have continued to exist if they weren't being paid. And whilst it is true that no bronze coinage has been located in Britain that was minted after 402, gold and silver coins minted up to c. 420 have been recovered.[25] However, the absence of bronze coinage is not necessarily indicative that there were no imperial units still functioning. Firstly, the *Limitanei* were not as well paid as the *Comitatenses*. With the withdrawal of the *Comitatenses*, the military authorities in Gaul may have felt that the existing money still in circulation in Britain was considered sufficient for ongoing payment of the *Limitanei*.[26] As time elapsed, a mixture of bartered goods and money would have become the norm, as was seen across the whole of the Roman economy as the fifth century continued. Finally, the *Limitanei*, unlike the *Comitatenses*, were perpetually tied to their home provinces, and generally formed an attachment to the province that they were living in. Such an attachment would be a powerful motivator to continue to defend the borders, even when conditions deteriorated, and money was no longer as plentiful as it had once been.

How long would this state of affairs have endured? Given the standard period of service in the Roman military of 25 years, the *terminus ante quem* of the *Limitanei* as a cohesive force would occur somewhere around 435-440, assuming little to no ongoing recruitment as the older veterans either retired or were killed in the ongoing raids.

[20] SOUTHERN 2004, 401-403; GOLDSWORTHY 2009, 340-341.

[21] MORRS/JONES/MARTINDALE 1971, 504.

[22] Constantius, *Vita Germani*, 17-18. The biographer, in keeping with a history of a saint, goes to great pains to ensure that there was no actual fighting against the Picts during this battle, rather that the raiders fled after hearing a great shout from the assembled Romano-British forces. This is purely a hagiographic necessity.

[23] JONES 1986, 363-373.

[24] Archeological evidence for the ongoing existence of the *Limitanei* is clearly shown at the Birdoswald Roman fort in Cumbria, which had a continued military presence stretching past the "official" removal of the legions in 410, and even beyond the proposed redating of 435/440, with ongoing local recruitment for at least 2 generations beyond that date. See WILMOTT/COOL/EVANS 2013, 203-387.

[25] MILLETT 1990, 226.

[26] The condition of the heavily worn coins from the Theodosian dynastic period support the assessment that these remained in circulation and use for a longer period of time than earlier Roman coins. See ESMONDE-CLEARY 2011, 18.

It is no coincidence that the year 440 roughly coincides with the Saxon *adventus*, as they were probably asked to come in as *foederati* to replace the now virtually non-existent *Limitanei*. And in fact, the *adventus* itself if a clear marker of the point at which Rome is unable to protect the British provinces. If the provinces were officially left to look after themselves in 410, such information would have made its way to various Germanic peoples who would have jumped at the opportunity to launch an incursion into the now open former provinces. That this did not happen for nearly 30 years is convincing proof in itself that the Romans did not walk away from Britain in 410.

EVIDENCE AGAINS OFFICIAL ROMAN ABANDONMENT IN 410 (II): ONGOING RELIGIOUS APPOINTMENTS

The intervention of Germanus in the 420s (above) was triggered by a religious dispute in the British provinces, and this highlights a function of the imperial court largely overlooked in any detailed analysis of the continued presence of Roman officials in Britain post 410.

The first thing to emphasise is that the Church at the time of Honorius was an imperial church – although in theory the appointment of bishops, metropolitans and patriarchs (including the Bishop of Rome) were in the hands of the clergy and the people, and thus independent of the state, the tightly controlled nature of the Dominate system of government would suggest that a level of imperial approval or confirmation was involved, especially once the gradual decay of imperial civic positions saw the imperial bishops taking on greater administrative roles.[27] However, there are glimpses of this approval process in the ancient sources. A clear example was the actions of Theodosius I in openly deposing bishop Demophilus of Constantinople during the Antiochene council of 381, and nominating his successor, Nectarius, a Roman senator who was the *praetor urbanus*, and was not even baptized at the time. The most important aspect of this episode was the emperor's expectation and ability to make the selection, and the Church's acceptance of his role.[28]

Admittedly the picture is not as clear cut in the west, especially at the level of the lower bishoprics, although Honorius's intervention in the disputed election of Boniface I in 418 is well documented.[29] One notes that such an imperial episcopal approval process is not clearly visible in the fifth century sources, nor is it alluded to by later Church sources, but these would have not emphasized any imperial involvement, given the later clashes between the increasingly independent western Church and the Byzantine court (and later the Holy Roman emperors). However, both the paucity of sources and the brief period of imperial authority in the west (within which falls this enquiry) cannot rule out the same level of imperial control that was present in the eastern court during the same period.[30]

What is clear however is the bishop's growing role in civil administration in the west, their right of acting as judges in civil cases, their sharing with the *defensor civitatis* the duty of protecting the poor against any oppression by government officials, and their right to bring cases to the attention of the emperor, all could not exist without a degree of integration with the administrative machinery of the Dominate government.[31] Added to this was the large proportion of bishops drawn from the *curiales* landowning classes with prior careers within the administrative machinery of the state.[32] Further, the fact that the Bishop of Rome was the only person in the western empire who officially appointed all bishops to their sees, and with the near constant communication with the imperial court at Ravenna, this paints a picture of imperial coordination of appropriate people to be assigned to the ecclesiastical positions within the provinces.[33] This interaction of imperial bureaucracy at Ravenna with the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome was aided by the largely ineffectual imperial governance of Honorius, and then Valentinian III, whose approval was largely one of acquiescence, aiding the illusion of the complete independence of the Roman church in the appointment of bishops and the higher clergy.

In the case of Britain post 410, and prior to the eradication of a centralized imperial church with the invasions of the Anglo-Saxons, there is no evidence of any formal abandonment of the appointment of bishops, metropolitans and exarchs to the British provinces.[34] Indeed, it is inconceivable that an organisation dedicated to the salvation of souls would have abandoned members of its flock, even in such a far-flung imperial outpost – see again the mission of Germanus.[35] The flow of religious office holders to Britain continued, and if they did, then it is reasonable to assume that their civil equivalents were also being sent as well, both being required to manage and regulate both the spiritual and the secular needs of the provinces. It is unlikely that any province of a now Christianised imperial state would completely reject the imposition of officials from one branch of the government and not the other. It would only come about from external factors such as the complete dismemberment of what remained of the entire Romanised administration by the Anglo-Saxons beginning in the late 440s.[36] Indeed, Prosper of Tiro speaks of Pope Celestine's actions in bringing the Pelagian outbreak under control as

[27] NORTON 2007, 240.
[28] BARRY 2019, 60-61. ERRINGTON 2006, 220-228. Note also Socrates, *Church History* 5.8, where he describes the emperor's approval, as well as Sozomen, *Church History*, 7.5-8.
[29] CHADWICK 2001, 459-460.
[30] Note Honorius's intervention to order a council of Catholic and Donatist bishops to meet in 411. See McEVOY 2013, 209.
[31] HUMFRESS 2003, 569-572.
[32] RAPP 2000, 379-399.
[33] McEVOY 2013, 208.
[34] In fact, there is no literary evidence for any religious appointments to Britain for the whole of the *fourth century*, apart from the mention of the three British bishops who attended the Council of Arles in 314. See WATTS 1991, 10-11.
[35] WOOD 2004, 434 observes that the exiling of Pelagian heretics shows just how much Britain had "returned" to being within the Imperial system after 410. This author argues that there was no return, but rather an ongoing continuation of imperial control.
[36] In fact, participation by a British bishop at a synod in Gaul demonstrates that at least some British churches were in full administrative and doctrinal touch with Gaul as late as 455.

occurring within what he explicitly describes as the British provinces, around 432.[37] He does not speak of the former British provinces, or of a church operating under the regime of various usurpers/tyrants.

It is quite probable therefore that for the period 410 to 435 civilian authority, like its religious counterpart, remained unchanged. Since the reforms of Constantine I, the civil administration was completely separated from the military structure. Any changes to the military appointments necessitated by the absence of the *Comitatenses* was not necessarily reflected in the gubernatorial appointments. There is no reason to assume that the *Vicarius* did not continue to represent the emperor and reside in London for a period after 410, or that governors continued to be sent from Rome to govern the five provinces, whose role included implementing imperial laws as promulgated by the Praetorian Prefect of Gaul. Again, the *Notitia Dignitatum* supports this view, with civilian officials still forming part of the official list of provincial and vicarate offices.[38]

But that is not to say that the chaos on the continent did not impact on the lives of the Romans in Britain. Bishops, the official face of the Imperial Church, continued to be appointed and hold their sees in the four principal cities of Britain, sharing their duties alongside the governors. The continued chaos in the western empire would surely have seen increasing periods where governors were not able to be immediately replaced, with the result that the imperial bishops increasingly took over their role in their absence.[39]

Arguments against the continuation of imperially coordinated civic appointments are again largely based on a lack of epigraphic evidence. And whilst it is true that no inscriptions containing the names of governors have come to light, that is not the same as saying that there weren't any. Firstly, the gradual decline in civic life by the elite, and their ongoing retreat into their countryside villas had been a feature of the fourth century and was continuing apace.[40] There is no doubt that the whole class of *Curiales* was in decline, and their gradual impoverishment contributed to the ongoing decay of the cities and smaller towns. But this was not unique to Britain, and was felt across the whole of the empire, and on the western provinces most keenly.[41] Consequently, the monumental building projects in the towns with which the elite had proclaimed their power and had etched their names in stone had long ceased to be. There are no recorded mentions of imperial governors after 410, but most provinces have large gaps in the records of gubernatorial appointments during the late 4th century onwards, and this reflects that the real power lay with the military hierarchy, part of the division of authority that Diocletian and Constantine introduced to prevent governors raising armies from within the provinces to challenge any imperial incumbent. Equally, we have no real knowledge of any appointment of bishops in the British dioceses, but that lack of evidence has not brought into question the ongoing existence of an organised British church with links and allegiances to both Rome (spiritual) and Ravenna (secular).[42] Of key importance here is the link between the cities and the bishops; if the civil administration had indeed been ejected in 410, replaced by regional rulers whose power emerged from older tribal allegiances, the abandonment of the cities should have been well on its way after a generation of neglect. This must have impacted upon the spiritual and secular requirements of the bishops, whose whole administrative apparatus was urban in nature, not least the public practice of the faith in large basilicas requiring significant numbers of the faithful present. But there is no evidence of the British sees being supressed by the Pope due to the decay of the cities as Gregory the Great did nearly 2 centuries later to several bishoprics in northern Italy after the Lombard invasions.[43]

The other argument is that in 410 the requirement of a civil administration, when the towns were in decline, an organised economy was disappearing and the elites were retreating, did not exist.[44] However, while a largely monetized economy was certainly being eroded, it is important to remember that the transition from money to barter economy already well underway in Britain and elsewhere prior to the year 410, and archaeological evidence points to continued, though greatly reduced and continually declining, manufacture of goods to service both a local and continental need stretching to around the mid fifth century, most especially seen in Wales and western England.[45] Industries such as pottery manufacture, it is true, were no longer mass producing their wares post-400, but hand-made pottery in the Roman form continued to be produced throughout the first few decades of the fifth century, and can only really be stated as ceasing altogether sometime during the 430s.[46] Further, this change doesn't simply begin in 400; the manufacture of hand-made pottery sees a resurgence in Britain from the late 3rd century, and occurs in parallel with the decline in the urban centres and the retreat of the elites to their villas.[47]

Crucially, however, the situation is identical in other parts of the western periphery. The cessation of mass-produced pottery and its replacement of hand-made replacements of inferior quality also occurred in northern Gaul at precisely the same time as Britain, while in Spain it occurs by the mid of the fifth century.[48] This is a picture of gradual decline within a failing imperial Roman model that is affecting all the provinces across the western empire along the periphery, all of whom show a similar trajectory. Northern Gaul for instance saw similar levels of fragmentation as experienced by Britain at roughly the same time.[49] However, those provinces continued to sit within a

[37] Prosper, *Chronicle*, Year 402; Prosper, *Contra Collatorem*, XXI.2.
[38] Among which were the *Rationalis summarum Britanniarum*, the *Praepositus thesaurorum Augustensium*, the *Procurator gynaecii (in Britannis) Ventensis*, and a section dealing with the officials under the *Vicarius Britanniarum*.
[39] RAPP 2013, 220.
[40] ESMONDE-CLEARY 2011, 17.
[41] JONES 1964, 735-756.
[42] The only name that emerges from fifth century obscurity is Fastidius, but there is no certainty that he was a bishop.
[43] JONES 1964, 875-879.
[44] HEATHER 2009, 293-296.
[45] MILLETT 1990, 225-226
[46] FITZPATRICK-MATTHEWS/FLEMING 2016, 1-33; FLEMING 2021, 16.
[47] PAUL 2007, 165.
[48] PAUL 2007, 164-166.
[49] GOLDSWORTHY 2009, 360.

Roman provincial system until their irretrievable loss during the mid-fifth century. There is no reason to assume, outside of the dubious references to the lost British provinces in the few remaining sources, that Britain was in any way or shape different. Although Roman Britain was beyond doubt a 'failing state' during the years after 410, this does not negate the likelihood of continued attempts by the central authorities to maintain the secular and religious imperial model, holding onto the principal cities where the officials resided, as the peripheral areas were gradually lost until it completely collapsed around 435-440.[50]

EVIDENCE AGAINST OFFICIAL ROMAN ABANDONMENT IN 410 (III): STATE OF BRITAIN AND THE EMPIRE IN 410 VS 440

The argument for the loss of the British provinces in 410 is also driven by a great deal of hindsight, interpreting contemporaneous events based on the later fact that the western empire fell. The watershed events of the crossing of the Rhine in 406 plus the emotive sacking of the former capital in 410 by Alaric makes that year especially symbolic, and seemingly logical that the empire's fall begins at that date. But how much of this is based on reality? The truth of the matter is that these shocks to the empire, while psychologically traumatic, did not really have any material impact on the strength of the empire to marshal resources to deal with the threats at that point in time.[51]

Apart from the Visigoths, who were more interested in settling down somewhere within the empire's boundaries, and function as semi-autonomous *foederati*, and the remnants of the Germanic forces that had crossed the Rhine in 406 which had not been captured, but were on their way to Spain, there were no significant threats to the empire at that time which would necessitate the casting adrift the British provinces. After all, the empire had been under similar stresses in the mid third century and had managed to come out the other side. And unlike that period, the Persian frontier was stable throughout the fifth century, meaning that the empire was not stretched fighting wars to the east and west. Tax revenues were still coming into the central authorities, allowing for the continual recruitment of troops, both Roman and German contingents. Simply put, there was no significant stresses that would necessitate the abandonment of Britain.

Within Britain itself, ongoing raids along the frontiers were a way of life at this stage, but in 410 there was no sense of crisis, that there was no picture of escalation in either the number or the extent of barbarian incursions. The key point here is that this scenario of a continued Roman presence in Britain only continued while the British elites were protected, and the central government could hold the Rhine and send what little military help they could spare. The situation of 410 therefore was no different to what it had been in the 380s or 390s.

The situation was profoundly different in 435-440, for two key reasons. Firstly, the division of the empire into 2 autonomous entities had sapped the much-reduced resources of the west. In 410, this division had only been in existence for 15 years, and the effects were not noticeable, nor had the two courts truly considered themselves as distinct entities.[52] By 440, it was nearly half a century of division, the imperial courts by now did consider themselves as distinct and separate, and the absence of the wealthy eastern provinces was clearly showing.[53] But the biggest single change, and the one that arguably caused the inevitable dissolution of the western empire, was the loss of the African provinces to the Vandals in the 430s. These provinces, the breadbasket of the west, were the greatest single contributor to the western imperial revenue stream. It was their loss that caused a crisis to the funding of the imperial armies, and that destroyed Ravenna's ability to fight its wars against the tribes that were overwhelming the frontiers.[54] It is that this point that the civil provincial government breaks down, and the empire would have been unable to continue sending imperial representatives of any sort to Britain. It is around 435-440 where the western empire, in a de-facto sense, abandons Britain and eventually necessitates the Romano-British to (i) elect their own kings, (ii) seek help from the Saxons and (iii) eventually send an appeal to Aetius, asking for help.

The appeal to Aetius is in itself quite illuminating of the state of Roman Britain at the point where the Romano-British do actually throw off any allegiance to the central government, and to quote the anonymous chronicler of the *Narratio*, "the Britains were lost to the Roman name forever". It is at this point, according to Gildas that:

> Again, therefore, the wretched remnant, sending to Aetius, a powerful Roman citizen, address him as follows: "To Aetius, now consul for the third time: the groans of the Britons." And again a little further thus: "The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea throws us back on the barbarians: thus two modes of death await us, we are either slain or drowned."

The reference to the third consulship places this appeal to the year 446 at the earliest.[55] We can safely say by this stage the *Limitanei* have ceased exist and had probably ceased to function as an effective border force a decade previously. The raids are by now virtually continuous and are reaching deep within the five provinces. So, does the appeal to Aetius predate or postdate the final expulsion of Roman officials representing the imperial court, or in fact even support an ousting? In one sense it doesn't matter, because the western empire was no longer in a position by 440 to hold any of the outlying provinces, but the phrasing of the appeal at least suggests that Roman officials were no longer arriving to the island, and hadn't been there for some years. In this context, the emergence of tyrants in the British provinces at the start of the 440s is more of a reflection of Roman neglect

[50] ESMONDE-CLEARY 2011, 20-22.
[51] HEATHER 2007, 191.
[52] McEVOY 2013, 195.
[53] JONES 1964, 1065-1068.
[54] GOLDSWORTHY 2010, 330, 358.
[55] WOOD 2004, 436-437.

due to the growing chaos on the continent rather than the overthrow and expulsion of the imperial governors.

The taking up of their own affairs plus the lack of any Roman aid saw the Romano-British take the fateful step of asking the Saxons for help to stop the raids from the Picts. This agreement, probably in the form of the Saxons acting as *foederati* in exchange for land (a reflection of the agreements being made between the Germanic tribes and Roman authorities on the continent) saw the Saxons gain a foothold in *Maxima Caesariensis*. So the appeal to Aetius in around 446 is most likely related to an event that the Gallic Chronicler dates to four years previously (442):

The Britains having been up to this time afflicted by various disasters and vicissitudes were brought under the control of the Saxons. [56]

The invitation to of the Saxons introduced a larger problem for the newly emerged tyrants of Britain. And just as happened on the continent, it would not take very long for the Saxon *foederati* to abandon any loyalty to the Romano-British and begin the process of creating their own kingdoms in the now lost Roman provinces. But the rise of these local tyrants that preceded the Saxon adventus have been transposed to a generation earlier than was the case, whose dating was originally built upon the erroneous account in Zosimus. Independent of Zosimus, the most likely course of events for the British provinces was the continued existence of the Roman administration, albeit gradually failing and fading in line with the rest of the western provinces. That assessment is supported by the ongoing listing of the provinces and officials in the *Notitia Dignitatum* that was maintained until the mid-420s. Certainly the reach of the imperial remit in Britain was no doubt in recession between 410 and 440, but again this is in line with other western imperial provinces along the periphery. The key drivers came with the eventual retirement of the soldiers forming the *Limitanei* and the co-incidental loss of the African provinces in the 430s. At this point the Romans were finally and irrevocably unable to fulfil their governing roles, forcing the inhabitants in Britain to look after themselves, the first step of which was to raise up local kings, men whom Gildas would later term Tyrants.

[56] Chron. Gall. a. 452, MGH AA IX, Chron. min. i. 660: OL. CCCVI 125 XVIII.

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